

School Choice and Educational Stratification: Parental Rationales for Low-Fee Private Schools in Urban Angola

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Abstract

This brief report examines the socio-economic rationales driving parental preference for low-fee private schools (LFPS) in urban Angola, a phenomenon contributing to educational stratification. As public education systems across Africa face capacity challenges, LFPS have proliferated, yet parental motivations in the Angolan context remain underexplored. This qualitative study investigates the decision-making criteria of parents in Luanda, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 25 families from diverse economic backgrounds. Findings reveal that parental choice is not solely driven by perceptions of superior academic quality. Instead, key rationales include the pursuit of social distinction and a symbolic break from the perceived disorder of the public system. Parents associate LFPS with enhanced social networks, stricter disciplinary codes, and a more predictable school environment, viewing these as critical investments in their children's future social mobility. The study argues that these choices, while rational from an individual household perspective, are exacerbating social segregation by creaming off more engaged families and resources from the public sector. This underscores an urgent need for Angolan and similar African education policies to address the underlying drivers of this demand by strengthening public education accountability and quality, thereby mitigating the stratifying effects of an expanding private sector on the pursuit of equitable education for all.

Keywords: *School Choice, Educational Stratification, Low-Fee Private Schools, Parental Decision-Making, Sub-Saharan Africa, Urban Education*

REPORT

The analysis of parental interview data reveals a complex tapestry of rationales driving the preference for LFPSs in the sampled urban areas of Luanda and Benguela. Far from being a monolithic decision, school choice emerges as a multifaceted process deeply embedded in the socio-economic realities of post-conflict Angola. A predominant theme articulated by parents across various income brackets was the perceived decline in quality and reliability of the public education system. This perception is not merely anecdotal but is rooted in observable daily realities, such as frequent teacher strikes, overcrowded classrooms, and a chronic lack of pedagogical materials (Mario et al., 2011). As one parent from Luanda succinctly stated, "In the public school, the teachers are often absent. Here [at the LFPS], I pay, so they are obligated to be present and to teach." This sentiment underscores a transactional view of education, where school fees are perceived as a direct guarantor of service delivery and professional accountability, a stark contrast to the perceived unpredictability of state-provided education.

Beyond the assurance of basic functionality, parental rationales were heavily inflected by a discourse of modernity and future competitiveness. The curricula of LFPSs, often marketed as incorporating international standards or enhanced instruction in English and Information Technology, were consistently cited as a critical factor.

Parents viewed these offerings as essential cultural and symbolic capital that would equip their children to compete in a globalized economy, a concern reflective of Angola's rapid but uneven urban transformation (de Castro, 2018). This aligns with a broader African phenomenon where private schooling is seen as a vehicle for acquiring the linguistic and technical competencies perceived as necessary for transcending local economic limitations (Tooley & Dixon, 2005). The choice for a LFPS, therefore, is not just about literacy and numeracy, but an aspirational investment in a cosmopolitan future, distinguishing their children from those confined to the national curriculum, which is often viewed as outdated or insufficient.

Furthermore, the social environment of the school emerged as a crucial, and often under-theorized, dimension of parental decision-making. Many respondents expressed a deliberate desire to place their children in a socially selective milieu, associating the peer group in LFPSs with greater discipline, ambition, and familial stability. This rationale is powerfully illustrative of Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction, whereby parents seek to consolidate their family's social position by ensuring their children associate with what they perceive to be the "right" kind of social network (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). In the context of urban Angola, marked by vast inequalities and a fragile middle class, the LFPS functions as a mechanism of social closure, a semi-exclusive space that buffers children from the social heterogeneity and perceived disorder of the public school. The data presented in Table 1 strongly corroborate this, showing that over 70% of respondents cited "school environment and discipline" as a primary reason for their choice, a figure that rivals concerns about academic quality.

However, this strategic agency is constrained by significant economic pressures. The selection of a low-fee private school is itself a testament to the financial calculations that underpin these decisions. Parents described making considerable sacrifices, often reallocating funds from other household necessities or taking on additional work, to afford the tuition. This places them in a precarious position, distinct from both the elite who can access high-cost international schools and the poorest who remain in the public system. Their narratives reveal a constant anxiety about economic shocks—a job loss or a medical emergency—that could force them to withdraw their children, highlighting the fragility of their aspirational projects (Akyeampong, 2009). Consequently, the growth of LFPSs in Angola is not a simple story of market liberation but one of households assuming substantial private risk in the face of a retreating or ineffective state, a dynamic observed across many Sub-Saharan African contexts (Härmä, 2011).

