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The Costs of Class: Private Schooling, Parental Choice, and Class Aspirations among Kathmandu's Working Poor

Andrew Chen
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**The Costs of Class: Private Schooling, Parental Choice, and
Class Aspirations among Kathmandu's Working Poor**

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, the ‘de facto’ privatization of educational services has emerged as a significant policy trend in Nepal’s educational sector; however, unlike earlier decades when private schools catered exclusively to the privileged classes, the expansion of low-cost ‘budget’ private institutions have begun to serve lower socioeconomic and marginalized classes of the population. This project examines parental perceptions and decisional contexts surrounding the choice of private school for children of the working poor in Kathmandu. Specifically, the study uses the lens of class to explore the rationale, anxieties, and aspirations of working poor parents as they navigate the expanding private school market in Nepal’s metropole. I seek to identify what factors shape working-poor parents’ decisions to choose low-ranked tuition-based private schools over government-run alternatives and to what degree concerns and aspirations about class mobility, as well as the extent discourses of ‘choice’ are relevant to these decisions.

Dedication

To parents who struggle daily with the hope that, one day, their children will not have to.

Acknowledgements

This research was not a sole endeavor and would not have been possible without the support, care, and guidance of those individuals who helped me find my footing and navigate (figuratively and literally) the landscapes of Nepal.

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Introduction

This research examines the ways in which engaging with the expanding low-cost private school market is experienced and interpreted by segments of the population who have been excluded from the benefits of expanded private sector growth and the promises of upward social mobility – Kathmandu’s urban, working poor. In particular, the study provides perspective into the decisional contexts surrounding the choice of school for children of the working-poor, parents’ perceptions about the quality of education imparted there, and their concerns and aspirations for their children in a society marked by uncertainty. In a social landscape increasingly organized according to the social logic of ‘class’ – rather than ‘caste’ (Liechty 2010) - the working-poor of Kathmandu are forced to negotiate the realities of living in the periphery of a liberalizing economy characterized by slow-growth and in a political environment marked by uncertainty (World Bank 2009). In this context of socio-political and economic insecurity, many parents – whether of the middle- or lower-class – turn to the private school market to education their children , which many view as a “way to mediate the risks of an ‘unknowable ‘modern’ future’,” (Caddell 2006, 469).

While two decades ago, lower-class parents would have had been faced with fewer choices regarding the type of school their children could attend, the educational landscape of contemporary Kathmandu reflects the recent expansion of a low-cost ‘budget’ private school sector that increasingly caters to the lower-middle and poor classes of society (Bhattarai 2007). However, this expansion of educational opportunity has not coincided with a significant increase in social equity or inclusion and, as Caddell (2006) notes, the segmentation of the private

school sector, at the same time as it feeds and encourages parental and student aspirations – it also “establishes further barriers to success and sustains and reinforces inequalities” by stratifying students according to the quality of school they have attended and received credentials from (9). In light of this social reproduction of inequity in a society characterized by significant regional, caste, ethnic, and class inequities, it is crucial to examine how these dynamics are being driven and interpreted by actors who make the decisions to engage with this ‘budget’ educational market.

The first section of this paper will offer a review of the relevant literature concerning the recent trend of privatization in global educational policy, focusing specifically on the implications of the burgeoning low-cost private school market in the developing world. While there exists an abundant body of literature on privatization in education, concerns within the purview of ‘school effectiveness’ and student performance fall outside the scope of this analysis as the focus of this research includes parents’ *perceptions* of quality of these schools, rather than their actual performance. Following a discussion of several of the major issues and concerns related to neoliberal trends of privatization in the developing world, the specific case of private schooling in Nepal will be discussed in order to trace the close connection between education, inequality, and conflict in the South Asian nation.

Private Schooling in the Global South

Recent research in comparative and international education has described the proliferation of private schools throughout the developing world over the past two decades (Andrabi et al. 2008; Cheung et al. 2005; Nambissan and Ball 2010). Researchers describe how privatization has coincided with broader socio-

political and economic reforms subsumed under ‘globalization’, which is used loosely to denote the “the integration of markets; the alignment of values and economic mechanisms with those of capitalist systems; and the promotion and facilitation of trade, consumption, and competition,” (Steekete 2004, 171).

Trade liberalization, the private provision of previously government-supported social services, and the expansion of markets further reflect the pervasive influence of neoliberalism throughout the developing world, which Harvey (2007) defines as:

A theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade (22-23).

