

Determinants of Parents' School Choice While Seeking Their Children's Admission

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Abstract

This study investigated the determinants influencing parents' school choice decisions when seeking admission for their children. A descriptive correlational research design was employed, utilizing a survey technique for data collection. The target population comprised parents residing in Okara District, Pakistan, representing diverse backgrounds in age, socioeconomic status, and monthly income. A convenience sampling method was used to gather data from 300 parents. The data collection instrument was a self-developed questionnaire, the reliability of which was calculated, yielding a strong reliability coefficient of 0.80. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 and Microsoft Excel 2010 were used for data analysis, involving descriptive and inferential components. The analysis aimed to examine the potential differences among various determinants that influenced parents' school choice decisions. The findings revealed no significant differences in the factors shaping parents' school preferences when seeking admission for their children. The study provides insights into the complex decision-making process in school selection and highlights the need to further explore the multifaceted determinants that guide parental choices in the educational context.

Keywords: School Choice, Parental Decision-Making, Admission Determinants, Educational Preferences, School Selection

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1. Introduction and Literature Review

In today's era of globalization, marked by intense competition, survival often favours the most adaptable. Nations worldwide prioritize education as a cornerstone for shaping future generations, employing public and private sector schools as primary educational opportunities. Consequently, considering socioeconomic status and evolving societal needs, selecting the right school for a child, particularly at the primary level, poses a significant challenge for parents (Bengtsson, Barakat, Muttarak, Kebede & Lutz, 2018).

It is widely acknowledged that the quality of a school correlates with academic outcomes (Schleicher, 2021). However, the crux of the issue lies in determining how parents can effectively

navigate the plethora of options to find a school that aligns with their preferences. This imperative has catalyzed the emergence of a burgeoning field within the realm of education economics, wherein researchers globally are dedicated to studying school choice dynamics and the myriad factors influencing parental decision-making (Li, 2023).

School selection involves parents' choices influencing the allocation of children to educational institutions, a notion underscored. Parental decision-making in this regard is commonly influenced by many social, economic, and cultural factors (Ainscow, 2020).

Previous research has identified eight key factors that prominently shape parental decision-making when seeking admission for their children at the primary level: Social background/status, income level, school syllabus, school environment/facilities, school performances, location, teacher quality, and distance (Hidayati & Rifa'i, 2020).

In a study conducted in the USA by Canadian (2020), the reasons for selecting private schools were as diverse as the array of available private school types. The researcher engaged three participant groups comprising parents, students, and administrators representing religious and non-religious private schools, documenting interviews with each group. The analysis of the collected data involved three levels: identifying patterns, extracting overarching themes from those patterns, and drawing conclusions to address the research inquiries.

This study primarily delves into four key determinants of school choice: perceived school characteristics, quality of education, physical environment, and extracurricular activities. Additionally, parents' educational attainment significantly influences their choice of school, whether in the public or private sector (Kumar & Choudhury, 2021).

In England, families prioritize three attributes when seeking school admission: academic quality, socioeconomic composition, and proximity to home. They emphasize higher academic standards and prefer smaller class sizes. Interestingly, parents are willing to invest in schools offering superior academic quality and enhanced facilities, even if located farther away, to maintain their socioeconomic status (Burgess, Greaves & Vignoles, 2019).

Parents also benefit from the competitive school landscape, often favouring those who excel academically. Similarly, a study conducted in Taiwan highlights several determinants, including educational environment, educational philosophy, campus facilities, location and transportation, social background and status, school performance, and proximity (Yang, 2021).

In the specific context of Pakistan, Khalid and Tadesse (2023) delved into determinants such as family size, parents' educational background, dissatisfaction with public schools, lack of teacher interest, parental income, and the medium of instruction, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of parental considerations. In the Pakistani context, several studies have been conducted different studies, like a qualitative study to explore the role of Parental Involvement in their Children's Academic Achievement (Shah et al., 2021) parent teachers meetings influence on early childhood students' performance (Arshad et al., 2021).

Moreover, a study focusing on parental choice determinants in Pakistan underscores the pivotal role of School-Parent Communication in shaping parental decisions. Factors like physical facilities, educational quality, environment, and term examination scores are deemed less important, particularly among urban parents with higher socioeconomic status and education levels (Ansari, 2018).

Similarly, another study highlights the significance of factors such as the school's proximity to the child's residence, medium of instruction, school performance, and parental income in shaping school choice at the primary level (Ashraf, 2014). These findings provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics influencing parental educational decision-making.

