Demonstration Effects in Primary School Choice: Rural-Urban Evidence from Kerala, India

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Abstract

This study examines how demonstration effects influence where parents send their children to primary school in Kerala. The study focused on the Ernakulam district, specifically comparing Chengamanad village and Edappally town. The study is based on 120 samples of middle-income families. To understand what drives these choices, the study uses simple descriptive methods and a multinomial logistic regression model. The results indicate a substantial difference between the two areas. Urban families in the sample are over 12 times more likely to choose private CBSE or ICSE schools than their rural counterparts. When parents have more education, they are much

more likely to pick a private school for their children. Even though Social influence isn't the biggest factor, it clearly pushes families toward certain private schools. This provides evidence consistent with a demonstration effect. In the rural area, parents tend toward conformity, constrained by fewer institutional alternatives and limited exposure to diverse schooling systems. In the city, however, it is more about aspirational imitation. These parents exhibit a marked preference for private, English-medium education, aligned with the aspirational standards of their peer group. The findings suggest, within the limits of this purposive sample, that school selection extends beyond household income alone. It is a deeply social process. Policy makers need to look at more than just school buildings; they must understand the social behavior behind how parents actually choose.

Keywords: Demonstration Effect, Primary Education, School Choice, Logistic Regression, Rural–Urban Disparity, Kerala

Introduction

Education is the foundational driver of economic growth and social mobility, contributing systematically to human capital formation. From a macroeconomic viewpoint, many studies show that investing in education helps labor productivity and new technology. This starts from the old works of Barro (1979) and Lucas (1988) up to the newer studies by Teixeira and Queirós (2016). But education is not just about money and growth. The social returns to education are substantial. Education helps people feel better and keeps the society together. Because of this, it is a main tool to reduce poverty (Ravallion & Chen, 1997). Primary schooling is the most important part of this whole process. This is where children develop their cognitive and behavioral foundation. These early years actually decide how a person will learn all their other skills later in life. India has tried to fix elementary education with a lot of government action and spending. Despite these efforts, the system remains deeply uneven. Drèze and Sen (2002) pointed out this system paradox. Some schools possess well-developed facilities, while others in close proximity lack even basic infrastructure. These disparities are predominant in between rural and urban areas. In these places, the access to schools and what parents want lead to vastly different outcomes.

Kerala presents a distinct case within the Indian context. The state has very high literacy and good human development. This is because of long-term social

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programs and steady government money (Chakraborty, 2009; Oommen, 2014). But the nature of Kerala is not uniform everywhere. Rural and urban areas still differ in the availability of schools and in the medium of instruction. The private sector also has a stronger pull in some locations. This shows that school outcomes are not just about what is available, but it depends on how parents perceive their options and how they act upon them. One interesting reason for this is the demonstration effect. Originating in consumption theory, this concept explains how individuals imitate observable choices of others under conditions of uncertainty. In urban locations, education is often seen as a positional good. This means picking a school is more about showing off social status than just the teaching methodology and curriculum. Even middle-income families incur disproportionate expenditure to enrol children in private English-medium institutions (Kingdon, 2020; Lohan et al., 2020). Such behaviour reflects conformity to prevailing local social norms rather than independent quality assessment.

Rural areas work differently. Even households with relatively higher incomes often choose government schools. This results in reduced spending on education. This is not a sign of indifference. Instead, the local culture makes public schooling a standard choice. So, the demonstration effect operates in both places, but the signal changes based on specific institutional and social conditions. Empirical researchers have identified long ago that income and parents' education and employment affect the performance of kids in school (Farooq et al., 2011; Al-Matalka, 2014). However, income is not the only determinant. Studies by Hijazi and Naqvi (2006) and Ogunshola and Adewale (2012) show that income and wealth matter less if the home learning environment and the education of the parents are good. Parents' own education and their goals for their kids are often more important than the family's bank balance (Singh & Singh, 2014). From a research standpoint, the study has to look at two things: what the state gives (supply-side) and what the family picks (demand-side). Motiram and Osberg (2012) noted that families in the same socioeconomic environment sometimes make different choices because they imitate their peers. Drèze and Sen (2002) also remind us that the household makes the final choice, even if the system is large. We need to understand this link between the system and behaviour. This is important for making policies that people actually prefer.

