

School choice in low- information environments:

A study of perceptions and realities in four states

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These papers present findings from Azim Premji Foundation's field engagements in trying to improve the quality and equity of school education in India. Our aim is to disseminate our studies to practitioners, academics and policy makers who wish to understand some of the key issues facing school education as observed by educators in the field. The findings of the paper are those of the Research Group and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.

School choice in low-information environments: A study of perceptions and realities in four states

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Executive Summary

School choice – broadly, the provision and promotion of alternatives to publicly provided schools as the primary path of improving school systems – is a significant element within a market-based approach to school education. Such market-based solutions to school improvement have been shown to not have worked in countries like the United States (*Ravitch, 2010, 2013*), and more so in school systems already characterised by existing inequities (*OECD, 2016: 123-127*).

Implicit in the school choice notion is also the idea that private schools can be a viable and better alternative to the public education system. However, the private school advantage claimed has been disproved in recent rounds of PISA and finds mention in a recent World Bank report on the status of learning in school systems across the world (*OECD, 2016: 126; World Bank, 2018: 176*). These empirical findings are also consistent with fundamental philosophical ideas underlying education, particularly around education not being a marketable good (*Winch, 1996*).

In India, a significant expansion of the schooling system has happened since the 1990s, and the past 15 years have seen a rapid growth in enrolment in low-fee private schools even while the access to government (public) schools has increased, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Because of the nature of school expansion, which is rapid and often inadequately regulated, parents are faced with more choice but in an environment where information on schools and schooling is low. In parallel, and despite insights from around the world, market-based solutions such as school choice and low-fee private schools for the poor as drivers for improving the school system continue to feature prominently in discussions about school education in India.

These dynamics led us to conduct a three-stage field study, covering 121 public and low-fee private schools and 1210 families, in 10 districts across 4 states to understand, in some detail, how parents make school choice, especially in the context of rural India.

The study finds that school choice is a complex process. A wide variety of considerations affect parent's choice of school. The perceptions of *teaching-learning, discipline and safety* of children in schools are important across parents. Parents who send their children to public schools consider expenses as an important factor. Parents who send their children to private schools consider '*English-medium*' as an important factor.

The study also finds that parental choices of low-fee private schools are very often not based on accurate information. Many parents think that they are sending their children to English-medium schools while in practice most of these schools are not English-medium. Similarly, parents who believe teacher characteristics to be an important factor often end up sending their children to schools with less qualified teachers.

Much of the emphasis by parents on many educationally unimportant but aspirational factors, and attendant information asymmetry, seems to be due to the simple fact of marketing by low-fee private schools. The study finds that the marketing efforts of schools and cultural aspirations of parents reinforce each other and allows for a situation in which actual educational outcomes can be subordinated, or worse, undermined.

Overall, the study endorses other studies worldwide that have shown that an uncritical and simplistic endorsement of market-based approaches to improvement of school systems is not only inadequate but could also have adverse implications for quality of school education.

1. Introduction

The elementary school system in India, since the 1990s, has seen significant expansion, in terms of the growth in reach of the public school system and the parallel growth of private schools¹. Even then, the public school system continues to be the main provider of schooling, especially for historically marginalised population groups and hitherto underserved areas. Much of the growth in the private school system has been led by the mushrooming of low-fee private schools², first in urban and peri-urban areas and subsequently in many other places including rural India. As a result of such a rapid and often inadequately regulated school expansion, parents are faced with more choice, but in an environment where information is low.

It is in this context that there has emerged, in educational policy debates, contested opinions and arguments around school choice. One such set of arguments underscores a market-based approach to school education where more choice for parents among school options would ensure competition among schools and the weeding out of inefficient schools, implicitly public schools in this narrative (*for example, Shah and Miranda, 2013*). However, the idea that parental choice would lead to optimal school outcomes has been critiqued by others. These studies have argued that the above simplistic understanding of parental choice ignores how mechanisms of choice actually operate in the context of disadvantaged communities and, more importantly, have adverse implications for equity of education in the context of an already stratified schooling system (*for example, Härmä, 2011; Srivastava, 2007*). In addition, the best available evidence suggests that there are no clear differences in learning outcomes between public and low-fee private schools (*for example, Chudgar and Quin, 2012; Karopady, 2014; Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2015*).

