



School Choice and Post Hoc Family Preference in Spain: Do They Match Up?

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Abstract: The process of school choice depends on a wide range of circumstances including those related to the accessibility to schools and parental preferences. This paper has three goals: (1) Identify whether the preferences for the different kinds of schools (public, publicly-funded private, or private) vary according to the family's traits; (2) estimate the degree of concurrence between the kind of school their children attend and the kind of school the parents prefer a posteriori; and (3) identify which social groups demonstrate lower levels of concurrence. We used a sub-sample of people with children registered in compulsory grades or post-compulsory grades up to university from representative national survey (2012). Results show that post hoc school preferences differ by educational level, economic status, religious orientation, and size of town. Likewise, we find divergences between the school parents prefer and the school their children attend, something that occurs more frequently among those with less economic resources.

Keywords: school access; school segregation; parental preferences; social inequality

Elección de centro educativo y preferencias familiares en España: ¿Coinciden?

Resumen: El proceso de elección-asignación de centro educativo depende de un amplio conjunto de circunstancias, incluyendo aquellas relacionadas con la accesibilidad de las familias a las escuelas y con las preferencias de los padres y madres. Este trabajo tiene tres

objetivos: (1) Identificar si las preferencias por los diferentes tipos de centro (público, concertado y privado) varían según las características de las familias; (2) estimar el grado de coincidencia entre el tipo de centro que prefieren los padres y el tipo de centro al que asisten sus hijos; y (3) identificar qué grupos sociales demuestran menores niveles de coincidencia. Se utiliza información del Estudio CIS 2935, realizado en 2012. Los resultados muestran preferencias diferenciadas según tamaño de municipio, nivel educativo, situación económica y orientación religiosa. Asimismo, en una parte significativa de los padres se observan divergencias entre el centro preferido y el centro al que asisten sus hijos, algo que ocurre con mayor frecuencia entre quienes disponen de menos recursos socioeconómicos.

Palabras-clave: acceso a las escuelas; segregación escolar; preferencias familiares; desigualdad social

Escolha de escola e preferências familiares em Espanha: Correspondem?

Resumo: O processo de escolha da escola depende de uma vasta gama de circunstâncias, incluindo as relacionadas com acesso das famílias às escolas e as preferências dos pais. Este trabalho tem três objetivos: (1) Identificar se as preferências pelos diferentes tipos de escola (pública, charter e privada) variam de acordo com as características das famílias; (2) estimar o grau de coincidência entre o tipo de escola preferido pelos pais e o tipo de escola frequentada por seus filhos; e (3) identificar quais grupos sociais demonstram níveis mais baixos de coincidência. São utilizadas informações do Estudo CIS 2935, realizado em 2012. Os resultados mostram preferências diferenciadas de acordo com o tamanho do município, nível educacional, situação econômica e orientação religiosa. Da mesma forma, em uma parte significativa dos pais, observam-se divergências entre o centro preferido e o centro frequentado pelos seus filhos, o que ocorre mais frequentemente entre os que têm menos recursos socioeconómicos.

Palavras-chave: acesso à escola; segregação escolar; preferências das famílias; desigualdade social

Introduction

In the field of educational policy research, much ink has been spilled on the way in which schools are chosen by the families and the effect those processes have on student-body segregation and on educational inequality (OECD, 2016; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007).

The policies to promote freedom of school choice are a necessary condition in the design of quasi-markets in education. Following the rationale of its advocates, these quasi-markets put families in the same conditions to choose a school, which promotes competition among schools that improves overall educational performance (Ball, 1993). In this thinking, liberalizing and deregulating the offering of schools through measures like public financing of private schools, school vouchers, or making educational districts more flexible are put forth (Alegre & Benito, 2012). The premise for good performance of educational markets is that there should be no asymmetries in the information available to families about schools, which should be accessible and complete, and no barriers blocking access to them. However, research on these kind of policies has shown that its most evident effect is the reproduction of education inequalities along social class lines for two reasons: first, because parents make their decisions in an unequal context regarding the information available about the schools and access to them; and, second, because the families use a rationale that do not correspond to the one expected in the educational market and that varies according to family and institutional circumstances (Verger, Bonal & Zancajo, 2016).

