

# **Parental Preference on Primary School Selection in Hong Kong**

Highlights of research findings for participating kindergartens and schools

Dr. Cecilia Ka Yuk Chan  
Dr. Nai Chi Jonathan Yeung

The University of Hong Kong

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## Background

The well-being and holistic growth of students during primary school years are pivotal to their lifelong development and mental health. In Hong Kong, most parents invest a great deal of energy in identifying and pursuing primary schools appropriate for their children, and the parents' preferences are influential to schools. The parents' considerations on primary school choices are therefore important information for both children education practitioners and school management.

To illuminate this subject matter, Dr. Cecilia Chan and her team at the University of Hong Kong conducted the present study in 2015-16. Through 99 participant kindergartens across all districts of Hong Kong, the team gathered the school-choice criteria and preferences of a representative sample of 3,378 parents (of the kindergartens' students). This report is intended to provide the partaking kindergartens and other interested parties with a summary of the key findings.

## Objectives

This research has sought to find out the

- (a) general criteria of parents in Hong Kong for selecting primary schools for their children;
- (b) relative priority of the criteria to parents; and
- (c) factors affecting the criteria.

## Data collection

The research team approached over 500 kindergartens randomly selected from all 18 districts of Hong Kong and requested the schools' assistance to distribute this study's questionnaires to the parents of their students and collect their returns. The parents were requested to rate the importance of the following 16 criteria for choosing their ideal primary schools, on a scale of 1 (very important) to 5 (very unimportant):

- “Through train”
- Small class teaching
- School fee and related costs
- Location/ distance from home
- Religion
- Secondary school allocation history
- School reputation/conduct
- School facilities
- Extracurricular activities
- Teacher qualification and reputation
- Child's happiness
- Teaching style: quality of homework, tests and exams
- Same school as sibling(s)
- Curriculum
- Gender of school (e.g., co-ed/ girls/ boys)
- Medium of instruction

The participants were also asked to indicate their “most important”, “second most important” and “third most important” criteria among the 16 criteria as well as to provide some further demographic information about themselves, their children and their families.

Ninety-nine kindergartens took part in data collection and delivered the questionnaires and participation consent forms to a total of over 6,000 parents. Subsequently over 3,400 completed questionnaires were returned, from which 3,378 sets of useable data were obtained. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 3,378 respondents, and Figure 2 and Figure 3 show their distribution by income and ethnicity categories respectively.

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by districts in Hong Kong.

