School Choice In Kazakhstan: Parental Strategies And Policy Drivers

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Abstract

Kazakhstan schools in areas with fast population growth operate in multiple shifts to accommodate growing student populations amid limited infrastructure capacity. This challenge requires public policy initiatives in enrollment forecasting and school construction. In developing forecasting models, it is important to understand parental choices in school selection. Drawing on 24 in-depth interviews, this study investigates how parents navigate school choice among those from varied socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds. The research identifies nine key factors influencing decision-making, including perceptions of school quality, safety, accessibility, reputation, language of instruction, and cultural alignment. Framed through Bourdieu's theory of capital and Gewirtz et al.'s concept of schooling circuits, the analysis reveals that parental choices reflect both long-term aspirations and immediate structural constraints. These choices, while often strategic and informed, are shaped by systemic inequities, such as disparities in infrastructure, access to inclusive education, and digital resources, that affect educational opportunities across social groups. The study shows how parental agency both reproduces and resists prevailing inequalities. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers aiming to align education infrastructure and planning with the needs of families in transitional contexts.

Keywords: school choice, parental decision-making, education policy, capitation financing, trilingual education, public administration, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Public policy in education planning and infrastructure development plays a critical role in shaping equitable access to and quality of education in both urban and rural settings. Previous research has emphasized the importance of aligning educational infrastructure with demographic changes, enrollment forecasting, and long-term planning goals (Barroso & de Oliveira, 2008; Bray & Varghese, 2011). Reliable school mapping and demand forecasting are crucial for preventing under- or over-capacity in school facilities, especially in rapidly urbanizing or demographically shifting contexts (Mulkeen, 2009; Lewin, 2007). Planning frameworks must also contend with constraints, such as budgetary limitations, shifting migration patterns, and the demand for localized schooling options (Pigozzi, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2020).

Understanding parental decision-making has become critical in educational planning, as families navigate diverse schooling options beyond traditional neighborhood assignments. This shift calls for more innovative planning approaches that integrate behavioral insights, qualitative evidence, and dynamic modeling tools to align infrastructure with actual demand. As education systems enable greater agency, through school vouchers, charter programs, or specialized public schools, understanding how and why parents choose schools becomes increasingly relevant for infrastructure planning and public policy design (Böhlmark et al., 2016; Denessen et al., 2005).

Empirical studies suggest that parental decision-making is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including school quality, socio-economic status, ethnic composition, religious values, and school leadership (Denessen et al., 2005; Böhlmark et al., 2016; Dixon et al., 2017). Research from high-income and low-income contexts has found that school choice may reinforce patterns of social stratification or self-segregation, often exacerbating inequalities even in systems with universal access (Dixon et al., 2017; Bensons et al., 2015; Böhlmark et al., 2016). For instance, middle-class families in Paris and London have been found to navigate school markets to optimize social capital strategically and perceived quality, while low-income families in Lagos rely on community networks and informal information (Bensons et al., 2015; Dixon et al., 2017).

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This paper draws on interview-based research to examine how parents make school choices in Kazakhstan and argues that integrating this qualitative understanding into education planning frameworks of broader public policy in this area is essential for achieving more responsive and equitable education systems.

School choice has become a pivotal issue within contemporary education systems, raising questions about whether expanding parental options improves educational quality or instead reinforces entrenched social inequalities. This question acquires particular urgency in transitional societies, where educational markets are not only expanding but are also undergoing profound socioeconomic and political shifts. Families in these contexts confront a web of competing priorities: aspirations for academic excellence, commitments to cultural preservation, and concerns for their children's social well-being. Their decisions are far from trivial. They shape both individual educational trajectories and broader patterns of social stratification. Yet despite the salience of these processes, most scholarly inquiries into school choice remain firmly anchored in Western contexts, as evidenced by studies such as Ball et al. (1996) and Ball and Vincent (1998). This geographic bias has left critical gaps in our understanding of how these dynamics play out in post-Soviet and other transitional societies, where distinct historical legacies and policy environments create unique challenges and opportunities.

Kazakhstan offers a compelling case for examining school choice within a non-Western context. Since gaining independence, the country has implemented rapid educational reforms reflecting broader changes in governance, economics, and cultural identity (Bray & Borevskaya, 2001). These reforms have created a complex educational landscape where parents must balance traditional values with aspirations for globally competitive schooling. Within this context, our study is guided by two theoretical frameworks: Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1986) forms of capital, which explores how families leverage cultural, social, and economic resources to navigate educational markets, and Gewirtz et al.'s (Gewirtz et al., 1995) circuits of schooling, which conceptualizes how access to information and resources shapes educational decision-making across different social groups.