The educational landscape in Pakistan reflects a growing trend of private sector schools expanding while public sector schools remain stagnant or even declining each year. This trend is mirrored in the academic performance of both sectors. As a result, parents grapple with uncertainty, unsure where to enrol their children for education. This dilemma is particularly acute at the primary level, as parents seek institutions to nurture their children in line with their aspirations (Draxler, 2015). Choosing the right school for their children is a formidable challenge for parents worldwide. This issue has been discussed in countries like the US, Canada, and the UK for several decades. These developed nations have approached the matter from an economic perspective, treating admission seekers as customers and schools engaging with parents on commercial terms. Consequently, degrees and certificates have become commoditized in private and public educational institutions (Lazarova, McNulty, & Semeniuk, 2015).

In the United States, Canada, and England, key determinants influencing parental school choice include school administration, support systems, integrated educational frameworks, family and community engagement, and inclusive policy structures and practices. Parents in these countries also prioritize factors such as parental involvement, class size, school-parent communication, academic performance, socioeconomic status, extracurricular activities, and locale. Given the welfare state nature of these countries, parents typically have access to a range of quality options for their children's education, aiming for the best or better alternatives (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Australia tends to follow the lead of the US and England in educational preferences. Parental education levels significantly impact school choice in Australia, with a focus on teacher quality and disciplinary standards. Additionally, religious perspectives play a role in school selection for Australian parents (Antony-Newman, 2019).

Studies conducted in Malaysia and Taiwan highlight similar parental decision-making determinants, including social background/status, income level, school syllabus, environment/facilities, school performance, location, teacher quality, and distance (Yaacob, Osman, & Bachok, 2014). The study in Taiwan further emphasizes factors such as educational environment, philosophy, campus facilities, curricular activities, and transportation.

In Pakistan, determinants influencing parental school choice encompass family size, parental education, dissatisfaction with public schools, teacher interest, parental income, and medium of instruction. Additional literature in Pakistan reveals that factors such as distance from the school, medium of instruction, school performance, and parental income significantly impact school choice. Quality of education, environment, term examination scores, school-parent communication, and parental qualifications also prominently in parental decision-making (Patzlaff, 2014).

After reviewing the existing literature on parental school choice, there is a gap in prioritizing these determinants. None of the studies have systematically ranked these determinants according to their importance in parental decision-making. The studies also focused on broader national policy perspectives, leading to generalized conclusions.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a nuanced understanding of the determinants influencing parental school choice at the primary level. This research seeks to offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics guiding school selection processes by prioritising these determinants based on their significance in parental decision-making. Moreover, the study will focus on the primary level, recognizing the unique considerations and challenges parents face during this crucial stage of their children's education. Through this targeted approach, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of parental school choice and inform

policy interventions tailored to meet the specific needs of parents and their children at the primary level.

Parents face a daunting task when seeking primary school admission for their children amidst a competitive landscape of public and private institutions. This dynamic is driven by supply, demand, and parental preferences, shaping schools into service providers catering to specific expectations.

To illuminate this complex process, a study titled "Determinants of Parents' School Choice While Seeking Admission at the Primary Level" explored key factors influencing parental decisions. Four primary variables emerged: school academic performance, parent-teacher communication, local context, and parental socioeconomic status.

In Pakistan, these factors have been emphasized in previous research. Academic performance is highly valued, reflecting parents' desire for educational excellence and opportunity. Effective communication fosters trust, while the local context influences convenience and accessibility. Additionally, parental socioeconomic status impacts decision-making, reflecting financial considerations.

These determinants are intertwined and dynamic, varying in importance based on individual circumstances. This study provides valuable insights into parental decision-making in primary education within the Pakistani context.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study was focused on the following objectives:

1. To investigate the determinants that affect parents' choices in seeking admission for their children at the primary level.
2. To investigate the differences in parents' choices regarding the admission of their children at the primary level based on demographics.

3. Research Questions

The study was focused on the following research questions:

1. Which determinant among the selected determinants contributes the most to parents' decisions to seek admission for their children at the primary level?
2. Is there a significant difference among parents in selecting primary schools for their children based on gender?
3. Is there a significant difference among parents in the selection of primary schools for their children based on the age group of respondents?
4. Is there a significant difference among parents in selecting primary schools for their children based on the type of school they attended?
5. Is there a significant difference among parents in their choice of primary schools based on the type of school their children attend?
6. Is there a significant difference among parents in choosing primary schools for their children based on their qualifications?
7. Is there a significant difference among parents in choosing primary schools for their children based on their monthly income?
8. Is there a significant difference among respondents in choosing primary schools for their children based on their locale?

