School Choice Autonomy- A Source of Generating Inequities in Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan comprises of a complex and chaotic society divided into various socio-economic strata. These strata are characterized in terms of their access to the resources and social mobility. Obviously rich strata are the privileged ones who have access and opportunities to the best resources and have social mobility. Lower classes have less opportunity to compete with the upper strata. The average class keeps struggling to attain their position in the society. This phenomenon has deep implications in parents' school choice for their children, more specifically in a society where they have free choice to select school of their choice. This is in contrast to Education system of Europe and America, where governments exert influence on parents' school choice to reduce inequities in the society. The study, thus, explores practices, actions and inclinations of parents' school choice for their children with respect to their social strata. The study endeavors to explain how and what various parents of different cultural capital look for while preferring one school to other. Exploratory design was used for the study. A sample of twenty-nine parents, fifteen from urban and fourteen from rural areas of Sargodha district was purposively selected and interviewed. Qualitative data were analyzed to get appropriate patterns of parents' school choice for their children. Overall, private schools are preferred over public schools due to the stigma attached to the public schools for not providing quality educational atmosphere and the parents' concerns for safety, security, caring atmosphere and good teachers with whom children feel comfort. As government plays no significant role in school choice for children, this creates segregation among students and generates inequities.

Keywords: Parents, School choice, Equity, Students

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Introduction

Pakistan comprises a complex and chaotic society divided into various socio-economic strata of rich, average and poor classes. These strata are characterized in terms of their access to the resources and social mobility. Obviously, classes belonging to rich strata are the most privileged ones who have access and opportunities to the best resources and ultimately climb up the ladder of social mobility. Poor classes having less access and opportunities lack far behind to compete with the upper strata and hence are left behind in all walks of life. The average class keeps getting inspired from rich and keeps struggling to attain their position in the society. This phenomenon has deep implications in parents' school choice for their children, more specifically in a society where parents have free choice to select any school of their choice. This is in contrast to schooling system of Europe and America, where governments exert influence on parents' school choice to reduce inequities in the society.

Coleman (1988) explained that parents' school choice is a component of a communal process of prominent properties of societal class and networking of social interaction. According to Smrekar and Goldring (1999), parents are constrained in their capacity to choose best school whose weak networking of valuable information about option of school does not provide access to suitable information regarding option of school choice. Similarly, Fung and Lam (2011) elaborated that school choice is a concern that has been paying attention in the education area and school choice gives parents superior power over their children's education. Parents are important stakeholders in the nurture of their children. According to Bosetti (2007), school choice and parent self-efficiency in part stem from dissatisfaction with comprehensive schools, superficial low educational values in public schools, and poor student performance among minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Parental school choice has become attractive area and now it is not a new trend. No doubt, it has attained its place in education management in the last three decades. Studies on parental school choice have not been confined to parent rights in education. For example, Fung and Lam (2011) has found that school choice increases parents' happiness and satisfaction and students' achievement. Parents are more important stakeholder in choice of school for children. According to Reich (2008), permitting parents to manage how their children are educated is the right of parents in a self-governing society. Ball (2003) has explained that parent's school choice and competition of market improve consumer-provider relationship between parents and schools, replacing it with a mutual partnership. Lubienski (2008) argued that parents look for a school that serves the values in accordance with the values at home. About school choice Cohen & Farrar (1995) explained that choice strengthens voices of parents and fulfills family's desire to impart the best education to their children. Weidner and Herrington's (2006) study found that decision of parents to choose school is based on an academic quality of school, quality of teachers, special education system, syllabus, class size, performance of school, students' achievements, financial aid, values, and

safety of school. Proponents of school choice argue that parents have the right to educate their children in accordance with their life-pattern and values. "Education is a natural extension of child rearing preferences; therefore, parents should be able to choose schools consistent with these preferences" (Levin, 2000, p. 7).

Parents wish to get enrolled their children in a better school that would help children to excel academically and to become productive citizen. However, there are financial constraints that consequently compel and perpetuate parents to select the right and proper school for children. While choosing appropriate school for children, parents keep in mind proximity or ease of travel, location of school from home, family or friends opinion, academic standards, general impression of the school, facilities, religious activities at schools, pre-school's childcare and curricular activities etc. According to Bempechat (1992), parents who are involved in choosing school for their children also tend to bring in good attitudes toward the teachers who teach the children. Kobayashi (2009) argued that choice in Paris (France) is not only determined by the social categories of parents but also by the result of the balance of force among different motivations, children and parents' previous school experience, their social representations, their expectations, the financial and geographical constraints, etc.