There is a lot of research, but not much on the demonstration effect in primary schools. Kerala is a perfect location to analyse this phenomenon because the infrastructural facilities are mostly the same everywhere. So, the study can focus on how people behave. This research addresses a vital gap and looks at the primary

level because of the highest chance for future mobility. This study looks at how social imitation affects the decision of parents in two parts of Ernakulam, Kerala. We compare the village of Chengamanad (rural) with the town of Edappally (urban). We want to determine whether social imitation is the same everywhere or if it changes between the city and the country. These findings will help us understand how psychology affects the future of human capital.

Review of Literature

The education literature provides a detailed insight into how inequality is reproduced through schools, homes, and locational contexts. Access to the institution is not the main crux of the debate anymore. Instead, researchers now focus on how the system of education is split into different layers. They also studied the unfair conditions of the learning environment. Altbach and Mathews (2015) found that in Kerala, almost everyone is enrolled in school. Simultaneously, institutional differentiation across school types has expanded. This means that even if the numbers look equal, the actual quality of education can be very different in different type of institutions. Jacob and Holsinger (2008) build on this idea. They argue that educational inequality is a slow but cumulative process. It is shaped by institutional design, household background, and policy frameworks, rather than any single factor.

Other research shifts the focus from the school to the family. It reveals how inequality is created by decisions made inside the household. Datta and Kingdon (2019) show that even as more kids get into school, families still spend money differently on each child. For example, boys are sometimes given a higher chance to go to private schools than girls. Their study also shows how much a family spends on education when their income fluctuates, especially in the case of lower-income families. Such households face constrained decisions regarding educational investment. These patterns suggest that simply getting a child into a classroom does not erase the deep preferences and constraints within a family.

It is very important to consider the government funding and the growth of private schools. Dongre and Kapur (2016) noted that public spending on primary education has stayed stagnat for a long time. There is also a bigger gap in expenditure between different states. The consequences are difficult to ignore. Insufficient public investment in government schools limits their capacity for improvement. This makes it easier for private schools to grow. In this situation, French and Kingdon (2010) and Kingdon (2020) found that Students in private schools demonstrate relatively

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better learning outcomes. These findings explain why more parents are switching to private institutions, even though people still concerned about costs and fairness.

The location where a person lives adds another layer of complexity. Research by Dem (2019) and Singh (2021) shows the ongoing disadvantages in rural areas. Rural locales struggle with poor infrastructure, fewer resources, and kids dropping out. Zamora and Dorado (2015) argue that the rural-urban divide is still an unsolved issue of overall inequality in education. Kundu and Dey (2018) further note that unequal access to digital infrastructure is reshaping existing educational divides. This creates new kinds of locational layers in how kids experience school.

Sociological views go further by questioning if economic conditions and constraints are the only thing that matters. Nambissan (2016) shows that school systems based on the market mechanism can actually make inequality worse for poor families instead of improving their position. Evidence from Ngware and Mutisya (2021) suggests that proximity to a school and peers' decisions are key for poor families in urban areas. Reay and Lucey (2000) offer a deeper look into social class. They show how a family's social position and their social reference groups change their decision regarding a right school. All this work shows that educational choice is a social process. It happens because of how institutions are set up, how households plan, and what the community thinks is normal. This gives us a solid base to study the demonstration effects in primary education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the theory of the demonstration effect. This theory explains how people make decisions by watching what others do. It started in the field of consumption economics. Now, however, it is used in many other areas. Both sociology and behavioral research show that people look for social cues. This happens especially when official information is hard to find or difficult to understand. The process of selecting a school for one's child aligns closely with this logic. Parents sometimes find it hard to judge school quality. Because of this, they turn to the choices made by neighbors, relatives, and friends. These visible choices serve as a sign of what a "good" school looks like.