Despite growing interest in Kazakhstan's educational transformation, existing research has primarily focused on macro-level policy changes or isolated factors such as school prestige and language instruction, without sufficiently examining the holistic decision-making processes of parents (Silova, 2009; Piller, 2016). This knowledge gap is particularly pertinent given the country's promotion of trilingual education and the tension between innovation and tradition in post-Soviet educational contexts (Johnson, 2014). How parents navigate structural constraints—including transportation limitations, resource disparities, and unequal access to information—remains inadequately understood, raising questions about educational equity and accessibility across diverse socioeconomic groups.

This paper aims to contribute to existing scholarship by exploring how parents in Kazakhstan navigate and make sense of their decisions when choosing schools for their children. Drawing on qualitative inquiry, the study examines the interplay of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors that appear to influence parental decision-making in a transitional educational context. While families engage in gathering information, evaluating priorities, and formulating strategies to secure preferred educational outcomes, these processes are often mediated by structural constraints that limit their range of choices. Our research is guided by the central question: **How do parents in Kazakhstan navigate and make sense of their decisions when choosing a school for their children?**

Understanding such micro-level dynamics may offer insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to align educational provision with parental needs. Moreover, by situating these findings within broader theoretical discussions on school choice, this paper aspires to enrich comparative perspectives on education in post-Soviet and transitional societies.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we detail our qualitative methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. Next, we present our findings organized around nine thematic categories that emerged from our analysis. The discussion section situates these findings within existing literature, focusing on three dimensions: the multidimensional nature of educational decision-making, tensions between tradition and innovation, and linguistic choices as future-oriented strategies. We conclude by acknowledging limitations, offering recommendations for future research, and highlighting the study's contributions to understanding educational choice in transitional societies.

Methods

Research Design. This study employs a qualitative research design, chosen for its capacity to provide rich, contextual insights into the dynamic educational choices of parents selecting schools in Kazakhstan. As

Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative approaches are particularly valuable when exploring phenomena that require a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meaning-making processes they engage in. Given the exploratory nature of our research question—"How do parents in Kazakhstan navigate and make sense of their decisions when choosing a school for their children?"—this approach allowed us to capture the multifaceted considerations influencing parental choices while remaining sensitive to the cultural and social context of contemporary Kazakhstan (Flick, 2018).

Participants and Sampling. This design positions the study as a qualitative policy evaluation of program implementation at the household level. We employed purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) to recruit 24 parents of preschool or school-age children. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (ranging from middle-income to upper-middle-income households), educational levels (52 % with undergraduate degrees, 33 % with graduate degrees, and 15 % with secondary education), and geographical locations (17 from urban centers, seven from suburban/regional areas). This sampling strategy facilitated maximum variation in perspectives while ensuring that information-rich cases were central to the research's purpose.

Participants were recruited through educational networks, community organizations, and social media platforms. We continued recruitment until we reached theoretical saturation, where additional interviews yielded diminishingly novel insights (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The final sample size of 24 aligns with recommendations for qualitative studies aiming to identify patterns across a heterogeneous group while maintaining depth of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Data Collection. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, which Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe as particularly suitable for exploring participants' perspectives and meaning-making processes. The interview protocol was developed based on relevant literature on educational decision-making. It was then piloted with three parents whose feedback informed refinements to phrasing and sequence of questions. The final protocol consisted of open-ended questions that explored parents' priorities, concerns, information-gathering strategies, and rationales behind their educational choices.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in participants' preferred language (18 in Kazakh and 6 in Russian). Linguistic equivalence was maintained through a rigorous translation process involving back-translation and review by bilingual researchers. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted either face-to-face (n = 16) or online (n = 8), accommodating participants' preferences and logistical considerations. Following Nowell et al.'s (2017) recommendations for enhancing trustworthiness, we maintained field notes that documented contextual information and initial analytical insights during and immediately after each interview.

Ethical Considerations. Participants were provided with detailed information about the research purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. All participants provided written informed consent, and pseudanyms (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) were used to ensure anonymity. All data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis. We employed reflexive thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which emphasizes the active role of researchers in identifying patterns and constructing themes. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into Dedoose software for thematic analysis. Our analytical process involved six phases:

1.   Familiarization: Researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated reading of transcripts.

2.   Initial coding: Open coding was performed independently by two researchers, generating preliminary codes highlighting key words and phrases related to parental priorities and considerations.

3.   Theme development: The codes were collectively examined to identify potential patterns and relationships, which were then grouped into candidate themes.

4.   Theme review: Themes were iteratively reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to enable coherence, distinctiveness, and adequate data support.