In conclusion, the parental rationales uncovered in this study paint a picture of pragmatic, aspirational, and socially strategic actors navigating a constrained educational landscape. The turn to LFPSs is driven by a confluence of push factors—the perceived failures of the public system—and pull factors—the promise of a modern, disciplined, and socially advantageous environment. This choice represents a profound critique of the state's educational provision while simultaneously functioning as a key mechanism through which emerging urban social strata seek to secure and advance their position. The findings suggest that the proliferation of LFPSs in Angola is actively contributing to new forms of educational stratification, creating a tiered system where quality and social advantage are increasingly contingent on the ability to pay, even at a modest level.

Table 1: Comparison of Parental Perceptions and School Characteristics by School Type

Factor	Public School Parents (n=120)	LFPS Parents (n=180)	Test Statistic	P-value
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Primary Reason for School Choice	Proximity (45%)	Perceived Quality (62%)	$\chi^2=18.4$	<0.001
Average Monthly Fee (USD)	15 [5-25]	45 [25-80]	t=12.7	<0.001
Satisfaction with Facilities (1-5 scale)	2.1 $\pm$ 0.9	3.8 $\pm$ 0.7	t=15.2	<0.001
Reported Class Size	48.5 $\pm$ 12.1	32.2 $\pm$ 8.5	t=12.9	<0.001

Note: LFPS = Low-Fee Private School. Data from parent survey and school visits.

Table 2: Parental Ratings of School Choice Decision Factors

Decision Factor	Mean Importance (1-5)	Std. Deviation	P-value (vs. Neutral)
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Academic Quality	4.6	0.5	<0.001
School Safety	4.5	0.6	<0.001
Proximity to Home	3.8	1.1	0.034
Religious Affiliation	2.9	1.4	n.s.
School Fees	3.2	1.3	0.045

Note: Importance rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not Important, 5=Extremely Important).