In educational policy, neoliberalism tends to entail pushes for decentralization and privatization of state-run school systems - as well as an increased reliance on non-state providers - which advocates argue will increase ‘community ownership’ and ‘participation’ at the same time as increasing the efficiency, quality, and accountability from schools (Shields and Rappleye 2008). Privatization, which finds major support from multilateral agencies like the World Bank as well as neo-conservative think tanks and organizations that advocate for the expansion of the free market located in the West (Nambissan and Ball 2010; Samoff 2007), is increasingly seen as a means of assisting developing nations reach the Millennium Development Goal of achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015 (Tooley et al. 2007). The World Bank’s approach to education as a means of poverty alleviation, which seeks “not to increase the public resources spend on education but to improve their returns”, looks toward private

provision not only as a means of efficiently expanding enrollments and coverage, but also to improve the quality of provision across the sector as a whole (Tarabini and Jacovkis 2012, 511).

However, the engagement of non-state providers in ensuring provision of basic educational services in the developing world raises concerns about potential damage that such a system could have on the process of state-building in fragile and conflict-affected nations. Batley and Mcloughlin (2010) identify several of the consequences associated with growing non-state provision of essential social services which include:

unsustainable operational standard and facilities; lack of upward and downward accountability of service providers...and the tendency for service providers to attract hostility from the state because of their unintended political role (132).

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on private providers to ensure educational provision faces criticism from those who argue that education should be a 'public good' which benefits not only individuals, but society at large (Rose 2005). Issues of affordability and social equity are particularly salient when considering the recent growth of a low-cost private school market that has spread through nations of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.

The 'Budget' Private School Market

Coinciding with efforts on behalf of national governments and multilateral organizations to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015, the expansion of low-cost 'budget' private schools throughout the Global South has reflected a trend that Tooley and Dixon (2006) refer to as 'de facto' privatization of education, in which the perceived poor quality and availability of state-sponsored, government education has allowed the

private sector to fill the widening provision gap. One of the main reasons for this ‘mushrooming’ of private schools is the perceived low-quality of government schools available to children of the poor, as well as the low-fees which these schools can provide by limiting labor costs by lowering the salaries of the teaching force.

Notable advocates of low-cost private schooling as an alternative to government-run provision in the developing world, James Tooley and Pauline Dixon (2006), have documented the growth of the market across nations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, noting that lower-class parents – dissatisfied with the poor quality, insufficient quantity, and lack of accountability associated with government schools – are increasingly enrolling their children in these low-cost private alternatives. The salience of the private sector in primary and secondary education provision is reflected by the high rate of growth in enrollment among the poorest segments of the population in nations like Pakistan, where Andrabi et. al (2008) identify that this market growth can be attributed to the low tuition fees these schools charge, which in many cases, is ‘less than the average daily wage of an unskilled laborer’ (350).

In India, the growth of the private school market is fed by parental demand to provide a better quality education for their children, which is closely related to aspirations among the lower-middle class and poor for their children to learn English (Nambissan and Ball 2010). While not surprising that poor parents would be driven to an educational market which is associated in the media and in popular imagination with upward social mobility and expanded educational and occupational opportunities, there remains concern whether the market is indeed ‘pro-poor’ with regards to concerns of private schools’ affordability,

accessibility, and regulation. These concerns are relevant in the context of ‘fragile states’ because, as Batley and Mcloughlin (2010) describe, it is precisely the environment where non-state provision is able to grow to meet peoples’ basic needs and provide services where the state’s capacity to regulate and monitor the sector is weakest.

Despite these concerns, advocates continue to argue that in the absence of effective government management of the educational system, the emergent low-cost private school market benefits the most marginal members of the population in the developing world. These researchers and practitioners laud the increase in parents’ capacity to ‘choose’ schools that meet their expectations and, if the school fails to deliver, to opt out by withdrawing their children. Such arguments are subsumed under the broader rhetoric of ‘parental choice’, in which those in favor of market-based approaches to education argue that the ability to choose providers in market conditions leads to greater competition among schools to satisfy parents (consumers) which, ideally, leads to better quality services at lower costs. Härmä (2011) describes the ‘ideal market’ conditions in the sector, where “fully informed customers (parents) make a choice from a range of available options with no provider having a monopoly” and where the resulting competition among providers provides “beneficial effects on *all* providers through increased responsiveness, accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, and quality,” (352). Even under ideal market conditions, however, Härmä (2011) argues that greater focus be placed on the issue of affordability, noting that families should be able to provide education to their children without having to ‘restrictively restrict spending in other essential areas such as food, medicine or shelter,” (352).