5.   Theme refinement: Themes were named and defined to capture their essence and relationship to the research question.

6.   Report production: Compelling data extracts were selected to illustrate themes and contextualize the analysis.

Coding disagreements were resolved through researcher triangulation involving detailed discussion and consensus-building among team members. This inductive analytical process led to the identification of nine

core thematic categories, each reflecting distinct yet interconnected factors shaping parental decision-making in Kazakhstan.

Findings

This section introduces the study's findings by examining the range of considerations and concerns that appear to influence how parents in Kazakhstan select schools for their children. Drawing on thematic analysis of interview data, we identified nine core themes, each representing a distinct dimension of parental decision-making. These include perceptions of educational quality, concerns about school safety, and preferences tied to language of instruction and religious values. The findings suggest a complex interplay between academic aspirations, cultural and social priorities, logistical constraints, and long-term educational goals, which collectively shape the strategies parents adopt. By unpacking these themes, the section seeks to provide a nuanced account of how families navigate and interpret the process of school selection. All participants' quotes were translated from the original Kazakh and Russian by the authors. Careful attention was paid to preserving meaning and contextual subtleties.

Perceptions of Educational Quality. For many parents, perceived educational quality is a central factor in choosing where to enroll their children. Some respondents pointed to the importance of curricula that align with contemporary educational standards and promote critical thinking, others highlighted a preference for environments that also nurture creativity and interdisciplinary learning. These qualities, they believe, contribute to a more holistic development, and may enhance future opportunities for their children. A few participants suggested that establishing a solid academic foundation during the early years of schooling could have lasting effects on both academic trajectories and personal growth.

Parental expectations frequently extend beyond academic outcomes alone. Many families, particularly those with prior exposure to alternative pedagogical models, expressed a desire for schools that cultivate independence and initiative among students. As one parent reflected, "The use of modern teaching methods in schools is crucial because a child's future depends on it" (Participant 14). Others linked educational quality closely to the competence and commitment of teaching staff, noting that the expertise of educators often serves as a reliable indicator of a school's overall performance. One respondent explained, "I choose a school where there is a high level of education and qualified teachers" (Participant 7). Similarly, another respondent highlighted how progressive teaching methods foster independent thought: "In our school, modern teaching methods are used, which allow children to develop critical thinking" (Participant 22).

To ensure they choose a high-quality educational institution, parents research school rankings, attend open house events, and consider peer recommendations. While some rely on word-of-mouth referrals, others turn to social media and online platforms to analyze reviews. One respondent described conducting comparative evaluations of different schools, scrutinizing curricula and teaching staff to make an informed decision (Participant 10). This information-gathering process underlines the extent to which parents are engaged in selecting the most suitable educational environment for their children.

School Climate and Peer Interactions. Parents in this study often reflected on the broader social environment of schools, noting that their children's daily experiences are shaped not only by classroom instruction but also by peer relationships and the school's overall communication culture. Many respondents regarded a positive and supportive climate as crucial for fostering children's socialization, emotional resilience, and psychological well-being. For some, concerns about bullying, interpersonal conflicts, and inconsistent disciplinary practices featured prominently in their accounts of school selection. One parent expressed this sentiment directly: "For us, it is important that there are good children in the class, without negative influences" (Participant 19).

The quality of teacher-student relationships was also identified as a key determinant of school climate. Several participants suggested that a culture grounded in mutual trust and respect can create conditions for more constructive learning environments. As one respondent noted, "Teachers should monitor the classroom atmosphere" (Participant 5). Beyond the classroom, parents pointed to extracurricular programs, community events, and informal networks as factors that help cultivate a sense of belonging and cohesion within the school. One parent shared, "I want my children to grow up in a good environment. The school's culture is especially important" (Participant 12).

To support their children's adaptation and success, some parents described engaging proactively with school communities. This included participating in parent chat groups, attending school-organized events, and seeking insights from other families. Notably, a substantial number of respondents preferred schools that placed strong emphasis on discipline, which they associated with improved student behavior and higher aca-

demic performance. Early childhood education was also cited as influential, with one parent observing that it helps establish social habits and expectations carried into later years (Participant 21). These accounts underscore the nuanced ways in which parents evaluate school environments, recognizing their significance for both academic development and broader personal growth.

School Accessibility and Transportation. Parents frequently described school accessibility and transport options as central to their decision-making, though the degree of influence appeared to vary across contexts. In urban areas, many families valued proximity, often favoring schools that enabled their children to commute independently. By contrast, in rural regions, limitations in public transportation and longer distances often constrained available choices. As one parent shared, "We chose the school based on how convenient it was to get there" (Participant 4).

For families living in regional centers, school selection was also shaped by logistical factors, such as commuting time, road safety, and the reliability of transport infrastructure. One parent observed, "A school near home is convenient because the child can walk on their own" (Participant 16). Another respondent highlighted, "Having an accessible route and reliable public transportation is an important factor in school selection" (Participant 23).

