

Beyond Proximity: Investigating Learners' Preference for Distant Schools Over Nearby Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Accessibility has historically been regarded as a major factor in school selection. New trends indicate that learners are placing a higher value on other characteristics like academic standing, specialized programs and campus amenities. Despite the availability of nearby institutions, this study investigates the factors that influence learners' preference for distant learning environments. This study helps to provide a more complex knowledge of learners' preferences, so providing important consequences for educational institutions trying to draw and keep learners as well as for lawmaking bodies. The participants of the study are learners studying at Valencia National High School, Valencia City, Bukidnon, Philippines and Halapitan National High School, Halapitan, San Fernando, Bukidnon, Philippines who live in an area far from their chosen schools. The researcher used qualitative methods with descriptive phenomenology to conduct the study. Research data collection involved participants being interviewed to provide deeper understanding of individual motivations.

The result shows that perceived future career benefits, extracurricular activities, and academic quality exceed the convenience of proximity. Furthermore, a very important factor in learners' decision-making are social factors and family expectations. The results expose the presumption that distance is a main obstacle and underline the complexity of elements influencing educational decisions. Future research should look more at how these factors change across time and in many cultural settings.

Keywords: school choice, learners' motivation, academic reputation, proximity, learner decision-making, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Choosing a school is one of the most crucial decisions students and their families face, as it influences not only academic achievement but also social development (Baker et al. 2024). Recently, a growing number of students have shown a preference for distant schools over those located nearby. This trend prompts us to explore the underlying reasons for these choices and their implications for educational equity. Traditionally, proximity has been a key factor in school selection; however, many learners are increasingly attracted to institutions that offer a wider variety of academic programs, extracurricular activities, and diverse social environments (Alegre et al. 2022).

Despite the importance of this topic, there is still a lack of knowledge regarding the viewpoints of learners. Learners who are directly impacted by these decisions have frequently had their voices marginalized in most of the research that has been done so far, which has mostly concentrated on parental influences and school characteristics (Bruhn et al. 2024). This oversight restricts our comprehension of the elements affecting school choice and the possible repercussions for educational equity (Cucchiara et al. 2019).

Factors such as academic reputation, perceived quality of education, and the availability of specialized programs significantly influence student choices (Bruhn et al. 2024). Social dynamics, including peer relationships and a sense of belonging, also play a vital role in shaping these preferences as stated by Baker et al. 2020. International studies support these findings. For example, research in Australia has shown that many

international students favor distant schools due to the diverse opportunities and resources they offer (Choi et al. 2021). Locally, studies indicate that learners from various socioeconomic backgrounds have different motivations for their school choices, adding complexity to the decision-making process (Burgess et al 2021).

The primary objective of this research is to investigate learners from Valencia National High School, Valencia City, Bukidnon, Philippines and Halapitan National High School, San Fernando, Bukidnon, Philippines as preferences for distant schools compared to nearby institutions, focusing on their perspectives and the relationships among various influencing factors. By centering this study on learners, we aim to gather insights that can inform educators and policymakers, ultimately fostering a more equitable and responsive educational landscape for all learners. Understanding these preferences, is essential for creating an educational system that meets the diverse needs of every learner.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To understand fully the experiences and motivations of the learners, this study used qualitative approach employing descriptive phenomenology. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to collect data enabling seven (7) participants from Valencia National High School, Valencia City, Bukidnon and seven (7) participants from Halapitan National High School, Halapitan San Fernando, Bukidnon, Philippines to share their individual experiences and viewpoints coded and categorized into themes. The study's main goals were to find out why some learners decide to go to distant schools like Valencia National High School and Halapitan National High School. What drives them to do so (such as the desire for better educational opportunities), and what factors make them choose to avoid local schools near them. By employing this design, the study hopes to understand the fundamental causes of these decisions; the difficulties that learners encounter, and their recommendations for upcoming learners who might also think about attending distant schools as opposed to those nearer to home.

Research Instrument

This study employed semi-structured interview questions that expert verified. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research technique that contains a set of open-ended questions. As a result, new ideas may be demonstrated, and the interviewer may do further investigations into themes and replies. Semi-structured interviews were employed in the study to analyze themes related to learners' school choice decisions. This study technique allowed participants to express their opinions, ideas, and real-life experiences without being limited to influenced by a predetermined interpretation of their selection process.