In this context the Research Group at Azim Premji Foundation is executing a set of studies that will contribute to the on-going debates around public and private school education. The objective of this particular study is to understand how parents make school choices, what considerations are critical in choosing a school, and how these factors map to the objective reality of schools.

In order to do this, we undertook a three-part field study. We first surveyed 1210 families spread across 25 rural sites in ten districts across four states in India to understand the factors involved in school choice and how parents assess schools. Second, we surveyed principals and teachers in 121 public and private schools in these sites and observed the processes at schools to ascertain the

1. Public schools and the public school system refer to government schools and the government school system respectively.

2. Low-fee private schools are also known as budget private schools or affordable private schools. The reference to private schools in this study pertain to such schools and may be used interchangeably.

match between parental perceptions about schools and the objective reality of education in schools. Analysis of this data showed interesting patterns related to the nature of school choice and private-school processes. In the last part, we used detailed qualitative interviews and examined some of these specific issues. This was conducted with a sample of parents sending children to public and private schools from different wealth quintiles as well as a sample of headteachers and teachers from the private schools covered under the first two parts of the study across different locations.

The sites for the study were purposively chosen so that they were from rural locations that have several public and private schools in the vicinity. Though not representative of the particular districts, states or the country, the survey provides a glimpse into how large sections of rural Indian parents perceive school quality as well as think about and exercise school choice.

The study finds that school choice, overall, is complex with a range of diverse factors being important for different parents. Perceptions of *teaching-learning* is the most important factor across parents. In addition, many parents also consider discipline and safety as important factors determining their choice. *English-medium* was more important as a reason for parents who chose private schools whereas *expenses* was a more important reason for parents who chose public schools.

In terms of distribution of preferences between private and public schools in the vicinity, the study finds that parental preferences are not concentrated in specific schools, whether private or public. The most preferred school in the vicinity where parents would like to send their children, across 25 villages, was almost as likely to be a public school as a private school.

Analysis of parental perceptions vis-à-vis school realities gathered from the school survey shows a huge mismatch between the two in low-fee private schools. Though parents report that children are going to English-medium schools, the reality for most such children is that they are not being taught in English. Similarly, though parents report selecting schools because they care about *teacher characteristics*, on average they end up picking schools that have lesser qualified teachers than other schools.

Data from the qualitative interviews reinforce the complicated nature of school choice. Among other things, this is revealed in the reconsideration and revision of initial choices made by the parents, and their switching, both within types (from one private school to another private school) and between types (from private school to public school). Some parents are also seen to continue with the already chosen private schools, despite their revalued perceptions of these schools, due to their aspirations for cultural capital.

The qualitative interviews also offer possible explanations for the mismatch between parental perceptions and school realities. At one end, parental choices of private schools are seen to be strongly determined by aspirational criteria such as children acquiring a smattering of English and having proper dress and behaviour. In addition, these criteria also reveal a form of social distancing from the poorer families accessing public schools by those parents sending their children to private schools. At the other end, low-fee private schools carry out systematic marketing and image-building efforts for enrolments in neighbouring villages. These marketing efforts highlight the very same criteria parents are seen to aspire for. As a result, visible non-educational quality parameters are reinforced by both parental aspirations for cultural capital and market-oriented practices of private schools³.

3. The study understands 'quality of education' as a normative, multidimensional concept informed by fundamental components of an education system such as aims, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school processes (see, Dhankar, 2002; Winch, 1996). It is with reference to this that parental perceptions of quality not aligned to such a concept are understood as non-educational.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in ten districts across four states (Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand) in the country. These are places where the Azim Premji Foundation has an active presence and has been working for some time⁴. One block per district was chosen and most of the blocks are those in which the respective district headquarters is located. The specific site for the study in each block was a delimited geography comprising a set of villages (i.e. a group of neighbouring villages, around 2-3) based on pre-specified criteria⁵. A total of 1210 families and 121 public and private schools were covered in the survey (see, Table 1).

