

Factors Influencing Parents' Choice of Schools for their Children's Education in Private Primary Schools in District Gilgit

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Received: 10-06-2025	Revised: 28-07-2025	Accepted: 20-08-2025	Published: 09-09-2025
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ABSTRACT

The ever increasing number of private school systems in Pakistan has made it challenging for parents to make a choice of school for their children's education. The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics that parents consider important when selecting private schools. An initial factor analysis identified school quality, projected future options, popularity, and proximity as the main factors representing parents' choice, explaining 67% of the variance. Sampling was conducted at two phases. In the first phase, 20 schools were randomly selected from 204 private primary schools in District Gilgit. In the second phase, five parents were randomly chosen from each school, resulting in a total sample size of 100 parents. The findings showed that parents' preferences were primarily influenced by the school quality, followed by projected future options, school popularity, and school proximity, in that order. No statistically significant association was found between parent income and qualification. Parents' rating of various factors highlights factors highlight the key influences on their preferences. The high importance placed on school suggests that both public and private schools may need to revisit their policies and reassess their priorities.

Key Words: School Choice; School selection; Parents' preferences; School quality

INTRODUCTION

The foundation of society and its prosperity depend on its quality of education (Benjamin et al., 2020). However, the growing demand for quality education has turned it a costly commodity, often out of reach for many. Consequently, private schools claiming to provide high-quality education are expanding rapidly across the world. The shift from public investment to private provision, along with the rising influence of market forces in education, undermine the notion of education as a public good. In Pakistan, the state funded most public schooling until the 1970s. At that time, only about 3% of students attended elite private schools, Madrasas (Islamic schools), or missionary schools, while the vast majority enrolled in government schools and received a common education (Institute of Social & Policy Sciences [ISAPS], 2010). Around the 1980s, the government began revisiting educational policy, opening the sector to private investment. Since then, private educational institutions have expanded significantly in Pakistan, particularly in regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan.

With the expansion of private education, question about quality and parental decision-making have become increasingly important. Compared to government institutions, private schools are often perceived to guarantee higher educational quality (Shabbir, 2018). Their growing presence has increased competition and provided parents with more schooling options within the private sector (Levin 2019). However, parents frequently struggle to select the most suitable institution for their children, as their choices are influenced by several factors, including school quality, location, reputation, and future educational opportunities (Farooq et al. 2017; Akhtar, 2021). Despite the alleged benefits of private education, social and economic inequalities remain. For instance, many families prefer low-cost private schools due to financial constraints. While such schools may offer relatively better opportunities, they often fail to meet the expectations of families with limited incomes (Davis, 2019). Farooq et al. (2017) also observed that parents often enroll their children in private schools with high popularity. Research across different context further shows that parents' decisions are shaped by multiple factors, including curriculum, instructional quality, safety, moral development, and the overall educational environment (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2022; Zafar et al., 2020).

Studies in Pakistan show that school selection is significantly influenced by parental income, educational background, and dissatisfaction with public schooling (Khalid & Tadesse, 2023). In Gilgit City, private schools have grown rapidly, making it increasingly difficult for parents to select institutions for their children. Since no single school can meet all the expectations parents may have, families are often forced to make choices based on trade-offs. Shahzad et al. (2020) found that parents' decisions are shaped by factors such as the demand for discipline, opportunities for parental involvement, and children's moral development. Similarly, Ahmed (2013) identified curriculum standards, teaching quality, school relationships, and future prospects as key considerations in parental school choice. These studies highlight that parents' preferences are shaped by multiple and fluctuating factors. However, much of the existing research in the Gilgit-Baltistan, such as Ahmed (2013) has focused on secondary school students, a stage where adolescents themselves participate in decision-making. At the primary level, however, parental choice becomes more crucial, as young children are less able to influence schooling decisions. This creates a need to explore how parents of primary school children in Gilgit-Baltistan make their choices generating such research-based evidence can help school administrations better align their environments and policies with parental expectations

Objectives of the Study

Following are the study's objectives;