Data Gathering Procedure

Participants were asked to provide written documents regarding research ethics. Each email invitation included a detailed research description, an electronic consent sheet for signatures, and an interview format. The research used semi-structured interviews to gather specific information from participants, resulting in a thorough understanding of their decisions and choices in choosing distant schools rather than schools near them.

Analysis of Data

The researchers used a methodical analysis for data transcription that followed the structure of the phenomenological descriptive approach. The research design allowed researchers to obtain concrete knowledge about the participants' decisions and choices in choosing distant schools over nearby institutions. Each interview transcription was reviewed after the recording process, translation step, and thorough examination of the data. Traditional content analysis allowed researchers to detect important statements followed by extracting meaningful units from the data. Open coding techniques allowed researchers to select concepts followed by the creation of subthemes and their definition.

The investigation and analysis of subtheme linkages led to the identification of conceptual patterns with tables and diagrams. The research employed line-by-line coding to generate themes, which were then integrated with subthemes using constant comparison analysis while retaining conceptual continuity. Repetitive analysis helped to clarify and validate themes, preventing important features of the researched phenomena from being overlooked. A panel of specialists evaluated the findings to determine the validity of the data interpretation method.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, the researcher compiled all human rights legislation, safety rules, health procedures and protocols, and conflict of interest criteria. Before being allowed to participate, each participant was given permission letters and invites, as well as consent papers to examine. Each participant received an interview transcript to review before the transcription was finalized. Throughout the study, participants were assured that all of their comments and personal information would be kept anonymous. Throughout this inquiry, the researcher provided correct credit to all research authors for their contributions while keeping complete openness throughout the ethical research procedure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The next part presents the themes gleaned from the interview transcript data. A methodical approach reduced the transcripts to codes, which were then grouped to extract themes before the final emerging themes were created. The investigation of learners' experiences in choosing distant schools over schools closer to them produced these emergent results that offer insights on their selections.

There are themes that arose from the analysis of the significant statements generated from the transcribed interviews.

Theme 1. Seeking Better Opportunities for Academic Excellence and Personal Development

Many participants mentioned stronger academic offerings and resources available at distant schools as a primary reason for their choice. Participants consistently said that their choice to attend distant schools was motivated by the need for greater academic offers, talented teachers, and a richer learning environment, as well as the potential for personal growth, freedom, and exposure to various experiences. Participant 1 explained, "Because of some advantages such as the schools' subjects, learning technique and many more," while another participant noted, "They promote more opportunities for me to grow and they have very skilled teachers." Participant 7 elaborated on the benefits by stating, "Enrolling to distant schools has many benefits. They offer many curriculums or strands you could choose and develop your ability to adapt new knowledge from different places while enhancing your confidence to pursue a better job in the future." These responses suggest a strong desire for quality education, diverse academic programs, and better preparation for the future careers – opportunities that learners believe are more easily available at distant institutions than those within their local area.

Several participants expressed a desire to challenge themselves, discover more about their capabilities, and become more self-reliant. Participant 8 shared that, "I want to be challenged and discover more things about myself. I also want to explore myself to a bigger school environment and experience a diverse crowd." Another explained, "For me, I chose distant school rather than school near to me because I wanted to be an independent learner who wants to face all the challenges to come so that I will be prepared when I go to college."

Analyzing learners' responses, it reveals that learners are not driven just by distance or convenience. Instead, learners are actively looking and seeking for environments that will promote and maximize both their academic and personal development. The implications are significant for educational planners and policymakers/politicians. Local schools may need to enhance their curriculum offerings, teaching quality, and extracurricular opportunities to retain learners within their communities. Furthermore, the emphasis on personal development and independence suggests that learners value opportunities that will prepare them for

future challenges, such as higher education and employment. This emphasizes the importance of the schools fostering not only academic excellence but also overall development, such as confidence, flexibility, adaptability, and social skills.

Recent literature supports these findings. According to research on school choice and distance education, families and learners frequently prioritize academic excellence and personal fit over location when choosing a school. For example, Bruhn et al. (2024) found that families are prepared to endure longer travel or remote learning if it meant access to higher academic standards and a better match for their child's requirements.