For this study, the demonstration effect is defined as the tendency of households to adopt schooling choices that are visibly prevalent among peers and neighbours, independent of their own direct assessment of school quality. This is distinct from general peer influence, which may include advice, recommendations, or information sharing. The demonstration effect is specifically about behavioural imitation of

observable choices. The framework used here does not treat school choice as just a matter of income and economic condition. Instead, it sees it as a social process. Family income is important, but it does not act in isolation. Parental choices are constructed through social effects and the local school environment. Neighbourhood norms and informal networks of family and friends exert a significant, if less visible, influence. At the same time, the parents' own education changes how they see these social signals. Parents with more information might check the school's quality on their own, whereas others will rely more on what the group thinks is best.

Social context also changes these elements. In rural areas, there are fewer schools and less information about alternatives. This makes people follow the crowd. Under such conditions, imitating the visible choices of others constitutes a rational response to uncertainty. Urban areas show a different picture. There are wider range of schooling options, which leads to more comparison and competition among families with similar backgrounds. In both cases, the demonstration effect is not just a small detail. It is the main way that educational choices are constructed and passed on through the community.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the presence of the demonstration effect in primary education.

2. To compare schooling choices between rural and urban households with similar income levels.

3. To statistically test the influence of social factors on school selection.

Hypotheses:

H1: School choice is significantly influenced by friends, family, and neighborhood decisions.

H2: There is a significant difference in school choice patterns between rural and urban areas.

Data and Methodology

The study uses a descriptive-analytical design with primary data collected through a structured interview schedule. The fieldwork took place in two socially and institutionally different areas within Ernakulam district, Kerala. Chengamanad village represents the rural school environment and Edappally town represents the urban context. The urban area has more exposure to education and more choices.

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This contrast is intentional. It lets the analysis go beyond simple averages. We can see how school decisions are determined under different social conditions.

In total, 120 households were surveyed using a purposive non random sampling method. There was equal representation from both rural and urban areas. The study only looks at households with children in primary education. This is the stage where parental decisions are most visible and connected to social factors. The sample is mostly from middle-income households. This methodological decision controls for income-driven variation in school choice. This helps us focus more on social, behavioural, and spatial influences. Data collection covered household socio-economic status, parental education, and jobs. The survey also recorded the type of school, the preferred medium of instruction, and educational expenditure. The study places particular emphasis on social influence as a distinct explanatory variable. This includes influence from friends, relatives, and neighbours. By doing this, the study captures demonstration effects directly.

The analysis combines descriptive and econometric techniques. Percentage analysis and cross tabulation were used to map out school patterns and the rural-urban differences clearly. Chi-square tests were used to check the link between social influence, where people live, and school choice. To assess the combined effect of all the factors, the study employs a multinomial logistic regression model. Government and state schools are the reference category in this model. The explanatory variables include the area of residence, the education of parents, and employment status. The analysis also included the preferred medium of instruction and social influence. The rural and urban groups were compared to clarify how copying and imitation work under different local pressures. These methods give a solid and consistent way to analyse demonstration effects in school choice.

Results and Discussion

This section gives the results of the study and discusses what the study found in detail. Initially, the basic socio-economic background of the 120 families is analysed. The study uses simple percentage analysis and Chi square tests. These methods help us see the main differences in school choices and language preferences. They also show how social influences vary between the two groups. The next is the use of a multinomial logistic regression model. This test shows how different factors, such as location and parental education, work together to decide the school choice. These results are important. They explain how the demonstration effect really works in the daily lives of these families.