In this way, parents use bounded rationality when choosing a school, a type of rationality that adapts to uncertain situations with unequal resources (Reay & Ball, 1997). Faced with a complex decision like choosing a school where there is a variety of alternatives and relevant information is lacking, parents reduce their options down to a cognitively acceptable number (Ben-Porath, 2009). In the school choice process, bounded rationality is reflected in parents' different choice sets, the schools that parents actually take into account for their children's schooling (Bell, 2009). The literature has shown that the choice set is also conditioned by the schools parents have access to (economically, geographically, and in terms of information) and by the elements that parents appreciate in the schools, by their preferences (Hastings Kane & Staiger, 2008; Villavicencio, 2013).

A key distinction in any analysis of these processes is between parental school preferences and school choice (Ball, 1993; Calsamiglia & Güell, 2014); between the kind of school that families prefer and the kind of school they are eventually assigned. The empirical research should, if possible, handle these two concepts separately and discover to what extent they match. This analysis can be used to show what role preferences and accessibility play in configuring the choice set. When parents' preferences do not coincide with the school to which they finally send their children, it is plausible to assume that there are limitations on access to schools. When the school they attend matches their preferences, the access limitations are not, apparently, determining factors in their choice although they might have been in the previous process of configuring their preferences.

In spite of the growing body of literature on the Spanish case there are still gaps in the understanding of the school choice process in terms of family preference and how this may segregate the student body by social class. Knowing to what extent social class configures different school preferences and socioeconomic resources condition the possibility of going to the school that matches those preferences is relevant. This paper aims to contribute to fill this gap through the following goals: (1) Identify whether the preferences for the different kinds of schools (public, publicly-funded private, or private) vary by type of family, in accordance with their socioeconomic position, religious beliefs, place of residence, and type of school already chosen; in this goal, those variations can be compared to those noted in the composition of the schools' student bodies; (2) estimate the degree of concurrence between the kind of school attended and the kind of school desired currently; and (3) find out what groups show lower

levels of concurrence and therefore less satisfaction with the kind of school assigned. The first goal aims to understand the factors conditioning the social construction of family preferences, the second to establish whether the supply of schools in Spain responds to family preferences and the third to verify whether there are socioeconomic inequalities in the choice process regarding family choice set.

Spanish Supply of Schools Supported by Public Funding

The Spanish case offers relevant distinctive features in educational funding and the supply of schools supported by public funds. During the transition to democracy (1975-1982), conservative and progressive political parties reached an “educational agreement” that opted for the coexistence of three types of schools (Olmedo, 2008): public (supported by public funds and publicly owned), publicly-funded private –known as *concertados*– (mainly supported by public funds and privately owned), and private (mainly supported by private funds and privately owned). These three kinds of schools existed primarily for two reasons: to satisfy the demands of all of the political sectors, including the Catholic Church, which played a major role in education at the time (Bonal, 2000) and to cover the growing demand for schools that existed (Fernández & Muñiz, 2012). Today, despite the changes the Spanish educational system has undergone, these three types remain. In this paper's focus, the 2011-2012 school year, 68.2% of non-university students attended public schools, 25.6% publicly-funded private schools, and 6.4% private schools (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2014).

The state law drafted by the conservative party (Partido Popular), Organic Law 8/2013 for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE), passed at the end of 2013 and which became effective in the 2014-2015 school year were a major endorsement of educational privatization policies (Saura, 2015). The main measure in that direction in the LOMCE is that public and publicly-funded private schools are made equal in the public offering of places. It stipulates that the public administration will guarantee schooling in public or publicly-funded private schools with no distinction. Before this, the administrations only guaranteed places in public schools. This measure opened the door, for example, to there being areas of the country in which the only public education offered is at publicly-funded private schools.