Beyond proximity, some parents considered the broader characteristics of neighborhoods when evaluating schools. Well-developed districts were often associated with stronger school environments and more diverse extracurricular opportunities. One participant reflected on this connection, suggesting that their child's educational experience benefited from the favorable location of their school (Participant 9). In contrast, transportation challenges in smaller towns and rural areas remained a recurring concern. As another parent noted, "Some schools are difficult to reach because public transport is lacking" (Participant 12).

To mitigate these issues, several schools have introduced dedicated bus services, while certain municipalities support government-subsidized travel programs to improve access. Taken together, these accounts underscore how practical considerations of location and mobility intersect with parental evaluations of educational quality and safety, shaping school choice decisions in nuanced ways.

Concerns About School Safety. School safety is a top priority for parents. They evaluate security measures, including cameras, controlled entry, and security guards. Concerns about bullying and student conflicts are also significant. Parents repeatedly framed the presence of closed-circuit cameras (CCTV) and licensed guards as proof that a school is "safe," a perception that closely reflects the 2022 Instruction on antiterrorist protection of educational facilities (Order No. 117) issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, which mandates full CCTV coverage and professional security in all schools (Protection for facilities, 2022). Several rural parents, however, noted that their local schools still lack complete camera networks or rely on volunteer watchkeepers, suggesting uneven implementation of the directive. One respondent highlighted this concern, stating, "The most important thing is that the school is safe. Security personnel and cameras are essential" (Participant 8).

Strict entry regulations and visitor controls are seen as crucial preventive measures. Some parents specifically choose schools with well-defined access policies, ensuring only authorized individuals can enter. As one participant put it, "We chose a school where entry is strictly controlled" (Participant 14). However, inconsistent security enforcement remains a concern, as noted by one respondent: "Safety is a major concern. In some schools, monitoring is weak" (Participant 3).

Parents stress the importance of preventing bullying and violence. They believe school administrators should collaborate with families to create safe and respectful environments. One parent emphasized, "To guarantee children's safety, school administrators must maintain regular communication with parents" (Participant 20).

To strengthen security, schools are increasingly implementing electronic pass systems, expanding surveillance networks, and hiring school psychologists to address conflict prevention and emotional support. Additionally, some institutions organize regular safety meetings between administrators and parents. The analysis reflects recognition that security strategies must address both physical protection and student wellbeing.

School Resources and Learning Environment. The quality of school infrastructure and the availability of modern educational resources are significant factors in parental decision-making. A substantial number of parents carefully assess the learning environment, considering whether schools provide well-equipped laboratories, sports facilities, libraries, and digital resources that support student learning. Parents' remarks about laboratories, STEM zones, and ergonomic furniture align with the design standards outlined in the pilot national project "Comfortable School" for 2023–2025, which allocates 1.49 trillion tenge to construct 400

innovation-ready schools across all regions (Comfortable School, 2022). As one parent explained, "A school must be well-equipped so that children can gain practical knowledge" (Participant 11).

For some, the physical condition of the school, including renovated buildings, well-maintained outdoor areas, and up-to-date classrooms, is a decisive factor in their decision. One respondent noted, "We chose a school that has a well-maintained campus and modern renovations" (Participant 6). Conversely, a lack of modern classrooms and up-to-date facilities is perceived as a significant drawback, with one parent stating, "The absence of contemporary classrooms is a serious disadvantage" (Participant 18).

Parents also recognize that the material and technical resources of a school directly impact on the quality of education. One parent emphasized this connection, stating, "The school's material base influences the quality of learning" (Participant 21). Similarly, another respondent highlighted the need for state-of-the-art equipment, noting, "Schools need modern facilities that meet today's standards" (Participant 15). It appears that the majority of parents seek to consult online reviews and be available to personally visit schools before enrolling their children to confirm that these institutions align with their expectations. These visits help parents to assess the school's facilities firsthand and decide if the environment is suitable for their child's educational needs and goals.

Perceived Reputation and School Prestige. Many parents in this study described the reputation and perceived prestige of a school as influential in shaping their decision-making, though their accounts suggest this influence varies across social and geographic contexts. For some, a school's standing is closely tied to its academic standards, the expertise of its teaching staff, and the success of its alumni. Such reputations often carry symbolic value, reinforcing parents' expectations about educational quality and future opportunities for their children.

Several respondents indicated that selecting a high-status school was, in their view, a strategic choice aimed at enhancing their child's chances of entering a prestigious university. One participant explained, "We chose this school because it is considered one of the best in the city" (Participant 9). Others, however, expressed a degree of caution, noting that prestige alone may not guarantee a supportive learning environment or alignment with their personal values. This divergence underscores how parental evaluations of school reputation are embedded within broader concerns about educational fit and long-term aspirations.