1. Socio-Economic Profile of the Sample

The analysis begins with the socio-economic profile of the 120 households surveyed. This helps to understand the background of families in both Chengamanad (Rural) and Edappally (Urban). The study specifically selected middle-income families for this analysis. Through this, it is possible to see how other factors like education and job status vary between the two areas. Table 1 below gives a detailed picture of these characteristics.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Sample Households

Variable	Category	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Income	Middle-income households	100.0	100.0	100.0
Education of parents	Graduate & above	33.3	53.3	43.3
	Secondary or below	66.7	46.7	56.7
Employment status	Working parents (both spouses)	41.7	65.0	53.3

Source: Primary survey data

The data in Table 1 shows clear differences between rural and urban households. They all belong to the middle-income group. In the urban area, more parents have higher education than in rural areas. Among urban households, 53.3 per cent of parents hold graduate-level qualifications or above. In the rural area, only 33.3% of parents reached that level. 66.7% of rural parents have only a secondary education or less. The data also shows a big difference in employment. In urban households, it is much more common for both spouses to work, which is 65.0%. In the rural area, this number is much lower at 41.7%. These differences in parental education and employment status carry significant analytical weight. They show that urban parents likely have more exposure to different schooling options and peer groups. This background helps explain why the demonstration effect might work differently in each location.

2. School Choice Patterns between Rural and Urban Areas

The following table illustrates the school choice pattern by area of residence. The classification is made between the syllabi taught, such as the state SCERT syllabus and CBSE or the ICSE syllabus.

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Table 2: School Choice Patterns by Area

Type of School	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Government / Aided (State syllabus)	78.33	28.33	53.33
Private (CBSE/ICSE/Similar)	21.67	71.67	46.67
Total	100.00	100.00	100.0
Chi-Square Test: $\chi^2 = 30.134$, df = 1, $p < 0.01$			

Source: Primary survey data and the authors' calculation

A marked difference is observed between rural and urban households in terms of the school type selected. 78.33 percent of rural households enrol their children in government or state syllabus schools. Urban respondents, however, show a strong preference for private CBSE or ICSE schools, at 71.67 per cent. This contrast may be attributable to constrained institutional availability in rural areas alongside aspirationally shaped preferences in urban settings. The Chi-square test shows a statistically significant association between school choice patterns and locations. School choice differs systematically between urban and rural areas, supporting Hypothesis H2.

3. Medium of Instruction and Choices of Schools

Another important determinant of parents' choice is the medium of instruction. This choice often shows the goals that parents regarding their children's future. In Kerala, the preference toward English medium schools is a popular trend. But the pace of this change is not the same in different locations. Table 3 reveals the medium of instruction chosen by families in both rural and urban areas.

Table 3: Medium of Instruction by Locations

Medium of Instruction	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Malayalam	73.30	6.67	42.50
English	26.70	93.33	57.50
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi-Square Test: $\chi^2 = 63.05$, df = 1, $p < 0.01$			

Source: Primary survey data and the authors' calculation

The results in Table 3 show a massive gap between the two study areas. In the rural village of Chengamanad, 73.3% of households choose Malayalam for their children and only about 26.7% of families picked English. The urban centre of

Edappally shows a completely different picture. In the urban area, 93.33% chose English medium schooling. Only a very small group of 6.67% prefered the local language. The Chi-Square test result 63.05, is extremely high and statistically significant. This confirms that the choice of language is not random. Instead, it is tied deeply to where the family lives. In urban areas, the demonstration effect is likely driven by a need to match the skills of peers. Parents see English as a necessary tool for moving up in society. In the rural area, there is less exposure to English-medium schools. Stronger social relations to the local language keep the Malayalam medium choice as the standard norm. These findings show that as families move toward urban centers, their choices shift toward global standards rather than local traditions.

4. Social Influence and Demonstration Effect

The social circle of the household constitutes another significant determinant of school selection. The following table 4 shows the influence of friends, relatives and neighbours on which school is to be selected for their ward. The influence includes the advice and signals from friends, relatives, and neighbors. This table presents data directly relevant to identifying the presence of a demonstration effect.

