

Does Quality of Education Really Matter for School- Choice?

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, the number of Budget Private Schools (BPS) and the number of children enrolled in them have dramatically increased. These schools compete with government schools in providing education to children of low-income and low-education households. However, such proliferation of BPS schools is ironic given that under the Right to Education Act (2009), education is 'free' for all students in government schools. This paper seeks to understand why parents choose to pay a fee to BPS over availing the free services of government schools. Further, it explores which are the factors that are most relevant to parent decision making. Our primary data suggests that it is 'socio-economic factors' rather than 'educational factors' that drive to the decision of low-income parents in sending their children to BPS.

INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive and universally accepted definition of BPS is unavailable in spite of the extensive research that has been carried out on the subject. Scholars studying BPS have used various indicators to define them. Many have used the fee that these schools command from its students as the primary indicator. In these definitions, BPS are defined as those schools that charge fees within the range of Rs. 50 – 500. However, the problem with this definition is the following: Do schools which charge a rupee more than Rs. 500 not qualify as BPS? It is important to identify a robust and universal definition of BPS before we enter a detailed discussion regarding BPS.

The researchers would like to define BPS as “any school that charges less than the per child funding of the government in the respective state”. By ‘per child funding’ the researchers are referring to the money spent by the state government for educating a child in a government school. Here one must note that government schools are free for students in India as every child enrolled in a state school is funded by his or her state government ((RTE 2009). This amount differs from state to state depending on various aspects (infrastructure costs, incentive structures required to attract children, amongst others). In the state of Delhi the per child funding is Rs. 1190. Since, our study is based in the state of Delhi, the private schools included in it are those that charge less than Rs. 1190 per month.

Having identified BPS, it is important to discuss their importance of BPS in the context of Delhi. These schools cater to the low income households of Delhi and have adopted cost effective methods of teaching so as to make them affordable for parents in these households. (interview) Mostly, BPS work with humanitarian interests and principals of the schools are often the owners as well. (interview). However, even though they work with small budgets, most researchers have reported that learning outcomes in BPS are far better than those in government schools. The reading of a student enrolled in a BPS offering primary school education is double that of his counterpart in a government school. (Tooley 2007) Such findings indicate that BPS are popular and have proliferated extensively due to the better quality of education that they offer. However, some scholars have suggested other factors underlying the popularity of BPS. For instance, Baird reported that in the slums of Mumbai, BPS were located closer to households in comparison to government schools. Such arguments propels one to ask: What are the factors that influence of a parent’s school choice? Further, what are the most important factors among these?

Exploring such questions is important for multiple stakeholders. Firstly, it will help BPS identify the factors that attract students and hence they would now emphasize on strengthening the relevant features of their school. Secondly, it would enable policymakers to make informed decisions while promoting education and investing in education related initiatives. Lastly, it would facilitate NGOs in mobilizing students and parents towards accessing quality education.

In this light, the researchers investigated the factors that drive decision making processes of parents through a survey of households in areas with a high concentration of both government and BPS. The findings suggest that it is 'socio-economic factors' rather than 'educational factors' that drives the decisions of low income parents in sending their children to BPS.

This finding will be presented in the paper in the following manner. Firstly, the paper will engage in a deeper discussion regarding the works of the above authors in a literature review. Secondly, the methodology that the researchers used to conduct the primary data will be discussed. The subsequent section will analyse the findings from the qualitative and quantitative that the researchers collected for the purpose of this paper. Finally, based on the findings the paper provides policy recommendations for the government's RTE as well as for BPS.

SECTION 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Most scholarly work focuses on the proliferation of private schools for the poor and how this proliferation has been crucial for attaining the Millennium Development Goal of universal education. James Tooley was one of the first to publish on the subject. His article, *Private Education and the Millennium Development Goal of primary education*, (2007) is based on a case study in Hyderabad, India. This article puts forth the factors that have made BPS more effective than government schools in raising primary school enrolment levels. Along the same lines, Geeta Kingdon in her work (2007) suggests that if India today is comparable to her neighbours, Bangladesh and China, in raising literacy rates, the credit should be given to private schools and not government initiatives. Similarly, Karthik Muralidharan has argued that private schools do outperform government schools and has suggested a set of parameters so as to make the comparison.

