

# What's Best for My Kids? An Empirical Assessment of Primary School Selection by Parents in Urban India

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## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to identify and prioritize a set of important attributes for school choice for millennial urban Indian parents. Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was applied to data collected from seventy-five millennial parents from the National Capital Region (NCR) of India to identify their prioritization of attributes for school choice. The study found that millennial Indian parents consider the quality and reputation of the schools as the most important attributes for primary school selection for their wards, followed by the overall infrastructure of the school. Further, contrary to the existing literature, tuition fee received a lower attribute ranking, while location was the least important attribute. The findings suggest that lack of policy directive in the education sector has resulted in parents valuing the quality of schools in terms of reputation, infrastructure, etc. as more important attributes while ignoring travel time or tuition fees. The findings are expected to contribute towards helping academicians and practitioners to understand parental decision-making, more so from the Indian or developing country perspective.

**Key words:** School choice, School selection, Private primary school, Primary school choice, School selection in India, Analytic Hierarchy Process, Multiple-criteria decision-making

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## **Introduction**

Contribution of quality primary education towards an individual's long-term success is universally accepted. Quality of the school holds equal importance along with student's intellect and socio-economic background, thus proper choice of schools influence the educational outcomes and experiences of students (Brandsma & Doolaard, 1999; Chen et al., 2016). Prior research works have substantiated the importance of proper school selection and its positive effects on student's academic performance (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Bagley et al., 1996; Bussel, 1998; Erickson, 2017; McCarthy, 2016; O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Zuilkowski et al., 2018), making primary school selection a necessary foundational prerogative towards rewarding experience and success at higher education levels. Thus, primary school quality becomes pivotal towards differentiating individual capabilities and academic performance (Baykasoglu & Durmusoglu, 2014).

Therefore, parents are vested in identifying the best alternative across available primary schools and the incentive to choose drives the legitimacy of the overall school choice process as an alternative to traditional public schooling (Erickson, 2017). Recent research works in school selection have shown that parents tend to weigh schools not only on their education quality but also on attributes like location and reputation (Murillo & Roman, 2011), safety and moral environment (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013) etc.

The dilemmas faced by parents during the school selection process is prevalent both in developed as well as developing countries. In countries like India, public school's failure to provide quality education and lack of policy restrictions has resulted in the growth of private primary schools, complicating the school selection process for parents (Govt. of India, 2016; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019). Further, large number of students from diverse background, has made the school choice exercise even harder for Indian parents (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019). Additionally, Indian parents often attach social meanings to the school choice process so much that they symbolize as means of expressing their identity (Gurney, 2017), making it a rather important parental decision-making process. Though government policies have attempted towards reduction these anomalies and the creation of a homogenous environment for education and development across all schools, they often differ physically, socially and pedagogically (Bussel, 1998; Baykasoglu & Durmusoglu,

2014).

Although school selection process has been extensively researched in developed countries (Alderman et al., 2001; Bosetti, 2004; Erickson, 2017; McCarthy, 2016; Schneider & Buckley 2002; Skallerud, 2011), and to a lesser extent in the context of developing countries, especially India (Boissiere, 2004; Gurney, 2017; Huisman & Smits, 2009; Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019; Tooley et al., 2011; Woodhead et al., 2013), there have been almost no prior studies examining the school selection process through the lens of multi-criteria decision-making. Further, though urban Indian parents have been exercising their choices based on multiple attributes, limited research works have studied the subjective or objective rationale behind these choices (Pushkarna, 2016; 2017). The current study tries to shed some light on this and attempts to understand the primary school selection process by Indian parents and to influence effective education policy formulation and implementation.

This study uses the multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) technique of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), to identify and prioritize a set of important attributes for primary school selection by urban Indian parents. Five attributes (quality of education, the reputation of the school, infrastructure, tuition fee, and location) were shortlisted through literature review and consultation with subject matter experts in the area of education comprising of researchers, policymakers as well as school administrators.