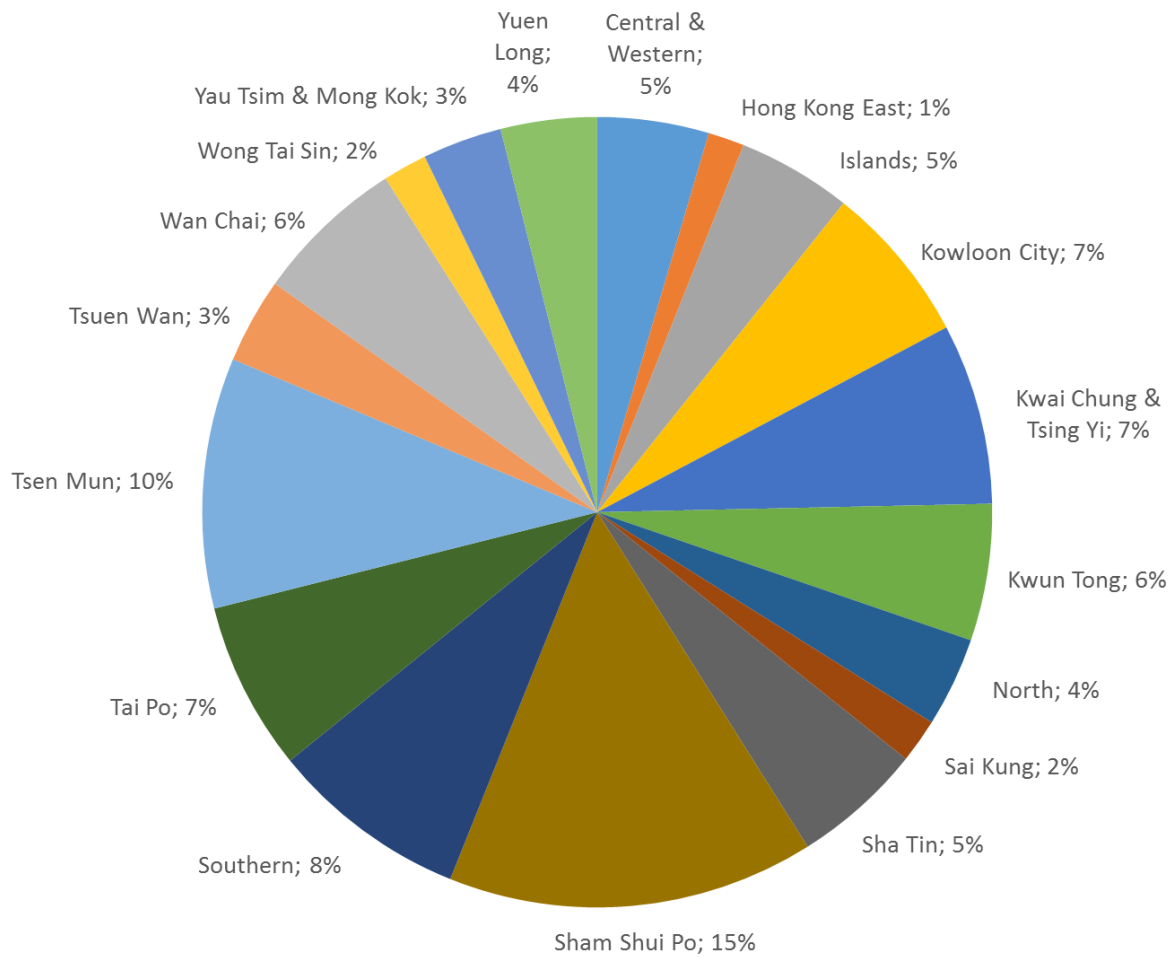


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by family income categories.