Table 1: Families, children and schools studied: district-wise

DISTRICTS	Villages	Families	Children	Public Schools	Private Schools	Public School Teachers	Private School Teachers
Baloda Bazar	3	120	248	6	2	34	28
Dhamtari	3	120	226	8	5	41	53
Janjgir Champa	3	121	250	9	9	36	74
Raigarh	2	120	219	6	4	35	50
Raipur	2	120	274	5	3	34	55
Yadgir	2	121	255	5	7	32	57
Tonk	2	120	214	5	12	52	147
Dehradun	4	120	289	5	6	19	63
Udham Singh Nagar	2	128	272	6	4	35	29
Bageshwar	2	120	217	6	8	25	116
TOTAL	25	1210	2464	61	60	343	672

*The specific sites in all districts were rural

4. The Azim Premji Foundation primarily works to support continuous professional development of public school teachers in these areas and largely on processes and platforms that can engage teachers voluntarily. There is no significant direct work with either schools or families in these areas.

5. The following criteria were used: (i) the presence of a balanced mix of public and private schools and around a minimum of 10 schools in total; this was to ensure a diversity of school options (both public and private) for the study; (ii) availability of accessible transport for the relevant village community; this was to ensure the non-inclusion of atypical remote villages that would not offer a diversity of school options; and (iii) population of around 1500-1800 households; this was to maintain a balance between available resources and a sample target of around 120 families from each site.

A Family Survey Tool was used for the first part of the study. While designed as a survey tool, its aim was to elicit from the families a nuanced understanding of the issues framing the key research questions. Important questions around opinions about local schools and choices were asked to elicit both a broader set of responses that parents had as well as their primary response. For example, when asking parents about the preferred school of choice in the vicinity for their children, parents were asked to provide the top three reasons and then the main reason for their opinions. The responses to these questions were open-ended and the survey team later classified the responses into one of the 15 categories. For instance, parents when asked about the reasons for their opinions could provide ‘teachers’ as a reason for their preferred school of choice. The survey team was, however, trained to further probe into what parents were referring to when they said ‘teachers’—teacher-characteristics, or teaching-learning related processes, or other processes such as discipline. It was these probed responses that were finally coded and analysed.

The analysis of data from the Family Survey Tool was followed by the development and implementation of a School Information Tool. The parameters for data collection were guided by the preliminary findings from the analysis of family data. The aim was to analyse primary data on the schools vis-à-vis secondary data collected on the schools from parental responses.

Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data revealed interesting patterns on issues such as nature of school choice, private-school processes, and understanding of English-medium. A qualitative component was undertaken to probe deeper into some of these patterns. The quantitative data was used to generate a sample group of parents, from different wealth quintiles, sending children to public and private schools, as well as a sample of headteachers and teachers from the private schools across the different locations. Semi-structured qualitative interview schedules were used to collect data from this sample group comprising 50 parents, 12 headteachers, and 24 teachers. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 Complex nature of school choice

In existing research, among the various factors that have been shown to affect parental choice, some of the important ones are: supply (school options available), quality of education, medium of instruction, affordability or cost, non-educational benefits, social barriers, and gender of the child (*for example, Streuli, Vennam, Woodhead, 2011; Hill, Samson, & Dasgupta, 2011; Härmä, 2010*). Furthermore, for parents, quality of education has also been shown to be an unclear category that refers to different things such as school infrastructure, examination results, discipline, and counter-intuitively even higher

pupil-teacher ratios (*e.g. Hill, Samson, & Dasgupta, 2011; Kaur, 2017; Srivastava, 2007*). In the family survey, we explored this by asking a range of open-ended questions to capture parental preferences of schools and the school choice process. Parents were asked two different types of questions related to choice. The first pertained to the *preferred school in their vicinity*, i.e. the specific school they would want to send their children to; and the second was regarding the school which *they actually chose to send their children to*.