Excellent school choices enhance the students' satisfaction and performance. Wise & Darling-Hammond (1995) have explained that school choice enables parents to provide their children good education potential. Houston (2004) argued that parents' true school choice made them more liable to devote themselves in their children's learning. Lubienski (2008) has explained that parent's primary school's choice decision is based on their children strengths and weaknesses, family values, parents' purview, parents' right to choose right school for their children. School choice behavior can be selected through demand side factors and supply side components or both. The selection is based on child specific behavior and characteristics like gender, age and intelligence, and also parents' specific characteristics in term of education and awareness as well as information through colleagues and market. Similarly, house-hold specification characteristic like income and wealth are also considered in this regard. Supply side factors include school specific characteristics like school management, quality, medium of instructions, private or public, school distance for home to school, co-education school or single sex school etc. Smrerkar and Goldring (1999) elaborated that school choice revitalizes public education through the establishment of private schools as an alternative source, that enhancing parents' involvement in choice and satisfaction, sense of community and resulting in enhancing students' achievement, and improved learning. Rationale theory choice explains more choice of school plans. For example, the theory proposes that parents are the main focusing agent for decision of school with respect to success and benefit. Ball (2003) has explicated that parent's school choice is a part of societal process which was influenced by different features and properties of social class and network of social relationships. Parents rely on their personal values, feeling and collect information from their social and

professional network to make decision about children education. According to Smrekar and Goldring (1999), parents who do not have extended network, do not access to get information from different people and it is hard collect valuable information regarding option of school choice. The involvement of parents in school is fruitful. In this regard, Henderson (1988) explicates that schools which favor involvement perform better as compared to those schools which do not. Moreover, Rose and Elicker (2010) concluded that there is a much gap between parental likings and the actual choices

Parents are differing in beliefs regarding how children should be treated that constitutes an ideal learning environment. The choice can be very effective and beneficial when child gets outstanding learning and outstanding school with reasonable money. According to Hill (2006), parents who are inexperienced and less privilege have scarcity of information about schools and they do not know how to make a good choice. According to Theobald (2005), literature indicates that parents choose conveniently located schools. Hastings, Justine, Thomas, Kane, and Staiger (2005) found that parents prefer schools which are close to home rather than high academic achievement. OECD (1994) reported that parents of middle class and in a specified profession paid more attention to schools' academic prestige and whether school could help improve students' academic performance. Riley and Glass (2002) indicate that poor parents cannot afford good school but they prefer public schools. Rose and Elicker (2010) found that many families spend their income on childcare which is not their first fondness. Barbarin, McCandies, Early, Clifford, Bryant, and Burchinal (2006) explained that parents whose income is high are more likely to spend on developmental aspect of child.

Manage school choice to avoid segregation and increased inequities providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socio economic background and generate greater inequities across education systems. Choice programmes can be designed and managed to balance choice while limiting its negative impact on equity. There are different options possible: introducing controlled choice schemes can combine parental choice and ensure a more diverse distribution of students. In addition, to ensure balance, incentives to make disadvantaged students attractive to quality education, school selection mechanisms, vouchers or tax credits can be alternative options. Policies are also required to improve disadvantaged families' access to information about schools and to support them in making informed choices.

Parental Choice of Schooling in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the private schools started to emerge from 1970 but the support of government to strengthen private sector started in 1990 with the formation of national and provincial level education foundation. The growth of private schools was no more an urban best phenomenon after denationalization in Pakistan. The school was also rapidly increasing and starts spreading in rural areas. Parents also check school quality, infrastructure and infer quality differences between schools from the fees which

responded to predictable way. Over the past some years, researches show that private schools system and provision of education has become an excellent and significant phenomenon in Pakistan both in rural and urban area. The main factor in fast growth of private educational institution in Pakistan is quality of education and learning. The research of Andrabi, Das and Khwaja (2002) indicate that if quality is low in some private school, it also needs to be given in society for low income people. Parents can differentiate between schools through the range of fees, quality of teaching and predictable way to school inputs. Parental choices are also affected on many other factors as well as personal references, school results, marketing of school, publicity, annual examination result and quality. In some instances, if school inputs are very high and quality is also very excellent but some time parents observed school building and low students-teacher ratio. According to Bengali (1999), education policies in Pakistan have intervened private provision.