While MCDM and AHP have been utilized in various domains (discussed in the coming sections), limited school choice research and more so primary school choice have used it. This served as a motivation to adopt the technique for this study. The final objective of this research was to primarily answer the following questions:

- a. What are the various attributes parents in urban India look into while choosing a primary school for their ward? and,
- b. What is the relative importance of these attributes as exercised by the parents in urban India while choosing the primary school?

Beginning with a theoretical foundation of the concepts, the paper discusses the attributes used for the study. Afterward, the basic AHP structure has been discussed. The findings of the study are subsequently discussed concerning the extant literature and research gaps. The final section of the paper discusses the limitation along with future

research directions.

## **Literature Review**

The section synthesizes the existing literature and identifies the gap this research is trying to address.

### **Overview of school selection**

The school selection process research is founded upon the *Rational Choice theory*. The theory states that a stakeholder's (parents) objective is to maximize utility through rational decision-making (school selection) from the available alternatives (Goldthorpe, 1996). This rational decision-making requires selection of alternatives or informed choices by a rational individual and in turn requires information search by the individual before the decision-making (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). However, easy availability of information also increases the complexity within the decision-making process (Campbell, 1988; Funke et al., 2018). Furthermore, the decision-making process being complex due to information availability also applies to the school choice process (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Koning & Van der Wiel, 2013; Pais & Pintér, 2008), making it worthy of scientific curiosity.

Besides, parental choice is also driven by social factors and relationships (Bauch & Goldring, 1995), therefore, having limited social network and lower accessibility to information reduces an individual's ability to make optimal choices (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). The same can be argued regarding school choice process, where a lower level of information available due to the limited social network might lead to sub-optimal school choice.

Further, Bosetti (2004) argues that parents are not the 'natural consumers' of education and sometimes their selection might have nothing to do with education quality, essentially arguing that other attributes might also play their part based on the information available through the social network influencing the choices. Among these attributes other than education quality, Alderman et al. (2001) found that parents' income level plays an

important role in decision-making. Substantiating that school choice is a multi-attribute problem, Skallerud (2011) states that parents, especially from low-income groups, apply a more practical approach, not always limited to education quality. Further, Schneider & Buckley (2002) found that in addition to the cost of education, parents search for several factors, like reputation, facilities, location, community, and so on. In the Indian context Singh & Sarkar (2015) studied how facilities and infrastructure play a vital role in student outcomes and found that students from private schools having access to better infrastructure perform better than their counterparts in government schools. Standing on the grounds of these prior research works, this research work incorporates economic and non-economic factors for the decision-making process, developing a more structured analysis of the decision-making process.

#### **Early childhood education in India: A brief discussion**

In the contemporary era, British colonialism including the use of textbooks and English as the primary language has been deep-set in the Indian education system (Gupta, 2006; Saini, 2000). Private schools in India have done a far better job of implementing English in their curriculum by hiring faculties well versed with the language, imbibing a sense of perceived superior quality (Singh, 2019). This is evident by the fact that in the last two decades, 'nearly 96 percent of the total increase in urban primary enrolment was due to the growth of private schooling' (Kingdon, 2007, p. 186). Parents in urban areas having higher education and income levels, perceive private schools to be better in terms of education quality in addition to other attributes (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019). In urban India, more than 65 percent of kids attend private schools, having higher fees than the government-aided (public) schools (Kingdon, 2017). Kingdon (2017) further provide a detailed review of how private schooling has boomed in all states of India, regardless of the high fee of these schools and the low income of individuals in many states. The study states that as the number of private schools across India grew, stiff competition led to a decline in certain attributes which might be important for parents but not for the school management. This study, therefore, intends to critically identify and categorize these attributes based on their preference by Indian parents. The further section describes the application of multi-attribute

methods in educational research and then elaborates upon the method adopted for this study.

