

An Analysis of Factors Contributing to the Choice of School

‘Informed Choice’ Vs ‘Grapevine Decision Making’

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Abstract

Provision of elementary education is one of the major responsibilities of the State. And with alignment to this responsibility and role, the State should endeavour to provide education to all, irrespective of any discrimination. The basic assumption behind this is that free education and incentives will attract the audience and will help achieve the objectives of Universal Elementary Education (UEE). Over the years, the access to schooling provisions has been increased by increasing the resource base and number of government-run schools. Several studies have shown that despite free provision of education, the households increasingly prefer private unaided schools by utilising their limited resources to fulfil ‘that’ need which the government is already legally bound to provide. While exercising their choices explicitly, they are seeking the options that relate to their own needs and interests. This paper is based on a survey of randomly selected 7 villages of Faridabad district of Haryana and tried to develop insights as to why parents choose a particular school and determinants for making these choices to develop an understanding of the process and whether they form an informed opinion or are merely perception based, twenty-one schools were taken under the framework of investigation.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a universal and publicly provided good which should be

accessible to all. Ratifying to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, primary education is made

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free and compulsory for all children. Nearly 70 years ago, India also made a constitutional commitment to provide free and compulsory education to all the children of age group 6–14 years and further adopted a rights-based approach towards the universalisation of education. Before independence, the rates of literacy were too low, with only 27 per cent male and 9 per cent female population as literates (Census of India, 1951). This was because of the educational system followed by Britishers which favoured the education of few (elites), who could help them administer the country (Kingdon, 2005) and the poor were deprived of the education.

This reinforced broadening up the gap of inequality among the people based on their social and economic positions. To reduce this gap, the Constitution of India adopted the goal of 'Education for All' after the adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1968, which stated that everyone has the right to education and it should be provided free at least at the fundamental stages and the parents have the prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Kothari Commission (1964–66) perceived the objective of education to be the attainment of equality. Based on this recommendation, the National Policy on Education (1968) aimed for equalisation of educational opportunity and adopted a common school system. In 1976, education was changed from a

State responsibility to the joint responsibility of the Centre and the State and with this, the agenda of UEE started taking shape. National Policy on Education (1986) with a focus on educational development of SC and ST, attempted to equalise the educational opportunities among different social groups. World Conference on EFA (1990) produced a broad consensus on universal access and equity in education while emphasising on strengthening the partnerships in education to meet the unmet goals of education. The first Human Development Report by UNDP in 1990 included 'to be educated' as a necessary aspect for maintaining a decent standard of life.

With the onset of liberalisation in 1991, India witnessed the growth of private schools and that of education at a large scale. To meet this increasing demand, District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was launched in 1994, which targeted universalisation of primary education in around 600 regions. Dakar Framework (2000) set time-bound targets and said that the governments should ensure that all children, principally the girls, children living in different circumstances, those belonging to minorities, must have access to free education and also, to achieve the goal of gender equality in education by 2015. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a flagship programme launched in 2001, aimed towards bridging the gender and social category gap in elementary education and improve the quality

of education thereof. This included increasing the resource base (opening new schools, additional classrooms, toilets, teachers, textbooks, uniforms, etc.). Insertion of Article 21A provided free and compulsory education to all children in the age group 6–14 years and made education a fundamental right. With the enactment and implementation of RTE Act 2009, India moved to the rights-based framework to education.

In India, there were around 81.5 lakh children who were out of school and out of these, the estimated numbers were 7.67 per cent for Muslims, 5.60 per cent for ST, 5.96 per cent for SC and 2.67 per cent for OBC and others (MHRD, 2010). Moreover, the girls, low caste children, and other underprivileged children were still over-presented in government schools (Mehta, 2005; Aggarwal, 2001; PROBE, 1999). By continuing the agenda, World Education Forum (2015) emphasised that the central role of education should be sustainable development paving the way for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2015), one of which is to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). This sets an ambitious agenda for the period from 2015 to 2030 and the process finally culminated in the Incheon Declaration.