Rationale, Research Problem and Research Questions

For the last two or three decades, forces to weaken public schools in Pakistan are getting strength and parents are getting more concern towards opting private schools on the basis of their assessment. Parents have a lot of concerns when choosing schools for children. Parents consider academic standards, ease of travel, facilities, curricular activities, tuition fee etc., while selecting schools. Considering the concerns of parents in opting schools for children, the study intends to explore parental choice of primary schools to get insight about how and what parents look for while preferring one school to other. This study also takes into account the parents' participation to support academically to their children in schools. The intended study identifies factors influencing parental school choice, assess views of parents' school choice for children, gets insight about how and what parents look for while opting school, explain parental participation to support the children academically. The study addresses following questions: (1) what factors influence parents to choose school for their children? (2) How do parents think of public and private schools while making decision to choose schools for their children?

Methodology

The study functions under the umbrella of qualitative approach where interviews were considered as the most appropriate technique to get insight of school choice from respondents. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2012), qualitative research is based on a more holistic view and it is not about answering questions such as "to what extent" or "how well" something is done. The study followed exploratory design to explore parent's practices of choosing schools with respect to their cultural capital and for this purpose open-ended questions in interviews were used. Parents who have enrolled their children in rural and urban public and private primary schools of Sargodha division were population of the study. It was assumed that parents understand the dynamics under

which they reach to decision while choosing one school over the other. A sample of twenty-nine parents of Sargodha district from both rural and urban areas was purposively selected from the population after taking into account their interest to willingly respond on the questions. The place of interviews was suggested by the parents. So, researchers conducted interviews either in parents' drawing room where both parents i.e. father and mother of a student were present or sometimes either one of them was available for interview. The time of each interview varied depending on the nature of the person interviewed as some parents were more vocal as compared to the others. The interviews lasted from 35 minutes to 1 hour in general. Researchers stopped to conduct further interviews when information started to repeat and it was the indication of data saturation. Thus, the data were confined to twenty-nine parents only and due to this saturation of the data the decision was changed to collect further information from rest of the parents chosen earlier for data collection. In total, data were collected from fifteen parents whose children enrolled in urban schools and fourteen parents whose children were enrolled in rural schools. During data collection process, it was observed that some parents at onset of interview were hesitant but later they were relaxed. Researchers tried to include parents with varied cultural capital. For example, socio-economic status, parents' education and nature of job etc of various parents included in the sample were different from each other. The sample consisted of both type of parents who send their children in private and public schools to explore patterns behind their school choice and to explore whether school choice autonomy is better in the aspect that does not link to inequities in education.

Experts' opinion was sought on the questions included in the interview to ensure the validity. Similarly, interviews were piloted to five parents before collecting final data. This step provided twofold benefit to researchers. In the first form, it brought clarify in screening parents and secondly it made the consistency in the patterns of information shared by the parents certain. Questions asked in interviews were flexible in structure i.e., if parents provided extra but relevant information to the purpose, they have not been interrupted. Researchers developed question based on global literature reviewed and trends and tendency of regional and national circumstances related to choose of school. The interview comprised of fourteen questions, related to basic information of parents and children, reasons concerning the idea to get admission in particular school, feelings of parents concerning school, satisfaction on teaching quality, curriculum, learning environment, teaching facilities, and medium of instruction used in schools. The researchers visited different areas and places to conduct interviews. Throughout the course of conducting interview the researchers introduced himself, introduced the topic and started formal interview and wrote some views of parents about school choice and also recorded interviews with the permission of parents and saved for further procedure. Finally, the researchers could be able to conduct 29 interviews of parents living in different places conveniently but purposively. Parents expressed themselves in Punjabi and Urdu language because they were comfortable to express themselves in mother

tongue or in national language. When all the interviews were transcribed, then these interviews were translated into English. The translated material and content were further corrected and validated by English Language teacher to keep the data as original as it was in Urdu language.