A school's ranking and public perception also influence parental preferences. Since the nationwide adoption of per-capita normative financing in 2020, enrollment numbers now translate directly into school operating budgets under Methodology No. 597 (Ministry of Education and Science of RK, 2019). Schools, therefore, invest in visibility and public promotion to secure a larger share of these transfers, a strategy that parents recognize when citing rankings as evidence of prestige. Many view high rankings as indicators of reliability and academic quality, as one respondent noted: "Good school ratings reflect their credibility and quality of education" (Participant 17). Additionally, parents recognize the long-term impact of school prestige on their child's academic and professional future. One parent emphasized this point, stating, "The reputation of a school has a significant impact on a child's future" (Participant 3).

In order to make informed decisions, parents seem to research official school rankings, consult online reviews, and solicit advice from other families. Some prioritize schools that appear to maintain a competitive admissions process. Parents believe that high selectivity guarantees a superior learning environment. As one parent explained, "If we choose a good school, the chances of getting into a top university are much higher" (Participant 22). However, in some instances, school prestige outweighs considerations of convenience or affordability, leading parents to accept longer commutes or higher tuition fees to secure admission to a highly regarded institution.

Language of Instruction and Parental Preferences. The language of instruction is a decisive factor for parents when selecting a school, as it directly influences their child's cultural identity and future educational opportunities. Parents in regions where Kazakh is dominant often prefer Kazakh-medium education, viewing it as essential for preserving national traditions and maintaining their native language. One parent emphasized this point, stating, "Education in Kazakh helps preserve national values" (Participant 5).

At the same time, for many families, Russian remains a crucial language for interethnic communication and access to a broader range of educational resources. One respondent explained, "I choose a school where Russian remains the main language, as it is important for future education and career prospects" (Participant 14). Others advocate for bilingual education, believing that fluency in both Kazakh and Russian provides students with greater flexibility in the academic and professional spheres. One parent highlighted this perspective, noting, "Bilingual education offers valuable opportunities for a child's future" (Participant 9).

Some parents express interest in trilingual education, emphasizing the importance of English proficiency for higher education and career advancement. One respondent stated, "Although we have opportunities for Kazakh-medium education, the quality is often lower. If there were stronger Russian- or English-language schools, we would choose them" (Participant 18). For others, language choice is influenced by practical considerations, such as parental involvement in their child's education. One parent explained, "Since my parents and I studied in Russian-language schools, we would be able to help our children with their homework" (Participant 22).

Language serves as a foundation for cultural and social development, underscoring its significance in educational decision-making, including school selection. Some parents prioritize linguistic and cultural preservation, while others focus on academic quality and career prospects to ensure their children receive an education that maximizes future opportunities.

Teaching Approaches and Educational Innovations. Parents increasingly value teaching that fosters critical thinking, independence, and creativity beyond academics. Innovation is seen as essential, making schools with modern methods particularly appealing. Parents in our sample explicitly link these policy targets to school quality, describing institutions as "modern" when they provide online homework portals and laboratory-style computer suites. One parent highlighted this perspective, stating, "It is important that children are taught to think, not just to memorize material" (Participant 6).

For a number of parents in this study, the integration of modern educational technology appeared to be an influential factor in their school selection process. Several respondents described digital tools and interactive learning environments as increasingly important for meeting the demands of contemporary education. One parent articulated this view, observing, "Modern technology must be part of education; otherwise, the school falls behind the times" (Participant 11). This perspective reflects a broader trend among families who prioritize technology-rich learning settings and expect schools to offer personalized and adaptive educational experiences.

In addition to technological considerations, some parents placed considerable emphasis on a school's affiliation with established educational networks. These networks were often associated, in their accounts, with high academic standards, distinctive pedagogical approaches, and reputational advantages. As one respondent remarked, "We want our child to study at BIL because it has a strong teaching staff" (Participant 19). Another participant highlighted the perceived benefits of private school systems, stating, "Private school networks provide more opportunities for an individualized approach" (Participant 24). Taken together, these insights suggest that for many families, both technological capacity and institutional reputation are key dimensions shaping their educational choices.

In their pursuit of progressive education, some families are even willing to relocate to another city or district to secure enrollment in a particular school known for its innovative methods. As one parent explained, "We prefer a school that follows a specific educational system" (Participant 7). Several individuals observed that integrating both traditional and contemporary teaching methods is essential to provide a comprehensive education. One participant remarked, "Innovative methods have a positive impact on children" (Participant 14), while another added, "It is not just about traditional education; new technologies are also necessary" (Participant 3).