Since 1985, the law requires publicly-funded private schools to meet the same admissions requirements as public schools. However, there is evidence that families that attend a publicly-funded private school must meet higher expenses than those who opt for a public one (Rogero-García & Andrés-Candelas, 2014) since some of these schools filter their applicant pool by charging fees (Mancebón-Torrubia & Pérez-Ximénez, 2007). It has also been observed that a significant part of Catholic publicly-funded private school require participation in religious activities (Fernández & Muñiz, 2012). The result is that these schools bring together families with middle to high incomes and higher education (Escardíbul & Villarroya, 2009; Mancebón-Torrubia & Pérez-Ximénez, 2010) who are from Spain (Salinas & Santín, 2012). The concentration by social origin is higher in Spain than in the majority of OECD countries and the kind of school has a strong influence on this gap (Jenkins Micklewright & Schnepf, 2006): Spain is the country with the fifth lowest social inclusion rating in the OECD in PISA 2015 (OECD, 2016).

The LOMCE has also established, for the first time, freedom of school choice as a basic principle of the educational system: “Freedom of school choice that recognizes the rights of fathers, mothers, and legal guardians to choose the kind of education and school for their children, within the framework of the constitutional principles” (Organic Law 8/2013, Art. 1, paragraph q). Its advocates usually assume, explicit or implicitly, at least three premises: first, that to achieve school choice the offering of private schools supported by public funds needs to be increased (Popular Party, 2015, pp. 184-185). Second, that parents' first option school is the school they prefer out of all of those offered by the public administration. Third, that all parents

have the same accessibility to the schools (Windle, 2009). These three premises can be tested, at least partially, with an analysis, as done in this paper, as to what extent there is a relationship between the school parents prefer and the school to which they actually send their children.

The Place of Family Preferences in Choosing a School

Three interrelated elements make up parents' choice set: the offering of schools (kinds, admissions conditions, etc.), family circumstances (economic status, place of residence, etc.), and parental preferences. School supply does not reflect parents' preferences; it is the result of a very complex historical process, as indicated above (Bonal, 2012). Parents' preferences then are formed based on the existing supply of schools (Verger, Bonal & Zancajo, 2016) that, in turn, conditions their choice (Escardibul & Villarroya, 2009). The choice will depend on the overlap between preferred schools (derived from family preferences) and accessible schools (derived from circumstances and school supply in a particular area).

Preferences depend, first, on the information available. Access to quality information favors a conscious decision-making process (Allen & Burgess, 2010; Koning & Van der Wiel, 2013). This decision requires accessing, understanding, and decoding the complexity of the information about schools, and also the consequences that come with the choice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the case of Spain, information on schools is hard to come by (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Fernández, 2009) and is usually based on incomplete or unreliable indicators like the ones offered by rankings based on external testing (Prieto & Villamor, 2012) that often do not satisfy the families' information needs (Román & Murillo, 2014). In this sense, not all families have access to the information that does exist. Aspects like socioeconomic level (Mancebón-Torrubia & Pérez-Ximénez, 2007) or cultural level (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Fernández, 2009) influence the amount and quality of the information about schools and the decision-making process itself, not only in Spain but also in other countries like the United States (Goldring & Rowley, 2008; Rich & Lennings, 2015) and Chile (Elacqua, 2009). This lack of information means families decide with a certain degree of anxiety, aware that their success depends on factors they are unaware of and that, consequentially, are beyond their control or that some families are labeled as bad decision-makers, ignoring the fact that, in practice, they are not in a position to choose (Ball, 1993). In this way, social position in the hierarchical class structure shapes the bounded rationality that parents develop when choosing a school.

Beyond the information available, preferences are strongly influenced by the expectations parents have about the school. Families attribute the function of transmitting curricular knowledge and improving academic performance to the school (Burgess et al., 2014), but there are different expectations about what good academic performance means (Colectivo IOE, 2010) and also, on a more general level, of what constitutes a good education, beyond just academics (Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007). Choice criteria are not neutral and vary by type of family (Alegre & Benito, 2012). Some of the families endeavor for their children's schoolmates to have their same socioeconomic status (Burgess et al., 2014). The expectation of academic success and of establishing certain social relationships are relevant issues in the discourse of many parents (Olmedo & Santa Cruz, 2011), and that idea is more present in families with higher social statuses (Alegre & Benito, 2012).

