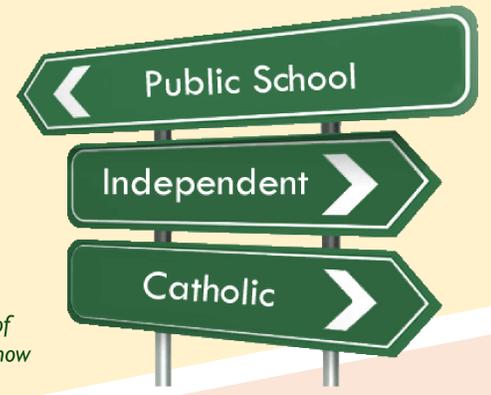


How parents solve the 'wicked' problem of choosing a school

A qualitative investigation within a behavioural economics framework

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We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. TS Eliot 1942



Research Goal

To understand the choice processes underlying **how parents choose schools for their children** and whether behavioural economics can provide insights into **why parents choose a particular school**.

Background

Complexity of choice process

Choice of school, and investments in their children's education in general, is a complex decision space with little opportunity to learn from experience. Complexity arises from high levels of incomplete information about future outcomes due to uncertainty and asymmetric information associated with schooling options. Complexity also arises from the importance personal context has on decision making. The willingness of parents to invest in their child's education is heavily influenced by a parent's past experiences of their own education, path dependency of prior schooling choices and choices made by other parents for their own children. Consequently, faced with limited time to make decisions and the infrequency of these choices, parents have little opportunity to optimise utility through repetitive refinement, Arrow's (1962) 'learning by doing'. For parents, choosing a school for their children is a particularly hard problem to solve.

Inter-generational choice

Adding to the complexity of choice, investments by parents in their children's education is an intergenerational decision problem. Where the cost of the decision are borne by the parent while the benefits and risks accrue to the child. Intergenerational choices in particular are problematic given very long time horizons mean that individuals making the choices now are not the same individuals who experience the consequences of the choices in the future.

Risks involved in school choice

Parents face the following key risks associated with uncertainty in decision making:

Immediate considerations:

- Characteristics of child's ability,
- Characteristics of school 'services',
- 'Quality' of school student cohort,

Considerations of dynamics over time:

- Choices that other parents make,
- What the future holds for their children,
- Ability of parents to sustain choice commitments.

Choices in education as a 'wicked' problem

Choices in education are wicked problems:

- Ability to observe information required to make a definitive judgement can only be done with hindsight.
- Due long time-frames you can never really know you have made the 'right' decision.
- Once choices are made it is very hard to go back and 'unmake' them.
- Past decisions impact current decisions.
- Decision outcomes are context sensitive. Small differences can have large effects.
- Each choice is unique and requires its own set of strategies.
- Choices in education generally involve 'value conflicts' between parents, and between parents and children.
- Parents do not have the option to make a 'wrong' choice when made on behalf of their children.

In their own words

Rational reasoning, joint decision making – not just value conflict but also conflict in processes parents use to make decisions

"I'm a sort of data geek and I wanted more and more information, and so my decision making process is long and tortuous – tortured, my wife would say – so it took forever, and she's more gut instinct and was much more reluctant to think about the private school. But I think in the end, those latter aspects and then she heard [son's] attitude which somewhat swayed us."

Pygmalion effects, self-efficacy & preference for development of non-cognitive skills

"I would say that it's not about gut feeling, because I actually think that a lot of people talk about or refer to as gut feelings, I would describe as being those intangible like culture and maybe the leadership and the feel of the school... You know, but they're all based on real things, on concrete things."

Changes in local demographic can motivate choice, choices in education involve long term frames

"...because of the nature of the area which was Brighton, that was just beginning to gentrify then, the parents with means were actually sending their children elsewhere. ... So we because we were in a position to do it, we said we would have to go private. Against our values in a sense. So when people speak to me now, is it good value, is it value for money? I have to say to them probably not. You could now go to our local secondary school which has improved out of all sight, over 10 years."

Wicked choices don't have exact solutions, shopping list choice heuristic

"It is certainly not an exact science. We weren't shopping on prestige or anything like that. We were shopping on continuity of teachers, shopping on subject choice, facilities I suppose and [independent school] ticks all those boxes."

Never having enough information

"... it's a classic example of trying to make a decision with limited information, because in the end you often don't have much idea of what really goes on inside the schools, ... it felt like making important decision with very limited information."

Child's choice, education as an 'experience good', matching risk

"She had heard about it, and we let her apply. We knew a little about the school, but because it's an unusual school it's very hard to know exactly what the experience would be like for your child."

Risk aversion, subject availability, risky choices over long timeframes

"... you assume that there are subjects, they tell you that there are going to be subjects delivered and all of a sudden they're not delivered because they can't find the teachers."

Satisficing as a solution to 'wicked' problem of no 'stopping-rule' of knowing when a choice is the 'right' one

"I think when I look back on it all I don't think you ever know what the right decision is and you make do with so many things that I felt were an issue"

Complexity of vicarious decision making, choices made on behalf of others

"I can't think of any purchasing decision that is so complex; it involves conflicts of values to such a degree. I suppose buying a house, but then there is values and stuff involved in that, but not so complex probably when you're taking a decision that's so important in somebody else's life, not just your own."

Research Design

Methodology

A qualitative mixed-methods approach is used to accommodate distinct heterogeneity in how individual parents experience and resolve the problem of choosing a school for their children.

The study is principally one of personal reflection upon choices that had been made. However, many parents remained immersed in the choice space. Continually re-evaluating choice made (revealed preferences) while their children attended these schools and their experiences evolved over time.