3.1.1 Which schools in the vicinity do parents prefer?

Analysis of preferences of parents for schools in the vicinity revealed that this was not concentrated in specific schools, either private or public. For this analysis, we excluded preferences for schools that were not in the immediate vicinity and found out the percentage of parents expressing their inclination for other schools in the vicinity. The average of this inclination across sites, for the school in the vicinity where parents would most likely want to send their children to, was 20 percent. Also, in 14 of the 25 villages across the 10 sites the most preferred school in the immediate vicinity was a private school while in 11 villages this was a public school. There were 4 villages in two sites where all the top three preferences were private; otherwise, for the rest of the 21 villages, public schools invariably figured among the top 3 preferences. In 13 villages, public schools figured more among the top three preferences as compared to 12 villages where private schools figured more among the top three preferences.

Analysis of reasons provided by parents behind school choice showed multiple considerations that vary across parents. We find that some reasons are important across all parents; some others seem to be more important for parents who prefer private schools over public schools and vice versa.

Table 2 presents the main reasons provided for parental preferences between specific schools in their vicinity that they would like to send their children to. Their perceptions of *Teaching-Learning* formed the most important category (33 percent) of reasons among parents to send children to a particular school. Perceptions of *Discipline* (11 percent) and *Safety and Security* (9 percent) in schools were also found to be important across parents.

The relative emphasis given to some of the other reasons mentioned as important were seen to be different among parents preferring public schools and private schools. *Expenses* were a much stronger reason for parents whose

Table 2: Main reason behind parents preferring specific schools in vicinity (%)

	Public Schools	Private Schools	Total
<i>Infrastructure</i>	2	3	3
<i>Facilities</i>	3	1	2
<i>School Reputation</i>	5	3	4
<i>Safety and Security</i>	12	8	9
<i>Inclusiveness</i>	5	1	3
<i>Encouragement and Support</i>	3	0	2
<i>Expenses</i>	16	2	8
<i>Forms of schooling⁶</i>	2	2	2
<i>School Administration</i>	2	4	3
<i>Teacher Characteristics</i>	10	6	8
<i>Teaching-Learning</i>	28	36	33
<i>Discipline</i>	8	12	11
<i>English-medium</i>	3	18	11
<i>Non-English Medium</i>	0	1	1
<i>Others</i>	2	2	2

*Figures have been rounded to the nearest integer

preferred choice was a particular public school in the vicinity as against a private school (16 vs. 2 percent). On the other hand, *English-medium* was a much stronger reason for parents who indicated a private school as their preferred choice (18 vs. 3 percent).

Analysis based on parents who mentioned the corresponding reason as one of the top three reasons – as against the main reason – behind preferences of specific schools in their vicinity that they would like to send their children to revealed patterns similar to Table 2.

6. *Forms of schooling* included preferences related to single/co-educational status, continuity across levels of schooling, and boards of affiliation.

3.1.2 Which schools do parents actually choose?

We now present the results from asking parents about which school they actually send their children to and why. Overall, slightly more than half (51 percent) of the children in our sample attend public schools and the rest go to private schools. The variation in type of schools children go to by wealth status of the household is evident, in that 71 percent of children belonging to the bottom asset quintile go to public schools, while only 17 percent of children belonging to the top asset quintile go to public schools.

The reasons for the actual school choice are similar to when they were asked about the reasons for the desired school in the vicinity. Table 3 shows the proportion of parents who mentioned the corresponding reason as the main reason behind their choices of particular schools that they actually send their children to. Parents' perception of *Teaching-Learning* was seen to be very important for both sets of parents, that is, those choosing public schools as well as those choosing private schools. Similarly, their perceptions of *Safety and Security*, *Discipline and Teacher Characteristics* were found to be important for both groups of parents. Expectedly, *Expenses* was a far more important reason behind school choice for parents of public school-going children while this was *English Medium* for parents of private school-going children. *Expenses* was seen to become more important for these parents when we explored reasons for actual school choice as against just their preferences.

