

School-Parents Communication as Determinant of School Selection in Context of Declining Enrollments in Government Elementary Schools

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Abstract

In the context of declining enrollments at Government Elementary Schools in Punjab, this study was conducted to identify the determinants of school selection preferred by the parents at the time of school selection. This study mainly focused on the school-parents communication as a determinant. A quantitative research design was adopted to collect the data. A self-developed questionnaire assisted to collect data involving 291 parents, who have enrolled their kids in the private schools. It was found that parents mostly attach importance to the following determinants: quality of teaching, school learning environment, school-parent communication and students' achievement. It was further established that parents with urban backgrounds paid significant attention to school-parent communication than the parents from rural areas. Moreover, parents with higher educational qualifications and greater monthly incomes also considered school-parent communication more important than the parents of lower educational qualifications and low monthly incomes. Interestingly, children from urban areas with more educated parents and higher SES are generally enrolled in private schools. Some recommendations also put forward to improve the enrollments in government schools specifically by focusing on school-parent communication. So that the parents of these groups may consider government schools as first choice for their children's education.

Keywords: Determinants, School selection, School-parent Communication, Government Elementary Schools, Declining enrolments

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Introduction

The educational landscape of Pakistan has witnessed multiple developments during the last two decades. International commitments stimulating education gurus to work hard to ensure 100% enrollment rates in schools at primary level. Resultantly, the implementation of these policies could be seen on ground (Government of Pakistan, 2011).

Many developments have been made in view of these policies and to make public schools more effective and attractive for the children and parents as well. On the other hand, the successive governments of the country encouraged private sector too. Parents got a choice to enroll their children in public or private school (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2014). This was somehow good in view of many perspectives of quality education as a healthy competition was on prospects. But, the public sector schools could not make their way and there is a continuous trend of low enrollment in public schools.

The actual picture of public schools highlights many loopholes in the system which are lowering down the quality of education and causing decline in enrollments. On the other side, the private sector offers a cost-effective means of providing education (both in terms of quality and quantity). That could be a reason that in rural areas, too, parents preferred to send their children in low fee private school as compared to free public school (Andrabi et al., 2007).

The decline in enrollment in public schools raised many questions that what indicators parents perceived or take into account at the time of admission in the school e.g. students' examination scores, school environment, physical facilities, quality teaching and school-parent communication. The factors which affect parents' decisions of school selection have been identified to wide extent. Specifically, school-parents communication has been acknowledged as one of the significant school-selection factors. That means, to what extent parents value school-parents communication in choosing a school for their child. So the study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the determinants of school selection which parents consider at the time of school selection for their children at elementary level?
2. How much importance parents attach to school-parent communication at the time of school selection?

Literature Review

As stated above an unprecedented growth of private schooling can be observed in Pakistan during the last two decades, where Punjab secured a significant place in the graph. Most of the private institutes (65%) are located in Punjab province (Barrera-Osorio & Raju, 2015). These private schools are trying to ensure all the quality standards to reach to the satisfaction of their customers primarily students and their parents. Ultimately, private schools are successful in creating their positive image in the society, achieved high level of parents' satisfaction and securing high enrollments in the schools.

On the other hand, the conventional public schools with their low pace in development could not meet the increasing standards of their counterparts. Thus, the enrolments trends in public schools went on decreasing. Citing Punjab government's official statistics, parents of over 25,000 students had to transfer their children from public to private schools because the government's education system was fast deteriorating in Punjab. (Government of Pakistan, 2005; 2013).

This is further confirmed through the international research resources. Tooley and Dixon (2007) in a Global Research Project in Developing Countries concluded that the first choice of parents in view of school selection is private schools because government schools are losing their image in the country.

The assumption is that parents and students are free to choose among expanded educational options, schools will differentiate themselves both philosophically and practically in response to their needs and interests with schools offering 'quality education' than their competitors (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of factors considered at the time of admission in the school e.g. teaching quality, school environment, and physical facilities at school, student examination scores, and school-parent communication. The last factor is considered very vital in school selection and the main focus of this research study.

It is generally believed that parental involvement in the school is of immense importance for child's learning. Literature identified that 'parent involvement' is a multidimensional concept that combines perspectives of both behavioral and psychological aspects. The famous model of Epstein (1995) also endorsed these aspect of school-parents involvement.

This construct was later endorsed by further researchers. Most studies considered as Fan and Chen (1999) explained the following dimension of school-parents communication: overall parent participation, the different dimensions of communication with children on school issues, homework (parental supervision of school issues), parental expectations, reading with children, parental attendance and participation in school activities, and the type of family.

All these dimensions explicitly introduced the concept of feedback. Communication by school in the form of reporting/feedback is one of the significant factors of parent satisfaction with schools (Badri, Mason & Mourad, 2010).