4. Significance of the Study

This study is important because it aims to ensure all parents can choose the best school for their kids, no matter how much money they have. By giving parents, the freedom to pick schools, it wants to give every child a chance at a good education. It is also important for government officials

to pay attention to this research, especially those in charge of education. It shows that we need to improve public schools so they can compete with private ones. It would make education fairer for everyone.

The study also adds to what we know about how parents choose schools, especially in Pakistan. It talks about how important it is for parents to be involved in picking schools and how that affects how well kids do in school. Helping parents make good choices does not just help kids find good schools; it also helps the economy.

Choosing the right school means fewer kids dropping out and doing better in school. It leads to more jobs and money for everyone. This study wants to make education better for parents and kids by ensuring public and private schools compete fairly. It also wants to boost parents' confidence in helping their kids succeed in school. Overall, this research shows how important it is for parents to be involved in picking schools and how this can make education better for everyone.

This study focused on the Okara district in Punjab, Pakistan, known for its rapid growth. It looked at public and private schools in the area to understand what parents prefer when choosing schools. Specifically, the study focused on parents choosing schools for children in playgroup to 5th grade, a crucial stage in their education. By narrowing down to this district and age group, the study aimed to provide a detailed understanding of what factors influence parents' decisions.

5. Research Methodology

Durheim (2014) emphasizes that research design is a strategic bridge between research questions and implementation. This study focuses on determinants influencing parental school choice at the primary level in Okara (Punjab, Pakistan). Employing a descriptive research method, data collection utilized a survey technique, and the variables were correlated. Therefore, the study is correlational. In this study, the target population was the parents seeking admission of their children at the primary level, and these parents live in the Okara district. These respondents participated in the research via questionnaires. In this study, respondents residing in Okara were selected based on accessibility due to the large district, limited time limit, budget constraints, and ease of research analysis. Convenient sampling was employed. Respondents came from diverse backgrounds, residing in various district areas and representing different income levels and qualifications. The sample comprised 300 respondents, with 66.7% male and 33.3% female respondents, covering both private and public sector schools. This sample was deemed representative of the entire population. The table below illustrates the characteristics of the population sample. The following table shows the population and sampling.

Table 1: Population and sampling

Okara	No. of selected school Type	No. of respondents
	Public sector school (3)	150 (50 respondents from each selected school)
	Private sector school (3)	150 (50 respondents from each selected school)
	Total 6	300 respondents

This study used a self-developed questionnaire to get information from the parents. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A focused on demographic information, including name, gender, age, qualification, monthly income, school attended by parents, school attended by children, and parental locale. Section B addressed basic school-related details, distinguishing between public and private sector schools. Section C explored factors influencing school choice, including school academic performance (7 statements), parents' socioeconomic status (7 statements), parents' locale (5 statements), and school administration and parental communication (4 statements). Each statement in Section C had five options for respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement: SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), N (Neutral),

DA (Disagree), and SD (Strongly Disagree). Respondents were encouraged to express their opinions freely without external influence. Before commencing the formal fieldwork, a preliminary instrument/sample questionnaire was distributed to 15 parents with children attending various schools to solicit their feedback. Upon receiving their responses, the instrument underwent a thorough review. Additional questions were incorporated, and the language was simplified. Responding to respondent demand, Urdu translations were included alongside the English questions, enhancing the instrument's effectiveness and reliability. The instrument's reliability was assessed using ANOVA, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.80%.

Data was collected from 300 parents residing in Okara District, representing diverse backgrounds in age, socioeconomic status, and monthly income. The majority of respondents were literate. They were provided with a questionnaire to understand the key factors influencing parents' choices when choosing their children's primary school.

The research design employed for this study was quantitative, with all collected data analyzed using quantitative methods. Conclusions were drawn based on quantitative assessments. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was utilized for data analysis, while Microsoft Excel 2010 supported the analysis process.

The data collected from 300 respondents was inputted into the SPSS software, which conducted comprehensive data analysis and provided accurate graphical output. Each level of opinion was assigned a numeric value from 1 to 5: SA (Strongly Agree) = 5, A (Agree) = 4, N (Neutral) = 3, DA (Disagree) = 2, and SD (Strongly Disagree) = 1. This numerical representation facilitated the determination of the most and least influential factors. The analysis comprised two main parts: descriptive and inferential, enabling a thorough understanding of the data and its implications.

6. Findings of the study

The following tables describe the findings of the study.