Analysis of data from qualitative interviews revealed similar findings. For most of the poor families with children going to public schools, the schools were seen to be a default choice in terms of affordability. As they shared, '*We are very poor; so we did not think about other schools and chose government school. Poor children study in government school only*' (Father, five children, Tonk). For many of these families, public schools were nearer to their homes and could address their safety-related concerns for

Table 3 : Main reason behind parental choices of public and private schools (%)

	Public Schools	Private Schools
<i>Infrastructure</i>	2	2
<i>Facilities</i>	6	1
<i>School Reputation</i>	2	4
<i>Safety and Security</i>	12	12
<i>Inclusiveness</i>	6	1
<i>Encouragement and Support</i>	4	1
<i>Expenses</i>	26	2
<i>Forms of schooling</i>	2	1
<i>School Administration</i>	1	3
<i>Teacher Characteristics</i>	6	5
<i>Teaching-Learning</i>	23	37
<i>Discipline</i>	6	11
<i>English-medium</i>	1	16
<i>Non-English Medium</i>	1	1
<i>Others</i>	3	3

*Figures have been rounded to the nearest integer

their children along with their own needs of being away the entire day for livelihood opportunities.

Contrarily, the distinguishing qualities of private schools, as expressed during the interviews by parents sending their children to private schools, mostly centred on English teaching and discipline. One such parent had to say the following, '*The books are in English and teachers teaches in English, which helps children learn better. There are*

activities that get organised by the school in which children participate and need to communicate in English. Teachers talk in English outside the class with children and also among themselves, as I have seen during parent-teacher meetings' (Father, one child, Raigarh). That discipline is a valued quality among parents and private schools was also seen in the responses from private schools, *'Another thing we stress upon is discipline. We believe this helps children do better in their results. But we also maintain discipline in terms of dress for girls, timing of the schools; our school is known for discipline. Most parents value discipline. However, some also complaint about it to be too strict'* (Director, Private School, Raipur).

3.1.3. Equivocal choices, shifting preferences

Analysis of data from the qualitative interviews does not indicate unequivocal parental preferences in favour of any type of school, public or private. Instead, what are seen are both a reassessment of their initial choices and switching of schools based on this reassessment among parents. We also see cases of persistence with apparently sub-optimal choices due to their desire for cultural capital.

Sample families selected for the qualitative interviews from the different wealth quintiles expressed a diverse set of views behind their choice of private schools. A number of families in relatively less difficult circumstances economically and sending their children to private schools cited fee waivers and the 25 percent provision in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 as reasons for opting for low-fee private schools⁷. Though good education (*'acchi padhai'*) was a stated criterion in terms of school choice, the actual choices appeared to be equivocal. One such parent, who was sending two of his three children to a low-fee private school and one to a public school said, *'In both school there is good teaching-learning. That is why when two of my children said they wanted to go to private school I sent them there and when one said he wanted to go to government school, I sent him there'* (Father, three children, Baloda Bazar). When asked about the reasons children had given for their preferences, he said, *'Now who asks children so much'*. Additionally, not all of the parents were happy with their choices. One parent, who had left the decision of school choice to his elder brother (who took such decisions in the family) and had enrolled both his children in the low-fee private school his elder brother sent his own children to, had the following to share, *'She (elder daughter) is in class 2. But she does not know her tables and cannot read properly while other children going to the government school are doing better. So, I am thinking of transferring my children to the government school from next year. Despite paying fees that are difficult for us to afford, learning is not happening in the current school'* (Father, two children, Tonk).

⁷ This refers to Section 12(1) (c) of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 that provides for inclusion of children from disadvantaged and weaker sections in private unaided schools.

