

Parental Choice of Institution for their Child's Early Education: A Situation Analysis from Southern Punjab

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Abstract- This study aims to explore the factors that influence parents when they choose an institution for their child's early education. The data was collected from sixty parents in Bahawalpur through a questionnaire. The results show that parents have different views on early childhood education based on their socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents who have higher education and income tend to prefer schools with better academic curricula, well-educated staff, modern technology, school facilities, a safe and friendly environment. Meanwhile, parents with lower income and modest families also have similar requirements but face financial difficulties and choose schools with nominal fee that are located nearby. It is recommended that schools should outfit themselves with modern amenities, equipped libraries, latest sports facilities as well as positive and affable educational perspective. The government should provide financial support and resources to achieve these goals. Additionally, schools should strengthen the relationship between teachers and parents by frequently inviting parents at schools to discuss the performance of their children.

Keywords: Early childhood education, school choice, student-teacher relationship, Parent-teacher relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is incredibly important for all children because it helps them to develop necessary learning skills they need to be successful in life. When children make appearance at a remarkable early childhood education program, they tend to perform better in areas such as language, literacy, problem-solving and math skills. Moreover, they also develop a strong sense of self-control which is a crucial skill to develop at an early age. However, despite the overwhelming evidence that shows the benefits of early childhood education, it is still challenging for many parents as they struggle to find right place for their children or preschoolers end up in poor-quality programs which means that millions of little learners don't get the chance to benefit from early childhood education (Bouffard, 2017).

During primary or secondary education, many children did not have control over attending a particular school, as these choices were often made by parents or guardians. Allowing parents to manage their children's education is a fundamental right in a self-governing society (Bertegna and Magni, 2020). School choice has been a topic of concern in education sector; it empowers parents to pay attention in their child's learning and encourages them to take a greater interest in the process of early education. Instead of just accepting the school assigned to them, they make a conscious decision about where their child will attend the school, public or private. This can be empowering and increase their confidence to get more involved in their child's education. Parents have limited access to valuable information about school options which hinders their ability to choose the best school for their child. Bosetti (2004) stated that school choice and parental self-efficacy are driven by dissatisfaction with wide-range of schools, lower academic standards in public schools and poor academic grades of students among underprivileged groups. Family decision in selecting schools is not a new trend and has become an attractive area. Supporters of school selection resist about parents having freedom of educating their children according to their own beliefs and lifestyles. Levin (2002) argued that education is an essential amplification of parental choice; therefore parents must have the right of school selection that matches their predilections.

According to a study conducted by Weidner and Herrington (2006), parents make their decision on which school to choose is based on several factors, including academic quality of the school, the quality of its

teachers, the effectiveness of its education system, the syllabus, class size, the school's overall performance, financial aid, values, the safe and healthy environment of the school. Moreover, Huisman and Smits (2009) stated that parents consider factors such as the school's academic achievements, curriculum, teacher proficiency, school environment and available facilities while selecting a school. These factors are considered essential for a child's education and personal growth. If the society of Pakistan is analyzed, it is divided into different socioeconomic classes - the rich, the average and the poor which are distinguished on the basis of accessibility to funds and resources as well as social advancement. The rich are the most honored and blessed ones having absolute resources and opportunities while the poor have lesser access to resources and opportunities, and they lag far behind in competing with the upper class as well as left behind in various aspects of life. The average class aspires to be like the rich and strives to reach their level of success in society. This phenomenon has significant implications for parents when it comes to their child's school selection. In communities where parents have the freedom of school selection, it is important to understand the dynamics that can impact their decision to opt for public or private institutions at early childhood education level. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the prominent aspects that affect parental choice of institutions for their children.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Human brain growth is unique in that ninety percent of it occurs outside the womb, under the care of adults. This growth takes place in the first three to five years of life, which is considered the first optimal period for human development, from birth through preschool (0-5 years). During the early years of our life, a child experiences a phase of rapid learning and development. In this period, the child develops senses, motor skills, identify social group, acquires language and social behaviors (Early Childhood Education, 2023). According to Mustard (2008), early childhood development has a significant impact on the development of a child's brain. If the development is slow or improper in the early stages of life, it can have a long-lasting effect on the child's cognitive skills, such as creativity, problem-solving abilities, and logical reasoning. In this context, Young (2002) explained that early childhood education (ECE) program was created to address the socio-emotional, intellectual and physical needs of children which subsequently promotes their creativity and helps them to become a successful member of society. Parents have indispensable role in upbringing and nurturing of their children. Selecting the exact school for their child's initial education is one of the most essential decisions parents make at early stage. It sets the foundation for a child's intellectual and cognitive development. According to Gordon and Browne (2016), during a child's early years, it is crucial for parents, teachers, and caregivers to engage in meaningful interactions that significantly impact the child's future. The concept of school choice is not just important for progress in educational standards via healthy contests between schools but it also encourage parents to actively participate in the whole learning process as an influential player in policy formulation. Some educational experts believe that parental involvement can serve as an effective tool for academic reforms such as Marsh, Car-Chellman and Sockman (2009) stated, "Parental perspectives can help policy makers to recognize the areas where public schools are possibly lacking compared to private schools." Furthermore, Godwin and Kemerer (2002) demonstrated that the parents' viewpoint may possibly help to overcome external forces that may affect the educational process negatively.