Parents build different social representations about the schools in line with their socioeconomic status. These representations are ideas that are made, shared, and used by groups and individuals as a framework for decision-making (Alonso, 1998). Independently of their quality in objective terms, those families that are better situated value private and publicly-funded private schools more (Rogero-García & Andrés-Candelas, 2016). Choosing a school then is, in part, the result of the way they perceive their own status in the social structure (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For the middle class and the working class, choosing a school constitutes a strategy driven by relative risk aversion, or by the goal of at very least maintaining the family's

current social position in the hierarchical class structure (Breen & Golthorpe 1997; Bridge & Wilson, 2015). In this sense, the choice is part of parents' practical rationality and is motivated by their interest in distinguishing themselves socially from the rest. These representations, consequently, configure parents' choice set.

Another facet that plays an important role are religious beliefs. In Spain, the Catholic Church's influence on education, derived from its massive presence in the education system during Franco's regime (1939-1975), has resulted in a large supply of Catholic schools. Around 60% of publicly-funded private schools and 8% of private schools are in the hands of Catholic institutions (Spanish National Institute of Statistics, 2012) which explains the importance of this factor in attendance at a certain kind of school (Arellano & Zamarro, 2007; Pérez-Díaz Rodríguez & Fernández, 2009). The influence of religion in choosing schools is present in other countries like the United States (Cohen-Zada & Sander, 2007), Chile (Flores & Carrasco, 2013), and most of the other European countries (Dronkers & Avram, 2014).

Preferences are also conditioned by the school supply in the specific geographic area. The supply of schools in a territory, in terms of kind of school and the sociodemographic make-up of the student body, is a determining factor in the configuration of the choice set in which parents frame and develop their preferences (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). In Spain, the school supply varies significantly depending on the geographic area. In general, supply in rural areas with small towns is mainly made up of public schools while, like in other countries (Noreisch, 2007), supply is more diverse in major cities and there are more schools with private financing (Arellano & Zamarro, 2007).

This paper studies what factors are related to preference for a public, publicly-funded private, or private schools in Spain and to what extent these factors are related to the effective possibility of attending the desired school. This analysis will help to understand how preferences are distributed among different social groups according to their position in the hierarchical class structure and to what extent they may be affecting student body segregation processes.

Methodology

Information is used from study 2935 of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [Center for Sociological Research], Spain carried out in March 2012 and representative of the Spanish population over 18. This study offers opinion data on different aspects of the educational system in Spain and is especially well-suited to address the paper's goals since it contains information on educational preferences and also on Spanish parents' de facto practices. It was the only survey found with national representativeness that allows relating parents' ideas to their practice in relation to the formal school system. Relevant information can be extracted about what the interaction between public policy and the stakeholders is.

For the analysis of school preferences, only people with children registered in compulsory grades or post-compulsory grades up to university were chosen, with a sample of 770. The intention was to consider the situation and opinion of parents who had a closer and more recent contact with the educational system. For the analysis of school attendance only those parents whose children were in elementary or high school were chosen since that was the only way attendance to a kind of school could be compared to preferences at each educational stage. The sample size was 493 people.

The dependent variables are type of preferred or desired school and type of school attended and their concurrence. The first was operationalized through question P.17 of the questionnaire: "If you could choose, what kind of school would you send your children to for their elementary or high school education? Public, publicly-funded private, private, no preference, don't know, no answer." Consequently, we are capturing preferences on school type once parents have already chosen a school for their children. The kind of school attended was extracted from question P. 31b: "What kind of elementary or high school do your children

attend? Public, publicly-funded private, or private.” The third dependent variable, concurrence of requested school and school attended, was created based on the first two.

The independent variables, chosen based on a literature review, were sex, age (18-34, 35-49, 50 and over), educational level (elementary or less, high school or vocational training, college), the size of the town of residence (0-10,000, 10,001-100,000, 100,001-1,000,000, more than 1,000,000 inhabitants), religious orientation (Catholic, non-Catholic), the self-perceived personal economic status (response to the question: How would you qualify your personal economic situation today: very wealthy, wealthy, middle, poor or very poor?), and the time when Spanish nationality was acquired (at birth or later). This last variable aims to cover the effect national origin might have since the study analyzed is not representative of the foreign population living in Spain.

