Factors Influencing the Selection of Kids’ Preliminary School in Pakistan: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study aimed at exploring those factors by following the procedures of qualitative research as well as exploration of rich sources of information contemplated by parents in order to get a better idea of schooling institutions.

Methodology: The data was collected by interviewing the parents who had lately admitted their kids to the schools and had the selection process fresh in their memory. To provide more valuable insights to the readers and by keeping in view the importance of parents’ mindfulness in the decision making, only those participants were considered who had at least 14 years of education themselves; about half of them are working as faculty members in the education sector in Pakistan. An in-depth qualitative analysis was done using NVIVO 20 software by utilizing the thematic analysis technique.

Findings: The findings revealed that numerous factors were considered by the parents such as the affordability of the educational expenses, the cultural values, the transportation issues, involvement of school in extra-curricular activities, the distance from home, the environment, the infrastructure of the school, the faculty and education level as well as the skills and creativity enhancement of kids. Although the educated participants talked about affordability issue but most of them were of the view that quality education of children should not be compromised because of this issue and other expenses could be lessened accordingly. The participants mostly relied on personal visits and consultation with educated people in their access for the collection of information about the institutes.

Implications: The readers of the paper could benefit from these decision-making insights of educated citizens as well as of those involved with education sector professionally.

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Introduction
The first learning institution for kids away from home is always considered very important in their academic development. It is the first step taken by their parents in their academic journey and serve as the foundation of whatever they achieve in that journey going forward. Appropriate preliminary education is an important aspect to consider in the individual capacity. Getting the right education is not only important for individual character building but also a basic human right for every individual (Wofford & Tibi, 2018). Apart from individual perspective, getting the right education also plays a critical role in nation building. It is the human capital of any country that differentiates it from the other countries and determines the way forward for the nation (Suppramaniam et al., 2019). For developing countries like Pakistan, it is of imperative nature that they produce personnel with quality education and skills to help them prosper socially and economically. It is of utmost importance that parents wisely take the decision of choosing appropriate preliminary schooling for their kids to let them get the appropriate education by considering all the relevant factors because erring in taking this decision results in adverse effects on their academic achievements (Lai et al., 2009). The decision of choosing the right school is dependent on the consideration of relevant factors and this consideration in turn depends on the awareness of parents as to whether they gather right information from appropriate sources. From institutional point of view, the institutions also need to have a good notion regarding the prevalent factors in the parent’s minds when they make the important decision of their kids’ schooling in order to better their offerings. In this way, the study finds its significance for both ends; the decision making parents/guardians and educational services offering institutes.

The study aims to explore the various factors which the parents consider important while addressing the question, ‘Which is the best school for our kids?’ Interviews of parents who recently, in a span of 3 years, admitted their kids to the schools are conducted to serve the purpose. Keeping in view the importance of parent’s mindfulness, only those parents who have at least 14 years of education themselves are interviewed.

Statement of the Problem
Multiple factors are involved in the important decision of choosing the right institutions for kids’ education. It is of high importance that adequate attention is given to this important decision by the parents or guardians of kids as their preliminary educational institute serves as the basis of what-to-come in their academic careers. In the same way, the institutions who offer the educational services also need to cater as to which aspects are undertaken by the guardians of kids while choosing one of those institutions. If enough impetus is not given by those responsible for the selection of schools for kids then it may result in kids missing out on their right of getting the appropriate education to kick start their academic journey. In the same way, if the institutions offering those educational services to the kids fail to consider the important facets which their guardians look for, the situation also becomes problematic for them. The services offering organizations are always at a risk of ousting themselves from the competition if they fail to consider the important factors the services’ receivers look for (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2009). This research is aimed at exploring those factors which those responsible for admitting the kids to their preliminary school look for. The exploration of these factors are ought to be helpful for the parents in a way that there are certain factors that could be overlooked while making the
important decision of preliminary school selection. The fact that most only educated people qualify as participants of this research, it adds more value to the sought results. Similarly, the examination of different important factors as an outcome of this study will certainly provide those who run the institutions with helpful insights.