Data Analysis

According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003), qualitative data helps to better understand the complexities of a phenomenon and an issue that is being explored. Data were analyzed by following Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) approach of qualitative data analysis. Researchers transcribed the recorded interviews and arranged the text of transcribed interviews sequentially based on questions included in the interview. Texts of transcribed interviews were split into codes, categories, sub-themes and themes. According to Saldana (2009), the researchers coded data to identify regular patterns or general themes. Taylor-Powell (2003) explained that all data were required to bring order and understanding for creativeness, order, discipline and organization. Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the "bottom-up," by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2007, p. 38-39). This inductive process makes researchers to continue to work between the extremes of text until the emergence of exclusive themes. Interactive collaboration with participants also facilitates the process. Researchers identified themes and under each emerged title, different categories were also identified. To avoid chances of overlapping among themes and categories many readings were conducted of the transcribed text. It was taken into account that parents often responded multiple times under the same category or under different categories. In such cases, parents' expressions were placed under relevant categories earlier established. Each parent was assigned with a specific identity code. The questions asked to parents in interviews were open-ended. The assigned codes represent the major category of the text in which parents reflected. The digit represents parents' frequency response on the issue. For example, the code PG4 i.e., parent who gathered information to choose schools while talking to relatives, friends, neighours etc., represents information on which four parents reflected. Similarly, code PW5 represents the issue relevant to the schools which are welcomed and reflected by five parents. In this way all the interviews' text was coded. Consistency in elaborative responses of parents on similar issue also indicates the reliability of analysis. Transcription of interviews was completed in Microsoft Office Word. Themes and categories which are emerged from transcribed text of interviews were:

1. On the grapevine
2. What curriculum exists in school
3. Welcoming schools
4. School access
5. Money matters

6.   Private versus public schools

The details of pictorial reflection of codes, sub-categories, categories, sub-themes under the themes "grapevine information or knowledge" and "preference of innovative curriculum" are given below:

1.   On the Grapevine

Parents rely on the information got through the grapevine. To choose school, most parents hear from other people about schools informally. Parents discuss with friends, colleagues and neighbors and other person of community. Parents also consider their previous experiences as well. For uneducated parents, it is difficult to understand the better choice and they do not look for better school' result. For example, the parent interviewed expressed, "… meeting with friends is a good tool to get information…" (PG1). Parents also decide to finalize school when other parents seem satisfied and their child feels good and goes to school happily. Also, Parents look for security as well. A parent explained during the interview, "… now-a-days, you know, a good security system is important…" (PG5). Similarly, another parent expressed his views regarding choice of school in these words: "we seek information of different schools through many sources like friends regarding better management, qualified staff, class size, school location and above all results of school" (PG4). Parents also ask through "on the grapevine" regarding fee-package. A parent explained "sometimes I feel school is not good but when I look at my pocket I become helpless to choose the same school… the school building is not fully furnished but I have to send my children in the school" (PG15).
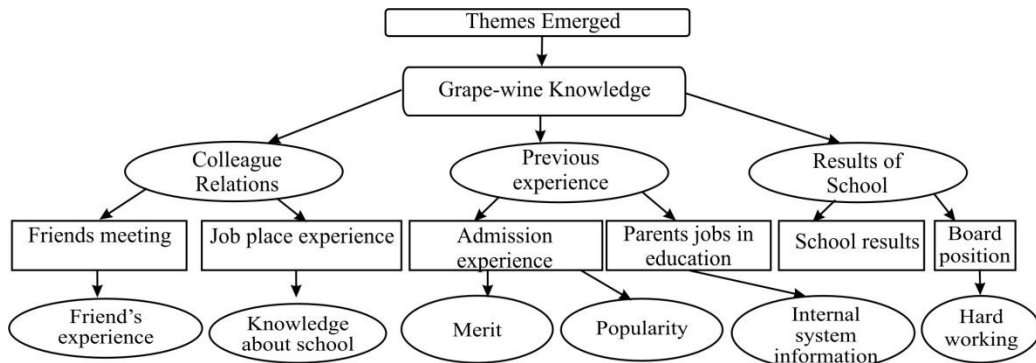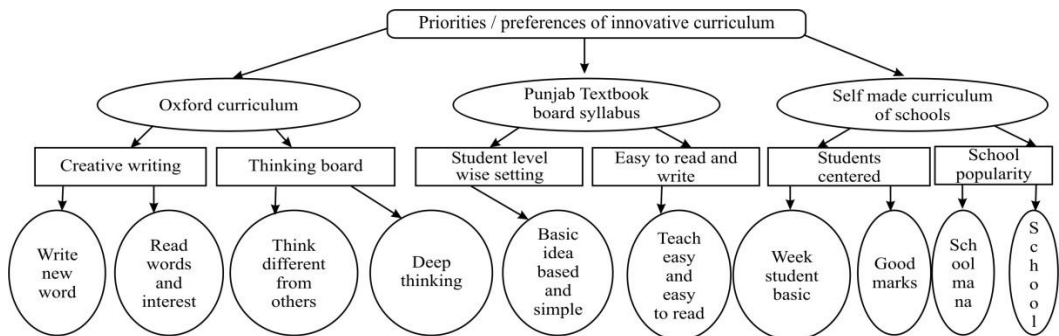
Figure 1: *Pictorial reflections of subthemes under the themes "grapevine knowledge" and "what curriculum exists in schools?"*

