



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. VIII, Issue No. XV,
July-2014, ISSN 2230-7540*

A CASE STUDY LOOKING AT PARENTAL SCHOOL CHOICE OF INDIA

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

A Case Study Looking At Parental School Choice of India

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Abstract – This paper aims at exploring the school choice patterns in the chosen school in detail. It does not draw generalizations of any kinds and uses qualitative research methodology of research although some quantitative data is also collected to assist data analysis. The researcher's findings suggest that parents are primarily considering academic factors while making the school choice. School choice is primarily a family process with parents consulting their children while making the final decision. The findings also suggest that on an average parents are choosing from amongst two to three schools while taking their decision and teachers are cited as the most useful sources of information by parents while the local newspapers which are the preferred tools of marketing for the school management are least favored.

Key Words: Parents, Information, Management

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian economy liberalized in the year 1991 and as a result introduced competition into several markets. It was an era of complete transformation and led to a chain reaction across the country. The Indian middle class was most affected by this change. New markets emerged as a result of liberalization and gave rise to a larger and refined middle class which had high aspirations and big dreams for its future. This new class desired the best education for its children which further led to establishment of thousands of private schools across the country adding to the already existing network of private schools in the country. This recent phenomenon has given a new meaning to the previously rudimentary market in education in India. The process of choosing a school has become more complex than ever before as more and more parents are becoming aware of what they seek from the school and have begun to carefully consider their choices before making the final selection of a school. Thus, it has become pertinent to understand the choice patterns among parents in order for schools to keep their student intake high and understand what makes a school favourable or not to the parents. However till date little, if any, work has been done in this field in India and few published studies are available.

The main aim of this research is to understand choice patterns among parents sending their children to a fee paying school in northern region of India. This paper does not aim to draw any generalisations across the country as a whole, as India territorially and with respect to its population, is huge, with vast differences from one region to another. Moreover, with the

available resources and limited time-frame for this paper, it is not possible to draw coherent conclusions regarding the whole education system in the subcontinent, which as a matter of fact is the second largest elementary education system in the world (M.O.E, 2005). However, the possibility of such a paper on a national level cannot be denied in future.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gorard (1999) claims that situational factors are often seen as important by parents. Availability of friends and proximity of school to residence has been found important in homes where the preference of the child is important. Organisational factors which include the school 'ethos' and management, he says, are not so important to parents when choosing schools, though they are seen as important in school effectiveness studies. He adds that small class sizes, small schools and traditional uniform has also been cited as important to parents while "physical environment and building of the school" can also be relevant (Cookson & Persell, 1985 in Gorard, 1999: 32)

Selective criterion Gorard (1999) notes are "often thought of as relating to ability". For example, the most popular schools are those with high ability pupils and high Socio Economic Status (SES) pupils. However even single-sex provisions, religion and social background can play an important role in parents choosing schools. Security is the last criterion on his list, wherein he mentions that safety and welfare are in general very important factors while choosing a school. Studies have reported discipline of the school in particular to be even more important

than academic factors for some parents' (Adler *et al.*, 1989: 132). In fact, parents who enroll their children in Catholic schools in the United States were reported to be seeking moral values, respect towards other people and discipline more than anything else from the school. (Gaffney, 1981: 19)

Coldron & Boulton (1991) in their thorough review of school choice categorised their findings into the following categories; academic, organisation, security and sources of information. They found that "nearness, and attendance by siblings and friends-were cited consistently across the socio-economic groups". Child's wish to attend the school including "a safe and disciplined environment; caring teachers" were also valued widely in school choice according to them. While studying school choice in South West London, scholars also found that sibling at school and close proximity to home along with academics were important (Webster *et al.*, 1993). West (1992: 217) has also reported that discipline in as an extremely important aspect with regard to school choice as in their study 89% parents "mentioned spontaneously or with prompting" that "good school discipline/ well behaved children" was a important aspect in secondary school choice. West *et al.* (1993) While researching on school choice in secondary schools, academics suggest that "the three "P"s performance (good academic results), a pleasant atmosphere/ethos (each mentioned by about a third of parents), and proximity to home (mentioned by about a quarter of parents)" with various combinations of reasons were "spontaneously mentioned as important in parent's choice of secondary school". They also found that school's good reputation and a child's happiness at school were important factors to a large percentage of parents. According to West *et al.* (1995: 30), most frequently used markers for school choice include school's reputation, proximity to home and the academic results.

Who Makes The Choice?

Approximately two third of parents reported that the final decision on choice of school was made by both parents and children, while 23% reported that both parents jointly made the decision and a single parent making the choice was quite rare. Not even one in ten people reported that only the father made this choice. The same response for only mothers making this choice was even lesser than this. Parents, while writing about their experience of school choice noted;

...all of us took the decision together and prepared a list. It was good that we got admission to the first school only.

-parent

Children along with parents should consider all these factors (listed on the questionnaire) before making a school choice

-parent

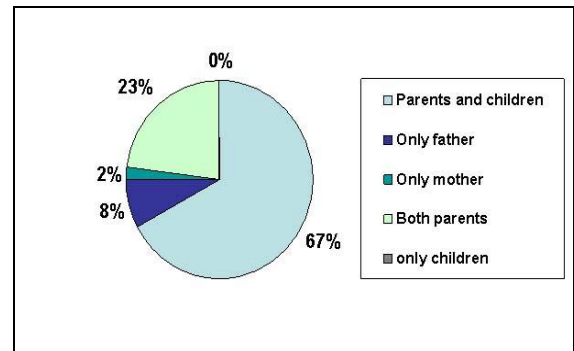


Fig 1: People responsible for the final choice of school

The findings in Fig 1 and comments made by parents suggest that for a large majority of families school choice is a decision taken by the entire family. Similar finding have also been reported by Woods *et al.* (1998: 117) they write "overwhelmingly, parents indicated that it was they and their children together who decided which school should be placed as their first preference". Thus from the findings and relevant literature one could say that school choice is mainly a family activity with the whole family contributing to it. While the finding suggest about a third of families are still making this decision without considering the child. As another parents writes

I just went and got him admitted...