Given that most scholars believe that BPS should be allowed to proliferate and flourish, it is important to look into the reasons that have been stated in the existing literature. First, it has been found that the average pupil's reading capacity of a BPS student is well ahead his/her peers in government schools. Second, teacher attendance and dedication in BPS is greater by manifolds given that BPS teachers do not enjoy the same job security that government schoolteachers do. Third, since salaries of BPS teachers are lower than their counterparts in government schools, whose salaries are artificially hiked, BPS administration tend to spend more on technological updating and classroom inputs such as blackboards, computers, restrooms, drinking water, etc. Fourth, the medium of instruction is English in most BPS schools.

The factors listed above are those that help BPS bring better learning outcomes in contrast to government schools. The findings have been the same across India. Authors such as Mehta (2005) and Varghese (1993) have listed similar aspects of BPS after conducting studies in Punjab and Madhya Pradesh respectively.

Interestingly, few researchers have taken a different approach in studying BPS. These scholars highlight the fact that the students that these schools target are from low income and low education households. Based on this they argue that it is unlikely that low income send their children to BPS solely based on educational quality, given that their households run on small budgets. Nambissan (2012), in her chapter on low cost private schools in India, identifies this vacuum as the “Contexts of Choice” for parents. Nambissan identifies that there is a possibility that the choice of BPS over free government schools rests upon large institutional and social contexts such as: availability or distance of the schools, “perceived” quality, advertising, and English as a language of instruction, religious affiliations.

Here it is important to understand the difference between ‘preference’ and ‘revealed preference.’ Every parent might have his or her own preferences in relation to education. However, these will be different from the driving factors underlying a decision to send one’s children to a school requiring a fee. The latter is the revealed preference.

This paper intends to continue Nambissan’s work and provide qualitative and quantitative data so as to bring strength to her argument. Further, this paper seeks to identify the most important factors that influence parent decision-making processes. In doing so, the paper argues that it is ‘socio-economic factors’ rather than ‘educational factors’ that drive to the decision of low-income parents in sending their children to BPS.

SECTION 2 - METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this paper a mix methodology approach was used by the researchers to collect the necessary data.

Initially, two focus group discussions were conducted with school principals. This was done to identify those factors that according to principals, who are often the owners of the BPS, influenced school choice. These two focus groups allowed the researchers to understand the revealed preferences and their characteristics of the population we were about to study.

As a pilot for our survey, 15 parents of school going children were interviewed in the Shahadra region in East Delhi. These were semi-structured interviews and findings were qualitative in nature. This allowed the researchers to design the questionnaire for the survey that was conducted in order to gather quantitative data regarding the choices of parents. The 15 parents that were interviewed were not exclusively parents of BPS going children. Some were also parents of government school children.

Following the pilot, the researchers conducted a survey of 374 parents of school going children. For this, the concentrations of BPS schools were identified across the state of Delhi. Of these

Bhajanpura, Sangam Vihar, Gokalpuri and Shubhash Vihar were selected for the survey. The researchers randomly selected the parents of school going children from these areas and administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered to both parent of BPS children and government school children.

The survey questionnaire asked parents to identify the socio-economic and educational quality factors that were important to their decision making process. Socio-economic factors included distance of the school, the choice of school of friends and neighbours, financial constraints, campaign or voucher programs by other NGOs, infrastructure and facilities, and the common perception. Educational quality factors included attentive teachers/discipline, academic performance of students, importance given to math and the sciences, medium of instruction being English, and professional management in the school. The socio-economic and academic factors were listed in random order within the same column in the questionnaire in order to avoid a bias among the parents.

Other data collected in the survey included the gender of the respondent, the education level of the respondent, employment status, and the annual household income. This data would help put the survey findings in context. Further, it would help find explanations why some factors were more significant to parents over others.

The data collected was analysed with the help of a ranking test. The respective methodologies and the findings along with their interpretation will be dealt with in the following relevant sections.