2.   *What curriculum exists in school?*

The second theme we traced during qualitative analysis is the preference of innovative curriculum. This is more important for parents in selection of school for their children. Most of the parents interviewed seemed interested to get information of curriculum and visit different schools before decision making. A parent showed satisfaction over choice of school in her words "I fully satisfied with the curriculum that is the best for children's concepts" (PC1). Mostly parent preferred activity based curriculum in schools. A parent argued "oxford syllabus, I think, should be used which is best for students learning as compared to others … I am satisfied because concepts of student are more important as compared to marks" (PC2). Another parent stressed the importance of curriculum for school choice as "curriculum used in my children's school is of oxford…this is activity based hence I am satisfied and my children concepts are good" (PC13). Similarly, a parent reflected "… I want a good learning environment at school, and syllabus should contain Islamic values" (PC14). Mostly parents considered it worthwhile when private schools opt for oxford curriculum that is best for students learning. To choose schools, parents prefer curriculum that facilitates in conceptual understanding. Some parents focus on curriculum that includes children's regional experiences. For example, a parent elaborated "curriculum of that school is interesting because of students' personal experiences, I think it is developed by the institution itself" (PC3). Most of the parents want reading and writing activities in the curriculum. The other parent explained "we were conscious about curriculum when we decided to choose school for our children… it should be good … children should be able to write particularly creative…" (PC6). For parents, getting good marks is of prime importance for students learning. Record of school should be good as far as results are concerned. Parents are satisfied and reflected as "our children get good marks in examination and I am happy from schools" (PC8). Similarly, parents considered the repute of the school significant along with its result. For example, a parent reflected "… school repute is good and the results are better that is why I have enrolled my child in this school" (PC10)

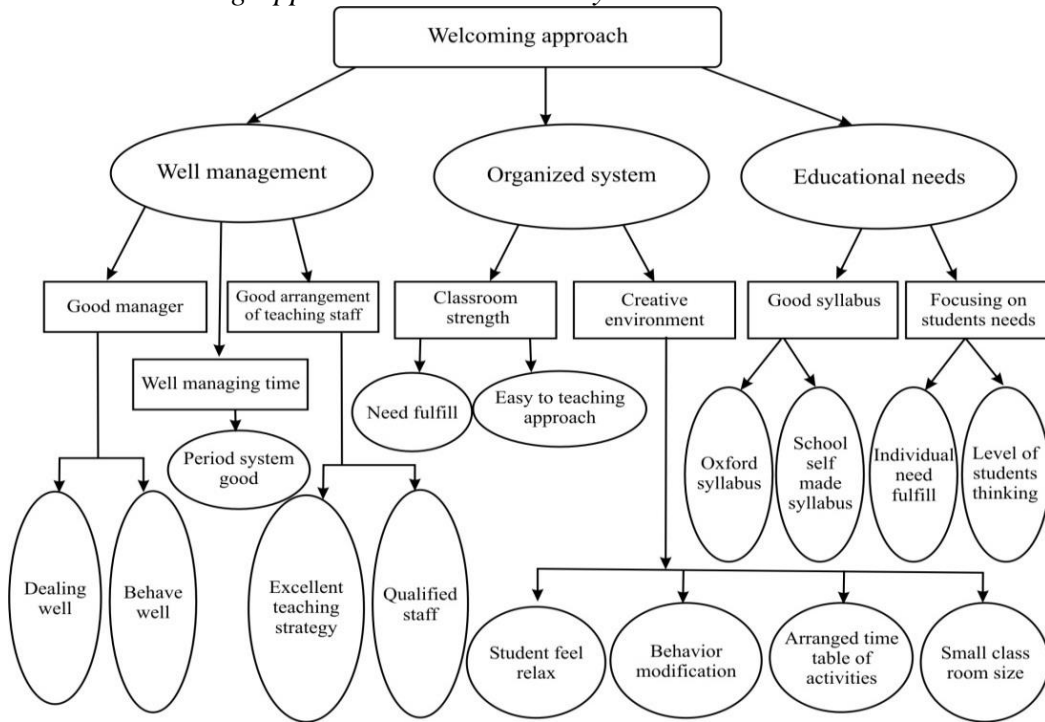*3.   Welcoming Approach and Accessibility*