The above mentioned dimensions of school-parent involvement are also vital in terms of school selection, parents' satisfaction and students' academic achievement. The available literature is evident to link these factors with parents' satisfaction and school performance. The factors like: (a) quality of teaching has been considered a most important factor of parent satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2013; Sudarshanam, 2011); (b) School environment is another determinant in school selection. Parents think that private schools offer more conducive school environment as compare to public schools (Rehman, Khan, Tariq & Tasleem, 2010); (c) physical conditions and facilities are the utmost convincing factor for the parents at the time of school selection for their child.

The available local and international literature (Ashraf, 2012; Sudarshanam, 2011) stressed on the fact that physical conditions of the school have their key role in school selection. The infrastructure and available facilities in the school play a vital role to attract the attention of the parents at the time of admission. Next, Ahmed et al. (2013) and Buckley and Schneider (2006) considered that academic achievements are also a strong factor in view of parents' decisions of school selection. This has been also confirmed in Pakistani context that school learning outcomes are the major determinant of parents' school selection (Ashraf, 2012).

Research Methodology

A survey was conducted using a mix-method research design but only the quantitative part of the study is being presented in this research paper. Two districts from Punjab province were selected to collect the data for this study. Further, one tehsil from each district was selected randomly. The selected tehsils were Sargodha and Mankera from Sargodha and Bhakkar districts respectively. All parents of the children enrolled in a private school considered the population of the study.

Initially a semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 conveniently selected parents from Sargodha tehsil. The interview protocol was developed on the basis of literature review in relation to declining enrollments of government elementary schools. On the basis of the findings of the interviews, eight factors were identified during interviews with parents. These factors were: scores in terminal examination, school environment, physical facilities at the school, school-parents communication, convenient location, quality of teaching at school, strength of students at school, and siblings already enrolled in that particular school. Accidental and convenient sampling techniques were applied to select the sample of 150 parents from each selected tehsil. Parents with different socio-economic status were approached to ensure the representation of the population.

A questionnaire was developed on the basis of these eight factors. Considering the literacy level of the parents, in some cases the responses were marked through a structured interview. It was planned that the parents would be asked to rank the eight determinants of school selection but the implementation was challenging. Keeping in view that multiple factors play their roles while selecting a school for a child, the parents were more at ease when they were asked about each determinant independently. So, we analyzed our data on the basis of mean and t-test to reach to certain conclusions. The Cronbach Alpha for the research instrument was 0.78. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and t-test was applied to analyze the data.

Results

The study aimed to study the perception of parents regarding determinants of school selection at elementary school level. A questionnaire was used to collect the opinion of the parents. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Descriptive statistics according to demographic variables of the sample*

Variables		Descriptive	Convenient location	Educational achievements	School environment	Enrolment at school	School-parent communication	Quality of teaching	Siblings at school	Physical facilities
Locality	Rural	<i>M</i>	2.19	3.71	3.68	1.96	3.50	4.35	2.70	3.61
	(n=137)	<i>SD</i>	0.71	.91	1.02	1.52	0.98	.62	1.06	1.07
	Urban	<i>M</i>	2.30	3.65	4.71	2.10	4.61	4.63	2.82	4.25
	(n=154)	<i>SD</i>	1.07	.79	.39	1.30	.54	.70	.99	.89
Academic qualification	Less than 14 years of education	<i>M</i>	2.80	3.77	3.45	2.24	3.33	4.22	2.99	3.50
	(n=192)	<i>SD</i>	0.89	1.03	1.10	1.16	.89	.79	.96	.66
	14 or more years of education	<i>M</i>	2.71	3.92	4.63	2.19	4.45	4.47	2.92	4.15
	(n=99)	<i>SD</i>	0.98	.96	.58	1.23	.63	.75	.98	1.07
Monthly income	Less than 40,000 PKR	<i>M</i>	2.56	4.07	3.70	2.44	3.59	4.32	3.02	3.80
	(n=167)	<i>SD</i>	0.82	1.12	1.19	1.04	1.08	.82	.92	.86
	40,000 or more PKR	<i>M</i>	2.48	4.02	4.51	2.53	4.40	4.45	2.95	3.84
	(n=124)	<i>SD</i>	1.02	1.06	.66	1.28	.70	.61	.96	1.18
Total (n=291)		<i>M</i>	2.51	3.87	4.02	2.24	3.98	4.41	2.90	3.86
		<i>SD</i>	.71	.94	1.00	1.37	.99	.72	1.29	1.05

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows that quality of teaching was the most important determinant of school selection considered by the parents ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.72$). Secondly, parents pay much attention to school environment at the time of school selection ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.00$). As to the next factor, parents rate school-parent communication ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.99$).

Next, educational achievements in the form of terminal examination scores place at number forth in the factors list ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.94$). Moreover, parents also pay attention to the availability of physical facilities at school ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.05$). The table further shows that parents do not attach much importance to students' strength at school, sibling already studying at school and convenient location.

Comparison of means on demographics of the sample

t-test was calculated to compare the results of the determinants on the basis of parents' demographic variables. The detail of the results is available in table 2.