Various attempts have been undertaken by the previous researchers to explore the underlying factors of educational decisions. However, most of them (Chan & Mongkolhutthi, 2017; Ilgan et al., 2018; Issa & Nwalo, 2008; Sabir et al., 2013) targeted the University or College level students. Few or little studies (Siah et al., 2018) have been a part of relevant literature which targeted the factors affecting the choice of preliminary school for kids; mainly with a quantitative approach (Dahari, 2011). This study addresses this narrow opening by exploring the unearthed in the context of Pakistan especially with a qualitative approach.

**Objectives of the Study**

To explore the sources through which the parents/guardians gather information for decision making regarding preliminary school for their kids.

To explore the various factors considered by the parents/guardians during the selection process of preliminary schooling institutes for their kids.

To determine whether the parents/guardians chose the schooling institutions as per their set criteria and felt satisfied with their decision afterwards or not.

**Review of the Literature**

The choice of parents differ in terms of independent and national schools, those preferring the former prioritized the faculty level as well as learning systems whereas the later ones found to be more concerned with affordability and location of school; interestingly, the language and the cultural factors were also undertaken by the parents (Siah et al., 2018). The authors through a quantitative approach stressed in the study that preferences could differ when different schools in terms of their ownership are considered by the parents. As per Spinney et al., (2019), there are different characteristics which are involved in the decision of choosing the schools which include those pertaining to personal level as well as to neighborhood but the standout factor among all is the school’s distance from home. The institutional popularity as well as the quality of education is at the core of decision making while preferring an educational institution over the other when it comes to the choice of institutions (Ilgan et al., 2018). The result of regression analysis suggested that choice of parents were affected by the security & safety of the schools, the hygiene level, the quality of teaching, preference towards privately owned institutions as well as branding strategies of these institutions; the decision of pre-schools for the kids also depends on the preferences of their parents owing to different institutions (Dahari, 2011). In terms of one parent, the mother, choosing the educational platforms for her children, it has been argued that mothers are not free in making the educational and bringing up decisions of their kids in line with the public policy as they are faced by a range of constraints within the social context of making their choices (David et al., 1997).

It has been argued that private schooling in Pakistan has been on a rise since late 90s and the start of 21st century. In this context, Andrabi et al., (2002) were of the view as per their presented evidence that educational institutes owned by private owners are a major and important factor in the educational context of Pakistan. They further said that there has been an increased improvement especially in the rural areas in terms of growth of private schooling despite the urban-rural gap and that private schools are not a core phenomenon of urban elite as they expected it to be. Even though citizens of northern areas of Pakistan are not as wealthy and affording, it was observed that most of them still believe that private schools are better for their kids in terms of quality of education and that it is an essential requirement that they get their education from English medium institutes (Harlech-Jones et al., 2005). The affordability is a
secondary aspect as it was found that services of private schools have been utilized extensively in Pakistan regardless of the economic situation of the households; even the poorest of them seemed to prefer the private schooling over the government schooling which is consistent with the language achievement of privately owned institutions (Alderman et al., 2001). Rather than varying within the households, the private school preference varies among children from one household to the other and the extent is much more than in case of Public sector schooling institutions (Nguyen & Raju, 2014). The examination of the literature in the context of Pakistan suggest that there has been a an increased preference of private schooling systems over public schools regardless of the affordability factors and in line with the medium of instructions’ language.