Ultimately, teaching approaches and school reputation significantly influence parental decision-making, as they prefer institutions that strike a balance between academic rigor, creativity, and technological advancements to prepare their children for the future.

Religious and Cultural Considerations in School Selection. For certain families, the alignment between a school's ethos and their own religious or cultural values appears to play an influential role in shaping school choices. While some parents deliberately seek out institutions that actively support and reinforce their traditions, others describe a preference for environments that maintain religious neutrality, allowing for exposure to a wider range of perspectives. In both cases, there is a recurring concern about how well a school's cultural climate reflects or accommodates family expectations. One participant articulated this view, stating, "I want the school to respect the religious traditions of our family" (Participant 8).

Other respondents emphasized the importance of secularism in education. They expressed a desire for schools that avoid imposing specific religious beliefs and instead foster inclusivity. As one parent noted, "It is important that religious views are not imposed at school" (Participant 14). At the same time, several families highlighted the significance of preserving cultural heritage through their choice of school, often linking such preferences to a sense of community identity. One respondent shared, "For our family, it is important that the school preserves cultural values" (Participant 22).

These differing perspectives illustrate the complexity of parental priorities. While some value religious alignment, others emphasize tolerance and multiculturalism, hoping to ensure their children grow up in environments that respect and celebrate diversity. As another participant put it, "We are looking for a school that respects our children's religious beliefs" (Participant 17).

The interconnections among these various considerations are depicted in Figure 1, which provides a visual overview of the key factors influencing parental decision-making in Kazakhstan. This figure illustrates how religious and cultural preferences intersect with other dimensions of school choice, forming a broader framework through which families navigate their educational options.
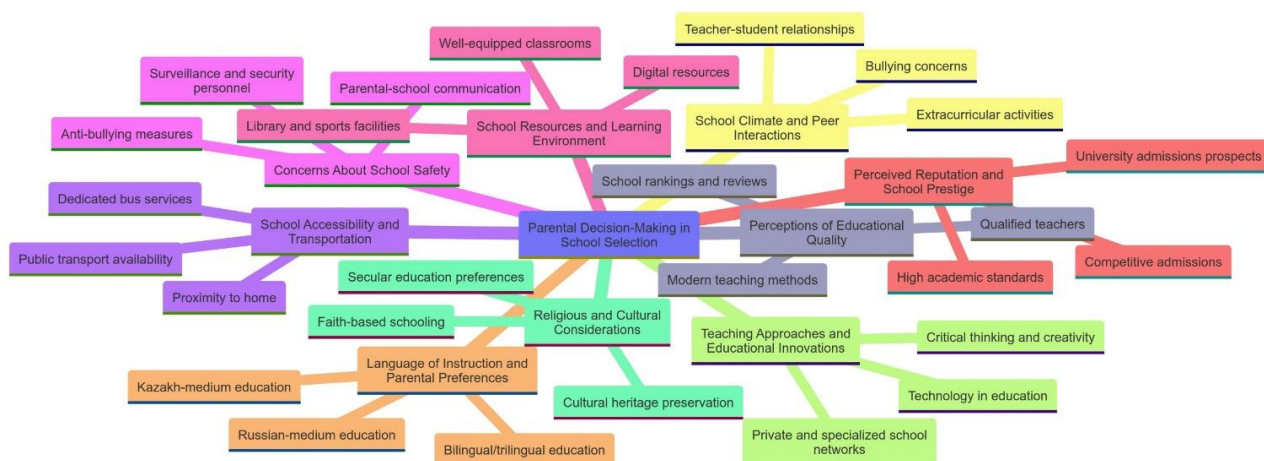

Figure 1. Key Themes in Parental Decision-Making for School Selection in Kazakhstan

Note — Compiled by the authors based on the findings of the study

Discussion and conclusions

This study explores how parents in Kazakhstan interpret and negotiate their school selection decisions within a multifaceted educational context. The findings suggest that parental decision-making is shaped by an intricate constellation of factors, including perceptions of academic quality, concerns about safety, language preferences, and cultural values. These influences often intersect in complex ways, reflecting the tensions between aspirations for educational excellence and practical constraints faced by families.

Through qualitative analysis of parent interviews, the research uncovered how values, expectations, and contextual challenges converge to inform school choice. Rather than presenting these factors as isolated determinants, the findings illustrated how parents weighed and reconciled multiple priorities in their search for suitable educational environments. In the following section, we situate these findings within the wider body of literature on parental decision-making, engaging critically with prevailing theoretical perspectives and considering their relevance to current policy discussions in Kazakhstan.