### **Application of MCDM in educational research**

Two of the earliest studies using MCDM in education were conducted by Liberatore & Nydick (1997) (using AHP for academic planning and evaluation problems) and Drake (1998) (using AHP for selection of engineering projects by students). Badri & Abdullah (2004) used AHP to determine faculty reward structure in higher education. Tsinidou et al. (2010) used AHP to prioritize the quality determinants for educational services from the student's perspective in Greece. Grandzol (2005) applied AHP for the faculty selection process in higher education. Raharjo et al. (2007) combined Quality Function Deployment and AHP to understand the quality of education. Lin (2010) used Fuzzy AHP to determine the quality of the course website. Dorado et al. (2014) used AHP to select simulation software for engineering education. Garg & Jain (2017) used Fuzzy AHP to evaluate e-learning websites. However, extant literature review indicated that MCDM has been used considerably in higher education, but not in primary education, something the current study is trying to achieve.

### **Refining the attributes**

Once the objectives were finalized, next stage comprised of shortlisting the critical attributes. The initial set of identified attributes were subsequently condensed after an extensive review of literature and discussion with subject matter experts. The experts were well conversant with the various attributes that the parents considered as a part of the school selection process for their ward. Certain attributes like catholic schools (Trivitt & Wolf, 2011) and specific sports programs (Rowe et al., 2010) were applicable in the context of Western nations but not in India. Most private schools in India follow a central or state education curriculum which is secular and not many schools provide sports-specific education (Sharma & Ramachandran, 2009). Hence, these criteria were discarded from the list. The top five attributes, as identified by all the experts were taken as the final set and were used for further analysis. The following section of the paper discusses these attributes.

## **Identification of the School Selection Attributes**

### **Education Quality**

The quality of education in schools has been extensively studied by academicians and practitioners. Wachtel (1976) conducted one of the earliest studies on the quality of education in schools, and suggested that skills or attitudes gained in elementary or high school have a lasting effect. Rizzuto & Wachtel (1980), and Card & Krueger (1992) discussed the importance of quality of schools. Mortimore & Stone (1991) proposed a set of measurable traits as metrics of quality. Cheong Cheng & Tam (1997) developed several models to assess education quality. Alderman et al. (2001) studied education quality concerning other factors like school cost, distance, and travel time.

Although quality of education is considered as part of academic rigor (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013; Rowe et al., 2010), limited research work has been done on quality of education from Indian context (exceptions being Kingdon (1996) and Woodhead et al. (2009)). Therefore, quality of education becomes an important attribute for the school selection process. For this study, the 'quality of education' was defined as '*school's education board affiliation, the teacher-student ratio, learning methods incorporated by the school and previous academic results of students.*'

### **Reputation of the school**

Reputation is stated as the stakeholder's perception of an institution's ability to deliver intended outcomes (Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). Reputation of an educational institution can be measured through the quality of education delivered, academic qualification of teachers and years since the establishment of the institution (Standifird, 2005). Prior research has indicated that 'parent satisfaction' had a positive effect on 'school reputation' and parent's views lead to higher loyalty (Li & Hung, 2009; Skallerud, 2011). Based on these, 'reputation of the school' was considered an important attribute for the school selection process. The study defines the 'reputation of the school' as '*school's ability to produce exceptional academic results in the past ten years, educational qualifications of its*

*faculty, being a member of an exclusive club (e.g. Indian Public Schools' Conference) and to provide a safe and conducive learning environment for students.'*

### **Infrastructure provisions at the school**

Greenwald & Hedges (1996) showed that spending on school resources (infrastructure) is positively linked with student performance in primary schools. Research works regarding school selection in developing countries have found a positive relationship between infrastructure and student performance (Cuesta et al., 2016; Heinesen & Graversen, 2005; Levacic & Vignoles, 2002; Murillo & Roman, 2011). Therefore, infrastructure provisions at the school were considered as one of the attributes. For this study, it has been defined as *'the physical assets provisioned by the school including classrooms, playing areas, washrooms, activity areas, labs, etc. which contribute to the development of a student from a young age through healthy learning processes.'*