SECTION 3 – DATA ANALYSIS

WHO ARE THE PARENTS?

The survey questionnaire was administered to 374 respondents in the regions of Sangam Vihar (South Delhi), Gokalpuri, Shubhash Vihar and Bhajanpura (East Delhi). This was a household survey and only parents of school going children were interviewed. Some of the demographic findings have been listed below.

It was found that there are more number of school going girls (190) than the number of school going boys (184). This suggests that there no longer exists a bias against the girl child in education. This is counterintuitive given that the respondents were little educated themselves. Nearly 73% of respondents had not completed any more than secondary school education, among which almost 33% had no schooling at all. This is an optimistic finding considering that according to common perception, lower levels of education amongst parents results in discrimination against the girl child's education. However still, there was some contrary

evidence that was collected. And hence, the role of gender biases in school choice will be discussed in further detail in the data analysis below.

Other findings included information related to the social standing of the surveyed parents. A significant part of the respondents (40.11%) were found to be self-employed or owners of small businesses like garland making, retailing, amongst others. Further, nearly 35% had full time jobs in either the public sector or the private sector.

Lastly, the economic status of the respondents was documented. It was found that the respondents came from weak economic backgrounds. In fact 49% of the respondents below the poverty line (BPL). The researchers identified BPL households using the guidelines of the Rangarajan Committee's report (2014). The report informed that a person would be considered BPL if his daily wage is below Rs. 47 per day in urban areas. However still, the average annual income of all the households is a relatively higher amount of Rs. 83,324.

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN?

The survey identified children who were attending both BPS and government schools. Nearly 52% of all the children in the survey were attending government schools while 48% of them were attending BPS. This is an interesting finding considering the fact that the survey was conducted in regions where there is a significant concentration of BPS. Additionally, the highest number of children were in classes 9 and 1 (nearly 13%). When the researchers examined whether there was a preference for a particular type of school for certain age-groups, no concrete results were found. While this indicates that there is no specific preference for BPS or government school depending on the class the child attends, the researchers found evidence suggesting otherwise from qualitative interviews. Many parents (16%) informed that non-availability of classes beyond class 5 in BPS was why some of them send their children to government schools.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The primary data collected corroborates our hypothesis, that is, it is 'socio-economic factors' rather than 'educational factors' that drives the decision of low-income parents in choosing a school for their children.

In the survey, the parents were asked to identify the three out of twelve reasons that influenced their decisions while choosing a school for their children. Once the three reasons were identified, the parents ranked the reasons as most important, moderately important and important. ~~The rest of the nine reasons were deemed unimportant. For every parent, the most~~

important reason was assigned a score of five, the moderately important reason was assigned a score of three and the last reason was assigned a score of 1. For every interview, the nine reasons that were deemed not important were assigned zero. For data analysis, the scores were totalled for each to reveal the most significant among them. The findings are below:

Table 1: Factors Determining School Choice for All Parents

Factor	Frequency of Most Important (5 points)	Frequency of Moderately Important (3 points)	Frequency of Important (1 point)	Total Score
Attentive teachers/ discipline	16	34	44	226
Distance of school from home	54	98	74	638
Academic performance	78	96	32	710
Subjects taught: Math, Science, Computers	2	4	6	28
Medium of instruction in school (English)	22	10	38	178
Other children from locality/family also attend the same school	10	58	32	256
Infrastructure	0	8	18	42
Professional Management	0	4	16	28
Campaign by NGOs or Government Agencies	0	0	0	0
Common Perception	20	4	58	170
Financial Constraints	166	6	10	858
Unavailability of BPS after class V	4	42	12	158

From the table above, we see that the top five most relevant factors in parent decision-making in order of rank are:

1. Financial Constraints
2. Academic Performance
3. Distance of school from home
4. Other children from locality/family also attend the same school
5. Attentive teachers/ discipline

The results suggest that socio-economic factors are indeed more important, given that 3 out of the 5 most important ones are socio-economic in nature. Moreover, the most important factor as per parents is 'financial constraints' which again is a socio-economic factor.