Table 2: Contributing determinants in parents' school choice

Variables	N	Mean	SD.
SAP	300	3.89	0.79
PSES	300	3.62	0.62
PL	300	3.84	0.61
SPC	300	3.85	0.69

Table 2 presents the statistical values of selected determinants contributing to parents' selection of primary schools. According to the data, School Academic Performance (SAP) exhibits the highest mean score ($M = 3.89$) and standard deviation ($SD = 0.79$), indicating it is the most influential determinant for parents when selecting a primary school for their children. Following closely, school-parent communication shows a mean score of ($M = 3.85$) with a standard deviation of ($SD = 0.69$), positioning it as the second most significant determinant for parents in their selection process.

Table 3: Comparison among Parent in the Selection of Primary Schools for their Children based on Gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	Sig. value
Male	200	3.8034	0.50	298	0.035	0.298
Female	100	3.8012	0.53			

$P > 0.05$

Table 3 indicates that the t-value (0.035) with degrees of freedom (df) 298 is not significant at $p < 0.05$. It suggests no significant difference between male participants ($M = 3.8034$, $SD = 0.50$) and female participants ($M = 3.8012$, $SD = 0.53$) regarding selecting a primary school for their

children. Therefore, it can be concluded that male and female parents collectively make decisions about their children's primary schooling.

Table 4: Comparison among Parent in the Selection of Primary Schools for their Children based on Age group

Respondents	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	f	Sig. value
Between Groups	1.007	4	0.336	1.292	0.277
Within Groups	76.866	296	0.260		
Total	77.873	299			

$p > 0.05$

One-way ANOVA was used to compare parents' preferences for primary school selection based on age groups. Table 4 reveals a significant F-value (1.292) at the $p = 0.277$ level. It suggests that there is no significant difference among parents regarding the choice of primary school for their children based on age group.

Table 5: Comparison among Parents about Choice of Primary School Based on School Type They Attended

Respondents	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. value
Public	244	3.79	0.52	298	-0.677	0.288
Private	56	3.84	0.47			

$P > 0.05$

Table 5 indicates that the t-value (-0.677) with degrees of freedom (df) 298 is insignificant at $p = 0.288$. It suggests that there is no significant difference between parents who attended private schools ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.47$) and those who attended public sector schools ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.52$) in their choice of primary school for their children. Therefore, it is concluded that there is a non-significant difference between the choice of primary school and the type of school parents themselves attended.

Table 6: Comparison among parents about the choice of primary school for their children based on the school type their children attending

Respondents	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. value
Public	110	3.90	0.50	298	2.56	0.911
Private	190	3.75	0.51			

$p > 0.05$

Table 6 indicates that the t-value (2.56) with degrees of freedom (df) 298 is insignificant at $p = 0.911$, greater than 0.05. It suggests no significant difference exists between parents whose children attend public sector schools ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.50$) and those whose children attend private sector schools ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.51$) in their choice of primary school for their children. Therefore, it is concluded that there is a non-significant difference between school choice and the type of school children are attending.

Table 7: Comparison among Respondents about Choice of Primary School based on their qualifications

Respondents	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	f	Sig. value
Between Groups	9.033	7	1.290	5.47*	0.000
Within Groups	68.840	292	0.236		
Total	77.873	299			

$P \leq 0.01$

Table 7 reveals a significant F-value of 5.474 at $p = 0.00$. It indicates a significant difference among respondents regarding their choice of primary schools for their children based on their qualifications.

Table 8: Comparison among respondents about choice of primary school based on their monthly income

Respondents	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig. value
Between Groups	4.321	6	0.720	2.87**	0.010
Within Groups	73.552	293	0.251		
Total	77.873	299			

$P=0.01$

One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare parents' choices of primary schools for their children based on their monthly income. Table 4.15 indicates a significant F-value of 2.87 at $p = 0.010$, less than the significance level of 0.01. It suggests a highly significant difference among parents regarding their children's choice of primary school based on their monthly income.

Table 9: Comparison between Respondents about School Choice based on locale

Locale	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. value
Rural	164	3.89	0.48	298	3.396	0.164
Urban	136	3.59	0.53			

$p>0.05$

Table 9 indicates that the t-value (3.396) with degrees of freedom (df) 298 is insignificant at $p = 0.164$, greater than 0.05. It implies that respondents who lived in rural areas with a higher mean score ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.48$) differ, but not significantly, from parents who lived in urban areas with a mean score ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.53$). Therefore, it can be concluded that parents who live in rural areas are different, but not significantly, from those who live in urban areas regarding their choice of primary school for their children.