Despite these efforts, educational levels improved very slowly and gaps

were seen among social, religious, regional and gender groups. Further, by granting parents the right to choose the type of education that will be provided to their children, the education system aims to increase participation from the various groups of community. The execution of choice systems has resulted in huge gush of schools established by both the private as well as public providers. Increased availability of options has increased the accessibility of schools, but the opinions of parents regarding different schools are also diverse. People from a particular class share common interest, based on which they acquire a collective identity and develop a similar pattern of behaviour and identity through collective action. The decision to participate in schooling rests with the households and for this, the households compute the social and economic returns and the opportunities that education will generate for the child in future. In the light of this argument, the present study attempts to develop insights as to why parents choose a particular kind of school for their children and what are the factors that support their choices. The study also develops an understanding of whether the factors cited are merely perception based or the households make informed choices.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the entry of the private sector in education, there has been a debate about why and which schools

parents should send their children to. The commodification of education and the prevalent market forces have affected the mindsets of the people regarding which school is best for their children. This entire debate was looked at critically by Coons and Sugarman (1978), who pointed out that parents choose that school for their children where children can be educated as per their own value system (Greene, 2001). Researches have shown that when parents are expected to assume functioning of the school as a part of their responsibility by paying a higher fee when they are educated and informed (Knowles, 1999) and are capable of securing the best placements for their children, they are more likely to seek out 'successful' comprehensive schools than the parents who are disengaged from education themselves. In this process, the poorest of the poor are excluded from participation or are left behind (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

Harma (2010) distinguished between school preference and the actual school choice made by the parents. School preference denoted the type of school that parents would like to provide for their children in the absence of any constraint and it may differ from the actual choice made by the parents. However, she found that there is a universal preference for private schools, yet the majority of children are enrolled in government schools and the primary reason for this is poverty. Further, due to moving up of wealthy

families to the private sector, the government sector has become the option of last resort for the poor and marginalised. Ramachandran (2004) also highlighted the 'hierarchies of access', where she focussed that on going down the social and economic pyramid, the access and quality issues become much more pronounced. She further observed that a vast number of poor in rural and urban parts of India rely on government schools of different types and their quality may vary. The relatively better-off people in rural and urban India either access better government schools or opt for private aided and unaided schools. This is because parents from higher social and economic backgrounds are more likely to be able to afford school fees. On the other hand, the poor, who cannot afford the fees, but aspire to enrol their children in private schools, fail to do so (Majumdar et al., 2002).

Lampl (1999) said that with greater resources, and for having greater access to education and jobs (Desai et al., 2008; Baird, 2009); private schools are chosen. Exploring the factors which influence the selection of any school, Beavis (2004) found that the economic factors, occupational status and the perceptions of schools play a role in shaping their selection. While analysing the private enrolment throughout India, Baird (2009) highlighted that the supply-side factors have a little statistical relationship to private schools; they do exist because the parents demand these schools. Government funding

is inversely proportional to private enrolment and private enrolment is linked to teacher absenteeism in government schools and students travelling more to reach school increases the likelihood of children dropping out of schools (Mike et al., 2008). Analysing the trends of children moving between and within government and private schools during the first grades of primary school, James and Woodhead (2014) observed that the majority of school shifts occur within private schools as the parents attempt to secure the best private school for their children. The school-related factors that the parents consider are— better accountability and right to question in private schools which usually lacks in government schools. Private schools are 'English medium' and offer a better prospect of the service sector. Among other factors are the facilities offered, teachers' qualifications and their English speaking and teaching abilities.