Gender as a Determinant

While girls constitute a greater percentage of the school going children in our survey, the disparity in the propensity to send a girl child to a government school and a boy child to BPS is alarming. On running a chi-square test we found that being a girl gives one a chance of less than 25% to attend BPS while being a boy gives you a chance of 75%. These findings are statistically significant at the 99.99% confidence level. The findings are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Chi-Square Test between Gender of Student and School Choice

Gender of the student	Percentage of students in Government School	Percentage of students in BPS school	Total
Boy	25.51	75.28	49.20
Girl	74.49	24.72	50.80
Total	100	100	100

Pearson Chi Square Value	Significance
92.4536	99.99%

Additionally we ran the same test for ranking of facts, with identical methodology for parents whose children go to BPS school only. The sample size for this was 174. The results identifying the top five factors are shown below.

Table 3: Factors Determining School Choice for BPS Parents

Factor	Frequency of Most Important (5 points)	Frequency of Moderately Important (3 points)	Frequency of Important (1 point)	Total Score
Academic performance	78	72	2	608
Distance of school from home	32	46	30	328
English Medium	22	10	38	178
Attentive Teachers / Discipline	16	34	44	145
Common Perception	20	0	6	106

From the table above, we see that the top five most relevant factors for parents who chose BPS over government schools in order of rank are:

1. Academic Performance
2. Distance of school from home
3. English Medium
4. Attentive teachers/ discipline
5. Common Perception

As we see, two out of the identified five important factors for choosing BPS are socio-economic factors while the rest are factors pertaining to academic performance. While in the case of BPS parents exclusively, academic factors outnumber the socio-economic factors slightly, there is still evidence enough to suggest that socio-economic factors play a major role in the decision making process of BPS parents.

Role of Gender for Above BPL Families

In order to identify the role that gender of the child plays, when the family is above the poverty line, we ran a chi-square test to identify if the bias against sending a girl child changes when the family can afford to send their children to BPS. The underlying assumption is that parents who are above the poverty line can afford to send their children to BPS instead of government i.e. they can place more salience to the factors of academic quality rather than socio-economic factors. Our finding suggests that being a girl child in an APL family gives on a less than 30% chance of going to a BPS school while a boy child has a 70% chance of going to a BPS school. This finding is statistically significant at the 99.99% confidence level. The findings are presented in the table below.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test between Gender of Student and School Choice for BPL Families

Gender of the student	Percentage of students in Government School	Percentage of students in BPS school	Total
Boy	37.78	70.18	55.88
Girl	62.22	29.82	44.12
Total	100	100	100

Pearson Chi Square Value	Significance
21.420	99.99%

Interpreting the Findings

Based on the demographic data and the qualitative interviews, the paper will now discuss the reasoning behind these factors being most significant. It will be seen that even though some educational quality factors have been identified as significant, they find relevance in decision making based on socio-economic factors. It is important to identify the reasoning of parents and the common trends in reasoning so as to make policy recommendation with the help of the findings.

1. Financial Constraints

Given that most of our respondents were below the poverty line, this is an almost obvious factor influencing school choice. All respondents who identified this as a

relevant factor sent their children to government schools. Further, our qualitative data informed that there does exist a gender bias among those for whom financial constraint was a factor. Few respondents sent their daughters to a government school while they sent their sons to private schools. The common reasoning was that girls were more sincere and had better learning outcomes than boys. Therefore, they could learn even in government schools while the boys required attentive teachers and the disciplined environment of private schools. Whether this is truly the reasoning or is there a general bias against spending on the girl child could not be determined from our survey. However still, what we did find was that some gender stereotypes do exist in the communities in our survey.

2. Academic Performance

This is a preference that would be expected given any socio-economic background and constitutes the essence of schooling. In fact, once government school respondents were removed from our sample and the factors were ranked according to BPS respondent's choices, academic performance stood as the most important factor in school choice. Further, since 'financial constraint' was identified as a factor for only households whose incomes were lower than Rs. 74,000, academic performance is the number of priority for parents above that income.