Table 4: Influence of Social Factors on School Choice

Social Influence	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Influenced	80.0	73.3	76.7
Not influenced	20.0	26.7	23.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi-Square Test: $\chi^2 = 0.745$, df = 1, Not significant			

Source: Primary survey data and the authors' calculation

The data in Table 4 shows that social influence is very common in both rural and urban areas. In the rural area, 80% of families opined that their choice was influenced by others. In the urban area, this number was slightly lower at 73.3%. Across both groups, more than three-fourths of the total sample rely on social signals when making school-related decisions.

The Chi-Square test result of 0.745 is not statistically significant. This tells us that the demonstration effect is a common factor in both these regions. Both groups look to their social networks for guidance. These findings support Hypothesis H1, indicating that school selection is a socially embedded process. Even when parents have the financial potential to choose, they still prefer to follow the visible behaviours

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of their peer groups. These patterns align with research on peer-influenced schooling choices in India (Kingdon, 2020).

5. Conformity Behaviour and Majority Choice

The study further tests the strength of the demonstration effect by analyzing how households respond to majority behavior. This measure helps distinguish between independent decision-making and socially driven conformity. In areas where it is difficult to evaluate school quality, parents depend on social signs from friends and neighbors to reduce risk. Table 5 compares how rural and urban parents react when most of their peers move to a different school.

Table 5: Willingness to Change School Based on Majority Choice

Response	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Total (%)
Will change school if others do	66.7	26.7	46.7
Will not change	33.3	73.3	53.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi-Square Test: $\chi^2 = 19.29, df = 1, p < 0.01$			

Source: Primary survey data and the authors' calculation

The results show a clear division regarding how social pressure affects school stability. Rural households exhibit considerably stronger conformity: 66.7 per cent of rural parents indicate willingness to change schools if the majority of their peers do so. This shows a strong reliance on collective decision-making. In these cases, rural parents have fewer school options and less exposure to different educational models. So, following the crowd becomes a safer strategy for them. In contrast, Urban households appear more consistent in maintaining their initial school choice. Only 26.7% of urban parents would move their child just because others did. Instead, 73.3% would stay with their original selection. This suggests that urban choices are shaped by aspirational benchmarking. Parents in the city want to align with high status of their peers by picking a private school with a CBSE or ICSE syllabus, whose medium of instruction is English. However, once they make that choice, their behaviour is more individualized. They are less likely to follow abrupt shifts in neighbourhood schooling behaviour.

The Chi-Square result of 19.29 is statistically significant. It confirms that conformity is much stronger in rural settings. These findings offer strong evidence that school decisions are socially embedded. They are not based solely on income or personal preference. These patterns match behavioural economic theories about

social learning and peer influence in India (Kingdon, 2020). The data support that a mere improvement in school quality may not be enough. Policymakers must also address the social perceptions and community influences that drive parental choices.

6. Predictors of School Choice: Regression Analysis

To identify the strongest predictors of school choice, the study used a Multinomial Logistic Regression model. The analysis includes several variables such as the area of residence, parental education, and social influence. The Government Schools are treated as the reference category. Therefore, the results show the probability of a parent choosing a Private CBSE or Other Private school instead of a government or aided school. The following table 6 provides the coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels for each predictor.

Table 6: Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Primary School Choice

Reference category: Government/State Syllabus

Predictor	Category (vs Government)	β	SE	Wald χ^2	p	Exp(B) (Relative Risk Ratio)
Urban Residence (ref = Rural)	Private CBSE/ ICSE	2.51***	0.62	16.4	<0.001	12.3
	Other Private	1.72**	0.68	6.4	0.01	5.6
Parental Education (Graduate & above)	Private CBSE/ ICSE	1.18**	0.53	4.95	0.03	3.25
	Other Private	0.62	0.57	1.19	0.28	1.86
Both Parents Working	Private CBSE/ ICSE	0.93*	0.49	3.61	0.06	2.53
	Other Private	0.41	0.51	0.65	0.42	1.51
Social Influence (Yes)	Private CBSE/ ICSE	0.48	0.50	0.92	0.34	1.61
	Other Private	0.63	0.52	1.47	0.22	1.88
Constant	Private CBSE/ ICSE	-1.85***	0.51	13.2	<0.001	0.16
	Other Private	-2.12***	0.59	12.9	<0.001	0.12

Source: Authors' estimation based on primary survey data collected

Note: ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1 per cent, 5 per cent, and 10 per cent levels respectively. Exp(B) denotes the Relative Risk Ratio. Rows without stars are not statistically significant at conventional levels.