Methodology
The research has been conducted to explore various factors that are considered by the parents/guardians of the kids when they seek to admit them to their preliminary educational institute. The research is based on exploration of factors and hence the ‘Grounded Theory’ research method has been deployed under the qualitative approach. The data for qualitative analysis was collected by conducting the interviews of the participants. The criterion to qualify as a participant of the study was that the participant must have 14 years of education him/herself. Moreover, only those participants were considered who had admitted their kids to school in a span of 3 years preceding their interview for the study so that they could provide more appropriate answers owing to their recent memory. Interviews of 8 participants from two cities of Pakistan, Lahore and Gujranwala, were conducted by the researcher. Different questions were asked from the participants as to which type of schools were under their consideration in terms of ownership and medium of language, the sources from which they collected the information regarding different schools and also the important factors which got their attention while choosing the best possible preliminary school for their kids. The analysis on the collected data was done using the thematic analysis with the help of NVIVO 20 software designed for qualitative research analysis (Wong, 2008). The tools like Word Cloud, Word Tree and Hierarchy Charts were utilized to conduct the analysis using the NVIVO software.

Analysis & Findings
Demographics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>No. of kids recently admitted to school</th>
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<td>PhD Scholar</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Housewife</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Graduation</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Demographics

The demographic analysis of the participants’ highlights that majority of the participants were highly educated. Another major finding of this analysis is that about half of the research
participants are working in the education sector themselves; their decision making and consideration of factors regarding the choice of school must have involved their own experience of education sector of Pakistan.

Word Cloud Analysis

Figure 1: Word Cloud

The word cloud represents the most occurring words in the data by highlighting the tags; it is fundamentally a visual representation of underlying themes in a data set (Castleberry, 2014). It works by magnifying the sizes and differentiating the colors of most discussed themes or concepts during the collection of data. The word cloud of this study in the above figure is highlighting that participants have frequently talked about the factors they considered during the school admission process of their kids. The word ‘school’ is at the most talked of all because of the fact that questions were asked in line with the preliminary school of the kids. Moreover, the figure also showcases the preference of parents to the schools where medium of instructions followed the English language. In addition to this, the inclination of most of the participants towards privately owned schools over public sector schools is also represented. The various underlying factors such as affordability of the guardians, the institute’s environment, the distance from home were also discussed frequently. From the viewpoint of collecting the information, personal visits were favored by the participants of the study.

Word Tree Analysis
Word Tree analysis allows the researcher to see the patterns around a core concept which are sought to be analyzed for valuable inferences (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). The core objective of this research was to examine the core factors considered by the parents while choosing the first educational institute for their kids, hence the word tree of the word ‘factors’ is presented above in Figure 2. For a thorough and meaningful analysis of the factors, up to 12 words were included by the researcher. The figure depicts different factors talked through by the participants which they considered during the choice of schools for their kids. The factors such as the affordability, the cultural norms, the creativity enabling factors of the institute, the distance from home, the quality of education, the quality of faculty, the infrastructure, the consideration of private schools and their engagement in extra-curricular activities, came to the fore as a result of analyzing the patterns around the word ‘factors’ under the word tree analysis of the data.

Hierarchy Chart

In addition to the word cloud and word tree, the hierarchy chart was also utilized by the researcher to analyze the patterns of coding of the data. The hierarchy chart enables the qualitative researchers to examine how the data unfolds and what sort of attributes the participants value during the collection of data (Trigueros-Cervantes et al., 2017). The hierarchy
chart of the data of this study as represented by Figure 3 provides valuable insights. The core factors considered by the parents as highlighted by the chart had been their affordability of education expenses, the cultural & family values, the transportation issues, the distance from home as well as involvement of schools in extra-curricular activities. These factors have been at the center of the mix when it came to decision making owing to the selection of preliminary school of participants’ kids. Several other factors were also scrutinized related to the faculty and education prospects as well as infrastructure of the institutions.

It was interesting to note that all of the participants were in favor of privately owned schools to go with one exception where public sector institutions were preferred. Similarly, the English medium schools were the choice of all the parents considered for data collection. Personal visits of the school were preferred by most of the participants in order to collect information regarding different schools they considered as per their criteria. The use of Internet and social media platforms also came to the fore when it came to using different sources to get information. Majority of the parents chose the schools which fulfilled their sought criteria and they seemed satisfied with their decision.