In accordance with the objectives, the methodology was designed following two steps. First, five binary logistics regression models were made. These models estimate the probability of a phenomenon occurring in certain circumstances (Harrell, 2001). This method allows for an analysis of the factors conditioning choice for each kind of school. Binary regression was chosen after confirming that adjusting for a multinomial logistic regression model that included all the kinds of schools would offer lower statistical significance, mainly due to fewer cases attending private schools. The first three models identify factors related to preference for a certain kind of school (public, publicly-funded private, or private) while the next two identify the factors associated with attending a certain kind of school. In this last case, only the models related to public and publicly-funded private schools are shown since the small number of cases attending private schools means their analysis will lack statistical power.

Secondly, a logistic regression model was built to explore the relationship between the independent variables and the concurrence of preferred and attended school. Before this last model, a bivariate contingency table was drawn up to observe the relationship between this concurrence and the independent variables. The models' fit were measured through Pearson's chi-squared test and Nagelkerke's R² (Norušis, 2005). The number of cases in the logistic regression on the kind of school that would be preferred was 759, 493 in those relative to the school attended and 406 in which their coincidence was analyzed. SPSS 21 software was used.

Results

If they could have chosen, 53.9% of parents would bring their children to public schools, 18.3% to publicly-funded private schools, 23.4% to private schools; 4.4% do not identify a specific school. At the time of the interview, 74% of parents had enrolled their children in public schools, 21.3% in publicly-funded private schools, and 4.8% in private schools. Table 1 shows the logistic regression models on the probability of preferring public, publicly-funded private, or private schools, and the probability of attending public or publicly-funded private schools. The preference for public schools (model 1) is significantly lower among those who live in towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants than in smaller towns, especially amongst those who live in major cities (OR=0.159). Those who are not Catholic have more probability of preferring a public school over another option (OR=1.866). Model 2 shows that those who live in towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants have less probability of preferring a publicly-funded private school than those who live in major cities (OR=7.234) or towns with between 10,001 and 100,000 inhabitants (OR=1.917). College graduates (OR=2.258) and high school graduates (OR=1.555) have more probabilities of preferring publicly-funded private schools. Those who are not Catholic have less probability of choosing these types of school (OR=0.545) and those who report a poor or very poor economic status (OR=0.434).

Model 3 indicates that, compared to those who graduated from elementary school, college graduates have less probability of preferring private schools (OR=0.604), and that this probability is also less among non-Catholics (OR=0.617). In comparison with those who are

wealthy or very wealthy, those who have a middle status demonstrate more probability of preferring private schools (OR=1.606). Model 4 shows that there are more probabilities of attending a public school in smaller towns and among those who have completed lower educational levels, as well as among non-Catholics (OR=1.717) and those who were naturalized after birth (OR=4.752). Model 5 shows that attendance at publicly-funded private schools is higher among those who live in more heavily populated towns, especially in major cities (OR=14.790, compared to those living in towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants), and among those who are high school (OR=2.287) or college graduates (OR=2.438) compared to those who are elementary school graduates.

Table 1

Logistic regression models: If you could choose, what school would you send your children to and what school do they attend for their elementary or high school education

	If I could, I would send them to			They attend	
	(1) Public	(2) Publicly funded private school	(3) Private	(4) Public	(5) Publicly funded private school
Sex (male)	1.157	1.101	0.847	1.307	0.750
18-34					
35-49	0.938	1.485	0.702	1.023	1.109
50 and older	1.074	1.185	0.652	1.029	1.075
0-10.000 inhabitants					
10,001-100,000	0.633*	1.917*	0.944	0.312***	3.741**
100,001-1,000,000	0.649*	1.574	1.474	0.357**	2.945*
More than 1,000,000	0.159***	7.234***	1.408	0.049***	14.79***
Elementary or less					
High school or vocational	0.797	1.555†	0.801	0.668†	2.287**
College	0.841	2.258**	0.604†	0.522*	2.438*
Religion (Catholic)	1.866**	0.545*	0.617*	1.717*	0.734
Wealthy or very wealthy					
Middle	0.966	0.714	1.606*	1.131	0.833
Poor or very poor	1.155	0.434**	1.505	1.368	0.718
Naturalized later (after birth)	0.957	0.587	1.213	3.011*	0.366
Constant	1.670	0.095***	0.374**	4.752**	0.055***
Nagelkerke <i>r</i> -squared (<i>N</i>)	0.084 (759)	0.152 (759)	0.049 (759)	0.185 (493)	0.175 (493)

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

The model on attendance at private school is not significant so it has been left out.