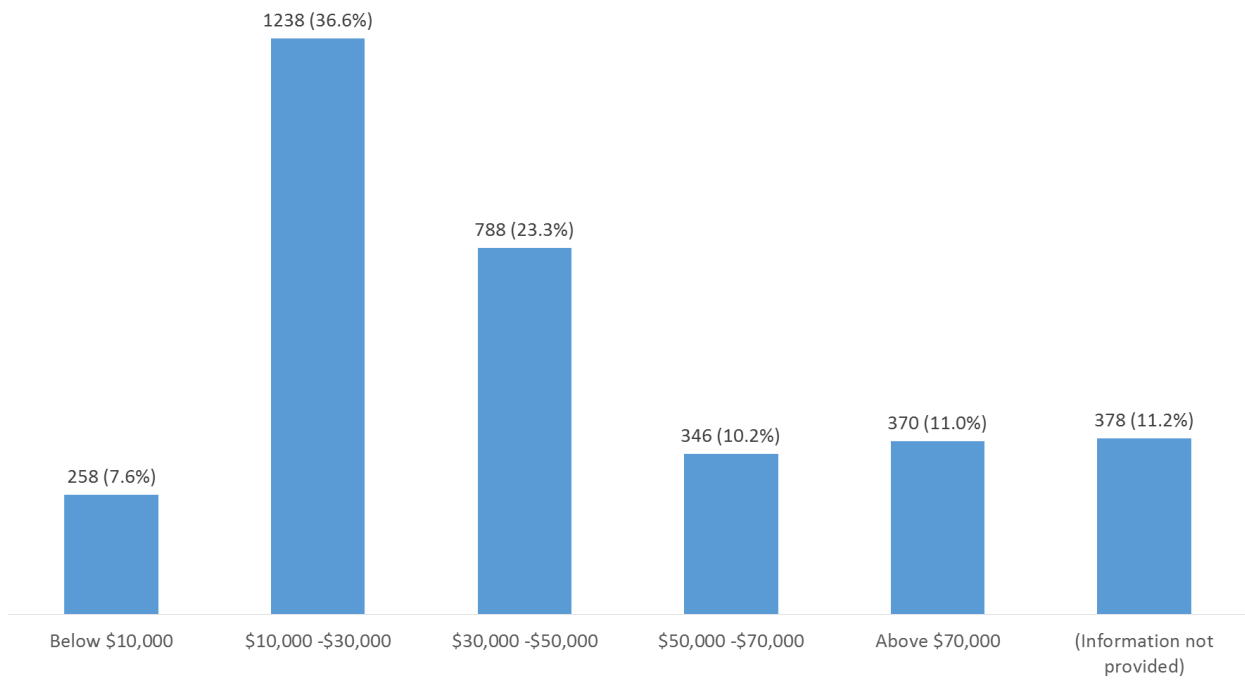
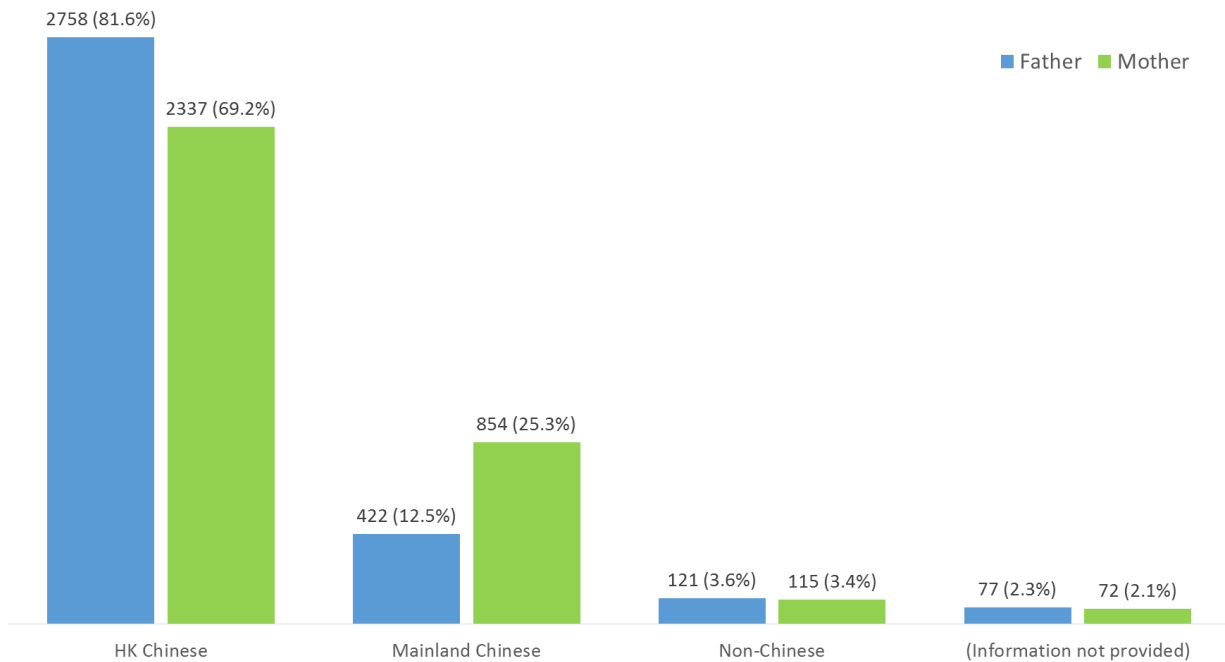


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by ethnicity.



## Key findings

### Relative importance of primary school selection criteria

The relative prominence of the 16 selection criteria were assessed by two metrics:

- (a) The total percentages of respondents who rated the criteria as “very important” or “important” among the five response options (the other three options being “neutral”, “unimportant”, “very unimportant”) – see Figure 4; and
- (b) the percentages of parents who identified the criteria as most important to them - see Figure 5.