**Discussion of the Findings**

The study was conducted to unearth different factors that are considered by educated citizens of Pakistan when they seek the admission of their kids in their preliminary schools. Different tools of the NVIVO software were utilized to analyze the data using a qualitative approach. It was found that majority of the participants of the study were in favor of private schools as well as they preferred those schools with English as medium of instructions. When asked about the reasons for these choices, the respondents collectively, with one exception, were of the view that the environment at the public sector schools is not good for their kids in Pakistan. The reason that came to the fore for the preference of English medium schools was that parents were concerned about the competition prevailing in the country when it comes to future career growth of the kids. Also, when it came to the question of consideration of different factors, serving the core objective of the study, the parents seemed concerned about the affordability which was the standout factor among all. These findings show that even though parents are concerned about the affordability issues, they are still not convinced that public sector schools are appropriate for their children. As per Andrabai et al., (2002), the fee structure of public schools is much more affordable than private schools but still there is an inclination of citizens towards the private schooling. The respondents of this study were all educated themselves and about half of them are involved in education sector to earn their share of bread. This goes to show that educated people value the educational environment of their kids even if they have to go extra mile in terms of affording the better environment as one of the respondents said that they try to cut their other expenses but does not compromise on their kids’ education. The findings are in line with the existing literature on private schooling in Pakistan.

In addition to the affordability, another major factor that popped out as a result of the analysis was the effect on cultural and family values of the kids when they go to school. The parents which considered this factor (majority of them), did not want that they choose such a school where there is an overhaul of western values over the cultural and family norms in the country. Apart from that, the creative and skillful knowledge, the extra-curricular activities and the infrastructure of the institutes were also highlighted as a part of decision making process of the parents. These factors are very important to consider from the institutional point of view since this study provides some key insights to those who are offering or plan to offer preliminary educational services in Pakistan as to become a part of decision making process of parents or guardians of kids regarding selection of their schools. While offering their services, the service providers should look for the key factors that their potential service consumers seek while choosing the suitable provider (Dorsch et al., 2000).
Another objective of the study was to explore different sources that the parents look to while gathering information regarding the desired institutions as per their criteria. When it came to collecting such information, the educated respondents preferred visiting the schools themselves to gather insights about the institutions. The use of Internet and social media is imperative nowadays since there is a lot of content available and different institutions look to these platforms for their marketing campaigns. The exploration of these information sources along with consultation with educated family members and colleagues could provide parents with information rich sources who seek to make the important decision of their child’s preliminary school.

The results of the analysis also suggested that after considering the discussed factors and collecting information from the highlighted sources, the parents mainly chose those schools which were fulfilling their criteria and they seemed to be satisfied with their decisions as the time went by. This provides more impetus to the unearthed factors and sources of information since about 50% of the respondents are involved as faculty members in the education sector themselves and were better placed to take this important decision for their kids. Hence the readers of the paper could benefit from this decision making insights of educated citizens as well as of those involved with education sector professionally.

Limitations of the Study
The study only involved the participants from two cities, Lahore and Gujranwala, of Pakistan due to time and resources constraints. Participants from different parts of the country could be included to explore better insights as to the thinking process of people from different cultural and regional backgrounds within the country. The study is also limited, in the context of the countries, to Pakistan only. Further research could cater the viewpoints of guardians of kids from different parts of the world for due comparisons among the preferences of people from different backgrounds.

Directions for Future Researchers
The study paves way for future research in the context of preliminary school education in Pakistan and decision-making process of parents while making the choice of schools for their kids. The studies relevant to this in the future may seek to examine the impact of explored factors on the decision making of the parents using a quantitative approach. The data in this study was collected from the decision makers only. The future researchers may collect data from the educational institutions in order to arrive at a conclusion as to the better understanding of a general gap or no gap between the factors sought by the parents and by the handlers of schooling institutions.

References