According to Smrekar and Goldring (1999), the introduction of school choice options can help to improve public education by providing an alternative source of education through private schools. This can lead to increase parental involvement in decision-making and satisfaction, as well as a greater sense of community which in turn can lead to improve academic achievement and learning outcomes. The theory of rationale choice suggests that parents are the primary decision-makers when it comes to choosing a school for their child as they aim to maximize their success and overall well-being. Parents without extended networks struggle to access valuable information about school choice. Ball (2003) explained that the choice of school that parents make for their children is a part of a larger social process that is inclined to various factors and functionalities of social hierarchies and social networks. To make decisions about their children's education, parents depend on their beliefs, feelings, information gathered and guidance from their societal and specialized experts in the field of education. Lubienski (2008) explained that parents always seek schools that align with their home values. They make primary school selection decisions based on various factors such as their child's strengths and weaknesses, family values, parental perspective and right to choose proper school for their child. The decision is influenced by child-specific behavior and characteristics such as gender, age, and intelligence, as well as the parents' level of education and

awareness. Parents also gather information from colleagues and the market to make an informed decision. When it comes to determine the quality of education, various factors are taken into consideration. Firstly, demand side factors such as household income and wealth are important determinants. Secondly, on the supply side, school-specific characteristics like quality of management, language of instruction, public or private ownership, distance from home to school, and co-education or single-gender schooling are also taken into account. According to Almutawa and Alwatfa (2007), several factors play a crucial role, including the type and quality of syllabus, ethical and religious beliefs and practices, teaching quality, well-organized school environment, security concerns, the educators' commitment, superior performance grades, inter-activeness with parents, clearly defined academic objectives, the socio-economic status of students, as well as schools' vicinity from their homes. Bell (2009) stated that many children around the world who come from underprivileged backgrounds are forced to attend schools in their local areas which may not have adequate resources or high-quality education. This is due to the fact that many parents cannot afford the cost of transportation to schools further away. Parents can choose to enroll their children in a better school, rather than a good one in their area by offering more options. Fung and Lam, (2011) indicated that the choice of right school has a positive effect on academic and behavioral outcomes.

Charles (2011) argued that parents' decision of choice of school is influenced by five main categories i.e. teaching quality, assistance in students' learning, school learning environment, parent/school interaction and management of available resources. It was explored that parents consider the quality of instruction and vicinity of school as decisive factors in school selection for their child's early education. Moreover, Hsu and Yuan-Fang (2013) were of the view that parents' choice of school is impacted by six main categories that include educational environment, educational philosophy, campus, facilities, curricular activities, school specialties, location and transportation. Yang and Kayaardi (2004) illustrated that parents having higher levels of education are better equipped to understand the importance of education and make rational choices for their child's education. Tuition fees, nearness to home and workplace are also significant factors that influence parents' choice of school as noted by Evans and Cleghorn (2014). Parents' preference for a healthy educational environment can act as a tool of reference for schools that wish to make advancements (Hsu and Yuan-fang, 2013). According to research by Lipsky, Friedman and Harkema (2017), many parents make decisions about which school to choose for their children based on information from their social networks rather than from the schools themselves. They rely heavily on the opinions of those in their social circles to judge the quality of an institution.