1. To assess parents' preference-influencing factors of school choices from within the private schools' system in District Gilgit, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan
2. To rank factors based on their priority as given by parents in school selection in private school context in District Gilgit.
3. To examine the impact of the Income and Education Level of parents on their preferences for factors influencing their school choice.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature on school-parent interaction reveals the nature of challenges that parents face. These challenges begin as soon as parents start thinking about their children's education. As Gomendio, (2020) observed, parents experience the difficulty in deciding which school best suits their children. Over the last few decades, the trend of privatization of education has placed parents in a position where their concerns and uncertainties have significantly increased. Consequently, researchers have identified a number of factors that parents must consider. These factors have gained more attention in recent years, particularly against the backdrop of the competitive landscape of private schools across the

globe, including Pakistan. Some parents even turn to homeschooling to prepare their children for independent study (Haque, & Akhter, 2019), often because they cannot find a school that meets expectations (Avram & Dronkers (2019). Previous studies show that the importance of these factors varies across context. For instance, in Nepali, the proximity of school to home is considered especial important for security reasons, given the country's frequently political strife and weak law and order situation. Din (2019) reported similar concerns among parents in Pakistan. However, some factors are universally influential and affect almost all parents, regardless of their particular circumstances or national context. In this review, we identify and discuss those prominent factors that most strongly shape parent's decision-making about schools.

Factors Influencing Parents' Choice

School Popularity

Previous studies show that parents are strongly influenced by a school's reputation and popularity. Rehman et al. (2019) pointed out that school reputation depends largely on public perception about its mode of instruction. In a survey on influencing factors, Rahman et al. (2019), found that 95.3% of parents were influenced by school reputation. Their study revealed that strict discipline, excellent results, rigorous standards, and available facilities were key indicators of the reputation. However, the sources of information parents rely on to form their perceptions, and the extent to which these sources align with actual satisfaction remains an important area of study. For some parents, religious education is a major concern (Joshi 2019). Evans and Cleghorn's (2020) found that quality education is often the top priority of parents, which is sometimes closely associated with school reputation.

Reputation, however, is not static. It can fluctuate as new schools emerge with fresh mottos and promises that attract parents. Magulod and Gilbert (2022) noted that some schools—particularly in the public sector—are losing popularity due to a declining teaching and learning culture. In some cases, the initial reputation built through heavy advertising quickly fades when parents discover that the promised quality education is not delivered. Common reasons include deteriorating infrastructure, students and teacher misbehaviour in classrooms, and delays in provision of school supplies and stationery. In contrast, private schools generally appear to maintain their standards (Evans & Cleghorn's 2020; Taylor, 2021). According to Davis (2019), parents' judgements about school popularity are shaped by the interaction of socio-economic variables, cultural values, and personal goals. Shehzad et al. (2020) further emphasized that when a private school has a strong academic reputation, parents are more likely to send their kids there (Shahzad et al., 2020).

School Quality

School quality is commonly measured by student success rates (Ghosh & Dey 2020). In Pakistan, quality is often associated with private schools, which explains their high demands (Ghosh & Dey 2020). In contrast, a survey, public schools in India found that public schools are in low demand due to poor quality and lack of resources, low accountability and many other social and cultural factors (Sipon, et al., 2020). More broadly, in emerging nations, students from private schools are expected to perform better than those in public institutions (Leroux, 2019). This perception of excellence has turned private education into a highly competitive market, with both advantages and disadvantage for the overall progress of society (Farooqi & Anwar, 2024). School performance and the school environment are consistently highlighted as key indicators of quality (Farooqi & Anwar, 2024; Ghosh & Dey 2020; Leroux, 2019). According to Shahzad et al. (2020), the foundation of strong academic performance lies in cultivating a positive school climate.

Parents' Education Level

Shahzad et al. (2020) noted that parents' socio-economic characteristics influence their perceptions of school and their selection criteria. Among these characteristics, parents' education level plays a significant role in the decision to choose private schools (Din, 2022). According to Davis (2019), both the educational attainment and financial status of parents are strong determinants of school choice. Several studies further indicate that educated parents are more likely than less-educated or uneducated parents to prefer private schools over public sectors school more by educated parents as compared to uneducated or parents with lower education level (Aslam & Kingdon, 2022; Begna, 2022). Similar findings are reported in Rehman et al. (2019) that among other demographics characteristics of parents, their educational level is also one of the significant factor. In Pakistan, the performance of government schools is frequently compared with that of private schools. As Balyan and Khama (2020, p. 34) suggest that like private schools, the government schools should also offer preformance goals and set accountability mechanism for teacher performance. Such comparison reinforces the tendency of educated parents to prefer private schools (Awan & Zia, 2019).