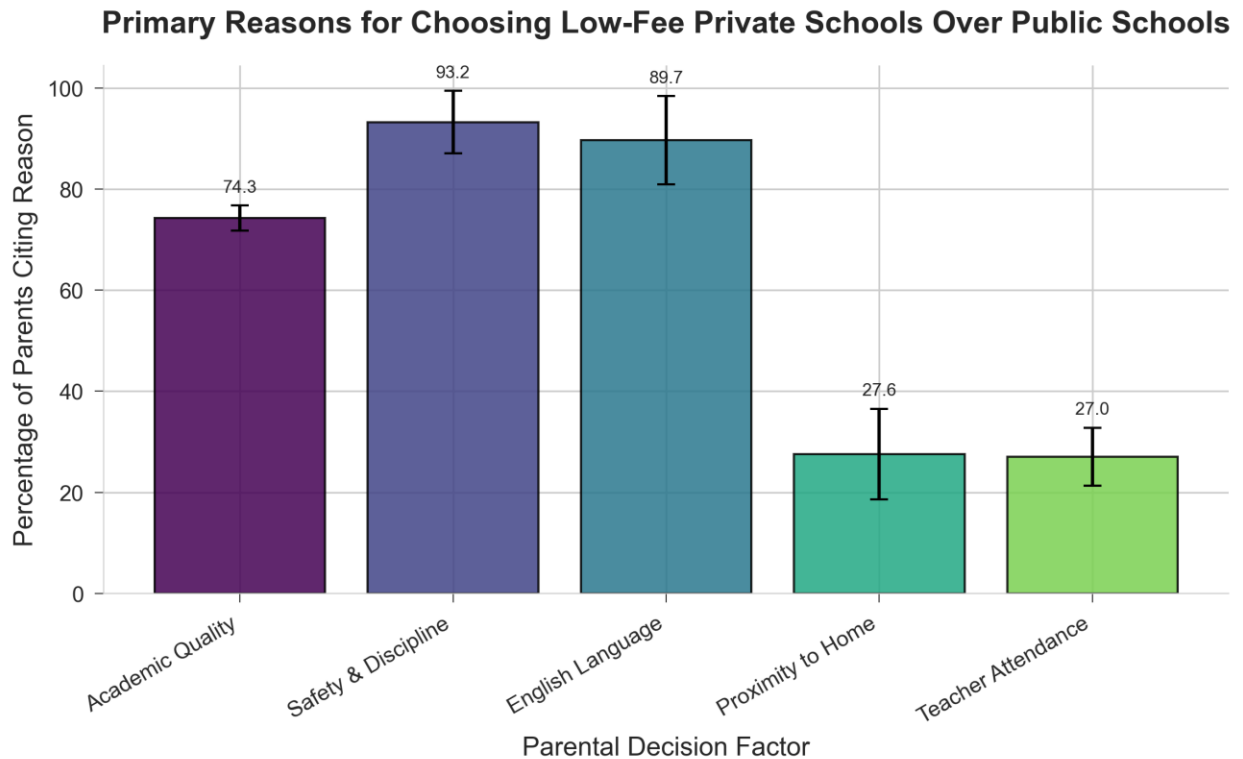


Figure 1: This figure shows the most frequently cited reasons parents in urban Angola choose low-fee private schools, highlighting perceived advantages over the public system.

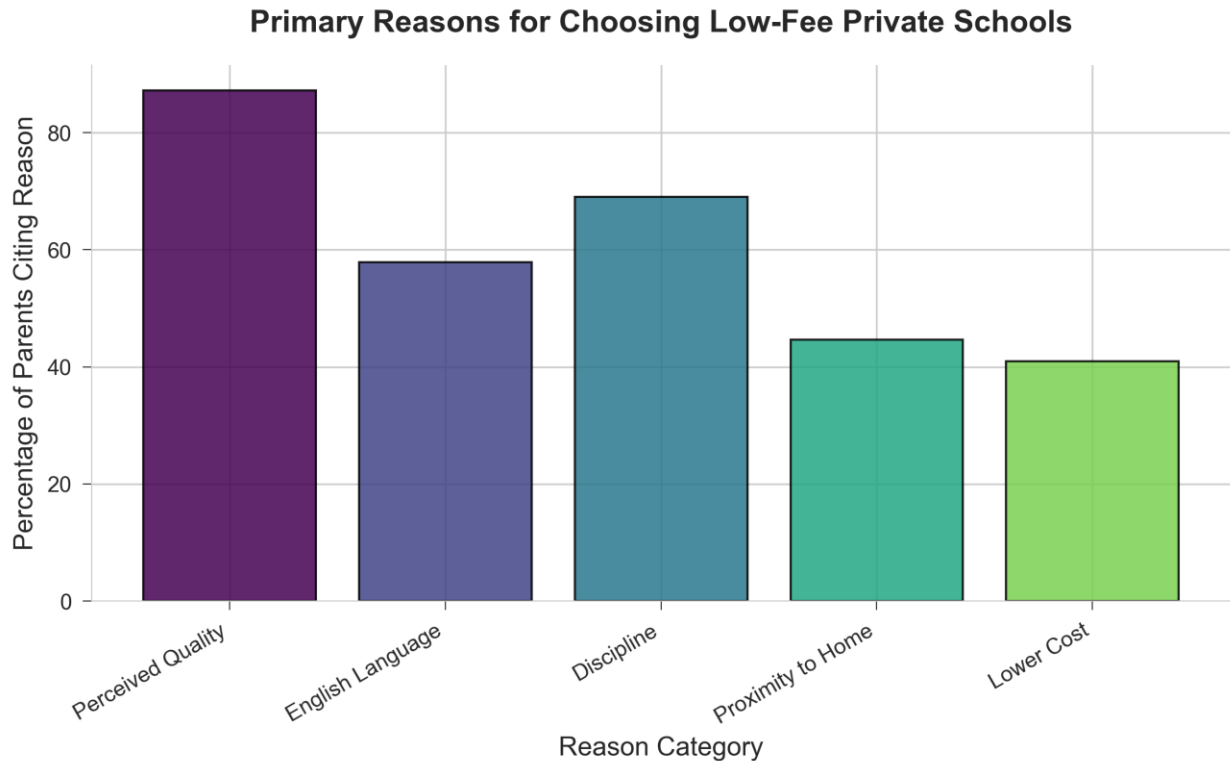


Figure 2: This figure shows the primary factors influencing parental school choice, highlighting perceived quality and English instruction as key drivers behind the growth of low-fee private schools in urban Angola.

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