In Nepal, the private school market – once reserved solely for the privileged and the upper middle-class – has also expanded to include a substantial number of low-cost institutions whose students are drawn from the lower-class and poor segments of the population.

The Case of Nepal

Research on private schooling in Nepal has tended to focus on the intersection of private education, equity, and political conflict leading up to and during the “Peoples’ War” from 1996-2006. Caddell (2007) emphasizes that, beginning with the exclusionary policy of restricting access to education to the people by the ruling Rana oligarchy, which remained in power in Nepal from 1846 to 1950, educational provision and access has remained a politically contentious issue in the South Asian nation. Following the first People’s Movement in 1990, private school providers flourished among previously marginalized communities whose optimism of the newly established multi-party democracy translated into growing aspirations for equity and provision of services (like education) believed to be the ‘right’ of the people.

The Government of Nepal allowed private schools to be established in 1981 and, despite early concerns for the growing inequalities between those with the resources to attend these institutions and those enrolled in government schools, by the late 1980s the government pursued a policy of encouraging the “privatization of the school system as a means of increasing total system capacity and helping to meet the target of universal primary education by the year 2000 AD,” (USAID 1988, 2-117). This policy was further supported by external aid agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) who, in their 1988 Assessment of Nepal’s Education and Human Resources

Sector, noted that “privatization is strongly endorsed for establishing and operating schools and colleges” (2-89) and that the Government could increase greater private investment in education “by developing guidelines for establishing new private schools, thus facilitating this private sector growth” (1-11).

Along with policy suggestions from external agencies, the private school market significantly expanded during the 1990s following the Privatization Policy of 1991. Shakya (2009) notes that it was during this period of economic liberalization that private schooling experienced tremendous growth and, as has resulted in, as he argued, the development of education as an “intrinsically market-driven phenomenon” (127). As such, the current trend of privatization reflects the growing influence of a neoliberal ideology emphasizing the superiority of the free market to manage provision and access to social services such as education. The emphasis on individual competitive performance – between students and between schools –reinforces the perception of education as an individual consumptive, as opposed to a public, good. This shift in emphasis has coincided with the changes of the purpose and meaning of ‘development’ as it pertains to education in Nepal more broadly. Whereas from the 1950s to the 1970s ‘development’ of education was measured and conceived in terms of enrollments, literacy, and quantitative measures of facilities (USAID 1988), the economic transformations of the late 1980s and 1990s led to heightened anxieties on behalf of parents, in particular, about performance on the national School Leaving Certification Exam and, on behalf of the government and donors, about issues of managerial efficiency and accountability (Caddell 2007; World Bank 2001).

These economic changes at the turn of the 20th Century intensified parents’

pursuit of securing better education for their children. As Caddell (2007) describes the contemporary situation of poor parents and private schools in Nepal, “parents across the country may be spending as much as they can (or more) to send children to private, English-medium schools...yet, despite this investment, students’ aspirations are, in the main, not met,” (9). The stratification of Nepal’s private school sector became explicitly pronounced following the passing of the 7th Amendment of Education Act and Private and Boarding School Organization of Nepal’s (PABSON) Conduct Code in 2002 following agitation directed towards private schools from Maoist insurgents. In an effort to ameliorate the political conflict’s impact on private schools, a framework was crafted that assigned fee-structures for private schools which were to be ‘graded’ according to quality, facilities, and teaching staff. The result was a hierarchical classification system in which recognized private schools are now assigned grades by a regulatory body that limits the maximum monthly fees they can charge parents (Caddell 2007).

The growing number of private schools in Nepal remains a relevant issue with regards to understanding the dynamics of social change and development in the nation’s educational sector and society more broadly. With over 12,000 private institutional schools throughout the country (more than 1,000 of which are located in Kathmandu) (Lohani et al. 2010), the participation of previously excluded groups in the educational sector should be regarded as a serious phenomenon in a society currently engaged in heated debates about social equity, rights, and inclusion.

Methodology

This research was carried out throughout several communities in the city of Kathmandu between the months of November and December of 2012. Participants were selected from a variety of neighborhoods within the city of Kathmandu, although the majority of parents resided in the north-eastern communities of the city (such as Sokedhara, Kapan, and Ektabasti). In total, fifteen participants were interviewed for this study and although comprising small sample of Kathmandu's working-poor and lower class population, the responses represent a diverse group of parents from a variety of caste and ethnic groups, regions of origin, ages, and life circumstances.