Likewise, some of the relatively economically well-off families sending their children to private schools did not seem to be unanimously satisfied with the quality of education in the schools they had enrolled their children in. They reported the need to switch from one private school to the other in the neighbourhood, and also to more distant places, as their expectations from the first school were not met. A few others, though dissatisfied, continued with the same private schools as these seemed to serve their expectations of cultural capital. For example, one parent had the following to say about the private school he sends his three children to, *'We chose this school for our children so that they could learn and speak both English and Hindi. Principal had told us during the admission that this*

school is English medium school and medium of teaching is mostly English. We thought that the children will be able to learn and speak English and Hindi which did not seem possible here in the village. Let alone English, you will not believe, one of my children studying in 4th standard is unable to properly read sentences even in Hindi. We (he and other parents) have often made complaints to the teachers regarding the level of this learning happening in the school' (Father, three children, Dhamtari). However, when asked whether nearby public schools would not be a better choice in such a situation, the parent reverted to the question of culture in terms of manners and ways of being and speaking, including the ability to speak in English.

3.2 Parental perceptions and school realities

We compared parental perceptions about two specific school characteristics – medium of instruction and teacher characteristics – with how these characteristics were seen to actually manifest at the school level. These school characteristics were collected through an independent school information tool that included both discussions with key respondents in the schools and focused school observations on specific school processes⁸. We found parental perceptions did not match with the reality of schools for the chosen characteristics. We present results for each of these two characteristics, examined separately.

3.2.1 Medium of instruction

English-medium did emerge as an important and valued characteristic, especially for parents sending their children to private schools. However, the study finds that there is a large discrepancy in parental reporting of English as the medium of instruction, the official medium of instruction as reported by schools and the medium of instruction used

in practice in schools. 39 percent of the children who go to private schools were reported as going to English medium schools by their parents. However, only 22 percent of the children who go to private schools have English as the official medium of instruction (as reported by school authorities). And school observations revealed that the percentage of children going to private schools that in practice have English-medium is only 10 percent.

In other words, as can be seen from Table 4, only 25 percent of parent's perception of English as the medium of instruction in their children's schools matches with reality. More than half (57 percent) of the children who are supposed to be going to English-medium schools are actually studying in the dominant regional language – Hindi or Kannada. Around 18 percent of these children go to a school that have books in English, but with teachers translating those into the dominant regional language while teaching (categorised as 'Mixed' in Table 4).

⁸ These observations were short-duration qualitative observations and not extended and prolonged observations of school processes. It would have been interesting to study other characteristics such as teaching-learning processes, discipline and safety, the perceptions of which are also significant factors for school choice. However, that would require a methodology that was beyond the possibilities of this study.

Table 4 : Official and actual medium of instruction for children whose parents perceive that their children are studying in English-medium Schools (%)

	Official medium of instruction	Actual medium of instruction
Hindi	43	52
Kannada	5	5
English	52	25
Mixed	0	18

Even when we looked *only* at responses of parents who said that English-medium was among their top three reasons for choosing the school that their child went to (this being 25 percent of parents sending children to private schools), the same discrepancy was observed. School observations revealed that only about a quarter of their children went to schools where the actual medium of instruction was English.

Insights into this discrepancy can be gained from the qualitative interview data. There was no clear understanding among parents as to what English-medium meant or what made it important for their choice of schools. For some parents, English-medium seemed to convey a pressure to conform to prevailing public sentiments about popularity of private schools over public schools. As a father from a *Rajasthani* family who had shifted to Yadgir, Karnataka, shared, *‘Recently my friends asked me, “In which school your children are studying?” When I said they are studying in one of the popular English medium schools, he felt proud and said I have done a good job by sending my children to that school, I was appreciated and respected by our community people, hence sending my children to private school is a prestige issue’*. Most parents were seen to associate private schools with processes that seemingly imparted a sense of distinctiveness to the ways of being of their children. This could be in the form of discipline, being well-mannered (in terms of dress and ways of speaking), and being in an environment where English was in use, either in the form of textbooks or spoken English. For example, one such parent shared his opinion about the

neighbouring public school as follows, *‘Let alone English, teachers in government school mostly speak in Chhattisgarhi language. Hindi is only spoken sporadically, that too during classroom transactions. Moreover, majority of children come ill dressed. Children are also often seen using abusive language. You can easily think how badly it will impact the overall nurturing of my children’* (Father, two children, Dhamtari). Such an implicit distancing, from what wealthier parents perceived to be the public school environment, was evident in their portrayal of this environment as being unsuitable for their children through expressions such as ‘schools with abusive and ill-mannered children’, ‘children from well-to do families do not go there’, and ‘children are not dressed well or do not keep clean’.