### **School tuition fee**

Härmä (2011), in her study of the Indian private schools, observed that school tuition fees play a critical role in decision-making for parents. Alderman et al. (2001) found a higher sensitivity towards school tuition fees, with revisions in fees affecting school choice decisions. Alcott and Rose (2017) discuss how 'wealth disparity' has led to a disparity in schools. Although the fee for private schools is relatively higher than public schools (Kingdon, 1996), parents prefer private schools due to the perceived higher quality of education and other facilities that public schools lack (Kingdon, 2007). Considering this sensitivity, school tuition fee has been considered as one of the important attributes. This study defines 'school tuition fee' as *'the amount parents pay to the school on a monthly/ quarterly/ annual basis for all the expenses listed by the school including academic, extracurricular, school trips, transportation, administrative and any other contingency.'*

### **Location**

Location of the school plays an important role in decision-making by parents (Schneider

& Buckley, 2002). Further, location becomes more important in developing countries like India, where road accessibility and vehicular safety are major determinants for any commute. Tetali et al. (2016) found that more than 60% of school kids walked to school in India, implying criticality of location for many parents, as walking long distances for kids is not preferred and use of the vehicle (personal or school bus) adds to the cost. For this study, location has been defined as *'the physical location of the school and its proximity to the student's residence, both in terms of physical distance (km.) and time taken to reach.'*

To summarize, Appendix-A tabulates various seminal works done in the last three decades in the area of education showing the influence of these five identified attributes. Additionally, the papers were chosen based on certain keywords concerning school choice and the attributes associated spanning over three decades, covering both developing and developed countries and also were well cited.

Figure 1 shows the basic hierarchy model of the current study with the five criteria chosen from literature and expert opinion.

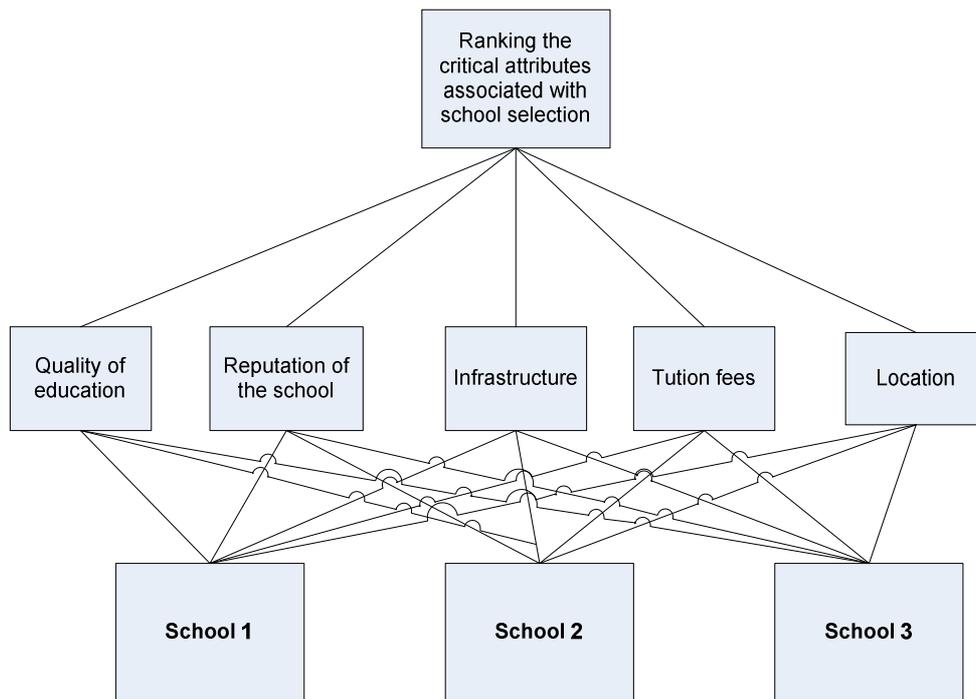


Figure 1. The AHP structure of the study

The goal of this study was to prioritize the identified attributes that parents might use as a part of private primary school selection for their child, therefore, the last level - determining the preferred school was considered beyond the scope of this research. The subsequent sections of the paper discuss the AHP process as well as the findings from the current study.