The Multidimensional Nature of Educational Decision-Making: Balancing Academic, Social, and Practical Factors. The findings indicated that parental school selection involves a complex interplay of factors, where parents consider academic quality, safety, accessibility, and institutional reputation. This seems to align with Gewirtz et al.'s (1995) concept of "circuits of schooling", which highlights how families navigate educational landscapes based on their differential access to resources, information, and transport options. In Kazakhstan, parents balance logistical constraints—such as proximity and safety—with long-term aspirations for their children's higher education and career trajectories, a tension observed in many school-choice contexts globally (Ball et al., 1996; Schneider & Enste, 2000).

Peer interactions and school climate indicate that school choice includes factors beyond academic performance. Parents in our study, much like those in other contexts (Vincent et al., 2012), viewed a positive peer environment as crucial for their children's social and psychological well-being. This is particularly significant, given research showing that school climate has a strong influence on both academic success and socio-emotional development (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Moreover, parents' reliance on informal networks — through parental chat groups and word-of-mouth recommendations — echoes findings from Reay and Ball (1997), who argue that middle-class parents, in particular, leverage social capital to navigate school markets.

However, a prominent issue emerging from our findings is the extent to which systemic inequalities constrain parental agency in school choice. While Kazakhstan has a growing education market, including

selective public schools and elite private institutions, access to high-quality education remains stratified along socioeconomic lines, reflecting patterns observed in other post-Soviet and neoliberalized education systems (Silova, 2009). The reliance on school prestige as a proxy for quality raises concerns about the reproduction of educational inequality, as families with greater economic and cultural capital are better positioned to access high-status schools (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau & Cox, 2011). Because capitation funding monetizes each additional student, public reputation becomes a form of economic capital. This dynamic aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) argument about the convertibility of capital, enabling privileged families to secure and reproduce educational advantage. This suggests that although parental decision-making is often presented as a matter of choice, it is frequently influenced by structural barriers, thereby necessitating policies that ensure fair access to high-quality education for all families.

Parents of children with special educational needs often resort to workarounds such as hiring shadow tutors or travelling long distances to reach pilot inclusive schools. These strategies expose a gap between the barrier-free schooling promised in the "Concept of Inclusive Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2025–2030" and the realities of access on the ground (Inclusive Policy, 2024). As a result, school choice continues to reproduce rather than alleviate inequality for families who depend most on inclusive provision.

The Tension Between Tradition and Innovation. An important finding of this investigation is the ongoing tension between traditional values and educational innovation in parental decision-making. Parents simultaneously desire schools that preserve cultural identity while embracing modern pedagogical approaches and technologies, reflecting a broader societal negotiation between continuity and change in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet transformation (Bray & Borevskaya, 2001). This duality is also evident in research on post-socialist education systems, where reforms introducing student-centered learning often coexist uneasily with established authoritarian teaching traditions (Johnson, 2014).

In our study, parents' desire for structured, disciplined learning environments coexists with an increasing preference for innovative teaching methods. This mirrors broader debates on global education reform, where calls for the development of 21st-century skills must contend with entrenched pedagogical norms (Fullan, 2013). Ball and Vincent (1998) argue that parents do not simply choose between traditional and progressive schooling models; instead, they prefer institutions that integrate both. Our findings align with this perspective, demonstrating that parents strategically evaluate how schools balance established educational norms with forward-looking approaches, such as the development of digital literacy and critical thinking.

The tension between tradition and innovation is also evident in discussions on school resources. While parents prioritize modern infrastructure and technology-rich classrooms, they often remain attached to traditional elements of schooling, such as discipline and hierarchical authority structures. This aligns with research suggesting that in transitional societies, educational preferences are shaped by both past experiences and future aspirations (Heyneman, 2010). However, a critical perspective is warranted: while parental support for educational innovation is encouraging, schools in Kazakhstan may face systemic barriers, such as outdated teacher training models and rigid curricula, which limit their ability to fully implement progressive methodologies (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018). Overcoming these structural obstacles is essential to transforming educational modernization from an aspirational goal into a tangible reality. Digital Kazakhstan set a national goal of 82 percent internet penetration by 2022 and an 83 percent digital literacy rate; however, monitoring reports continue to record uneven connectivity across rural areas (Digital Kazakhstan, 2017). The resulting digital divide means that urban schools translate technology into additional cultural and symbolic capital, while their rural counterparts struggle to meet even the baseline infrastructure standards. Consequently, a policy designed to equalize opportunity risks reproducing existing hierarchies instead of narrowing them.