Figure 2: *The details of pictorial reflection of codes, sub-categories, categories, sub-themes under the theme "welcoming schools"*

This is about the parents' feelings about school. How do schools welcome parents and children? How do management system, school administration and school leadership greet parents? Parents visit schools to observe management and administrative system to make a choice for their children's first entry in school. Parents' satisfaction of school management consequentially leads them to school selection. A teacher who have visited and observed the classroom explained: "… on visiting schools, I suppose…, I see good qualities of personnel involved in management…" (PW5). In the same context, another parent who also visited school and classroom elaborated "… school have designed and decorated classroom with colorful chairs and tables for play-group children…it seems us very attractive… class teacher with teaching-assistant was present… students were doing different task" (PW5). Similarly, a parent reflected "… no extra coaching needed for our children… they go to school happily and do their home-work daily with keen interest" (PW1). "Excellently fulfil educational needs and concept according to level of student and class. "We visited and observed schools where classes are well manageable…we want this for our children" (PW11). Parents also voiced as "…school contains sixteen

students per class… not more than that… that's good school but some feel that fee package is high …" (PW14). A parent who chose public school for her children reasoned: "…now-a-days I managed better school with proper classrooms, affordable fee and above all teachers are good…" (PW14). Another teacher declared his choice good because the school is welcoming: "…less number of students in class, well learning environment …good results… qualified staff… teaching facilities and moderate fee packages…" (PW18).

Parents choose schools which are easily accessible with respect to location and ease of traveling. Parents are satisfied if schools are safe and provide healthy and rich environment for children. A Parent expressed as "…less number of students and easily approached school… I am satisfied" (PA5). Another parent explained as "…the schools is near to our house and no transport is required…we save money and also … I go to job and my child go to school alone without any fear" (PA14). The reflections converge towards conclusion that parents prefer schools in terms of location and access.
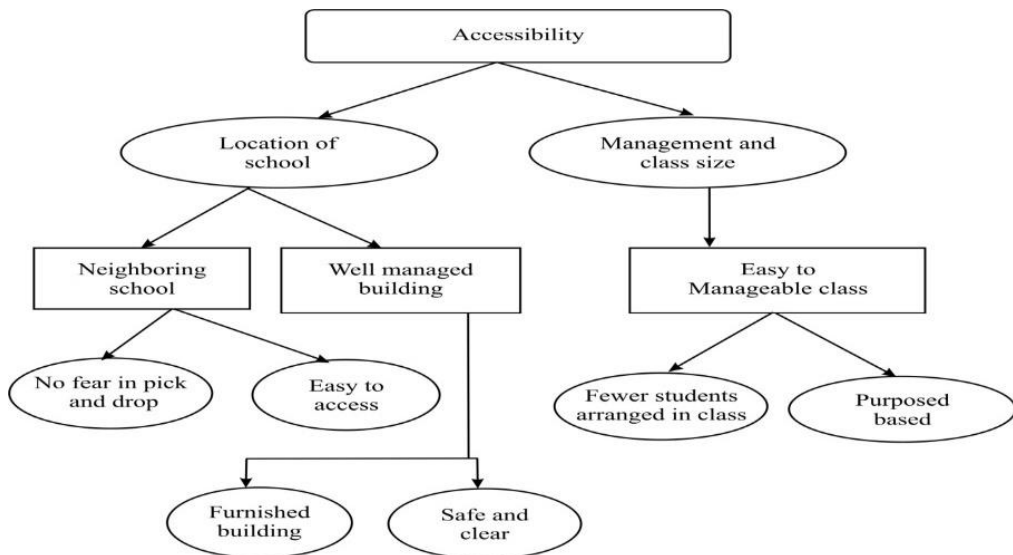

Figure 3: *Pictorial reflection of sub-themes under the theme "location and accessibility"*