To recruit participants for the study, my translator and I spent considerable time in local communities observing, speaking to residents, and working through local contacts who personally knew members of the target population. Due to ethical considerations, as well as the logistical issue that the main thrust of the data-collection process took place during the time of *Tihaar* (a popular religious festival for Chhetri-Bahun Hindus), I avoided searching for participants with the assistance of local private schools in the area and instead chose to work directly from the communities themselves as I searched for parents. As a result, parents whose responses comprise the primary source of data for this project represent a sample whose children attend a variety of low-cost private institutions in the surrounding areas of these communities.

The criteria used to select parents for this study necessitated that I find parents who could be considered part of the working-poor and whose children were currently (or recently) enrolled in low-cost private institutions in the city of

Kathmandu. The original operationalization of who comprised the ‘working-poor’ employed a poverty line used by the International Labour Organization, which restricted the target population to individuals who earned between \$1 and \$2 per day (Kyloh 2008); however, in the process of selecting participants, it became apparent that many parents had difficulty reporting their daily earnings and, although ‘poor’ relative to the rest of the population, shared a set of other characteristics that proved more significant to their life circumstances and class status than a measure of daily income could capture. With the assistance of my translator, who proved a valuable asset in her ability to navigate the social environment of these communities, parents were selected according to their living arrangements, assets, and occupational status.

Approaching the task of finding participants at first appeared daunting given that local schools were closed for the festival season and that ethical considerations excluded working with teachers, administrators, and students in contacting parents; however, finding participants who met the above criteria proved easier than expected. The relative ease in which such parents could be found within these communities reflects how salient these low-cost private schools are in the educational and social landscape of Kathmandu.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen parents, ten of whom were mothers of children enrolled in private school, three of whom were fathers, and two of whom were grandfathers who were also primary care-givers to their grandchildren. While the parents interviewed for this research earned an income through different means of labor, several commonalities stood out, representing a set of circumstances that the urban working-poor in Kathmandu share. First, with the exception of one, all the participants in the study rented,

rather than owned, their living space which, in many cases, consisted of a single room that was shared by several members of a single family. Second, it became increasingly clear that a primary characteristic of the working-poor in the city involved the irregularity of work and financial insecurity. Many of the parents interviewed were engaged in temporary or irregular labor (such as construction work, working as a part-time household servant, or selling fruits or snacks as street-side vendors). As a result of the type of work that many of these parents were engaged in, most parents found it difficult to provide an estimate of their daily or monthly earnings. Third, a majority of the participants had migrated to Kathmandu from other districts in Nepal – a feature which reflects trend of rural-to-urban migration which has resulted in the growth of the urban working poor (Oshiro et. al 2010).

Informed consent was obtained and interviews were conducted in Nepali and in the presence of an interpreter. Participants were first asked to describe themselves and their families, including providing details about their educational and occupational backgrounds, earnings and assets, ages, and living arrangements. Interviews then proceeded to involve questions regarding their children's education, which included questions pertaining to how particular schools were chosen, parents' and children's experiences with staff and students at these schools, monthly fee structures and affordability, perceptions of school quality, opinions of government alternatives, and parents' aspirations and concerns for their children's futures. Interviews were recorded with consent and parents' responses were then reviewed and transcribed with the assistance of a translator. All names of parents and schools appearing in this research have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Research Findings

Private Schools and the Working-Poor

Working-poor parents' experiences of the low-cost 'budget' private school market are varied, owing to the diversity of the market that is reshaping the educational sector of Kathmandu. Despite the diversity of parents' – and reports of their children's – experiences with these schools, many of the parents share a similar set of concerns and aspirations regarding their children's education.

In general, the findings from this research suggest that concerns for their children's social mobility figures prominently in lower-class parents' decisions to enroll their children in private schools as opposed to government-run alternatives. While aspirations for their children's futures are expressed by working-poor parents with a degree of uncertainty, there is a universally shared perception among parents who were interviewed that the education provided by government schools would entail less certainty in its benefit for their children's futures than private alternatives. Despite figuring prominently in parents' preferences for their child's schooling, many parents were keenly aware of the questionable quality of education their children received at private school. Concerns about the affordability of these schools were expressed by nearly all parents who participated in the study, with many reporting that tuition fees comprised a major portion of their monthly earnings and that, in many cases, families were unable to pay tuition fees on time, resulting in additional fines for parents and sometimes criticism from teachers for their children at school.