- Besides, the factors such as academic attainment of students, socio-economic composition of the school and travelling distance from home to school also play an important role (Burgess et al., 2015). Dreze and Kingdon (1999) found that school participation, especially among girls, is determined by a wide range of variables including parental education and motivation, social background and non-teaching duties. Even pupil-teacher ratio

was discovered to be important for families with the inclusion of mid-day meals. The participation of female children was found to be 15 per cent higher when the mid-day meal was provided in school than when it was not. Among the other factors responsible for low enrolment and retention of students in schools is lack of school infrastructure, absence of schools, the distance of schools, lack of facilities in schools, lack of teachers, teachers' accountability, curriculum, teaching methodology and lack of motivation (Mukherjee, 2011). Based on the 'Young Lives Study on Quality of Schooling in Andhra Pradesh', Singh and Bangay (2014) discovered that before making choice, parents seek a range of advice about schools and consult their neighbours about the quality of schools before sending their children to school. They also make financial sacrifices in the hope that their children will have a better life.

Thus, the factors determining the educational participation of children in a particular kind of school relate to the availability of teachers and resources, infrastructure, school performance and school accessibility. Since school participation responds to a wide variety of variables, thus in the light of the review, the present study attempts to ascertain the congenial as well as the enabling factors that determine the participation of children in the education system.

OBJECTIVE

The major objective of this paper is to find out the factors which influence the households' decision for the choice of school for their children. By studying these factors, an attempt is also made to see if the choices they have made are informed choices or are the perceived ones.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-method design and is primarily based on a survey done by the researcher to collect the data about households' pattern of school choice and the factors behind that choice by using semi-structured questionnaires.

STUDY DESIGN

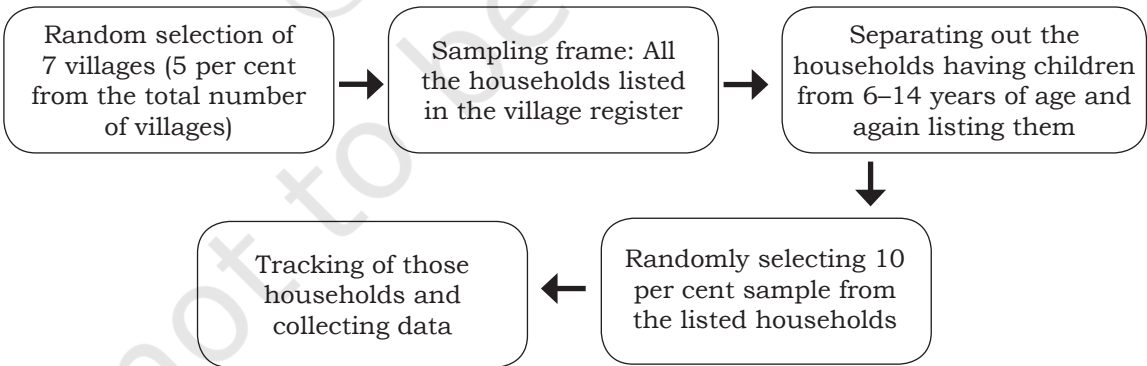
The study makes use of the field survey method wherein two semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect the data from the households and the schools.

SAMPLING PROCESS

The sampling process involved the selection of villages followed by the selection of households from those selected villages. As per Haryana Statistical Abstract (2011–12), Faridabad has a total of 144 inhabited villages and those villages which had the availability of both private and government elementary schools were identified and listed. From among the listed villages, a sample of 5 per cent of villages was selected randomly, to constitute a total sample of 7 villages.

As the present study targets the elementary stage of education, the households possessing at least one child from the age group 6–14 years constituted the target group. The list containing the details regarding the head of the household, details of the number of members, their sex and age was obtained from aanganwadi workers of the village.

Graph 1: Stages of Sample Selection



Source: Researcher's compilation

From the list, firstly, those households were segregated in which there was at least one child from the age group 6–14 years. A sample of 10 per cent of households was then selected as the final sample using a random table method. The selected 190 households were then approached and were interviewed.

Selection of schools was also made after the interview from the households was done. One private unaided school and one government elementary school were selected from among the schools which were preferred by the households for their children. The total number of sampled schools was 21, out of which 13 schools were government schools and 8 schools were private unaided schools.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in seven villages of Faridabad and 190 households were selected and surveyed. 19 households were from village Karnera, 25 households were from village Samaipur, 48 from village Pali, 48 from village Seekri, 15 from village Kailgaon, 19 from Madalpur and 16 from village Kureshipur.