At the other end, school practices and processes showed the difficulties of actually aligning with any claims of English-medium by the private schools. Most of the schools shared how challenging it was to hire well-qualified English teachers, and more generally good teachers. Some resort to hiring teachers from faraway places (for example, Kerala and West Bengal) but are always unsure whether these teachers will return to the school after any vacation to their native places. Others make do with unemployed youth from the nearby villages. The limited ability of the schools to fulfil their claims of English-medium education was also apparent in the teaching-learning practices. As teachers from one of the schools in Yadgir expressed, it was difficult for them to deal with students in English, especially for students in grades 1 to 4. The teachers stated that they gave more homework and provided extra classes for those children who struggled to understand English. This practice of giving more homework seemed to satisfy parents who could not provide home support and insisted on teachers giving more homework. At the same time, teachers across these schools complained about parents not being able to provide adequate support at home due to their own unfamiliarity with English and that many parents send their children to tuition classes even though, according to the teachers, the schools provided good education.

3.2.2 Teacher characteristics

In our school survey, we collected information on academic and professional qualification, and years of experience of all teachers employed in these schools. First, the data collected points to stark differences between public and private schools when compared on individual teacher characteristics. Table 5 shows that public school teachers are by far better qualified academically (64 percent have post graduate degree as compared to only 44 percent for private schools), professionally (almost all public school teachers have some professional qualification; whereas 29 percent of private school teachers do not have any professional qualification), and have more teaching experience than their private school counterparts (average public school teacher has experience of 14 years as compared to only 5 years for private school teachers).

Table 5 : Teacher characteristics— public and private schools (% of teachers)

	Public Schools	Private Schools
Academic Qualification		
<i>Below Graduate</i>	7	15
<i>Graduate</i>	30	40
<i>Post Graduate and above</i>	64	44
Professional teacher qualification (any)	99	71
Teaching experience		
<i>1 year or less</i>	2	20
<i>1 to 2 years</i>	2	18
<i>2 to 5 years</i>	9	35
<i>More than 5 years</i>	87	27

Second, when parental perceptions of teacher characteristics were compared with school-level data of individual teacher characteristics, there was a mismatch between the two for private schools. There is a mismatch between the importance assigned to teacher characteristics by parents and the reality of teachers in the schools. The children of parents who identify teacher characteristics as an important attribute – i.e. have that among the top three reasons for their choice of schools – do not necessarily go to schools with better teacher characteristics.

As Table 6 shows, while there is a match between parents’ perceptions and realities in public schools on teacher characteristics, such as academic and professional qualifications of teachers and their teaching experience, there is a strong mismatch on these characteristics for parents sending their children to private schools. For this analysis parents were grouped into two categories—those who considered teacher characteristics to be important in governing the choice of their children’s school and those who did not consider teacher characteristics to be important. Schools chosen showed lower percentage of academically qualified teachers (76 vs. 87 percent), lower percentage of teachers with professional qualifications (64 vs. 74 percent), and lower average experience of teachers (74 months vs. 79 months) for the group who thought teacher characteristics were important as compared to the group who thought it was not important. In other words, parents who thought teacher characteristics were important do not choose schools that in reality have better teacher characteristics as compared to those who thought teacher characteristics were not important for their school choice decisions. These numbers were also lower than the average across the sample of private schools which had 84 percent teachers who are graduates and 71 percent teachers who are professionally qualified.