Figure 4. Total percentages of “very important” and “important” ratings for the school selection criteria.

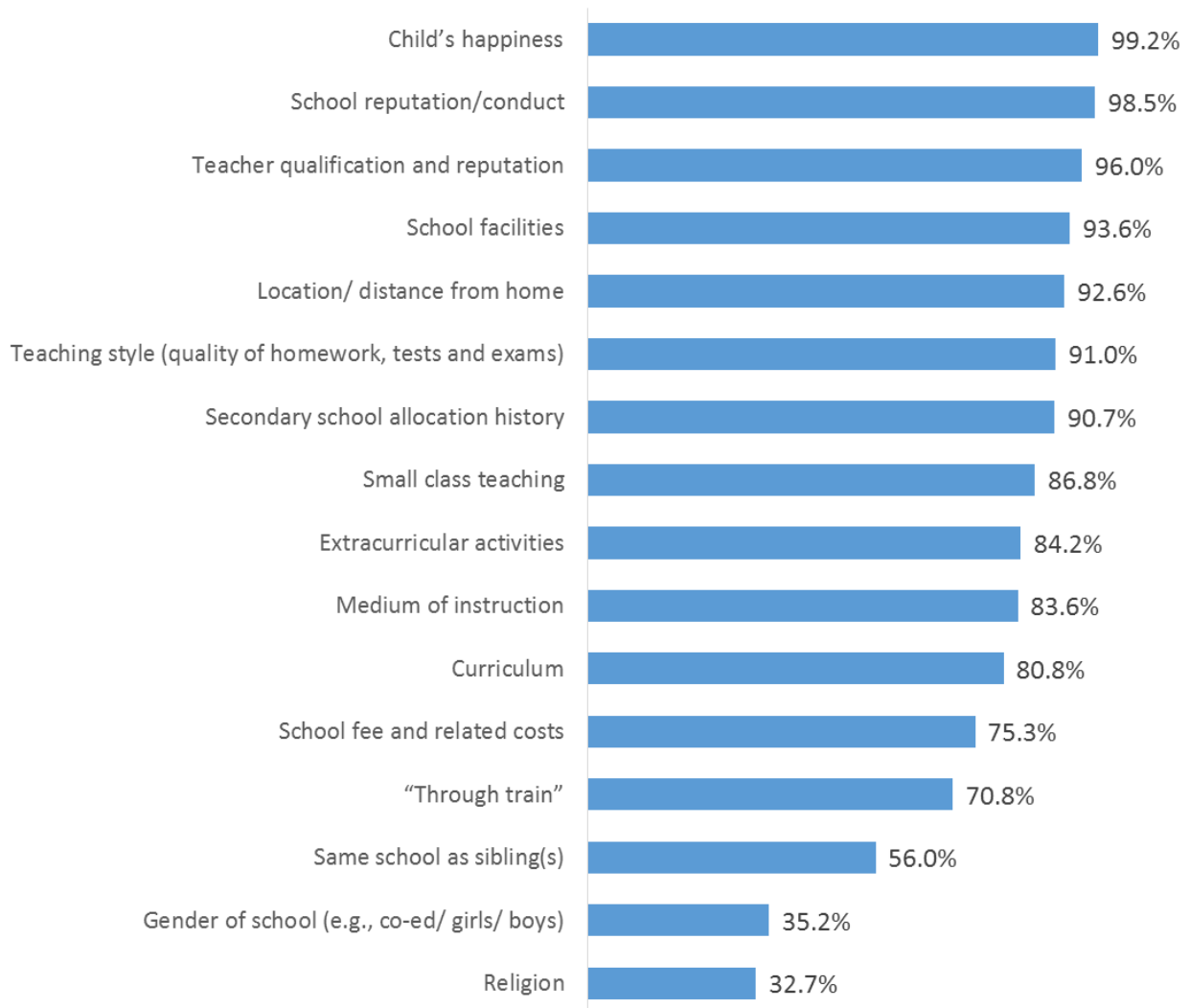
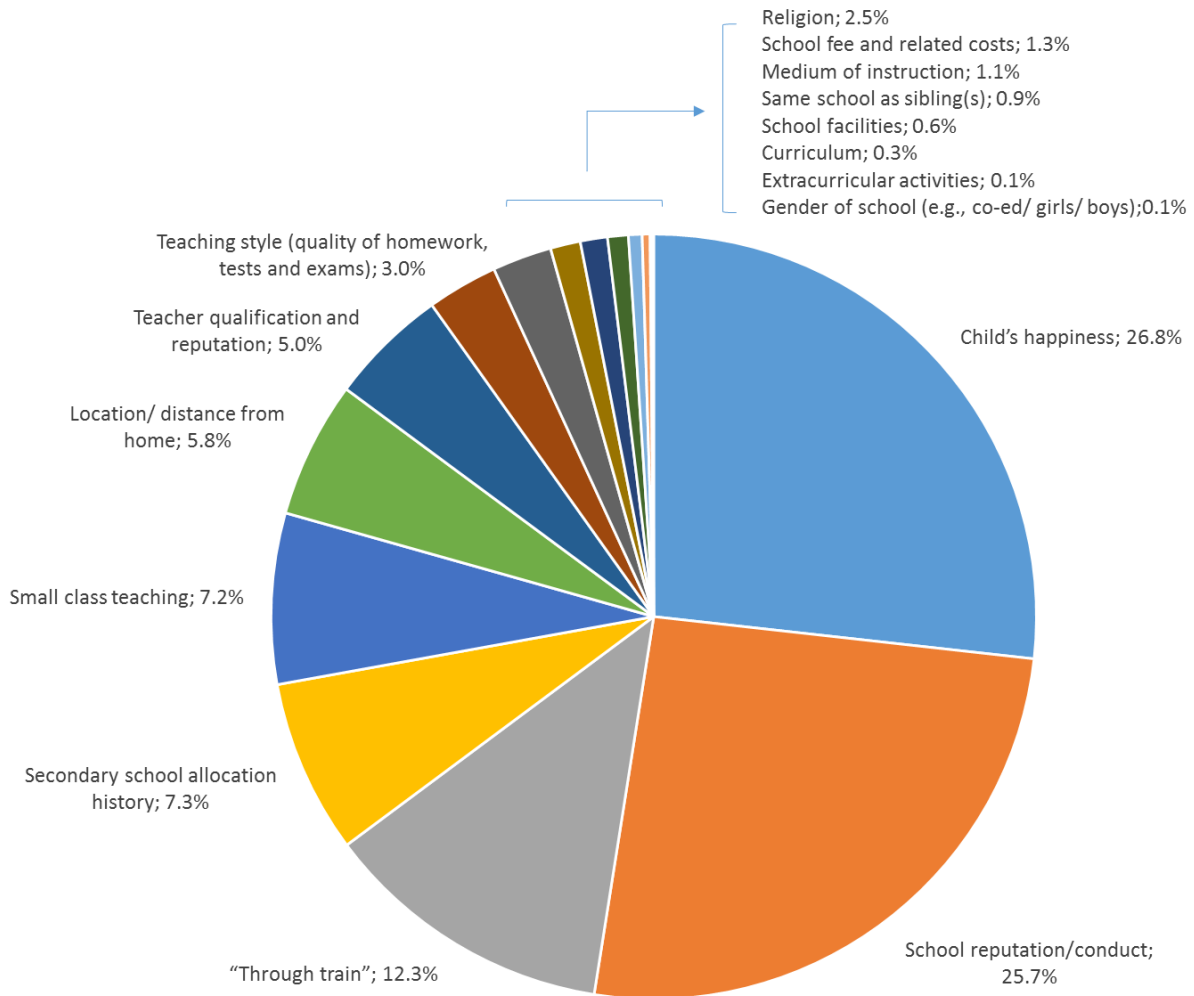