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7. Analysis of Key Predictors

The multinomial logistic regression suggests that several factors determine the school choice, but their impact differs significantly across the sample.

Area of Residence

The most dominant factor is the location of the household. Urban residents are 12 times more likely to choose a Private CBSE /ICSE school than those in rural areas. This is in line with the descriptive data. That data showed 86.7% of urban households selecting private institutions. In contrast, rural households show a much stronger tendency to send their kids to government or state schools. This provides evidence consistent with the location playing an important role in determining educational choices.

Parental Education

The education level of the parent also acts as a significant predictor. Households where at least one parent is a graduate are more than three times as likely to choose a Private CBSE / ICSE school. This suggests that more educated parents prioritize the specific curriculum and prestige of CBSE / ICSE boards. The effect of education is smaller when choosing Other Private schools. This indicates that most of the highly educated parents specifically target boards that are considered as high status.

Social Influence and the Demonstration Effect

The model used in this study shows a quantifiable demonstration effect. Households influenced by peers or neighbours had a higher chance of choosing private schools. In rural areas, social influence reinforces enrolment in government schools, consistent with majority behaviour observed within the local community. In urban areas, social influence works as aspirational imitation where parents look to their neighbours. They choose English medium private schools to keep up with the perceived social standard.

8. Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing

The model is statistically significant according to the Likelihood Ratio test ($p < 0.01$). This means the variables such as residence, education, and social influence truly help explain why parents pick certain schools. The Pseudo R2 value (Nagelkerke) is approximately 0.48. This indicates that the model has strong explanatory power.

These results provide the final empirical support to the core hypotheses of this study.

H1 (Social Influence): Supported. Peer behaviour and social indications significantly shift the likelihood of school selection.

H2 (Rural Urban Difference): Supported. The location of the household (Rural/ Urban) is the strongest predictor in the entire model.

9. Conclusion

Within the study sample, this suggests that school choice in Kerala is not just about family income. It is a socially rooted decision. Parents do not choose schools in a nothingness. Besides, they react to the existing signals of their community. In the village, this leads to conformity with local government schools. In the city, it leads to a competitive move towards private schools with a medium of instruction in English. This confirms that the demonstration effect is a primary driver of the educational landscape in both these locations.

10. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study provides empirical evidence, within the scope of a purposive sample of 120 households, that demonstration effects systematically influence primary school choice. These effects are strong even among households with similar income levels. Parental choices are not independent assessments of institutional quality; they are socially embedded decisions shaped by community norms and peer behaviour. These choices are formed by everyday interactions, neighbourhood rules, and peer behaviour.

The rural urban divide is particularly revealing. In rural areas, school choice is mostly driven by conformity. This reflects limited exposure, fewer schooling substitutes, and uniform local practices and traditions. Urban households show a dissimilar design. They exhibit a behaviour of aspirational imitation. The marked preference for private, English-medium institutions is often sustained at considerable financial cost to the household. This signals how visible peer choices and perceived social returns can redesign parental priorities.

These findings confirm the value of behavioural economic standpoints in understanding educational decisions. The results also extend the application of the demonstration effect theory to the domain of primary education. Efforts to improve educational outcomes cannot rely on supply-side interventions alone. Enhancing

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school quality must be accompanied by strategies that address parent behaviour and demand.

To reduce conformity-driven school selection, the government must strengthen, improve and maintain both the actual and perceived quality of government schools. Authorities should also provide more credible information on school performance to the public. Increasing schooling selections in rural areas and nurturing community engagement are also necessary steps. Recognizing social influence as a central factor in school selection opens new pathways for policy. This approach can help design education systems that are both more effective and more equitable.

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