Source: CIS 2935 study.

Table 2 shows the percentage of concurrence between the kind of school chosen and the kind of school preferred. In it, 36% of parents enroll their children in a kind of school that, if they could, they would change. There is higher concurrence among parents who have completed higher educational levels: 76.3% in the case of college graduates compared to 59.4% among those who graduated from elementary school. Those who are wealthy or very wealthy show significantly higher concurrence levels than those who have a poor or very poor one (77.7% and

57.1% respectively). As seen in the model shown in table 3, those who choose a publicly-funded private school (OR=0.479) or private school (OR=0.420) have less probability of attendance and preference coinciding in comparison to those who choose a public school and those who report a personal middle economic status (OR=0.468), poor or very poor (OR=0.383), compared to those who are wealthy or very wealthy.

Table 2

Concurrence between the kind of school preferred and the kind of school chosen

	N	Do not coincide	Coincides	Total	P-value χ^2
Total	411	36.0	64.0	100.0	
Male	201	35.8	64.2	100.0	0.938
Female	210	36.2	63.8	100.0	
18-34	54	40.7	59.3	100.0	0.726
35-49	310	35.5	64.5	100.0	
50 and older	47	34.0	66.0	100.0	
0-10,000 inhabitants	88	29.5	70.5	100.0	0.105
10,001-100,000	170	41.8	58.2	100.0	
More than 100,000	153	33.3	66.7	100.0	
Elementary or less	180	40.6	59.4	100.0	0.036
High school or vocational	155	36.8	63.2	100.0	
College	76	23.7	76.3	100.0	
Catholic	305	36.4	63.6	100.0	0.424
Non-Catholic	101	34.7	65.3	100.0	
Wealthy or very wealthy	94	22.3	77.7	100.0	0.005
Middle	198	38.4	61.6	100.0	
Poor or very poor	119	42.9	57.1	100.0	
They go to a public school	311	32.8	67.2	100.0	0.053
Publicly funded private school	82	45.1	54.9	100.0	
Private	18	50.0	50.0	100.0	
Spanish national from birth	390	36.4	63.6	100.0	0.316
Later	21	28.6	71.4	100.0	

Source: CIS 2935 study.

Table 3

Logistic regression model: Preference and attendance coincide

Sex (male)	0.905
18-34	
35-49	1.365
50 and older	1.206
0-10,000 inhabitants	
10,001-100,000	0.679
100,001-1,000,000	0.827
More than 1,000,000	1.342
Elementary or less	
High school or vocational	1.182
College	1.757
Religion (Catholic)	1.011

Table 3 cont.

Logistic regression model: Preference and attendance coincide

School they enroll their children in (Public)	
Publicly funded private school	0.479*
Private	0.420*
Wealthy or very wealthy	
Middle	0.468**
Poor or very poor	0.383†
Naturalized later (after birth)	1.432
Constant	3.397
Nagelkerke <i>r</i> -squared (N)	0.086 (406)

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

Source: CIS 2935 study.

Discussion

Any analysis of educational policies should, if possible, connect the discourses that justify them, the texts that develop them, the context in which they are applied, and the effects that they produce (Ball, 2015). In Spain, the most recent legal texts have situated family preferences as the basic criteria used when distributing students among schools. However, the previous literature has shown that there are differences between the preferred school and the school requested in the administrative process (Ball, 1993; Calsamiglia & Güell, 2014). This paper, unlike most research on the school choice process in Spain, incorporates family preference for school type as well as dissonance between the type of school actually attended and post hoc preferences for the different type of schools.

The first goal consisted of finding out whether these preferences varied by kind of family and if these variations were like those observed in school attended. The results show significant differences between those who today prefer public, publicly-funded private, and private school which are similar to the differences among those who actually attend each school. Families who have completed higher educational levels prefer and also attend publicly-funded private and private schools. This is consistent with previous findings indicating that people who have more cultural capital and better socioeconomic statuses use school choice as a social distinction mechanism based mainly on the school's student body composition (Burgess et al., 2014; Olmedo & Santa Cruz, 2011), driven by relative risk aversion (Breen & Golthorpe, 1997). If it is kept in mind that when the family makes no explicit choice, the public administration by default assigns a public school, that attendance pattern is also partially explained by the fact that parents who have completed higher educational levels are more actively involved in making the choice (Mancebón & Pérez-Ximenez, 2007; Rich & Lennings, 2015). These results suggest that although parents follow the common general logic of attempting to maximize the educational results of their children, in practice the limitations on access to schools conditions their preferences and contributes to increasing the student body's socioeconomic segregation (Verger, Bonal & Zancajo, 2016).