Figure 5. Percentages of parents who chose the school selection criteria as most important to them.

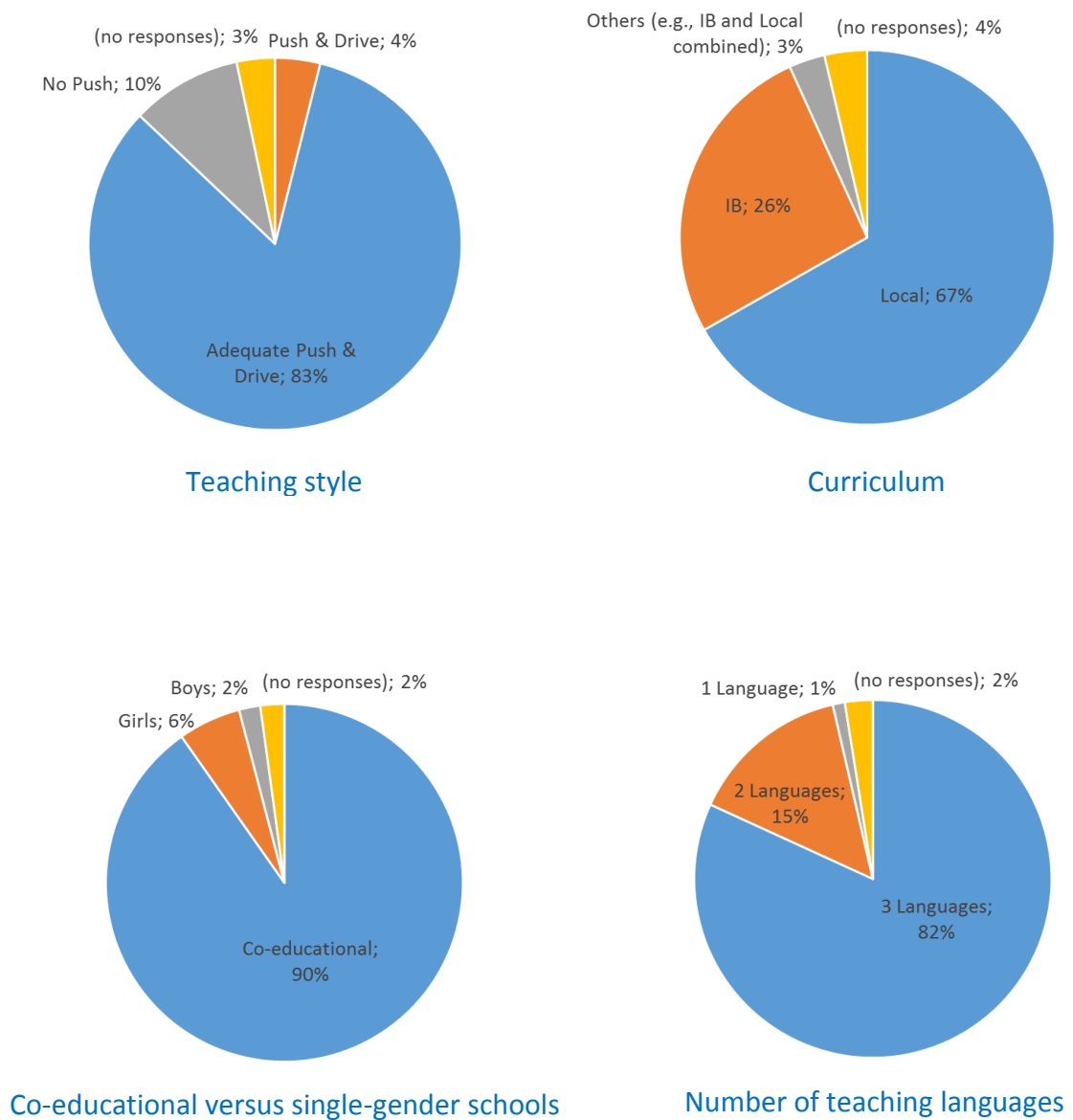


Child's happiness and school reputation/conduct are the two most important considerations of parents based on either of the metrics as displayed in Figure 4 and Figure 5. Some educators have raised the possibility that as traditional Chinese culture emphasizes scholastic attainments and diligence, parents in Hong Kong may predominately focus on academic superiority relative to holistic development of children in schools. However, this study revealed that parents in Hong Kong regard child's happiness as the single most significant criterion for school choices, same as reported by a number of previous studies on parental school choices in Western countries. In the present study, a small proportion (around 3.6%) of the participants were non-Chinese by ethnicity. Statistical procedures performed on the data suggested that the average important ratings on the child's happiness criterion are comparable across the Chinese and non-Chinese parents (no statistically significant differences in technical terms).