7. Conclusions and Discussion

Upon examining the data, the researcher identified numerous factors influencing parents' decisions when selecting a primary school for their children. These factors were categorized as determinants of school choice. In this study, the researcher narrowed the focus and identified four primary determinants: School Academic Performance, Parent-School Communication, Socioeconomic Status of Parents, and Locality. Among these determinants, school academic performance emerged as the most significant factor. The findings consistently support the notion that School Academic Performance is the primary consideration for parents when choosing a school for their children.

In the data collection phase, male and female respondents provided their perspectives. Upon analyzing the data, it was evident that the opinions of male and female respondents differed, albeit not drastically. The respondents were categorized into four age groups, with the 31–40 age groups demonstrating the most influence, while the 51–60 age groups exhibited the least impact. The age group of 41–50 showed only a slight variance.

The level of significance, calculated at 0.277, indicated a high significant difference among parents based on their monthly income. Similarly, a significant difference was observed among parents based on their qualifications.

Further examination revealed no significant difference among parents concerning the primary school they attended during their student years. Likewise, no significant difference was found based on the choice of school their children currently attend. Similarly, no significant difference

was noted based on locality, encompassing school proximity, transportation availability, and ease of access for parents.

Considering the conclusions, it is evident that the priorities of the state and the nation play a significant role in shaping educational perspectives. In Pakistan, a developing country, education is perceived in many ways.

The data collection, conducted through questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS Software and MS Excel, shed light on the diverse educational viewpoints. It emerged that education holds different meanings for different parents. For some, it serves as a status symbol, as highlighted by the discussion on socioeconomic status as a determinant. Others view education as a crucial investment in their children's future, recognizing its potential to open doors to opportunities. Additionally, for some parents, education is intricately linked to securing employment, while it is a matter of survival for others.

Due to these varied perspectives and priorities, the outcomes in school choice naturally vary. It underscores the complex interplay of socioeconomic factors, cultural values, and individual aspirations in shaping educational decisions in Pakistan.

Based on the data analysis and literature review, parents prioritize academic performance when choosing a school for their children. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Ansari (2018), emphasizing the universal importance of academic performance in school choice.

Furthermore, communication between school and parents emerges as the second most preferred determinant. Khalid & Tadesse (2023) highlighted this aspect in Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan, underscoring its significance in fostering a strong relationship between parents and school management to benefit the students.

Lastly, parents' socioeconomic status influences their school choice, with many in Pakistan viewing schools as status symbols. Consequently, parents often select schools that align with their socioeconomic standing and family traditions.

Ashraf (2014) supported the significance of academic performance as a determinant in school choice and highlighted the association between family occupational status and school selection. The fourth determinant is the parents' location, specifically the distance between school and home. This aspect was discussed by Lin & Yu (2023) in the context of Taiwan's compulsory education system and neighbourhood school attendance plan. Despite Taiwan's government aiming to address low fertility rates, the international importance of locality as a determinant was underscored.

This study stands out for its comprehensive data exploration, presenting the determinants in detail and prioritizing them accordingly. The richness of the questionnaire allowed for in-depth information collection. Furthermore, additional conclusions could be drawn based on parents' qualifications, income, age, single-parent status, and rural or urban classification. Additionally, further research avenues could include exploring the influence of religion on school choice.

8. Recommendations

The study suggests several recommendations for researchers and future research:

1. Consider conducting further research on the same topic, incorporating additional variables such as school environment, security, parents' qualifications, urban and rural impacts, and teachers' quality.
2. Universities should expand their research scope beyond Okara to other districts of Punjab, focusing on each determinant identified in this study to benefit upcoming research scholars.

3. Explore the educational challenges children of brick-kiln labourers face, considering their unique circumstances and their impact on their education and prospects.
4. Enhance communication among parents of students, despite potential concerns from educational organizations, to foster a stronger partnership between home and school.
5. Advocate for smaller class sizes, as they can lead to better student care and outcomes.
6. Encourage positive interactions between teachers and parents to enhance teachers' professional expertise and better understand students' backgrounds.
7. Improve teacher satisfaction and dedication by providing adequate facilities and support.
8. Reduce the student-teacher ratio in public schools to ensure adequate attention for each student and investigate the effects of this ratio on student outcomes.
9. Enhance management qualifications in public schools, ensure impartial leadership and effective administration, and draw lessons from successful practices in the private sector.
10. Explore the impact of parents' qualifications and single-parent households on children's education through further research.

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