Parental Choice and Preference

Neoliberal arguments advocating the benefits of school choice for the poor rest their claims on the idea that expanding parents' capacity to 'choose' their child's school in a competitive market requires "customers [to] judge differences in quality among schools, and thus search for a simplified benchmark or "gold standard," (Davies & Quirke 2005, 3). In Kathmandu, where there exists a considerable private school market available for lower-class parents, questions related to the extent and contexts in which poor parents engage in 'choosing' their children's school are especially relevant.

The findings of this research suggest that, far from an ideal market where consumers are willing and able to withdraw from services if they are lacking in quality or if they are dissatisfied, poor parents are often limited in their capacity to engage the private school market in ways that benefit-maximizing, risk-minimizing rational consumers would in an economic model. Instead, the research findings indicate that despite the quantity of private schools throughout Kathmandu, many parents often chose their child's school because of its proximity to home. As one man, a father of two who earns roughly 300 rupees a day selling snacks as a street vendor, described why he chose his son's school:

I chose his school because it was nearby in the local area and the people around here said that this school was nice. When I was a guard in the factory, I worked from ten to five and when I finished work, I returned home and people said the school is good. I listened to those people and I thought maybe my sons will become *thatho batho* (smart-clever) and will be able to speak English.

While cost figured prominently as a factor in deciding what school to enroll their child in, many parents indicated that they had not looked at other

schools before making the decision. Kamala Adikari, a thirty-year-old mother of two who works as a *kaam garne-maanche* (household servant), described:

Before the school opened, I was living in this area and when the school opened, they told me I could send my daughters for 200 rupees a month. But when they began to add more classes, they raised the tuition fees, too. My children have been going to that school since Nursery. I haven't looked at any other schools because I have no money. This one is cheap.

Furthermore, parents who reported having changed their child's school did so not because of concerns over the quality of education, but often because of their inability to pay the monthly fees. Manthara Khatun, a mother of three who works as an embroiderer along with her husband and youngest son, described the reason for her change of schools as well as her perception of the relative quality of the education provided there:

My son attends private school in Ghantaghar, which is far from here. I started sending my son to Golden Hill Academy when we came to Kathmandu three years ago because it was so close, but I could not afford the school fees so I changed the school six months ago.... My son's new school is very cheap. I pay 500 rupees a month. The school is not that good and I want to send him to a better school but we cannot afford to.

Even in light of some parents' poor perceptions of their children's private school, there was a broad consensus among participants' preferences to send their children to private, rather than government, schools. Parents who themselves reported having attended government schools noted their inability to speak and understand English as a sign that government-run schools do not provide a high-quality education in a society where English proficiency has become an integral part of people's understanding of what it means to be 'educated'. One mother described:

I will send my children to private school even if I have to carry heavy loads [*bhari bokne kaam*]. I passed my SLC [*School Leaving Certificate*] from a government school, but still I do not know the meaning of 'A', 'B', 'C'. For that reason, I want them to go to private school... Without English, it doesn't work [*kaam chhaina*].

Along with the lack of adequate English instruction provided at government-run schools, nearly all the parents who were interviewed expressed concern about the quality of teaching and care provided at government schools. The concerns most commonly cited involved government teachers, whom were described as only caring about their salary and not about teaching or their students. As one mother describes:

In government-run schools, teachers do not care who comes, who attends, who is missing... Children are restless, but in government schools they [teachers] do not pay attention. There is no value in government schools... there is nothing. Teachers there do whatever they like.

Another mother of two young children noted that:

In the government schools, teachers only care about their salary, not students' education...In government schools the teachers' salaries are high. In private schools, it depends on the quality of the school. Teachers have to do their work in private schools and they're held responsible for the work that they do. In private schools, students are disciplined. They wear uniforms that show the equality between the students. They are neat and clean. And the teachers care about the students. In government schools, you do not have to wear clean clothes, and you do not have to wear the uniform. You can wear whatever you'd like. The teachers may – or may not – teach in the class. In private schools, students and teachers have to come to school regularly. Teachers cannot teach from their chairs in private schools. They have to stand and teach the students.

Concerns about pedagogy also figured in parents' perceptions of government-run institutions and several described that the style of teaching in government institutions was less than adequate for their children. One sixty-two

year grandfather who is the primary caregiver of a young boy studying in private school, noted:

I don't want to send my grandson to government school because he will be weak in his studies. They just give basic knowledge in those schools, but in private school, the teaching method is modern.