Parents' Income Level

Like education level, parents' income level is also a key determinant of their school choices. According to Peteros, et al. (2022), apart from education level, parents' discontent with specific schools, instructors' qualifications, and school performance, the most significant factors is their income level. Other factors, as Ghosh and Dey (2020) found that low-income parents also consider school quality and learning environment, and thus willing to limit other expenses so as to be able to pay fee for their children's education. However, in the competitive scenario, private schools provide better facilities compared to other schools, which results in the fact that such schools are affordable only by the wealthy members of the society (Ghosh & Dey, 2020). Although there are also low-cost private schools providing better teaching methods to poorer households, there is a concern that these options might lead to inequality (Akhter, 2021, p. 2).

According to Benjamin (2020), a study from Australia indicated that "the majority of parents who do not send their children to a private school are from moderate or low-income families. The degree of income is linked to the employment and has an impact on the school choosing process" (p. 13). According to the study's findings, the majority of high-income households (\$100,000) send their children to private school, whereas the majority of low-income families (\$25,000) send their children to public or other schools

Projected Future Option

Some parents are attracted to well-known schools with hope that their children will be easier admission to prestigious institution in the future. For instance, Zafar et al. (2020), the Guardians School in Pakistan has a significant influence on children's development and future success. Similarly, Baum, et al. (2019) reported parent's value perspective, such as choosing a religious education for their children are also shaped by consideration of future opportunities. Parents who want their children to interact with a particular group of peers may likewise contribute to what is termed 'perceived future options' (Joshi, 2019). In addition, some parents select schools for their children due to psychological, medical, and social reasons (Taylor, 2021).

In Pakistan, schools that follow the British curriculum numerous opportunities because of the advantages associated with strong English language proficiency, which often translates into future prospects regardless of school popularity and school quality. Many students enrolled in private institutions, particularly those pursuing O-Level and A-Level programs (Baliyan & Khama 2020). Therefore, whether or not these considerations are linked to school quality, school popularity, or parent's income level, some

parents make decisions primarily based on future opportunities, treating them as independent factor influencing their choices.

School Proximity

Haque and Akter (2019) highlighted a possible association between students' poor academic performance and the distance of the school from home, a concern also noted by Rehman, et al. (2019). The majority of the pupils, according to the results, must travel a long distance to go to school. The results indicated that most pupils must travel long distances to attend school, as many of their homes are situated far from roads. However, Mousumi and Kusakabe (2022) found no significant correlation between students; mode of transport, household proximity to roads, and academic achievement. In contrast, Mawene and Bal (2018) reported that lengthy commute times, and reduced-after study hours had a significant negative effect on students' earning. School proximity appears to be an even more critical factor for children with disabilities. Moreover, concerns about children's safety and security also influences parents' preference for schools located closer to home (Mawene & Bal 2018)

Conceptual Frameworks of the Study

The conceptual framework for the present study is informed by the **Rational Choice Theory**, which suggests that decisions are made through calculations involving the cost, benefits, and probabilities of success of various options (Bosetti, 2004, p. 388). In the educational context, this theory implies that the quality of children's education is weighed against its financial cost. Empirical studies, (e.g., Akhtar, 2107; Mousomi et al., 2020) have shown that parents' rational decision-making shaped by factors such as school quality, school reputation, perceived future opportunities, proximity, and other social considerations including school selection. The application of this theory in education context is that children's quality education is compared with its cost. Based on these studies the following framework is developed for the present study as shown in figure 1.1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Frame Work of the Study