Furthermore, worldwide research shows that settings choices are influenced by the desire for quality, progress, and future chances, regardless of location. These trends, observed from 2018 to 2025, underline the fact that learners' decisions to attend distant schools are motivated by a purposeful desire for both academic and personal growth.

Theme 2. Logistic and Social-emotional Challenges

Many learners mentioned their difficulties to arrive on time due to distance and transportation issues. Learners indicated that enrolling in schools away from home led to persistent difficulties and issues with punctuality and transportation, as well as difficulties and challenges in social integration and emotional adjustment. For example, Participant 1 mentioned such as, "Sometimes there is no ride available because I am a commuter. If you wake up late, then you will be late for school." Other participants note that being late affects their academic work as seen by the response of Participant 2 "being not on time (being late) and having difficulties in projects." These statements demonstrate how driving to a distant school frequently results in tardiness and logistical issues, which have a great negative impact on attendance and participation.

Socially and emotionally, learners experience feelings of isolation and difficulty integrating. Just like Participant 4 sharing, "I felt so lonely and friendless", while Participant 5 states that "being shy just because of the people you've never met before, reducing skills in communicating." Analyzing these responses, it indicates that logistic barriers not only disrupt learners' academic routines and habits but also intensify emotional distress. The stress of inconsistent transportation and frequent tardiness can increase feelings of isolation, making it more difficult for students to form supportive peer relationships and fully participate in school activities. This combined burden has the potential to set off a vicious cycle in which academic and social challenges reinforce each other, potentially leading to disengagement or dropout.

Recent research study supports these conclusions. For example, a 2021 study on geographically remote schools discovered that logistical impediments, such as a resource constraints and transportation concerns, are directly related to learners' retention and engagement challenges (Smith et al., 2023). Furthermore, research on the function of the learning environment in socio-emotional development demonstrates that good peer and teacher interactions are critical for emotional well-being, and a lack of such support can impair communication skills and raise feelings of isolation. The significance of psychological assistance in schools has also been highlighted, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic, since learners' mental health problems have grown more acute and necessitate extensive school-based solutions (Garcia et al. 2020)

The implication is clear: simply addressing the logistical concerns of distance school enrollment is insufficient. Schools must implement comprehensive initiatives that promote social-emotional well-being, such as peer mentorship, accessible counseling, and inclusive community building activities as mentioned by Baker et al. (2020). Such techniques can assist kids in faraway schools overcome the multiple hurdles they confront, promoting both academic and emotional resilience (Choi et al. 2021).

Theme 3. Strategic Adaptation to Overcome Distance-Related Challenges

Learners who chose distant schools actively created and developed practical routines and social techniques to deal with the demands of their situation. Time management was a consistent strategy among the participants. Several participants indicated activities they took to deal with the problems of attending a distant school away from their home, such as getting up early, planning their calendars and avoiding procrastination. Just like

Participant 1 simply stated “time management,” while Participant 2 explained, “I manage my time, woke up early and go to school as early as possible.” Participant 6 added more detail, saying that they managed their time by waking up early, staying organized with homework and avoiding procrastination to minimize stress, “Staying organized by answering homework to minimize stress.” These responses show how effective their management of their daily routines was an essential key to overcoming the difficulties associated with choosing a distant school.

Developing confidence to interact with others in the new school environment is the most necessary way to adapt to a new environment. Participant 3 shared, “I’ve managed to do such things such as being friendly to others and respect everyone around me so that they could also do the same thing for me.” Highlighting the importance of positive social interactions, Participant 5 shared by stating, “To ease that problem, I enhance my self-confidence to talk to my classmates and make friends.” These responses suggest that forming connections and integrating socially were important strategies for managing the challenges of attending a distant school.

Based on the findings, learners do not passively accept the problems connected with distance. Instead, they proactively adjust by recognizing their daily routines, prioritizing critical chores, and forming supporting social circles. This strategic adaptation not only helps learner with practical issues like travel and time constraints, but it also addresses the social and emotional aspects of living a new period (Han et al. 2022). The interference is that learners who can adjust in these ways are more likely to thrive academically and socially, even when confronted with additional obstacles and responsibilities from distance. Schools that attract learners from distant may benefit from supporting these adaptation techniques with programs that enhance time management and social integration (Jabbar et al. 2019).