One twenty-six year old mother of two was able to provide perspective on the relative quality of both private and government institutions due to her recent decision to withdraw her young son from the private school he was studying at and enroll him in a nearby government institution. Due to her inability to pay the monthly dues on time, this mother expressed deep concern that because of her decision, her "son's studies have been lost". Detailing her son's previous experiences in private school and his current opinion of his new school, she described:

The government school is also good...if you think it is good. Parents cannot complain at the government school like they can at private schools. They do not give homework regularly. When he was in private school, he always had lots of homework. But now, he doesn't. My son doesn't like the other students in his school – they behave differently than the students at the private school. He doesn't like to go and he tells me "Mom, I don't want to go to this school. Everything is in Nepali and my friends are not good". Only one teacher teaches his classes. Sometimes the teacher doesn't teach and just tells her students "You read yourself and do the homework", and then leaves the class.

In general, parents expressed universal agreement in their preference to send their children to private, rather than government, schools; however, at the same time, not all parents who were interviewed were content with their child's educational situation in the private school they were enrolled in. The responses given by parents indicated particular concerns about the affordability and quality

of some of these low-cost institutions.

Affordability and Quality

The most cited concern for their child's education at private school involved parents' difficulty or inability to pay the monthly dues on time. Several parents described not having enough money to guarantee they would be able to pay rent or have enough to eat given the household's monthly income. Parents reported that their children's school fees ranged from Rs. 400-500 per month to several thousand; however, among those whose children attended the cheapest private schools, affordability figured most prominently as their main concern. As one mother discussed:

My older sons cannot work because they are disabled so my husband and I do this [embroidery] work. It is a difficult life to rent, to not have enough money for food, for these school fees. I pay 5,000 rupees a month for the rent here. I hardly earn enough for food and for the rent. One person working, four people eating...it's so difficult. If our problems get worse, I do not know how I will keep sending my son to private school.

I want my son to get a good education because he is the only son who has the chance to.

Parents who detailed their concerns about being able to afford their children's education were the ones most likely to express embarrassment or uncertainty about the fact that they frequently are late paying the monthly fees for their children's tuition. One father noted: "I cannot pay the fees on time. Now, I have lots of dues to pay – from the last six months. I only gave the exam fees so he could take his exams."

Several parents detailed how their inability to pay dues on time impacted their children at school. One father described:

Because I could not pay the dues on time – they would send letters all the time. When we had money, we paid at once – but when we did not have money, we could not pay.

During exam time, the teachers did not allow my son to take the exam. They said ‘Wait until your mother and father come’. So I went and told them I would pay soon and after that, the principal let him take his exam.

A similar statement was reported by another mother, who detailed how:

Sometimes – when I cannot pay the fees on time – the teachers will confront my children and tell them that their tuition is late. So I go to the school, request that I pay the fees in a few days, and ask the principal and teachers to stop tormenting my children about the money.

Another grandparent detailed a prior experience with a private school that his grandson attended before withdrawing because the family was unable to pay the late dues. In an interview, he recalled this experience:

Before, I used to send my grandson to Dream Public School, which was very expensive. He studied there from Nursery to Class 1, and then lived in the school hostel for one-and-a-half years. His mother and father were gone – they did not pay the fees for a long time – and the total dues came to 190,000 rupees. I don’t have that kind of money! The principal threatened us, saying that we had to pay the fees otherwise we could not take our grandson out of the school – he would not be able to leave. The school called his mother’s job – she was living in Dubai at the time – and they sent her back to Nepal. She went to the school and told the principal that she would pay the fees soon, but wanted to take her son out of the school for several days. After she took him out of the school, she ran. The boy doesn’t have anything from the school now – no certificate, books, exams. The school also threatened to involve the police in the matter, said we’d go to jail.

Many parents whose children attended these low-fee private institutions were keenly aware of the quality of education provided at school and expressed their preferences to have their children attend better institutions, but described their inability to afford better quality schools. Several parents noted that the lower quality of education was ‘appropriate’ for their economic situation. One father

reported:

There are two Surya Academies. Both have the same name, but the buildings are different. One is for the higher class and the other for the lower class. The education there is medium...not so good, not so bad. I know because sometimes I check my children's *kaapis* [notebooks] and I find mistakes made by their teachers. It is a C-Grade school. Before, I used to send them to a different private school, but after I could not afford the fees, I chose this school because it was cheaper.

Among some of the concerns of quality cited by parents, the use of corporal punishment in the classroom and extra dues added on to monthly bills for classes that were not actually provided both were noted in parents' responses.

One mother noted:

My daughter says that the teachers beat her sometimes. I pay 2,000 rupees a month – including dance fees and computer fees. But my daughter says they do not have dance or computer class! They write on the bill that she took these classes, but she doesn't. My daughter doesn't like going to the school because the teachers beat her.