Lower preference for public schools on the part of parents with high socioeconomic levels may also be linked to the expectations of the different groups. In the Spanish case, it has been observed that the assessment of public services depends in part on the expectations people have about those services (Rodríguez, Pruneda & Cuerto, 2014). In particular, the educational system is rated worse by families with higher expectations about their children's academic achievements (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Fernández, 2009) and by those who attend publicly-funded private and private schools (Marchesi & Pérez, 2005). In this way, recourse to these kinds of schools is seen by some families as a way to get out of the system and a refuge from their problems (Colectivo IOE, 2010). Those families that attend public school, in general, would be

less inclined to distinguish themselves, as shown by their being more willing to share a school with immigrant students, than those who opt for publicly-funded private or private schools (Marchesi & Pérez, 2005).

The results show a strong relationship between preferences and the size of the town. In urban areas where there are more publicly-funded private and private schools available and more admission opportunities (Arellano & Zamarro, 2007), these kinds of schools are preferred more than in small towns. It is probable that a higher amount of one or another kind of school increases how preferred it is by the mere fact of its having more possibilities of being chosen (Escardíbul & Villarroya, 2009). Furthermore, in large cities there is usually higher diversity in the population by national origin and socioeconomic level. Some parents with more resources choose private schools to avoid students who may be more problematic (Olmedo & Santa Cruz, 2011), which is to say those born in another country or more socially disadvantaged that usually concentrate in public schools (Mancebón-Torrubia & Pérez-Ximénez, 2010). In major cities, the filtering and differentiating role that privately-owned schools play is more effective for families who can afford it.

The lower preference for publicly-funded private schools among those with less resources might be related to the fact that they have less real opportunities to attend them due to their higher cost (Rogeró-García & Andrés-Candelas, 2014); those parents will tend to rank the options within their reach higher (Bellei et al., 2017), distancing them from schools with a greater risk of being rejected from (Reay & Ball, 1997).

Religious beliefs are shown to be another determining factor; those who do not state that they are Catholic have more probability of preferring and attending public schools. This is explained by the abovementioned influence the Catholic Church has in managing publicly-funded private schools. In Spain, Catholics show a higher inclination to vote for parties identified with the right, in a stronger relationship than in other countries (Montero, Calvo & Martínez, 2008). That provides another possible explanation, since people that self-identify on the ideological right are usually less satisfied with public services (Rodríguez, Pruneda & Cueto, 2014) and more identified with the liberal discourse that attributes greater efficiency to private management (Rodríguez, 2014). These results show that student body segregation is two-sided: socioeconomic and according to religious beliefs.

The last two goals aimed to estimate to what point the school preferred by families and the school children actually attend coincide and specifically to identify in what cases divergence between them occurs most often. It was expected that the school chosen and preferred would be highly correlated but it was unknown to what degree. In accordance with our results, 36% of parents would choose a kind of school different from the one their children attend. It should be noted that here we are only analyzing the differences in relation to the kind of financing the school receives; in all probability, the differences would be greater if we included other features of the schools (lay or religious, educational program, etc.).

A significant element in our analysis is that parents express those preferences a posteriori, so they will be conditioned by the type of school already chosen. For parents, school choice is an open decision in the sense that it is constantly being updated and may change every school year. Dissonance between the school attended and the preference for a different type of school indicates discomfort with the previously-made decision. Individuals tend to fix this discomfort in two ways: not recognising that their actual preference is not what they decided, or changing their decision to adjust their preferences to the type of school their children attend. Consequently, in our results, the dissonance between preferred and chosen school may reveal not just the gap between what families want and what they have but also that some parents do not express their true preferences. In this sense, some ideologically left-wing parents –traditionally more in favor of public services (Rodríguez, Pruneda & Cueto, 2014)– could be hiding their true preferences for a privately-financed school.