4.   *Money Matters*

Money is a significant factor in school choice. Parents' autonomy seems less autonomous rather bound with respect to their cultural capital. The choice depends on parents' capacity for fee affordability. "…we cannot afford high fee…our children go to public school" (P4). Another parent explained "…in this school I can pay fee easily" (PM9). Parents choose school that provides better facilities and fewer fee packages. A parent reflected "…being an employee of this school I prefer to choose this school…here

is qualified staff, proper campus for children, and fee is low because of concession…I am fully satisfied" (PM11). Similarly, another parent expressed "I couldn't continue previous school that was very expensive and … due to some financial problem… I choose this school because of low fee…" (PM15). The same parent continues to explain "…I want to continue children further education in this school as I have shifted in this city…I am not fully satisfied but you know… here lays financial constraints… although school building is not fully furnished and not safe…" (PM15). "…good result, qualified staff, better system, good curriculum, physical facilities, moderate fee packages all these things are required in schools, I think…" (PM18), a parent reflected.
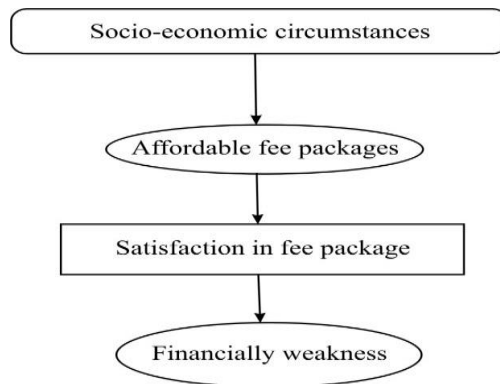
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Figure 4: *Pictorial reflection of sub-themes under the theme "money matters"*

5.   *Private versus public schools*

Now-a-days, almost all parents prefer private over public schools. The trends seem to be emerged and reached to its peak. Public schools have been weakening for two to three decades. Private schools emerged on the basis of quality. Not only parents assume that private schools are better in quality but under social pressure parents are compelled to choose private schools for their children as they feel inferior if they reflect that their children are going to public schools. A parent expressed "… I prefer private school due to well learning environment and management…" (PP2). Another parent explained the reason to choose private school as "… I feel fear in Army Public School due to some security reason …" (PP1). Parents do not prefer public school because of resources unavailability. According to a parent "I choose private school but I also prefer army school for better students learning and education … high qualified teachers are available in public schools but all other resources are not available…" (PP5). Another parent argued "…in public schools there are no facilities and poor learning environment and also classrooms are not available…" (PP3). "I chose private schools…public schools are poorly managed…" (PP4). Parents prefer private over public schools on basis of various factors like quality learning, organized school system, facilities available, management, educational environment, parent-teacher meetings, qualified staff, students' needs

fulfilments, good syllabus, well managed and safe building, security system. Parents prefer public over private schools due to affordable fee, good reading and writing skill practices, qualified staff and sometimes wider and organized buildings.
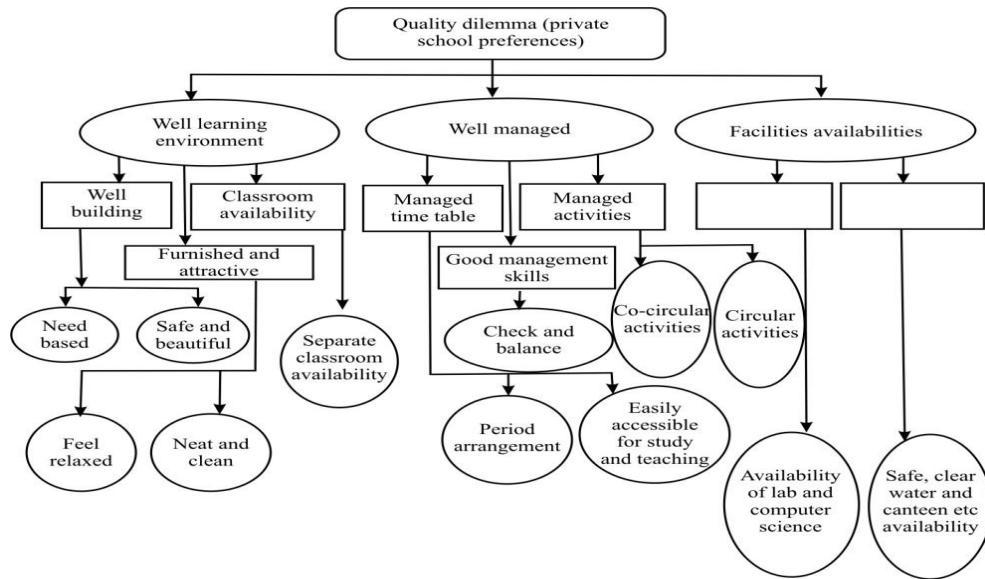