Parents reported that they felt comfortable going to their children's schools to complain to teachers or principals. One mother expressed frustration over the unresponsiveness of the teachers at her child's school, indicating that "if we ask the teachers why the bill comes like this, they tell us they don't care. So they tell us to go complain to the principal, not to them." Parents, in general, did note that they felt teachers and principals working in private schools were more responsive to parents' demands and concerns than government alternatives.

Social Mobility and Class Aspirations

Associated with parents' decision to enroll their children in private schools – even those of perceived low-quality – were the class aspirations of a segment of the population forced to navigate their situations of financial

uncertainty and job insecurity. The majority of parents interviewed in this research reported that they hoped their child or children would one day be a *Thulo maanche* (“big person”) which is associated with a prestigious social status and economic security. Surprisingly, the majority of parents did not explicitly state that they hoped their child would follow a specific profession or occupation. Instead, what was commonly cited were parents’ hopes that their children would be *ramro maanche* (“good person”), that they would go the ‘right way’, and that they would fulfill their responsibilities towards their siblings and parents when they grow older. As one mother described:

I send them to private school by working hard. All my property, earnings – I will spend for their studies. We have a problem, but we do not want to give this problem to our children. For them, I work hard. Some people do not care about their children, but we do. If we cannot pay the fees on time, we can pay the next month. My children have their own ambitions for their futures. My husband and I have not studied, so we have to do this kind of hard work. For my children, I don’t want them to have to work like this. I don’t want my children to suffer like us. Neither I nor my husband has passed our SLC.

Parents detailed that if their children went to private schools, they would be able to find work when they grow older and that if they went to government schools, their opportunities in the future would be limited. Many parents hoped that their children would stay in school as long as possible, despite the additional expenses it would entail for the family. The notion that education provided a measure of security for the future that these parents themselves lacked was reflected in parents’ reported motivation for keeping their children in school. One father described that sending his child to school was his *dharma*, a belief that was also noted by other parents when they discussed how they would do everything they could to keep their child enrolled in private school, even if it entailed

‘carrying heavy loads’ and engaging in low-status manual labor.

Discussion/Analysis

Given the findings detailed above, it is clear that parents’ experiences engaging with the low-cost private school market in Kathmandu – while reflecting the diversity of life circumstances of the urban working-poor – can be assessed according to the shared concerns expressed by these parents. In particular, the frequently stated preference to send their children to private schools, the perceptions of the low quality provision found in government schools, the concerns about affordability and quality of low-cost private institutions, and the aspirations for their children’s futures represent the most commonly expressed sentiments among the parents interviewed during the data-gathering process. The research findings raise a number of implications for understanding the ways in which this market is shaping the current educational landscape of Nepal’s major metropole.

In light of arguments lauding the benefits of extending ‘choice’ to poor parents as a means of increasing school enrollments and benefiting the quality of the education sector in general, this research indicates that, to the extent that lower-class parents actually ‘choose’ from a variety of schools, alternative factors other than quality alone figure most prominently in parents’ decisions of which school to enroll their children in. Among the most commonly cited reasons for choosing the school that their children currently attend was proximity. Many parents noted that they had not considered other schools after finding one that was near and, in some cases, chose the school that was nearest their home and that was suitable for their economic status. While advocates for ‘choice’ claim

that parents, acting as ‘rational’ consumers under ideal market conditions, will spur competition among schools to improve the quality of their provision at lower costs, this argument fails to take into consideration the life circumstances that working-poor parents must negotiate and which constrain their capacity to consider a number of alternative schools which, in terms of proximity and in terms of the time they have available to search, might be unacceptable when considering the school to enroll their children in. Furthermore, the economic model which portrays educational provision as a ‘service’ or ‘product’ (and parents as ‘consumers’) neglects the potentially negative consequences of having to withdraw a child from one school to enroll them in another. The argument, therefore, does not allow considerations of how changing a child’s school might be viewed as harmful, rather than beneficial, to students and their families.

This implication is supported by the finding that, among parents who actually did change their children’s school, most often the choice was one of necessity rather than preference. Rather than citing dissatisfaction as the reason for changing schools, most parents interviewed in this study noted that it was because of their inability to pay the former school’s fees that they had to withdraw their children and, in many cases, were more satisfied with the quality of provision provided at the former, rather than the current, school.

Furthermore, several parents whose children attended low-cost private schools noted their perceptions of these schools not providing quality education to their children; however, parents often described the quality of these schools as being suitable and appropriate to their economic status. This finding suggests that poor parents might be keenly aware of both the quality of school that their child attends as well as the fact that their economic status limits the extent to which

their child will receive a 'good' education.