Educational Status of Children

The questionnaire used to collect data from the households had two parts, first part dealt with the collection of general information about the households and the second part consisted of questions about the schooling of the children in the

households. The respondents were asked questions about the present educational status of their children, the kind of schools they are studying in and the factors they considered while making choice and who all were involved in this process. Taking an elaborated view of the schooling of a child from each selected household, 184 choice patterns were obtained. Of the total children, 36.8 per cent were boys while 62.6 per cent of children were female children. Of all the children attending schools, 40.5 per cent of children were going to the government school while 57.9 per cent were studying in private unaided schools; 1.1 per cent were found to be obtaining *madarsa* education and 0.5 per cent had never attended any school.

While choosing any school, parents often rely on certain types of network systems, usually the informal ones. This may include information gathered from people in their neighborhood, their own friends, friends of the child, etc. The parents also rely on the information made available by the schools formally in the form of brochures, pamphlets, advertisements and websites, etc. Although 55.8 per cent of the households said that they randomly enrolled their child in the school because someone recommended it as 'good', while 43.2 per cent of the respondents said that they chose the school by personally visiting it, surfing the internet, talking to

the parents of the children already studying in that school and talking to the teachers. Around 44.7 per cent of the households selected the school after consulting their neighbours or the friends of the child. 34.8 per cent of households choose the school based on its location; as that was the closest school to their households, so they preferred it. However, households also used formal means of gathering information about the school and relied on advertisements shown on TV or newspaper, pamphlets, school prospectus and internet searches. But it was also observed that the parents typically held very little information about their children's school or the choices available to them and very few households appeared willing to acquire the relevant information and made informed decisions. In other words, very few households knew how to find the information about the school, from where to find and how to use it.

The factors mentioned as most important by the households were school discipline, school's ability to impart moral values to their children, the medium of the school, quality of education and expenditures associated with schooling. While the religion of the teachers and other students of the school, timings of the school, resources, infrastructure and building of the school were least considered by the households while choosing the school. Besides, most of the households were unaware of the qualifications of teachers of the

schools, the pupil to teacher ratio, the approaches used by the teachers to teach children and the performance of the school during the previous years.

Issue of Quality of Education

As perceived by the opinion of the households, quality was the major factor that influenced their shift of preference from the government to private schooling. English medium schools are often equated with 'good quality schools' by households as evidenced by higher percentage of participation of sampled households in different kinds of schools. The purpose of taking the schools was to see whether the households make informed choices about the schools or they merely make opinion based decisions. For assessing the quality of teaching and learning processes, various factors have been considered like the admission criteria of the school, maintenance of security and sanitation of children in school, training status and educational qualifications and appointment process of teachers, and evaluation system of teachers and students.

Infrastructural Facilities

All schools had good infrastructural facilities from having their own building, availability of blackboards, chalks, seating arrangements, drinking water, separate toilets for girls and boys, to playground and electricity. The government schools had good quality and fairly well-maintained buildings, a covered

verandah, a store-room and a large outdoor area. The selected private unaided schools varied considerably on account of the poor-quality building, improper rooms, and less outdoor area. The private schools had guards allotted at the gates and thus there was almost no scope for any child to escape from the school. Besides, the teachers of the schools were also quite attentive towards the security of the children. On the other hand, the government schools had no guards at the gates and it was very easy for the students to escape. This was cited as the main reason by the households that in government schools, children wander without any restrictions while in private schools, the children were made to sit in the classes which facilitate their learning.

In private schools, the parents pay the fee which includes tuition fee, examination fee, admission fee and transportation fee (if applicable). Whereas in government schools, no fee, in any form, was being charged by the school, students were given mid-day meals, provided textbooks, uniforms and the girls or children belonging to ST, SC or other minorities were given stipends. Discipline was also given utmost importance in private schools and rules were followed to maintain the same while the government schools lacked this aspect and hence households get a chance to opt for other schools than government schools.