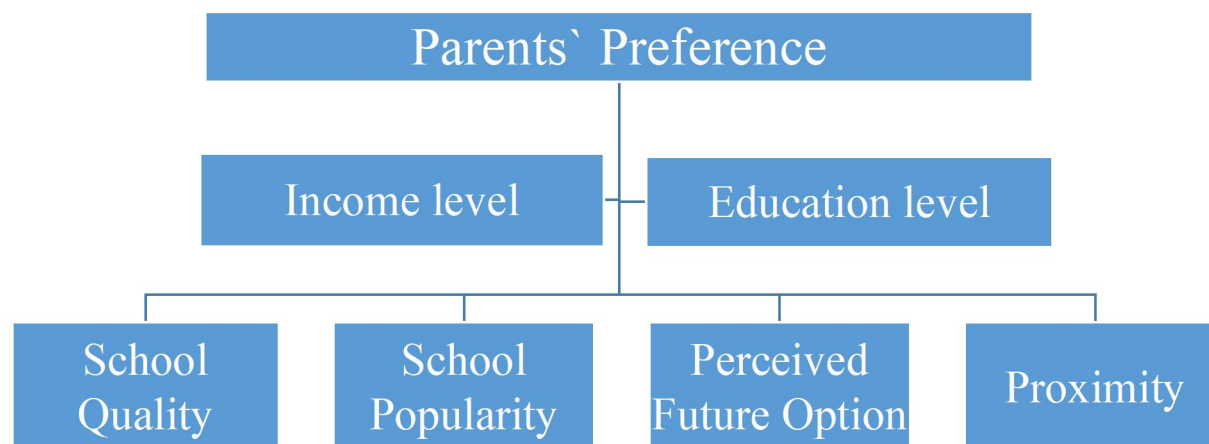


Figure 1 shows the based on prior studies, key factors shaping parents' rational decision-making include school quality, school reputation perceived future options, and proximity, along with broader socio-economic and cultural considerations. In this study, these factor are explored for their relative importance

and in association with parents' income and educational level. This framework will guide the analysis of whether factors identified in other contexts similarly influence school choice in Gilgit-Baltistan. Given the region's unique geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions, it is expected that the relative importance of these predictors may differ from those reported in previous research.

METHODS AND MEASURES

The study employed quantitative survey design. The population included parents who had their children admitted in the private sector schools in district Gilgit. A self-made survey questionnaire was designed to collect data, as there was no appropriate and relevant tool available. The survey's initial component asked participants' demographic questions about their income, education level, as a measure of their socioeconomic status. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of statements for the respondent to rate each item from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The theoretical framework was used as a guideline to develop the questionnaire. Data were analyzed in SPSS v-26 (trial). The review of literature helped in ensuring the construct and the content validity, and while for face validity the instrument of the study was validated by seeking two field experts' feedback who were PhDs, one was an Associate professor from economics department. Another was from Education department, who appreciated the questionnaire and also pointed out some language errors in the questionnaire, which were corrected. Pilot testing sample include 30 parents for private schools (other than the main study sample). Cronbach's alpha reliability value was used to check the reliability of the scales. Each dimension showed the acceptable value of Cronbach's Alpha .7 values. All ethical considerations suggested under the KIU research ethics guidelines, were used. During data collection and reporting of results, participants, privacy, right to withdraw and voluntarily participate was discussed.

FINDINGS

An initial analysis of frequencies showed that there were 48 females and 51 males. One questionnaire was not properly filled, which was discarded. Fifty-seven respondents held an MA or M.Sc. Only seven respondents reported having an income below Rs. 30,000, whereas the largest number of respondents (36) had income more than Rs. 1 lac. The skewness values in all the data sets indicated high negative skewness. The Shapiro-Wilk test showed that all the set of data violated the assumption of normality ($P > .05$). Moreover, *School Quality* had the highest mean value i.e. 24.75, *Projected Future Option* had a mean value of 21.19 *School Popularity* with the mean value of 16.07 and school proximity had lowest rating with the mean value of 7.11. The mean values show the relative level of each factor's contribution to the parents' decision making of the school choice. For construct validity, factor analysis was run on SPSS. The components or variables explained a significant amount of the variation in the data (67%). When the eigenvalues of all four variables—school proximity, perceived future choice, school quality, and school popularity—are larger than 1.