3. Distance of School from Home / Safety

This factor was most important for primary school children and for girls. In the case of both safety was a priority among parents and hence, distance of the school played an important role. In all our sample, this was identified as an influencing factor only when parents chose to send their children to BPS. This suggests that BPS have proliferated much more than government schools and hence are more accessible to school children.

4. Other Children from Locality / Family also Attend the Same School

This was the factor that come up most frequently in the case of large families or in the case of girls. In the case of large families, younger children tended to go to the same school as their older siblings. It must be mentioned that there were some outliers where the older sibling had experienced poor learning outcomes in either his BPS or government school and therefore the younger children were sent to the alternative option. The reason why this came up as a factor in the case of girls was because the safety of the girl was of utmost importance to parent. Parents found it safer for all the girls from a neighbourhood to leave for school together.

5. Attentive Teachers/ Discipline:

This was a factor that was again mostly highlighted among BPS parents. Many parents who went to government schools themselves informed that there was little teaching that took place in their classrooms and that truancy was common. Therefore, they had chosen to send their children to BPS. They were highly impressed by the fact that BPS teachers would call up the parents to inform a missing child. The presence of attentive teachers was however most important for parents of handicapped children or those with learning difficulties, all of whom sent their children to BPS.

6. English Medium Education

Most parents agreed that learning the English language was an important component of their child's education. Knowledge of English was detrimental for social and economic upward mobility. Therefore, many parents chose BPS over government schools since they learnt how to read and speak English with greater fluency in BPS according to them.

7. Common Perception

Since our survey was conducted in low income and low education households, it was found that parents often with no schooling sent their children to BPS over government schools simply due to the "common perception." We found that it is commonly believed that private enterprises provide services of a better quality. Therefore, once a household has income greater than the Rs. 80,000 and financial constraints are no longer pressing, many parents chose to send their children to private schools. However still, one may note that gender bias against the girl child continues to play a role in parental decision making. Despite stable incomes, many parents do not opt to spend on their daughter's education and send them to private schools that are commonly perceived to provide better quality of education.

SECTION 4 - POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For Budget Private Schools

1. Minimize Costs: Reduce fees as more members of the family join the same school

Taking into account the fact that financial constraints inhibit parents from sending their children to BPS, the latter should design incentives for parents with big families to send

their children to private schools. A monetary incentive such as the one suggested would also increase enrolment in private schools by manifold not only because of the financial concessions but also since our survey found that parents prefer to send all their children to the same school.

However, simply reducing costs might not increase options for school choice. Even though our survey suggests that the tipping household income above which a family faces less financial constraints in sending their children to BPS is Rs.80,000 per annum, many households above this income still prefer to send their children to government schools due to other factors such as other children in the locality go to the government school close by. Therefore, given such practices our paper provides the below recommendations to compliment the one of reducing fees.

2. Organize Campaigns

As mentioned above, we found that school choice is influenced by the school other family members or neighbours chose to go to. Additionally, our survey suggests that more children go to government schools rather than BPS. The two findings together suggest that a vicious cycle has been created where children continue to go to government schools over BPS since their neighbours or siblings go to government schools. It is vital that BPS break this cycle through awareness campaigns. BPS should promote the benefits of attending them such as the possibility of better learning outcomes and more parent involvement in the child's education.

3. Reduce Fees for Girls

Given that a significantly small percentage of girls go to BPS when compared to the percentage of boys, BPS should provide monetary incentives to parents in sending their daughters to BPS. If the BPS is successful in attracting more girls to their schools, it would lead to better learning outcomes amongst them.

For Government Schools

1. Introduce Cash Voucher, Especially for the Girl Child

Since our data suggests that parents are reluctant to spend for their daughter's education, the government should introduce cash transfers for the education of the girl child, specifically.

2. Evaluate Learning Outcomes

A large percentage of the surveyed respondents were of the opinion that learning outcomes in government schools were poor. Hence, academic performance stood as the primary cause underlying parents' decision in choosing a BPS over a government school. Therefore, the government should introduce policies so as to evaluate learning outcomes under the RTE. Currently, the provisions under the RTE only evaluate teaching inputs in a school. These provisions should be accompanied with evaluation models to make the Act more robust.