## **Method**

### **Overview of the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP)**

The AHP technique was developed by T. L. Saaty (1980). It allows the decision-maker to structure the problem hierarchically, the topmost level is the objective of the problem, followed by the attribute levels. The final level comprises of alternatives. Based on this hierarchical structure, the next step comprises deriving the eigenvector weights of the attributes through a series of pairwise comparisons that consist of assigning the relative importance of each attribute against the other, in a particular hierarchical level (Ganguly & Merino, 2015; Macharis et al., 2004). These pairwise comparisons are converted into a numeric scale and entered into a matrix. They are further combined into a composite score reflecting how well each of the alternatives fit into the overall decision-making objective, which is then used to arrive at the final decision.. The alternative yielding the highest AHP value is chosen as the best alternative. Another important advantage of the AHP is that pairwise decisions can be tested for consistency (through a consistency ratio) to ensure results are rational (Ganguly & Merino, 2015).

The current study applies the following steps as a part of the research process (Badri & Abdulla, 2004). The steps involved are as follows:

1. Defining the objective of the study (for the current study, it was ranking the attributes identified for private primary school selection in India).
2. Identifying the attributes for school selection and structuring the AHP hierarchy (Figure 1 in the following section).
3. The next step was to construct a pairwise comparison matrix of the attributes.
4. This step comprised of an AHP survey to obtain pairwise judgments among the

identified attributes from the respondents.

5. Based on the survey responses, prioritized weights of the identified attributes are obtained and consistency among the judgments tested.

6. Determination of the final prioritized set of attributes based upon the overall objective of the study and selection of the best alternative.

The AHP method adoption was done after establishing that school selection process is a multi-attribute selection process. Post attribute finalization, the next stage comprised of surveying parents currently involved in selecting primary private schools for their children.

### **Selection of respondents**

The survey instrument, consisting of a structured AHP questionnaire, was sent out to 123 parents, out of which 75 responded (61% response rate). They were chosen as part of the sampling with a requirement of living in a metropolitan city (population above 1 million) for at least five years i.e. Tier I (Tier -X) and Tier II (Tier -Y) cities as per the recommendations of Seventh Pay Commission, Government of India (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2015), which are used for house rent allowances and income tax exemptions, and indirectly represent the expenditure and disposable income of the residents.

The questionnaire was administered to parents for whom school-choice matters from the perspective of qualitative dimensions and who also can act upon those choices through their disposable income. Further, these cities were located in the northern part of India and have more than 2 million population, with similar cultural landscapes. The fact that all the respondents had English as their second language with professional proficiency allowed the authors to administer the questionnaire in English.

Additionally, the authors adhered to the necessary research ethics as a part of this study. The respondents' permission was taken before sending them the survey and no sensitive questions were asked as a part of the study. Independence of the research was maintained through approaching all the respondents separately so that they were completely unaware of the other respondents. Further, all analyses and discussions have been provided for the aggregated data set.

The questionnaire included five major attributes associated with primary school selection.