Current study highlights the need of strategic adaptation in educational situations. For example, research on school adaptation and performance shows that strategic flexibility, creativity, innovation, and organizational capacities significantly increase school outcomes, especially in changing or challenging circumstances. According to studies, adaptive strategies such as inclusive curriculum design, the use of digital technology, and the promotion of collaboration are critical for maintaining educational quality and relevance in the face of social and logistical challenges (Morrison, N. 2025). Furthermore, learners’ adaptation research demonstrates that self-regulated learning techniques, such as time management and social interaction, are critical for overcoming hurdles in both traditional and remote education settings (Liu et al. 2023).

Theme 4. Effective Self-Management and Preparedness

Learners who decided to attend distant schools need to develop strong self-management skills and be emotionally, physically and psychologically ready to handle the extra challenges that come with distance. Time constraints, transportation, and acclimating to new surroundings are likely the reason. Several participants emphasized the importance of time management for learners attending distant schools or institutions. “Be on time, because it will affect your learning skills in the school,” said Participant 1, while Participant 2 advised, “Be aware of the school about its rules and regulations as well as devise a plan whether a relative lives near the school so that you can go to school without being late.” Participant 4 went on to say, “I recommend managing your time wisely by planning ahead. Always stay organized by answering all your homework to reduce stress. Lastly, staying healthy by sleeping early and to eat regularly to stay energized.”

Acknowledging the potential hardships-such as transportation issues, managing finances, and even the pain of losing familiar comforts as explained by Participant 5, “I recommend that you will be brave and confident so that you can cope up with such things,” recognizing the emotional and social adjustment required. Participant 9 further elaborated, “We all know that going in the distant school is a hassle, like transportation and how to manage your allowance. Therefore, I recommend to those learners who wants to study in a distant school, you should prepare mentally, physically and emotionally. Mentally prepared for the problems that will come and physical prepared for the challenges that will come, lastly be emotionally prepared for the pain of losing”

The ability to manage learners’ academic performance and general well-being are directly impacts by their capacity for time management, motivation, and environmental adaptation (Liu et al. 2023). Lack of these

abilities can cause learners to experience higher levels of stress, subpar academic results, and loneliness (Nguyen et al. 2021). Recent literature provides strong support for these finding. Self-management and self-regulated learning (SLR) are essential for learners in distant learning environments according to a wealth of research (Jabbar et al. 2019). For instance, research indicates that while poor self-management can result in stress and disturbed sleep patterns, good time management is associated with improved academic performance and decreased anxiety (Smith et al. 2020). Due to the emotional and practical challenges, they encounter, learners must be pro-active, well organized, and resilient.

CONCLUSION

Learners' primary motive for enrolling in a distant school is to improve their academic opportunities, personal growth and development, and job preparedness in the future. Participants repeatedly emphasized academic programs, skilled teachers, and diverse learning environments provided in distant schools, which they believe are essential for their development and success. Learners' choices come with significant logistical and social-emotional challenges. Learners expressed issues with transportation, punctuality, and feelings of loneliness, as well as the need to adapt to new social environments and managed growing independence.

Even with difficulties, learner suggests that those considering distant schools should be well-prepared, self-disciplined, and resilient, emphasizing the importance of effective self-management and holistic readiness. According to the study, to better meet the goals of learners, educational institutions and policymakers should improve the caliber and diversity of local school offerings in addition to addressing logistical obstacles. In the end, more responsive and equitable educational systems may result from an awareness of and commitment to learners' diverse needs.

RECOMMENDATION

Local schools should strengthen their academic programs and activities to match what distant schools provide. This includes expanding topic options, improving teaching techniques, and providing more engaging after school activities for the learners. Schools must provide frequent teacher training to help them teach more effectively and employ innovative approaches to keep learners interested.

Schools and Local Governments (LGU's) should collaborate to address transportation issues. Many learners reported being late due to travel concerns. Better transit alternatives would allow learners to arrive on time and relieve stress. Government authorities should ensure that all schools receive equitable funding and resources. Schools in rural places sometimes have little to offer so many learners travel far to find better opportunities.

More study should be conducted to better understand how learners' preferences vary over time and between communities. Investigating what attracts learners to distant schools might help local schools improve. These methods can assist to improve local schools by meeting learners needs to eliminate the need for long distant travel and promoting community growth.

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