In this regard, religious education also plays a significant role in parents' decision-making process. Parents often choose private schools due to the psychological stigmas associated with them, such as a sense of superiority. Private schools have a good reputation due to their modern curriculum, quality education, hands-on learning experiences, and better infrastructure facilities (Ali, Umer and Khan, 2022). During the school selection process, parents of students attending private schools considered good learning circumstances, superior education, an innocuous environment and additional facilities such as conveyance and extra study programs as the most important factors. However, parents of students attending public schools prioritize affordability, proximity to their living area, and good educational conditions while selecting a school for their child (Tarkhnishvili, Tarkhnishvili and Strielkowski, 2022). In recent times, the school selection process has become more complex and multifaceted. The society is sharply segmented with people divided into their own social circles with differing attitudes towards the public and private education system and early childhood education is a crucial issue for them.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to explore the factors affecting parents' choice of institution for their child at early childhood level by using a descriptive survey methodology. The study was delimited to Bahawalpur district of southern Punjab only and the parents of said district were population of the study. A sample of sixty families/parents was selected through random sampling from Bahawalpur to participate in the study. The questionnaire (validated through experts' judgment) was constructed as a tool to collect data from the sample. The research tool was divided by relevant factors into three main categories. The first category is academic category that includes academic program, teacher qualifications and student-teacher relationship. The second category focused on the parent-school relationship while third category examined the convenience factor which looked at school facilities, social status elements, co-curricular activities and safety. The researcher personally administered questionnaire to sixty parents with return rate of hundred

percent. The return rate of questionnaires was very good due to persistent and repeated follow-up by the researcher. The collected data was evaluated on statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) by using frequencies and percentages and the results were tabulated and interpreted.

IV. RESULTS

The study was focused on identifying factors affecting parents' choice of institution for early education of their child. The results of this study were organized along the major categories and presented in the following sections:

Table 1: Academic Category

Statements	S.A	A	UD	DA	SD	Mean
i. Academic Program						
Religious environment	12 (20%)	22 (36.7%)	11 (18.3%)	11 (18.3%)	4 (6.7%)	2.75
Better academic curriculum and quality education	33 (55%)	18 (30%)	6 (10%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (1.7%)	1.67
Academic achievement	18 (30%)	35 (58.3%)	4 (6.7%)	3 (5%)	0 (0.0%)	1.87
ii. Qualification of Teachers						
Highly qualified and experienced teaching staff	33 (55%)	17 (28.3%)	5 (8.3%)	3 (5%)	2 (3.3%)	1.73
iii. Student-Teacher Relationship						
Teacher and child respect one another	34 (56.7%)	21 (35%)	5 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.52

The information presented in Table 1 indicated that parents tend to strongly agreed and preferred schools that provide high-quality academic curriculum and education. Additionally, they prioritized schools that have highly qualified and experienced staff as well as a positive and respectful relationship between teachers and students. Parents also tend to be agreed that they would choose a school where they believe their child will achieve high grades/scores. Further, parents appeared to be agreed regarding the religious environment when choosing a school for their children at early stages.

Table 2: Parent School Relationship

Statements	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Mean
Parents-teacher meetings held	14 (23.3%)	37 (61.7%)	8 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.7%)	1.95
School events and parents act as volunteer	11 (18.3%)	38 (63.3%)	10 (16.7%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2.02
Membership in school committees and arrange different tasks	15 (25%)	21 (35%)	19 (31.7%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.7%)	2.25
Suitable opportunities for parents' involvement in their child's development	20 (30.3%)	29 (48.3%)	6 (10%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.7%)	1.95
Frequent visits of parents in school	9 (15%)	32 (53.3%)	8 (13.3%)	8 (13.3%)	3 (5%)	2.4
Co-operation between parents and school administration	15 (25%)	31 (51.7%)	11 (18.3%)	3 (5%)	0 (0.0%)	2.03

According to the data examined in Table 2, it is clear that most of the parents preferred schools that conduct parent-teacher meetings, provide opportunities for parents to participate voluntarily in school events and play a role in their child's development. Furthermore, parents highly preferred schools that offer voluntary membership to parents in school committees and are willing to cooperate with parents in case of any issues that may arise during their child's early education.