The respondents were requested to perform a pairwise comparison among the attributes. The five shortlisted attributes, required ten pairwise comparisons for evaluation [ ${}^5C_2$ ]. Aggregated values of various socio-economic aspects of the survey respondents have been provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Profile of the Survey Respondents (75 Respondents)*

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>&lt; 25 years</b>	<b>25 – 30 years</b>	<b>31 – 35 years</b>	<b>36 – 40 years</b>	<b>&gt; 40 years</b>
Respondent Percentage	0%	14%	65%	11%	10%

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Graduation</b>	<b>Post-Graduation</b>	<b>Doctorate</b>	<b>Post-Doctorate</b>
Respondent Percentage	0%	14%	79%	7%	0%

<b>Monthly Income (Indian National Rupee – INR)</b>	<b>&gt; 25,000 (333\$)</b>	<b>25,000 (333 \$) – 75,000 (1000\$)</b>	<b>75,000 (1000\$) – 1,25,000 (1667\$)</b>	<b>1,25,000 (1667\$) – 1,50,000 (2000\$)</b>	<b>&gt; 1,50,000 (2000\$)</b>
Respondent Percentage	5%	44%	40%	11%	0%

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Self-Employed</b>	<b>Freelancing</b>	<b>Between Jobs</b>
Respondent Percentage	60%	20%	10%	5%	5%

### Survey instrument

The survey questionnaire used comprised of pairwise AHP scales as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Scale for Pairwise Comparison using AHP*

Relative Intensity	Definition	Explanation
1	Equally Preferred	The two attributes in question ( <i>i and j</i> ) are of equal importance
3	A Little More Preferred	One variable is a little more important than the other
5	Moderately Preferred	One variable is much more important than the other
7	Highly Preferred	One variable is very much more important than the other
9	Extremely Preferred	One variable is extremely more important than the other
Reciprocal (1/3, 1/5, 1/7, 1/9)	If attribute <i>i</i> has one of the above numbers assigned to it when compared with attribute <i>j</i> , then <i>j</i> has the value 1/number assigned to it when compared with <i>i</i> . More formally if $n_{ij} = x$ then $n_{ji} = 1/x$ .	

Source: Saaty (1980) and Lang & Merino (1993)

The respondents were asked to pairwise compare the identified attributes as shown in Table 2. The feedback received from the respondents were combined and normalized to arrive at the global priority weights for each of the attributes.

## Results

As the questionnaire was specifically designed for an AHP study, data was entered manually into an MS-Excel file designed for AHP analysis. Descriptive statistics were also obtained using MS Excel.

### Descriptive Statistics

The respondents were equally distributed among males (49%) and females (51%). The average respondent age was around 32 years and the average income stood at Indian National Rupee (INR) 90, 000 (\$1,200). 65% of the respondents belonged to the age group of 31 to 35 years. Additionally, nearly 84% of the respondents earned somewhere between INR 25,000 (\$333) and INR 1, 25,000 (\$1667) per month, belonging to middle-class and upper-middle-class Indian strata and 79% of the respondents had post-graduate degrees,

while 60% were working in the service industry. Hence, from the demographic perspective, the majority of the respondents were urban educated and financially comfortable millennial for whom educational choice for their kids is a major decision-making process.

### Outcome of AHP analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the respondents separately to eliminate any possible response biases. Response bias denotes the tendency of a respondent to provide a survey response that might be misleading in nature, thereby leading to the adverse result of the study (Arnold and Feldman, 1981; Sax et al., 2003). Response bias can stem from a group of respondents surveyed together, influencing each other's response, which was avoided in the current study.

The feedback received from the respondents were combined and normalized to arrive at the global priority weights for each of the attributes. A pairwise comparison among the five attributes selected along with their mean normalized weights for one of the respondents is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Pairwise Comparison among the Attributes and their Normalized Weights*

RAW AHP WEIGHTS						
	Quality	Reputation	Infrastructure	School Fees	Location	Mean Normalized Value (%)
Quality	1	5	9	7	9	<b>56.40</b>
Reputation	1/5	1	6	5	6	<b>24.00</b>
Infrastructure	1/9	1/6	1	2	4	<b>9.50</b>
School fees	1/7	1/5	½	1	2	<b>6.20</b>
Location	1/9	1/6	¼	1/2	1	<b>3.90</b>
Total	-	-	-	-	-	<b>100.00</b>

*Consistency ratio = 0.105*

The results exhibited in Table 3 show the pairwise comparison as provided by one of the respondents and is not a composite mean of all responses. The responses received from the other respondents were analyzed similarly and all the results obtained were used for final

analysis and discussion. Table 4 provides the final 'overall rankings' of the identified attributes based on a composite analysis of all 75 responses along with their mean and standard deviations.