Difference between Levels of Preferences

One of the objectives of the study was to assess the level of influence of each factor, in terms of how parents rated the factors as their choices. The one way repeated ANOVA test was used to compare the difference between the factors of school preference. Results are shown in Table 1

Table 1: Variations Across levels

<i>Multivariate Tests^a</i>						
<i>Effect</i>		<i>Value</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Error df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Factors	Pillai's Trace	.94	511.613 ^b	.00	97.00	.00
	Wilks' Lambda	.05	511.613 ^b	.00	97.00	.00
	Hotelling's Trace	15.82	511.613 ^b	.00	97.00	.00

Roy's LargestRoot	15.82	511.613 ^b	.00	97.00	.00
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a. Design: Intercept

Within Subjects Design: Choice

b. Exact statistic

Results shown in Table 1 revealed that the Wilks' Lambda value was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that there is a significant difference in the four dimensions. However, to assess the differences in the factors, the Paired-sample t-test was used for clearer and better interpretations. This is shown in Table 2

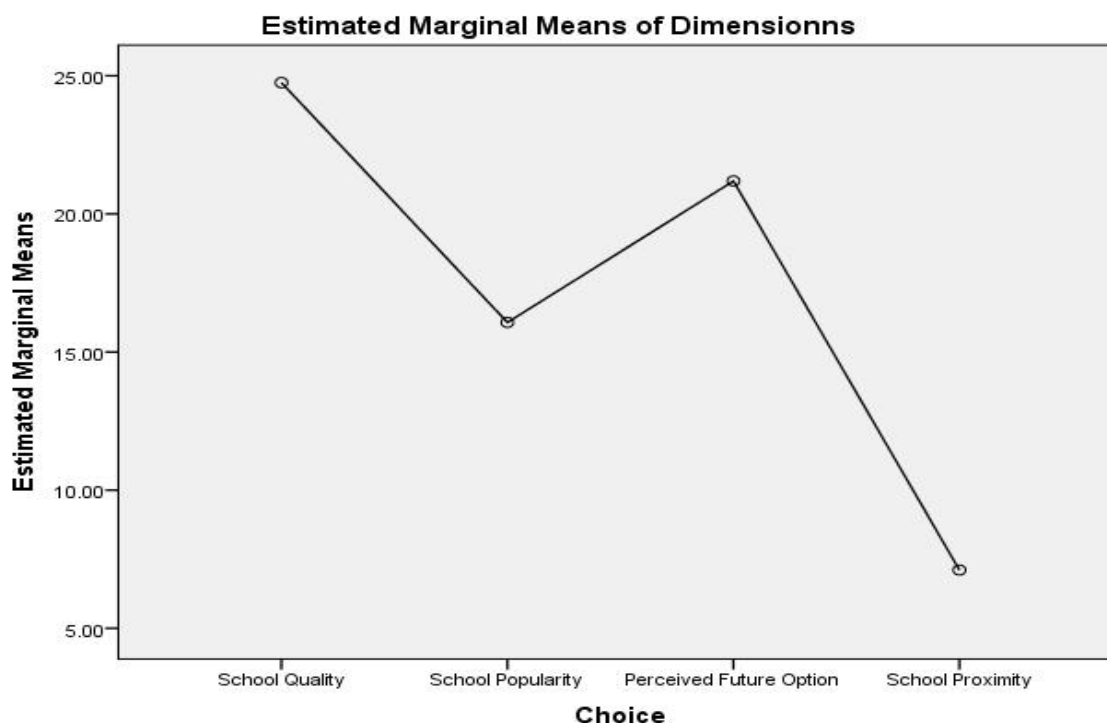
Table 2: Paired Wise Comparison between Dimensions

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	SD	T	Df	Sig.
Pair 1	SQ	24.70	99	3.51	26.861	98	.000
	SP	16.03	99	2.82			
Pair 2	SQ	24.69	99	3.52	13.329	98	.000
	PFO	21.15	99	3.15			
Pair 3	SQ	24.70	99	3.52	38.632	98	.000
	SP	7.08	99	2.68			
Pair 4	SP	16.03	99	2.82	-16.109	98	.000
	PFO	21.15	99	3.15			
Pair 5	SP	16.03	99	2.82	23.723	98	.000
	S. Prox.	7.08	99	2.69			
Pair 6	PFO	21.15	99	3.15	32.699	98	.000
	S. Prox	7.08	99	2.69			