Table 6 : Teacher characteristics—parental perceptions vs. school realities

Schools	Parental perceptions	% graduate teachers	% teachers with professional qualifications	Average teacher experience in months
Public	<i>Parents for whom teacher characteristics are Important</i>	96	98	169
	<i>Parents for whom teacher characteristics are Not Important</i>	92	98	164
Private	<i>Parents for whom teacher characteristics are Important</i>	76	64	74
	<i>Parents for whom teacher characteristics are Not Important</i>	87	74	79

3.3 Parental aspirations and marketing practices

Data from qualitative interviews provides an understanding of the possible reasons for mismatch between parental perceptions and school realities. Most of the private schools shared that they organised systematic enrolment drives to advertise the schools and generate admissions. These enrolment drives were undertaken by teachers during the summer vacation. Describing these enrolment drives one of the teacher respondents shared, ‘*We visit the villages with the help of our current students’ parents. We contact the sarpanch and other influential people from the village. We reach villages in the school vehicle which has a loud speaker. We gather people in one location and tell them about our school. Then the teachers are divided into groups of two each for door-to-door visits in the village. We collect the information on children in the families, take their phone number and then finally explain the school to them*’ (Teacher, Private School, Raipur). During these door-to-door visits printed pamphlets highlighting the main features of the school are distributed to the parents.

When school headteachers and teachers were asked about what were the content of these school enrolment drives and pamphlets, the list covered the following: to and fro conveyance for children, CCTV cameras in school, early admission discounts, sibling discounts, English writing and speaking skills, cultivation of good manners, habits and thoughts, computer education, computer-aided classes, extra-curricular activities, weekly or daily tests, and pass percentages in board examinations. Some of the simple messages that

constitute continuous image-building efforts include good education at low fees, use of English language for routine conversation, no usage of local language or dialects in schools, and importance of discipline and traditions.

Parents are also seen to align with these more visible but suspect parameters of educational quality. Prominent among these parameters was '*sanskaar*', an idea of culture in the private schools that referred to the dress, behaviour, and ways of speaking in these schools, as compared to the public schools. Parents, referring to the manner in which children in private schools were supposedly able to conduct themselves as compared to those in public schools, were often found to say, '*And children here are more well-mannered*'. A number of other dominant considerations reported by parents sending their children to private schools, for them, complemented this idea of '*sanskaar*'. These included mandatory conversation in English in private schools vis-à-vis the use of local language and dialects in public schools and strict discipline and monitoring of activities and whereabouts of children in private schools. One of the parents, from among the families who were in a position to afford low-fee private schools but opted to send their children to a public school, seemed to aptly summarise this broad approach to choosing between public and private schools among parents, '*Government schools are good today as well. But people usually think that children of poor people study in government school. Hence other people do not send their children and choose private schools.*' (Father, two children, Tonk).

4. Concluding Thoughts

The study illuminates a number of important educational issues and debates, with particular reference to the idea of parental school choice. Overall, it cautions against an uncritical endorsement of market-based policy moves such as school choice and vouchers.

The findings of this study challenge the simplistic notion that parental choices are well-informed and always based on the most important educational criteria for assessing schools. The role of multiple factors and the influence of both practical and educational considerations in the parental choice show that school choice is an inherently complex process. The ambivalence and shifting perceptions, even of parents who can afford private schools, towards the quality of education in the schools in their neighbourhoods, further underlines the complexity of school choice.

Moreover, the study reveals significant mismatches between parental perceptions of specific school characteristics and school realities with reference to the same characteristics, for most parents sending their children to private schools. Are parents misled or simply misinformed about private school characteristics? Our field work suggests some elements of both are at play. What is visible on one end is the aspiration for cultural capital among parents sending their children to private schools. On the other end, private schools respond to these aspirations through market-based practices. What, therefore, gets emphasised in this mutual interaction are visible but non-educational parameters which parents seem to conflate with quality of teaching-learning in these schools. Not so visible, but critical parameters of educational quality such as teacher capacity gets short-changed in the process.

Our study provokes the need for a better understanding of the nature of this information asymmetry between educational practices and realities of schools, especially low-fee private schools, and parental perceptions about their educational quality. There is also the need for a more nuanced understanding of parental school choice, mainly in terms of their decision-making process that arguably involves consideration and synthesis of multiple factors based on their constraints, priorities, and available information.





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