A key part of the qualitative methodology draws upon approaches used in the decision sciences and behavioural economics. In particular, how individual resolve complex problems when subject to time constraints, the dual-process model of the mind, asymmetric risk preferences, and the use of decision heuristics as mental short-cuts.

Interviews

The study comprises 22 semi-structured exploratory interviews of Australian parents, principally from Melbourne with some from regional Victoria. The socio-economic backgrounds of the parents interviewed are broadly middle socio-economic, from low to high middle class. Parents were encouraged to talk about their experience in choosing a school for their children.

Open ended follow-up questions focused on what motivated parents to search for alternatives, what their sources of information, how parents searched for this information, how parents evaluated the information gathered, how parents co-ordinated the choice problem as a joint decision and how they sorted through alternatives to arrive at a preferred choice.

Interviews were typically 30-45mins in length, digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed into text by professional transcribers independent of the researcher for subsequent analysis.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis of the parent interviews on four key components. Initial attribute coding collected information about the parent being interviewed, such as the school they choose and the type of school they themselves attended. Descriptive coding was used to summarise the key sources of information parents used in their choice process.

Thematic analysis was used to extract 'choice attributes' that parents identified as influencing their decisions. For those parents who were able to articulate a clear decision process, a decision modeling approach is used to understand differences underlying choice behaviour.

Participant Selection

Participants were parents with children currently attending either a primary or secondary school. Parents were sourced through school newsletters, local community newspapers and subsequent referrals. Consequently, self-selection effects linked to parents being highly likely to be actively engaged in the choice process is expected.

Demographics

Demographics of parents interviewed : Determinants of School Choice																		
Interviews	Gender		Primary School Type				Secondary School Type				Regionality	Ethnicity	Religiosity	Single				
22	8	14	13	3	6	0	8	8	4	2	18	4	5	17	9	13	3	19
%	36%	64%	59%	14%	27%	0%	36%	36%	18%	9%	82%	18%	23%	77%	41%	59%	14%	86%
	Male	Female	Public	Independent	Catholic	Selective Public	Public	Independent	Catholic	Selective Public	Melbourne	Regional Victoria	Asian decent	European descent	Strongly Religious	Not/weakly religious	Single Parent Household	Dual Parent Household

Findings

Role of informal information

Parents readily rely on informal 'hot knowledge' in order to make sense of local specificities of context impacting choices. It is the contextual nature of informal knowledge that gives its value. By understanding the local context and characteristics of these individuals, parents are able to make a reasonable judgement as to what their own child's experience will be.

Some researchers view informal 'hot knowledge' as a 'grapevine' where information is generated from a range of social interactions with family, friends, neighbours and community. This 'grapevine' information being is shaped by rumour and gossip. However, this approach understates the active role parents take in sourcing information from particular trusted sources. In particular, those individuals who have current or past experience of particular schools. By having 'skin in the game' in making actual choices, information provided by these parents is considered to be of a higher quality.

Suspicion of formal information

Many parents have a general suspicion of formal information provided by schools. Some parents perceive formal information from elite schools as being a deliberate mechanism in which to screen parents. An example would be an emphasis on time consuming extra-curricular activities in order to screen out parents 'less committed' to their children's education.

Government (MySchool data) sources of formal information are generally perceived by parents as providing objective information about particular schools. However, some parents use MySchool as a way to ascertain the socio-economic quality of the student cohort rather than academic performance.

Preference 'mindsets'

- Four distinct preference mindsets identified.
- **'Academic pressure' mindset** tend to prefer gov't selective schools and focus on academic results.
 - **'Encourage/Motivate' mindset** tend to prefer elite Independent schools and focus on non-cognitive outcomes (growth mindset).
 - **'Support/Wellbeing' mindset** tend to prefer non-elite Independent schools and focus on pastoral care outcomes (strongly loss averse).
 - **'Discipline/Values' mindset** tend prefer Catholic schools and focus on social identity and a sense of community.
 - **'Safety & convenience' mindset** tends to dominate choice of Primary schools.

Choice decision types

Parent Type	Motivation	Search Rules	Evaluation Rules
Avoiding	Singular focus on avoiding a particular school characteristic	Stop on finding 1st alternative meeting criteria	Intuitive 1st available Binary criteria
Satisficing	Hedging uncertainty by making 'good' choices across a number of dimensions	Variety of Search rules e.g. exploratory, shopping list	Mixture of Intuitive & Rational Variety of Evaluation rules e.g. similarity, lexicographic Multi-criteria
Maximizing	Making the 'best' choice. Highly confident about the future.	Seek many alternatives based on well defined criteria	Rational Optimization Singular criteria

Insights

Solving 'wicked' problems

- In general, parents seek to make 'good' choices as opposed to 'perfect' choices when faced with high levels of complexity and uncertainty.

Decision Processes

- Distinct heterogeneity in how parents make decisions (3 Decision Types identified) and their 'preference mindsets' (4 Preference Mindsets identified)
- Parents use a mix of intuitive and rational decision processes into order to make choices.
- Intuitive decision processes used when choice characteristics can't be objectively measured.

Responses to Risk

- Australia parents very risk averse. They do not like taking risks when choices are linked to education (schools).
- Parents shed risk by preferring schools with more options and resources and thereby increasing the likelihood of optimal matching of their child's needs.

Active Choice

- 'Active choice' increases a person's commitment to choice.
- Related to the 'Effort Heuristic' (Ikea Effect), value of something is positively affected by the amount of effort put into acquiring it. Even if it is the original default choice.

Choice Contrast

- Greater difference between choice alternatives, greater the commitment to actual choice made.



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