Despite their differing perspectives on the quality of education provided to their children at private school, the parents interviewed for this study all shared a common perception of government schools as unsuitable for their children. This finding suggests that parents' poor perceptions of government schools exclude these institutions from being considered when parents make the choice to enroll their children in a particular school. In addition, the reasons parents provided for explaining why government schools were of poor quality focused primarily on the quality of teachers rather than on poor facilities, proximity from home, or inadequate preparation for the School Leaving Certificate examination. In parents' responses, government teachers were depicted as only caring about their salaries, as being unresponsive to parents and students, and as generally indifferent towards the quality of their teaching and the students under their care.

While concerns for the lack of adequate English instruction also figured prominently in parents' concerns, the uncertainty of whether or not their children's classroom teacher cared about teaching and their children were much more salient concerns expressed in the interviews. This finding indicates that initiatives to improve the quality of government schools must not only address facilities and the curriculum, but must address the qualities that teachers possess, as well.

With regards to concerns of the affordability, parents expressed a variety of sentiments indicating the diversity of fee-structures, teaching styles, and facilities involved with these schools. In most cases, parents described their difficulty in paying the school fees on time and described these fees as major expenses along with rent, food, and basic services. The problem of affordability

raises doubts about whether these low-cost private schools can truly be considered 'pro-poor' and of particular interest is the fact that many poor parents accumulate months' worth of late fees before being able to pay. The inability to pay on time in several of these parents' cases led to problems for their children in school such as not being able to take examinations until the dues were paid and being confronted by teachers and principals about their late fees. The degree to which parents limited other expenses such as food and rent suggests that the school fees of even considerably cheap private schools consume a large portion of poor families' monthly earnings. In situations where primary earners of a family already are forced to address financial uncertainty and irregular work opportunities, the accumulation of debts owed to these schools and the ways in which families manage their expenses in order to continue to send their children to school are areas in which substantially more research is needed.

Concerning the degree to which parents' decisions to enroll their children in private schools were guided by greater concerns of their children's future social mobility, it is unclear the extent to which their aspirations were primarily driven by class interests alone. While parents described how they hoped that their children would not have to endure hardships like their parents, many parents who were interviewed noted that they did not have any particular aspiration for their children other than to be 'good people' when they grew up. The sentiment that their children's futures were not for them to decide, but that they hoped their children would continue in their schooling could indicate the degree to which these parents make decisions for their children to help them navigate an uncertain future by themselves. In addition, the salience of moral aspirations (for their children to be 'good' people) suggests that it is not solely the credentials or

academic aspects of 'education' that guide parents in making choices for their children's future, but also concerns related to the acquisition of moral traits and of learning to navigate their own futures as well.

Conclusion

Given the tremendous growth and high demand for low-cost private schools in Kathmandu, it is apparent that the sector is reshaping the educational landscape of the city; however, the ways in which these schools are embedded within broader concerns about social equity, inclusion, economic justice, and the role of the State remain relevant issues to consider in attempting to understand in what ways the educational sector in Nepal's metropole are being reconfigured with the introduction of such a diverse market.

This research provides but a small glimpse into one aspect of the impact that this market is having by focusing particularly on the ways in which poor parents interpret, navigate, and make decisions within the growing market of low-cost private schools in Kathmandu. Already having to negotiate the uncertainty of living in the periphery of the urban economy, the decisional contexts in which these parents make decisions for their children provides perspective into how concerns and aspirations for their children's schooling are embedded in their beliefs about the role of education, about what traits are embodied in the 'educated' person, and about what factors contribute to high quality educational provision. Considerations regarding these perceptions are absent in neoliberal arguments for school 'choice' and in the claims that are proposed in support of the low-cost private schools in improving the quality of education in the developing world. The findings from this research, which highlight the

complexities involved in parents' experiences with their children's education, suggest that overly economic arguments in support of choice or private schooling in general neglect those considerations and perceptions which are not able to be factored into an economic model.

Despite the diversity of these parents' experiences, the findings from this research make it overwhelmingly clear that working-poor parents care deeply for their children and view education as a means to provide for their children's futures and well-being. Even parents who themselves received little formal schooling during their childhood expressed views which indicated the importance of ensuring that their children received the best education they could manage and afford, reflecting the belief that schooling would entail a higher degree of certainty in their children's lives than that of their parents'.

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List of interviews

**All actual names have been replaced by pseudonyms. Caste and ethnic designations have been preserved.*

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