Parents with a better economic position show higher matches between the school chosen and school preferred. These results confirm that the socioeconomic resources of families not only influence the configuration of their choice set but also condition their real possibilities of going to the schools within that choice set. However, surprisingly, those who choose private schools (either publicly funded or not) have less probability of attending their preferred school. This indicates that despite the fact that they are families with more choice capacity they are not satisfied with what they have chosen. This higher dissatisfaction may be due to the fact that these families usually have expectations that are harder to meet (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez & Fernández, 2009).

In this case, these parents might perceive that the offering of private schools does not guarantee their continued position in the hierarchical class structure and that another kind of school might have done so effectively and at a lower cost. Another possible explanation resides in the administrative process used to assign schools. In many regions of Spain, the public administration prioritizes top options. That means that if there is excess demand for a school, those families that made it their first choice but are not given a spot, relinquish priority for the rest of schools to those who did make them their first choice. In this way, despite the fact that some schools can be chosen on a formal level, if parents perceive the probability of obtaining a spot at that school to be low even though it is what they would “ideally” prefer, it is plausible that they might opt for a safer –albeit less desirable– option. It is possible that this logic, derived from the administrative process used to assign schools, is behind the percentage of families who prefer a public school but, in reality, attend a publicly-funded private or fully private school, a safer option for Spanish-born middle-class families (Alegre & Benito, 2012).

Conclusions

This paper analyzes for the first time the preferences Spanish parents have by different kinds of schools in relation to the kind of school attended. The results presented have some limitations that should be taken into account. First, the quantitative approximation is limited to capture the sense that parents give to their preferences and their choice of school and does not explain why they are mismatched. In that same way, the survey methodology prevents going beyond the questions posed by the questionnaire. Specifically, we cannot know exactly how the question on preferences was interpreted and in particular the fictional situation it puts the survey responder in (“If you could choose”). So we do not know if the interviewee interprets “if you could choose” any school in the region (regardless of its economic or geographic accessibility) or any one from his/her school set (i.e. only among those that they perceive to have real possibilities of going to). Second, we capture family preferences once children are already attending a certain school. As discussed before, this will condition their response to a question about their preferred type of school. In this sense, we do not have information about what their preference was before their child was sent to school. As has been argued, it is highly probable that some of the interviewees have responded based on the need to justify their prior choice and not their real preference. The concept of preference we use here then should be interpreted generically and conditioned by previous choices. Future studies should include a precise idea of preference and, if possible, differentiate between *ex ante* and *ex post* preferences in the process of choosing a school. Third, the data analyzed only includes in its sample parents who are Spanish, so we are unaware of the opinions of those from other nationalities, despite the fact that it is probable that their children are indeed Spanish. This excludes a relevant part of the families that make up the Spanish educational system. Forth, the sample size forces us to be especially cautious when interpreting the data on private schools. Finally, since the information is not representative by region, it does not suitably capture the characteristics of the school offering, a key element in the configuration of preferences and final choice. Similar studies with larger samples and representative data by region should be carried out in the future.

Despite its limitations, this paper sheds new light on the school choice process in Spain. Our results suggest that preferences by school are closely related to status in the social structure (Roger-García & Andrés-Candelas, 2016). This paper also shows that a significant amount of families does not attend the type of school they currently prefer, and that people with more economic resources have more probability of choosing the school they prefer since they have a wider offering of schools within their reach (Burgess et al., 2014; Flores & Carrasco, 2009; Rich & Jennings, 2015). This indicates that access limitations are determining factors for many parents in their configuration of the choice set of potential schools. These results point to significant inequalities in the school choice process in Spain and suggest that its configuration contributes to a socioeconomically segregated student body. The origins of this inequality can be found in the features of supply (differentiated costs by school, religious or lay, the use of languages –bilingual or not, for instance–, etc.) and demand (inequalities among families in terms of income, educational level completed, knowledge of foreign languages, etc.) (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010; Escardíbul & Villarroja, 2009). In line with the results, if the goal is to increase school choice, the key step does not appear to be so much to further liberalize supply as to level out the conditions of demand and make it possible for all families to have access to the school they prefer.

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