Table 2
Comparison of means on demographical variables

Factors	Demographical Variables								
	Locality			Academic Qualification			Monthly Income		
	Sum of squares (total)	F	Sig.	Sum of squares (total)	F	Sig.	Sum of squares (total)	F	Sig.
Convenient location	72.853	.552	.608	79.126	.496	.598	61.960	1.410	.242
Scores in terminal examination	82.805	.418	.531	84.056	1.882	.180	80.701	.176	.690
School environment	115.243	81.086	.000***	111.098	49.754	.000***	114.876	17.624	.000***
Enrollment at School	69.269	.608	.667	72.382	.592	.610	74.920	.508	.426
School-parent communication	109.892	50.354	.000***	111.008	84.742	.000***	112.652	22.206	.000***
Quality of teaching	61.638	4.826	.029*	61.184	2.994	.089	68.257	1.921	.308
Sibling already at School	71.120	.526	.580	81.612	.358	.634	67.346	1.862	.256
Physical facilities	120.149	15.254	.000***	118.788	55.211	.000***	118.339	.054	.829
	* $p < .05$	** $p < .01$	*** $p < .001$						

As far as the difference of mean scores on the basis of demographic variables were concerned, a significant difference was found between the mean score of the parents on the basis of locality ($F=81.086$, $t=.000$), academic qualification ($F=49.754$, $t=.000$), monthly income ($F=17.624$, $t=.000$) in relation to school environment of the school as a determinant of school selection decision.

A significant difference was also found between the mean score of the parents on the basis of locality ($F=50.354$, $t=.000$), academic qualification ($F=84.742$, $t=.000$), monthly income ($F=22.206$, $t=.000$) in relation to school-parent communication of the school as a determinant of school selection decision.

As to the quality of teaching, only a significant difference was also found between the mean score of the parents on the basis of locality ($F=4.826$, $t=.029$). As to academic qualification ($F=2.994$, $t=.089$) and monthly income ($F=1.921$, $t=.308$), we could not identify the significant values.

A significant difference was also identified between the mean score of the parents on the basis of locality ($F=15.254$, $t=.000$), academic qualification ($F=55.211$, $t=.000$), monthly income ($F=.054$, $t=.829$) in relation to physical facilities at school as a determinant of school selection decision.

As to the remaining determinants e.g., convenient location, students' examination scores, enrollment at school, sibling already at school, we could not identify any significant differences between determinants with parents' demographic variables.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the perception of parents regarding determinants of school selection at elementary school level. The study results indicate that out of eight determinants, four key determinants considered by the parents at the time of school selection: school environment, school-parent communication, and physical facilities. We will discuss the findings in relation to these key determinants.

The first key determinant considered by the parents was the '*quality of teaching*' at school. Parents pay significant attention to quality teaching at the time of school selection for their children. These findings are corroborating with the study findings of Sudarshanam (2011) who identified that the quality of education and teaching at school is the key determinant of parental satisfaction in schools.

Next, *school environment* is also a key determinant considered by the parents at the time of school selection. Parents pay much attention to classroom environment, teachers' behavior, and conduciveness etc. Our findings are completely in line with the earlier research (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2015) which identified the same determinant considered by the parents at the time of school selection.

School-parent communication is reported to be completely missing in public schools. Schools hardly communicate the results of their children to the parents. These findings are in line with the study results of Hussain and Hameed (2014) as they have identified in their research that parents are complaining about the behavior of schools that they do not remain in touch with the parents to communicate the performance and behavior of their child. This is further confirmed by the study results of Ahmad (2010) who investigated that parents were not satisfied with the communication made by the government schools in Pakistan. There could be many reasons linked to this situation, it can be due to financial constraints because public schools do not have sufficient funds for such initiatives. A lack of interest on the part of parents and teachers could be another reason of this missing link. Next, literacy level of parents could be another reason of this lack of communication between school and parents.

As to the last significant determinant by the parents in school selection of their child was *physical facilities* available at school. Indeed, private schools are well developed as compared to public schools. Private schools have better infrastructure e.g., buildings, labs, facilities etc. as compared to public schools. Nevertheless, our findings are align with the available studies conducted in Pakistani context. Ahmed and Sheikh (2014) and Siddiqui and Gorard (2017) conducted their research in view of the comparison of public and private schools in Punjab. They identified that the infrastructure or physical facilities are better in private schools as compared to government schools. Indeed, parents pay attention to these things at the time of admission of their child in the school. But again it linked to their monthly income either they can afford private school or not.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to identify determinants of schools selection at elementary level in the context of declining enrollments at government elementary schools. The main focus of the study was school-parent communication as a determinant of school selection. Parents especially from urban areas, with higher academic qualifications and of higher SES attach more importance in school selection decision than the determinants like students' achievements and physical infrastructure of the school. Sufficient literature is available to verdict that government schools are giving more importance on students' scores and improving physical infrastructure and no attention is being paid at school-parent communication. The government sector is not responsive to parents' demand; that is why the enrollments at elementary level are decreasing day by day. It is strongly recommended that government schools should pay attention to these determinants which parents

considered at the time of school section for their children so that they can compete with their counterparts in the market and attract parents and children towards public schools.

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