Table 3: Convenience Factors

Statements	SA	A	UD	D	SD	Mean
i. School Facilities						
Safe transportation for children	23 (38.3%)	25 (41.7%)	7 (11.7%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.7%)	2.45
Use of modern technologies	32 (53.3%)	20 (33.3%)	6 (10%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	1.65
School located in the neighborhood	24 (40%)	26 (43.3%)	7 (11.7%)	3 (5%)	0 (0.0%)	1.82
Home location	18 (30%)	30 (50%)	10 (16.7%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	1.95
ii. Social Status Determinants						
Parents' income	32 (53.3%)	24 (40%)	3 (50%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1.55
Parents' working status	31 (51.7%)	23 (38.3%)	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	0 (0.0%)	1.63
Low fee in schools	6 (10%)	20 (33.3%)	19 (31.7%)	8 (13.3%)	7 (11.7%)	2.83
Famous chain of schools	8 (13.3%)	19 (31.7%)	13 (21.7%)	15 (25%)	5 (8.3%)	2.83
School rank/quality and discipline	19 (31.7%)	33 (55%)	4 (6.7%)	3 (5%)	1 (1.7%)	1.9
iii. Safe Haven						
School safety and friendly atmosphere	29 (48.3%)	18 (30%)	7 (11.7%)	2 (3.3%)	4 (6.7%)	1.9

Based on Table 3, it was found that when parents were asked about the factors they consider while choosing a school for their child's early education, most of them strongly agreed that they preferred schools that use modern technologies to educate their child. Further, school safety and a friendly atmosphere are also of utmost concern to them. They also strongly agreed that their working status and income have an impact on their decision to select a school for their child. While the respondents agreed that safe transportation, school location, fee structure, fame, rank/quality and discipline also influence their decision in selecting a school for early education of their child.

V. CONCLUSION

Parents play a crucial role in raising and developing their children. One of the most important decisions parents make is selecting the right institution for their children's early learning which lays foundation of intellectual growth. The prime purpose of this study was to determine the aspects that affect parents' selection of pre-school institutions for their children. The results revealed that parents' working status, family income, home location, school safety and friendly atmosphere, quality education, modern technologies, transportation, low fees, religious affiliation and access to information about their child's progress were among the factors that affected their decision. These findings were consistent with conclusions of several researchers (Yang and Kayaardi, 2004; Almutawa and Alwatfa, 2007; Hsu and Yuan-fang, 2013; Tarkhnishvili, Tarkhnishvili, and Strielkowski, 2022).

Moreover, Pakistan has a complicated social structure with numerous classes. These classes have varying perspectives on early childhood education. Parents with higher education and income often prefer institutions with superior academic curricula, well-educated staff, modern technologies and other facilities, as well as a safe and friendly atmosphere. On the other hand, parents with lower income also have same necessities for early childhood education but have financial constraints and need to choose schools with low fees and located within their proximity. Although this study has limitations as it only includes the parents of Bahawalpur, it has generated authentic data that provides a basic understanding of factors that affect parents' school choices for their child's early education. The findings suggest that schools should equip themselves with modern learning and IT equipments, fully-equipped libraries, latest co-curricular

facilities, positive, competitive, safe and healthy educational environment. The government should provide financial support for public institutions to achieve early childhood education goals. The relationship between teachers and parents could be strengthened by inviting parents for frequent meetings. This would help to overcome any serious issues and bring the performance of students to the notice of their parents. Furthermore, it is difficult to balance the parental choice over their child's early education despite substantial investment. Enhancements in early childhood education efficacy are contingent upon its integration with continuous research and comprehensive evaluation process.

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