Teachers' Training and Evaluation

Although none of the government schools had any untrained teacher, three private schools had a few untrained teachers at the elementary level. The private schools appointed teachers based on availability, while a proper procedure is followed in the government schools to appoint a teacher. Secondly, no proper evaluation system of the teachers was found in private schools. The evaluation of teachers was merely restricted to the surprise visits by Head Teacher or Principal in the classrooms and the teachers were given verbal feedback. While in the government schools, frequent visits were made by the higher-level officers like DEO, DDO, cluster head, etc. The teachers of the government schools were found to be evaluated annually using APAR (Annual Performance and Appraisal Report) and ACR (Annual Confidential Report), issued by the Education Department of Haryana. The government school teachers are evaluated at two levels, one by Head Teacher of the school and then by Elementary Education Head of the area. The teachers are assessed on the factors like punctuality, students' performance, behaviour with students and other teachers in the class and outside the class in school, use of teaching and learning material, their language and way of delivering the lecture, etc.

Student Evaluation

The structure of student evaluation was also found to be weak in private

schools. The government schools were provided with pre-designed evaluation sheets/booklet (as per the policy) separately for each child. These were so designed that each aspect of the child (scholastic or co-scholastic) was covered and gave detailed and timely progress of each child, while the private schools were following CCE pattern without any proper understanding, and evaluation of students was restricted only to the scholastic aspect. Most of the households were found to be ignorant of the evaluation system followed in the schools of their children.

The households with children in private schools were completely dependent on the tuitions for their academic performance. Households with children in private schools were completely dependent on tuitions for their academic performance whereas the households with children in public schools did not put much emphasis on their children's academic attainment.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has tried to pin down the factors that influence the role of households in choosing different kinds of schools. The rural households of the selected villages of Faridabad had the option to access the government schools managed by the Department of Education, the private unaided schools managed and run by the private authorities or *madarsas* (for muslims). The study found that the decision to choose any school lies with the father while the mother of

the child was hardly involved in the process. But even after the fathers are educated, they fail to make informed choices about the schools that they are choosing. The participation percentage of households in the kinds of schools reveals that households choose private schools more than the government schools and are ready to pay even the meagre resources as tuition fee of their children. Government schools are preferred by the households which did not possess any resources or do not value education much. Private schools opted by the parents are the low fee-charging schools where the amount of fee to be paid by the households is decided based on their economic status. Such schools have emerged as alternatives to government schools which promise the parents a better-quality education for their children than the government schools.

Households who opted the government schools reasoned that they find government schools to be a representative of the local community. Also as the school's composition in terms of caste and economic status resembles a lot to the general structure of the community, it is more likely that the children value inclusiveness and thus support each other, including the minorities and the disadvantaged groups. Other people choose private schools as they provide a better academic environment, a sense of safety, better teachers without frequent absenteeism and the accountability

of schools for students' performance. It was also evident that parents give importance to the schools having traditional values as well as wearing a clean and tidy school uniform and studying in a more hygienic environment.

Further, these small and low fee private schools have copied the educational pattern and practices of some elite private schools and then advertise accordingly despite the fact that they lag in almost all the aspects. They have weak students' and teachers' evaluation systems and fail to provide the basic facilities to them. Although the households consider a lot of factors while enrolling their children in a school, they somehow fail to make informed choices. This is because most of the households rely on the opinion of their neighbours and friends or the information made available from the schools in terms of advertisements or pamphlets for making a choice and give least importance to check the validity of that information. This

demonstrates that interpersonal networks serve as an efficient means of gathering information. However, formal networks in terms of internet searches and advertisements were seen to be less preferred methods of gathering information about the schools. Very few people visit the schools to enquire about the general working and specific aspects regarding teachers, methods of teaching, activities carried on, examination, etc. In the absence of the willingness to enquire for the same and due to the lack of awareness of the educational policies and rights of parents and children, the households end up making uninformed choices. Thus, the households should understand that having the right to choose the type of education for their children gives them the power to demand quality education for their children and to effect changes through their own efforts. But all this is possible only if they are willingly involved in the education of their children.

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