Linguistic Choices as Future-Oriented Strategies. One of the most compelling findings concerns how parents approach linguistic choices as strategic investments in their children's futures. In multilingual societies, language education functions as a form of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and our findings illustrate how Kazakhstani parents position their children within national, regional, and global linguistic markets. The preference for Kazakh-medium education reflects efforts to preserve national identity in a post-Soviet context. At the same time, the prioritization of Russian signals continued engagement with regional economic and educational networks (Smagulova, 2008). The increasing emphasis on English proficiency aligns with global trends, where English is positioned as a gateway to international mobility and higher socioeconomic status (Phillipson, 2009).

The trilingual policy aims to safeguard Kazakh cultural identity while enhancing global competitiveness through English and sustaining Russian as a lingua franca. Our data reveal a clear hierarchy: parents treat

Kazakh as an assumed baseline, regard Russian as functional, and invest symbolic capital in English as a prestige asset.

However, linguistic preferences among parents should not be viewed solely as individual choices; rather, they seem deeply influenced by wider political and socioeconomic dynamics. In Kazakhstan, the government's trilingual education policy—designed to promote Kazakh, Russian, and English—has been framed as an attempt to reconcile national identity with aspirations for global integration (Kambatyrova & Sagintayeva, 2020). While some parents expressed support for this multilingual vision, others raised concerns about its uneven implementation. In particular, issues such as disparities in resource allocation and varying levels of teacher preparedness have generated skepticism about the policy's capacity to deliver equitable outcomes (Chaney et al., 2020). These findings suggest a need for closer scrutiny of how language policies translate into practice, especially for students from less advantaged backgrounds who may lack consistent access to high-quality instruction across all three languages.

Moreover, the data indicate that parents often perceive language choice as a proxy for educational quality. Schools offering Russian or English as mediums of instruction are commonly associated with stronger academic programs and enhanced prospects for university admission. Such perceptions risk reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that privilege certain groups, with linguistic capital functioning as a mechanism of stratification rather than inclusion (Piller, 2016). From a policy perspective, ensuring that each linguistic track provides equally rigorous and comprehensive education emerges as a pressing concern if efforts to mitigate social divisions tied to language proficiency are to succeed.

Limitations of the Study. This study offers important insights into how Kazakhstani parents approach school selection; however, several limitations merit careful consideration. To begin with, despite efforts to recruit diverse participant pool, the sample was skewed toward middle- and upper-middle-income urban families, with approximately 71 percent residing in urban areas. This demographic concentration inevitably limits the applicability of the findings to rural and lower-income communities, where school choice may be shaped by different constraints, such as limited resources and alternative cultural priorities.

It is also important to acknowledge that the study focused on parents' articulated reasoning. Such focus might not be suitable for capturing unconscious biases, unspoken sociocultural influences, or external pressures that may be affecting school choice but remain implicit in interviews.

Likewise, the reliance on self-reported data without studying and incorporating perspectives from other stakeholders, such as educators, administrators, or students themselves, may have restricted the breadth of data analysis. More inclusive, multi-perspective studies have the potential to reveal how institutional practices and family priorities interact in shaping educational pathways.

Recommendations for Future Research. The study points toward three directions that warrant deeper scholarly engagement. A priority lies in conducting longitudinal research to trace how parental decision-making unfolds as children progress through different educational stages. While our cross-sectional study provides a snapshot of current strategies, it remains unclear whether initial priorities persist or shift as families encounter new institutional challenges and societal changes. A longitudinal investigation would offer insights into the ways aspirations are recalibrated over time in response to Kazakhstan's evolving policy environment and broader socio-economic dynamics.

Perhaps equally important is the need for comparative investigations that probe school choice across more diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts. The present study, shaped by an urban, middle-income sample, leaves open questions about how families in urban areas or those with more limited resources navigate the education landscape. Incorporating these variations into a study could uncover alternative logics of decision-making that differ from those observed in urban settings. Such an approach might help understand how inequities in access and information influence patterns of opportunity and exclusion.

A third avenue for future research invites a closer and more critical examination of children's roles within family decision-making processes regarding school choice. Much of the existing literature positions parents as the primary architects of educational trajectories of children. However, this perspective risks overlooking subtle yet significant ways in which children's voices, preferences, and maybe aspirations inform these decisions. Emerging studies in sociology and education suggest that children, even at relatively young ages, are not passive recipients of parental choices but active participants who negotiate, resist, or endorse family strategies in complex ways (Jerome & Starkey, 2022; Martinez Sainz et al., 2024). Exploring how young people articulate their educational priorities, both explicitly and through their everyday interactions, could offer valuable data about the dynamics behind choosing schools within households. This approach would also enable a deeper understanding of the intergenerational transmission of educational values, partic-

ularly in societies like Kazakhstan where cultural expectations, linguistic preferences, and schooling aspirations are in flux. Additionally, examining children's agency in this context could shed light on the potential tensions and accommodations within families as they navigate between traditional authority structures and contemporary ideals of child-centered education.

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