## Preferences of parents on teaching practices

Figure 6 summarizes parents' replies to the questions regarding their preferences on teaching style, local versus International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, co-educational versus single gender schools and number of teaching languages respectively. The majority responses were “adequate push and drive” in teaching style, local curriculum (versus IB), co-educational schools and having three teaching languages (Chinese, Cantonese and English).

Figure 6. Preferences on teaching style, curriculum, co-educational versus single-gender schools and number of teaching languages.





## Trends of importance ratings by parent categories

On the questionnaire the respondents indicated their family income and highest educational qualification levels of both parents (of the children concerned). Statistical procedures revealed that the importance ratings on some of the school-selection criteria vary across the income and educational levels.

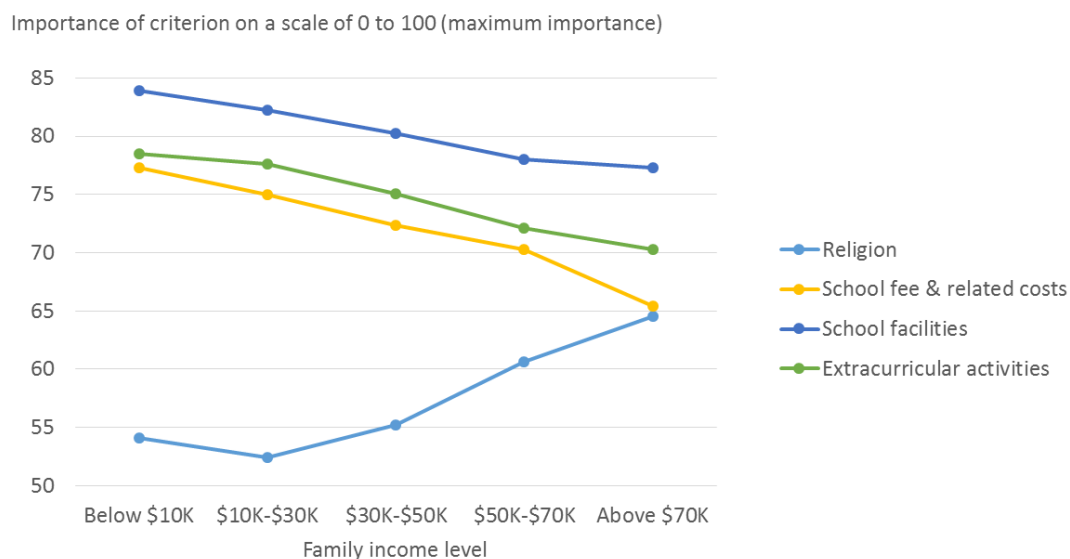
The top four (i.e., 25%) school-selection criteria that vary most pronouncedly with family income were:

- religion;
- school fee and related costs;
- school facilities; and
- extracurricular activities.

To illustrate their trends, the average ratings for each criterion were first converted to a scale that varies between 0 (the lowest possible value - if all respondents rate it as “very unimportant”) and 100 (the highest possible value – if all respondents rate it as “very important”). On this scale Figure 7 shows that:

- the importance of religion as a school-choice criterion increases with family income; while
- the importance of school fee and related costs, school facilities and extracurricular activities are higher for the lower income groups relative to their higher income counterparts.