Table 4. *Final AHP Values and their Rankings*

	Quality	Reputation	Infrastructure	School fees	Location
<b>Mean Value</b>	0.46	0.30	0.11	0.09	0.05
<b>Std. Dev</b>	0.876	0.912	0.764	0.791	0.521
<b>Rank</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

*N = 75, Average Consistency Ratio = 0.162*

As observed from Table 4, quality of education (0.46) and reputation of the school (0.30) came out to be the most important attributes affecting more than 75% of the school choice decisions among urban Indian parents. Infrastructure, tuition fee, and distance are the third, fourth and fifth valued attributes respectively, but with significantly lower eigenvector weights. This means that urban Indian parents have low sensitivity towards tuition fees and distance, their wards will commute. Their perception is mostly influenced by the perceived quality of education and reputation of the school, which are built over a period of time.

The standard deviation for all the five attributes was observed to be low (0.52 to 0.91), substantiating that in spite of being surveyed separately the respondents were fairly in agreement with one another.

It was also observed that the consistency ratio (0.16) associated with the current study was marginally higher than the acceptable value ( $\leq 0.10$ ). This can be attributed to the fact that pairwise comparison among the shortlisted attributes was not transitive. For example, the relative importance of 'reputation' being higher than 'tuition fees' and the relative importance of 'reputation' being greater than the 'location' might not necessarily denote that 'location' will have a higher eigenvector weight than 'tuition fees' (and vice versa). As mentioned by Saaty (1994), evaluators often make trade-offs that violate transitivity but overall, are accurate in their judgment since they consider the relative importance of the criteria themselves, which might lead to a marginally higher consistency ratio. The following section of the paper will discuss the findings, with comparisons to the literature, providing insights based on the findings.

## Discussion

Parents invest a lot of time and effort in selecting quality education for their children, starting from the primary school level. Most of the parents surveyed valued the 'quality' of education over any other factor. Contrary to prior studies that state that in developing countries, individuals would be more sensitive to tuition fees rather than education quality. However, with globalization and subsequent affluence, in addition to increased information accessibility and cut-throat competition at all levels, the thought has started shifting slowly from price sensitivity to other qualitative attributes. This is also in line with the results of other studies around the globe by Alderman et al. (2001) and Kingdon (2007) who state quality in education as an important attribute for the selection process, further validated by Shalgren (2013).

The quality of education was followed by the reputation of the school. This was not surprising as the reputation of a school is built upon its education quality (Standifird, 2005), and parent's satisfaction and trust (Skallerud, 2011). One of the parents mentioned how the 'name' of the school has become an important attribute for enrolling their kids. One reason for this might be that most of the 'reputed' schools in India perform well, not only academically, but also provide exceptional facilities to their students, which leads to parents willing to pay the extra charges for the education quality and the 'brand name'.

The third most important attribute was the infrastructure that schools provide. The role of infrastructure and its effect on student performance has been established by Greenwald & Hedges (1996). A school that invests heavily in infrastructure including basic facilities and enhancing the overall school environment (Murillo & Roman, 2011) might have higher enrolment rates stemming from higher parental satisfaction. Such schools might slowly build reputation backed by academic performances, also complementing its quality, leading towards higher tuition fees.

The current study found that the school fees, although an important attribute for the selection process, ranked below the quality and reputation. A possible reason for this might be the fact that despite being price sensitive, urban Indian parents value the quality of education. It was also observed that parents are more concerned about their kid's comfort and learning environment, even though it results in higher expenditure. Many parents were

also paying additional fees for extracurricular activities and school trips, which does not directly affect their academic progress. Even then, parents found it beneficial as it would enhance the overall personality of their ward.