- Parent

However this claim can't be made with reasonable surety as the questionnaire was sent just to the parents and not to the children who might have had different opinion to those of their parents. On the whole, the findings suggest that families as a whole are involved in taking the decision of choosing a school. This brings us to the question of how the choice is made.

How The Choice Was Made?

The process through which the school is chosen is very important as it along with giving an insight to how the choice is being made, to certain extent suggests the families' seriousness towards the school choosing process. In the study, the parents were asked whether the final selection was made through a systematic screening of all schools, the school chosen from amongst 2-3 pre decided schools or did they always know where they wanted to send their child. A column of 'others' was also provided which did not generate any response.

The findings point towards a varied response to the actual process of school choice. 43% parents reported that they undertook a systematic screening approach while 42% reported choosing from amongst 2-3 pre-decided schools and 15% reported that they always

knew their choice. However, the striking finding was that parents were following some sort of a plan while choosing the school with a big majority of parents considering two or more schools.

We had three schools in mind though we did not consider all the factors that are there on this questionnaire...and made the choice amongst these.

-parent

Similar findings are also reported by Woods *et al.* (1998) who found out that on an average parents choose between three or more schools (p: 119). ISIS (2001) while researching on private schools in UK also report that usually parents would visit at least one schools while more than half of parents visit two to three schools before making the choice. People choosing school with pre conceived notion or stereotypes are in very small minority though they still exist. This suggests that parents are serious about school choice and spend considerable time and energy in making this choice. Though only limited inference can be drawn from these findings seeing that the researcher has not asked the parents how much time was spent on school choice and the level of seriousness they experienced.

A very important element of school choice is the information sources from which parents gather information regarding schools. This will now be discussed.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Through what sources the information on the various schools of choice was gathered and how useful were the chosen sources, was what the last research question concerned itself with. As there are various sources through which this information can be attained, an extensive list of information sources was provided and parents were asked to mark them as- not useful, useful, very useful, extremely useful or not applicable. An additional section of others was also provided for parents to mark any other source that they might have used but it did not initiate any responses.

School teachers were clearly the favorite sources of information to those parents who had access to them before admitting their children in a school, with a majority of parents considering them extremely useful sources of information. On the other hand, the people who considered them to be not applicable were also the highest (which suggests that not all parents had access to them but the ones who did regarded their opinions very highly. This was the most interesting finding of the entire research to the researcher as though he knew that the teacher community is highly respected in the country, they command this much

respect and are taken so seriously by society was a revelation. This is a very rare finding as the researcher hasn't come across any other research suggesting such results. The researcher believes the primary root of such behaviour lies in the traditional culture of the majority of the people in the area who are Hindus. The reason being, teachers or the spiritual guides have been placed in the highest category by the ancient texts of the religion and it is considered that they are the kind people who speak only the truth. Thus, to a large extent such feelings of respect dominate the common masses. (Mascaró, 2003)

The school prospectus and school visits were reported the second most useful sources of information, these were also the most used sources of information across all studied sources, since they reported the least number of people marking them 'not applicable'; information sought from friends and family was also considered extremely useful with a majority of parents considering them to be very/extremely important sources of information. As a parent remarks

We have had long relation with this school, me and my brothers studied from here. It is like our family school, so this was a very important source of information to us.

-parent

Studies done in the West also suggest that these are very important sources of information to parents (Glatter *et al.*, 1997). According to West *et al.* (1993: 9) visits to the schools, friends/neighbours and school information booklets" are the most frequent sources of information. The information collected from the brother/ sister already at school was also reported to quiet useful by parents, with over 70% parents marking so.

The local newspaper was found the least favoured source of information by parents which again was an interesting finding as schools in the area regularly advertise in the local newspapers announcing that "admissions are open" in the school. These adverts carry a brief about the schools key features. This is one of the primary sources of providing information that schools in the area use to market themselves and majority of marketing budget is spent on such adverts every year by almost all schools. However, from the parent response this seems to be futile as only 17% of parents found it very/ extremely useful source of information which was the lowest amongst all the sources of information. This source though registered low 'not applicable' responses, received the maximum responses for being 'not useful' which was 26%.

CONCLUSION

This paper conducted on 'public school' in a medium sized city called Ghaziabad, in northern region of India revealed several findings which were unknown to the researcher and many others in the region seeing that very limited literature is available on school choice in India and almost no research in the local context. The researcher attributes this to the fact that education market in India began to get structured only after 1991 when the country was liberalised as liberalisation brought with it the virtues of competition and exposure to the western standards of quality with the advent of MNCs in several markets. These changes initiated a chain reaction amongst the Indian consumer who now wanted better quality products as they were now available in the local market at reduced prices. The liberalisation also created a new class of people which is popularly known as the 'new middle class'. This class comprises of people working primarily under structured employment and living in cities that have high inspirations for themselves and their children and are working towards improving their destinies. They believe that education as a platform can achieve the higher standards of living for themselves and their children thus they want to send their children to the best of schools and have increasingly been considering the process of school choice more seriously than they did in the 1980s.

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