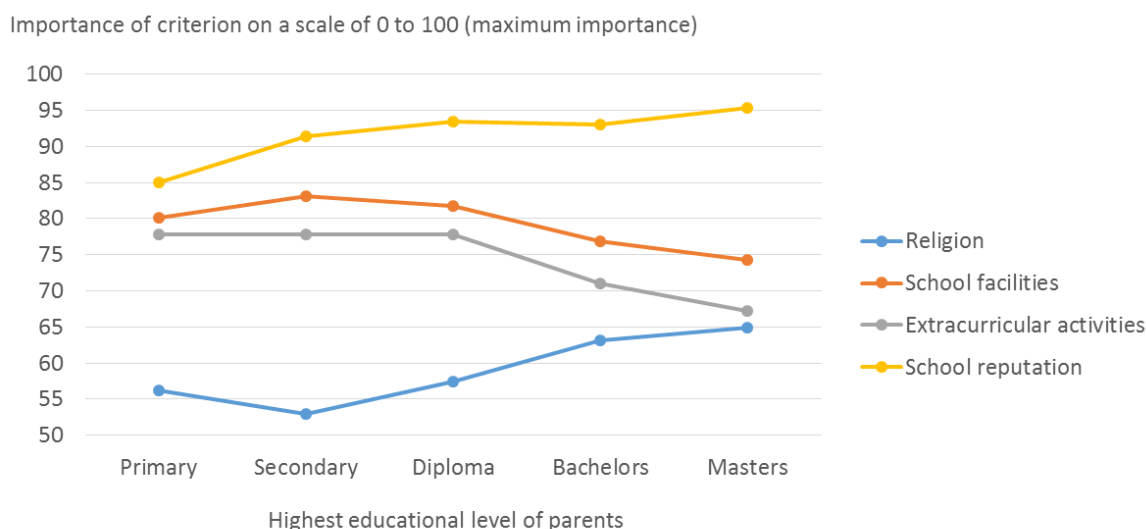
Figure 7. The trends of the four school-selection criteria that vary most pronouncedly with income.



Regarding parental educational qualifications, the importance ratings of the criteria vary with fathers’ qualifications in a very similar way as with mothers’ qualifications. The common trends can be illustrated by 2,066 (61.1%) of the data cases in which both parents were of the same educational level. Based on the common parental education level of this subgroup, Figure 8 shows the trends of

the four school selection criteria that vary most pronouncedly with parents' educational level: the importance of religion and school reputation increases with qualification level, while the importance of school facilities and extracurricular activities vary in the opposite direction.

Figure 8. The trends of the four school selection criteria that vary most pronouncedly with parents' educational qualification level.



## Conclusion

This study identified the key criteria of parents in Hong Kong for selecting primary schools for their children. As shown in Figure 4, based on a cut-off of being regarded by more than 90% of the respondents as “very important” or “important”, the key criteria included:

- Child’s happiness;
- School reputation/conduct;
- Teacher qualification and reputation;
- School facilities;
- Location/distance from home;
- Teaching style (quality of homework, tests, and examinations); and
- Secondary school allocation history.

Apart from location, which is understandably a pragmatic consideration, the other six key criteria can be matched with two themes that have been identified by a number of related overseas studies:

- child’s well-being (happiness, school facilities), and
- academic excellence (school reputation/conduct, teacher qualification and reputation, quality of homework, tests and examinations, secondary school allocation history).

Balancing the focus on these well-being and academic aspects, given the practical limits on learning time and resources at schools, is critical. As Hong Kong's educational system is competitive with heavy emphasis on examinations, academic related activities and achievement are understandably the focus of most schools in Hong Kong in terms of resources allocation and teaching practices (e.g., homework demands). However, the headline finding of this research is that happiness of students is also a core concern of parents despite the cultural emphasis on academic and examination attainments. In this connection, the findings of educational researchers have converged to show that school practices can play a very significant role in promoting social and emotional learning of students (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). It is worth an ongoing effort of schools to seek out and be responsive to the expectations and feedback of parents on the well-being and holistic development of students on top of the attention on academic progress.

## Note

Some parts of this summary paper were extracted from a full report of the present study's findings to be submitted for a peer-reviewed periodical.

## Reference

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1), 405-432.