Contrary to other research works, the least important attribute was the location. According to Tetali et al. (2016), a large majority of kids in urban settings were walking to school. However, it was observed that many established schools were expanding their branches outside the city due to space constraints, making it essential for them to provide pick and drop services. Even though parents need to pay for these services, they accept this trade-off against their own time. Additionally, parents are also willing to pay for transportation facilities for a school not located far from their home as well. One needs to carefully observe the findings to see how precisely the school fee attribute gets placed in the hierarchy, as it is preceded by attributes like quality, infrastructure, and reputation while succeeding the attributes- location, meaning parents are ready to compromise on the location after paying some extra money.

## **Conclusion**

The research work intends to influence the school administration as well as education policymakers towards devising strategies and policies facilitating homogenization of the educational environment across all schools. To do so the paper identifies important attributes parents look into before deciding the school for their wards, thereby providing the strategists and policymakers guiding tools for the said environment creation through adequate monetary and non-monetary intervention.

The purpose of this study was to identify and prioritize a set of important attributes that parents use during the private primary school selection process using AHP. The study found that the selection process stretches far beyond fee sensitivity to a plethora of complex, non-economic attributes. 'School fee' indeed was not the top priority for urban Indian parents, rather, education quality followed by reputation were the critical factors for enrolment.

The schools should focus on providing the highest education quality, as many parents are

more concerned about quality rather than infrastructure. The hiring of able and qualified teachers would lead to improved results, which eventually improves enrollments. Furthermore, the schools should work towards continuous improvement. Once parents trust the institute and are satisfied by its quality, reputation is a self-sustaining process. This study serves the school administrators to understand the relative importance of attributes that parents evaluate as a part of the selection process, and thus can design their quality assurance, content, and other strategies accordingly.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The major limitation of the current study was that the sample was selected from the Tier-I and Tier-II cities, having million-plus population, are well-developed urban areas of India having better amenities and infrastructure as compared to rest of the country. However, the social attributes and culture of people residing in Tier-I and Tier-II cities are found to be very similar (Shah, 2009), facilitating generalization of results from the urban Indian context.

Similarly, the school education system in India is different from Western nations and East Asian countries like Japan. Factors like location might not feature in developed nations where almost 70% of kids use private transport to reach their school (Richardson et al., 1996). Hence, the generalizability of the study might not be possible in a global context.

The majority of the households surveyed belonged to the middle or upper-middle-class (84%). A similar study of other economic classes and rural context might yield different results. Singh and Sarkar (2015) state that almost 70% of kids from lower-income groups are enrolled in public schools in India. This can be taken up as future research work.

This study can be expanded further by applying other methods or considering additional factors for school selection. There are aspects of emotional attachment, like inter-generational alumni of the same school, which might influence the school choice. Also, sometimes, tradition and culture are an integral part and can influence decision-making to a large extent. Yet, this study showcases important decision attributes and the preference of millennial parents in India, which is crucial for schools and policy-makers alike.

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**Appendix A. School Choice Attributes as identified in the literature**

Journal papers	Attributes				
	Education Quality	Reputation of School	Infrastructure	School Fee	Location of School
Mortimore and Stone (1991)	✓	✓	✓		
Alderman et al. (2001)	✓			✓	✓
Rowe et al. (2010)	✓				
Kelly and Scafidi (2013)	✓				
Kingdon (1996)	✓			✓	
Woodhead (2009)	✓		✓		
Standifird (2005)	✓	✓			
Li and Hung (2009)		✓			
Skallerud (2011)		✓			
Cuesta et al. (2016)			✓		
Murillo and Roman (2011)			✓		
Harma (2011)				✓	
Alcott and Rose (2017)				✓	
Kingdon (2007)	✓		✓	✓	
Schneider and Buckley (2002)					✓
Tetali et al. (2016)					✓
Shalgren (2013)	✓				
Richardson et al. (1996)					✓
	9	4	5	5	4

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