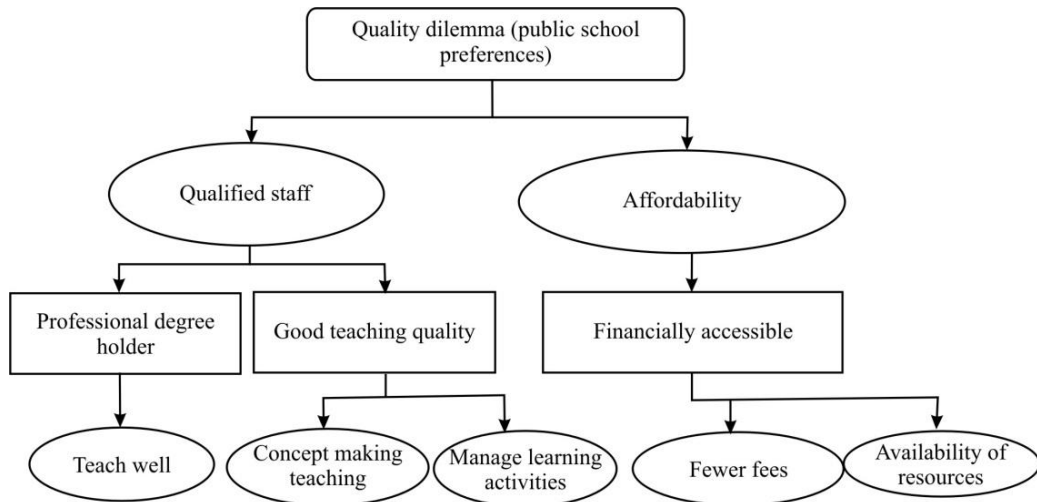Figure 4(a): *Pictorial reflection of sub-themes under the theme "private versus public schools"*

Figure 4(b): *Pictorial reflection of sub-themes under the theme "private versus public schools"*

Discussion and Conclusion

The study conducted indicates that parents choose schools in accordance with their social category they have in the society. Similarly, Kobayashi (2009) concluded in her study that choice is not only determined by the social categories of parents but also by the result of the balance of force among different motivations, children and parents' previous school experience, their social representations, their expectations, the financial and geographical constraints, etc. The study also indicates the importance of curriculum, pedagogy, achievements of students and school environment as performance indicators for parents that affect school choice. In the same way, OECD (1994) reported that parents in particular profession and average class parents paid much attention in choice of school and check school academic performance whether school help the children in achieving quality education? Safety is another factor, particularly in the country where terrorism activities exist, sans doubt; parents have more conscious about the safety of their children.

Parents always try to get enrolled their children in a better school that would help children to excel academically so that they may become a productive and active citizen. However, parents' affordability in terms of tuition fee becomes a barrier that consequently compels and perpetuates them to select appropriate school in accordance with their aspiration for their children. In addition, parents consider proximity or ease of travel, location of school from home, family or friends opinion, academic standards, general impression of the school, facilities, religious activities at schools, pre-school's childcare and curricular activities etc. Parents keep in view their own socio-economic condition as well as that of school's fee. Parents are also found to incline towards religious values while choosing school for their children. Parents' school choice is also based on school distance and location. In this study none of the parents reflected about the duration or length of time that children spend in schools. School's resources and facilities are important for parents. The study also reflects whether schools are welcoming in terms of fulfilling educational needs or not. The study unfolds that parents' cultural capital restrains their opportunities to choose desired school for their children. Their access to resources and social mobility are conditioned to their circumstances and hence to their children. Parents who are well off are concerned with the location, management and the environment provided in schools. Overall, private schools are preferred over public schools due to the stigma attached to the public schools for not providing quality educational atmosphere and the parents' concerns for safety, security, caring atmosphere and good teachers with whom children feel comfort. The study also reveals that parents are entirely autonomous in school choice albeit conditioned to respective cultural capital or social class strata. As government plays no significant role in school choice for children, this creates segregation among students and generates inequities. The OECD (2012) also declared that parental school choice independence can result in segregating students by ability; socio-economic background can generate greater inequities across education systems. The study recommends that there is a dire need to improve the

performance of public schools so that parents show confidence for their children's admission to the public schools, and at the same time, school choice be addressed at policy level and strategies be developed through which segregation and increasing inequities could be lessened among students of various classes in Pakistan.

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