3. Provide Pickup – Drop Service for a Nominal Fee

One of the primary reasons many respondents chose BPS over government was the easy accessibility, that is, the near location of BPS. Therefore, in the case government schools cannot proliferate due to budget constraints, introducing an option of a bus service may be solution the government should consider. This would ensure the safety of primary school children and girls.

4. Enter into Public-Private Partnerships with Private Schools to Provide Low-Cost Education

In the midst of conducting survey in Sangam Vihar, the researchers identified a few private schools that the government has partnered with. These schools have insignificant fees (Rs. 40 per month) as the government subsidizes them. The learning outcomes in these schools are comparable to those in other BPS and better than state schools as per the surveyed parents. Therefore, instead of increasing the number of state schools, the government should enter public private partnerships as it has in a few areas in the state of Delhi.

5. Mandate Attendance

Among the top five factors that influences parent decision making is the presence of attentive teachers and discipline at school. This factor generally drove parents to send their children to BPS where teachers were more caring and yet disciplined their classes. On the other hand, the lack of attentive teachers in government schools led to high rates of truancy in government schools. Therefore, this paper recommends that the government should introduce mandatory attendance requirements so as to ensure that children were present in class. Full classes might also force government school teachers to discipline students and conduct classes.

6. Reduce Entry Barriers for BPS in Secondary and Higher Secondary Education

In our survey, it was found that many parents were forced to send their children to government schools due to the unavailability of BPS after primary school. Additionally, in our focus group discussion with BPS principals we were informed that the RTE has introduced multiple entry barriers against them in secondary and higher secondary education. Therefore, this paper recommends that BPS should be allowed to offer its services even in secondary and higher secondary education. This would provide more choice to parents and they alone would be in a position to decide which school would serve their purposes the best.

For NGOs

1. Increase awareness

A. Cash voucher programs in education

Since financial constraints was identified as the most significant factor deterring parents from sending their children to BPS schools, cash voucher programs would help increase the number of options available to parents for educating their children. With less financial concerns, parents would be able to prioritize educational quality factors while choosing a school for their children. Therefore, NGOs working in the education sector should promote cash voucher programs and increase awareness regarding them.

B. Better schooling options

Since one of our findings was that economic factors such as household income are not sufficient to explain school choice and that various social factors such as community cohesiveness play a role, it is important that parents are educated on how to make appropriate school choice and not base the decision on common practices or perceptions.

C. Importance of girl child education

Having identified the existence of gender biases even today, it is pressing that civil society highlights the issue and spreads awareness regarding the benefits of a gender equal society.

2. Increase participation of parents in government schools:

On survey, it was found that many parents chose to send their children to BPS over government schools as the latter's management did not respond to parent inquiries or grievances. On the other hand, principals and teachers of BPS were more responsive and parents could be more involved in their child's education.

The common opinion was that BPS collected fees from parents and hence were liable to answer them. However, government schools are set up with social interests and since, they run on taxpayer's money, they too are answerable to parents. In this context, NGOs should mobilize parents and organize them in way they can collectively assert their rights.

SECTION 5 – CONCLUSIONS

This paper had set out to analyse the socio-economic and academic factors that influence school choice. Initially, the researchers had hypothesized that it is not factors pertaining to quality of education but those with socio-economic factors that drive school choice for the parents in low-income families. Our research established this hypothesis and also identified the importance of gender in school choice. Further, our research identified the importance of the financial status, distance of school from home and the cohesive nature of the community as determining factors for school choice and also BPS as a school choice.

With these findings the researchers identified the gap between preferences and the revealed preferences of consumers of low budget education: The preferences being good academic performance and English medium education and the revealed preference being socio economic factors. The researchers further recommended policies for the government as well as other stakeholder's in the low budget educational field.

While this research was quantitatively and qualitatively robust, further research needs to be conducted with time-series data in order to establish the causality of these factors when it comes to school choice and the decision of BPS parents.

“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation.”

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