Table 2 shows that all the dimensions significantly differed from each other. However, SQ (School Quality) and PFO (Projected Future Options) mean difference was comparatively less than the difference between SQ (School Quality) and SP (School Proximity). Furthermore, it can also be seen that highest difference is between SQ and SP while the lowest difference is between SP and PFO. From the mean values it can be noted that the SQ received the highest rating, followed by *Projected Future* option, *School Popularity*, and *School Proximity*. Figure 1, further gives an eyeball view of the differences.

Figure 4.5 Mean Plot for Dimensions



Comparison between Demographics on Total Preferences

Effects of qualification

The overall score, which is the sum of the four dimensions, showed a normal distribution even though each dimension set. Therefore, parametric tests of repeated measure ANOVA and One Way ANOVA were employed for the overall analysis.

Table 3: Total Preference and Qualification

	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between Groups	541.14	4	135.28	.97	.10
Within Groups	6513.41	95	68.56		
Total	7054.56	99			

Table 3 shows total preference score versus qualification. The output of the result showed that there is no significant difference between qualification on the overall score of preferences ($p > .05$ level: $F = 1.06$, $p = .37$).

Impact of income on total Preference

The question whether parents' income level had any effect on parents' overall rating of the factors, the One-Way Anova was run again with Income levels. Results of the analysis can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 Differences Based on Income

	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between Groups	283.11	5	56.62	78	.56
Within Groups	6771.45	4	72.03		

Total	7054.56	9
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Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference between income on the overall score of preferences ($p > .05$ level: $F = .78$, $p = .56$). Therefore, it was concluded that parents' education level had not effect on how parents perceive of factors influencing their school selection, in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan.

DISCUSSION

Parental preferences at private schools in District Gilgit were the subject of this study that produced notable results. The findings show that among the several important factors School Quality, was the most rated and preferred factor. Gomendio (2021) is of the view that selecting the appropriate school is crucial for leading towards future academic success of children. The study's finding that the most highly regarded component is school quality. This finding is in line with other studies as Zafar et al. (2020) found that a private school that has a strong academic reputation attract parents. The least influential factor was the proximity to the school. This shows that although parents think that the school's location is a big deal, however, the prefer quality over school-proximity. Rehman et al., (2019) looked into the possibility of parents selecting the ideal school for their children. The results showed that most parents put their children's long-term success ahead of everything else. Parents seem to be aware that quality education can ensure that long term success. Unlike previous studies that show a significant positive impact of income (Akhter, 2021; Ghosh & Dey, 2020), Peteros, et al., 2022), the current study found no significant effect of parental income on their school preference. Similarly, there was no significant effect of parental qualification on parents' school preference. The findings reveal that in the context of the Gilgit-Baltistan the socio-economic factors are less influential as compared to the ones found in other studies. There appeared to be no significant gap between the rich and the poor as in other parts of Pakistan. Similarly, parents' qualification also showed no effect on their overall rating of factors.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study was guided by research objectives. The first objective was to assess the level of school quality, popularity, future option and proximity as parents' preference-influencing key factors in private schools of District Gilgit. The study concluded that the most important factor that influences parents' ratings of various factors affecting their school selection is School Quality. Projected Future Option was second most influential factor followed by School Popularity, and School Proximity. However, the differences between these factors should be interpreted cautiously as the School Popularity and School Quality had a medium level positive and significant correlation. Hence these two factors need to be understood in connection with one another. The remaining factors were not too highly correlated which was also confirmed in the initial factor analysis. The last objective was to examine the effect of the demographic variables such as education and income level of parents on school preferences. No significant effects of Income and Qualification was found. The study has implications for educational policy and practice as well as useful insights into the variables influencing parents' preferences in District Gilgit private schools. The study findings may be primarily useful for private schools but public schools may also find useful to notice the factors that influence parents' preference for school their kids in the content of GB, Pakistan. The findings indicate that parents are also forced to consider these challenging factors in the competitive scenario of private schools, as they are disappointed from the quality education in the public sector.

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