

Understanding Parents' decision Process in Selecting K-12 Schools for their Children in India

¹Abhijeet Wairagade,² Dr. Abhishek Mukherjee

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, School of Business, Dr Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune

²Assistant Professor, School of Business, Dr Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune

Abstract

There is an increased demand for international schools in India as it provides a global perspective by incorporating international standards and best practices of teaching and learning. These schools have international recognition across the world and their focus is more on the holistic development of students and their linguistic skills to prepare students for higher education by supporting them with career Counselling Guidance & University Placements platform. With this, parents must select the right international school as it directly impacts their child's education journey and future opportunities. This article investigates the parents' decision-making process journey and crucial factors that guide their choices for finalizing the K-12 school.

Keywords: International school, decision-making process, parents, curriculum, language options, accreditation, facilities, location, cost, peer recommendations, school reputation, parent involvement

This article highlights parents' decision-making process in selecting K-12 schools for their kids. Due to the diverse curriculum, global exposure and better opportunities, International K-12 Schools have gained popularity in India. There are many international schools and selecting the best out of the same is a very complex task. Parents take into account a wide array of factors when making decisions. This article is an attempt to highlight and analyze these factors that shape parents' decisions. It will also help school management to have a better understanding of this process to meet the parents' expectations and the holistic development of the students.

Literature Review

The papers collectively provide insights into the decision-making process of parents when selecting K-12 schools in India. (Lohan et al., 2020) found that millennial urban Indian parents prioritize the quality and reputation of schools, as well as overall infrastructure, while tuition fees and location were less important factors. (Ibrahim et al., 2014) highlighted that parents in Gombak District prioritize school academic performance when selecting public schools. (Priya, 2018) discussed the fierce competition among schools in India and the factors influencing parental choice, including quality education and adequate facilities. Hossain 2022 focused on the determinants of school choice in Khulna City Corporation, Bangladesh, and found that parental education, income, and psychological impression of schools were influential factors. (Harianto et al., 2022) identified factors shaping parents' decisions, including service and ambiance excellence, student competence, learning management system, and school reputation. (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2017) highlighted that low-income parents in Delhi are compelled to send their children to private unaided recognized and unrecognized schools due to safety concerns and preferences for faith-based teaching. (Ghosh et al., 2020) identifies teacher motivation as the most influential factor, which affects teacher experience, class size, teacher qualification, transport facilities, curriculum, and teacher salary. (Venkatesamy & Miller, 2021) identified factors such as proximity, cost, curriculum, technology, and relationships as influential in parents' school selection process. Vij, R., & Farhan, M. (2018) examines the primary variables affecting Indian parents' school choice selections are examined in this study. The study reveals the most important variables, which include a child's academic achievement being regularly updated and being close to the school. School achievement, social environments and amenities, supervision, and social background and status are other significant factors for parents to take into account. For schools striving to live up to parental expectations, understanding these elements is essential.

In summary, parents in India consider factors such as school quality, reputation, infrastructure, academic performance, safety and facilities, location, and school reputation when making decisions about K-12 school selection for their children.

Research Statement

The research examines decision-making among parents in choosing K-12 schools in India which aims to uncover the crucial factors influencing these choices and provide insights to support parents, school management, and the K-12 Schools Sector.

Objectives

- Investigate the factors influencing parents decision making
- Offering valuable insights to parents by exploring the decision-making process
- Assist International School Management in gaining a better understanding of parental expectations
- Contributing to the K-12 schools sector by explaining the dynamics of parent decision-making

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted that involved surveys and interviews with a different group of parents from different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations in Mumbai. Collected data was reviewed and assessed through thematic analysis, to identify significant factors and consistent decision-making patterns. Also, the journey of parents shortlisting international schools for their children is proposed by applying the consumer decision-making model developed by John Dewey in 1910, which comprises five distinct stages.

Theory – Implementing John Dewey's model for consumer decision-making consisting of five stages

To explore the journey of parents as they finalize their decision on an international school, John Dewey's five-stage consumer decision-making model is adopted here. The stages involved in this process are - need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (**Barnes, 1986**). It will also help to understand various factors for arriving at the final decision of finalizing the school by the parents. By applying this model, we can get a deeper understanding of the factors and preferences that influence parents' selection process for finalizing school and ultimately guide them toward making the best choice for their child's education and satisfaction. Additionally, it helps international schools to understand the key drivers and preferences of parents, helping them customize their offerings and communication approaches effectively to align with the requirements of potential families.

Below are the 5 stages to highlight the journey of the parents

1) Need Recognition



Figure 1

As per the survey conducted of 30 parents, It has been found that every parent has a different mindset and objective before admitting his or her child to an international school resulting in varied needs. However, the order of needs may differ as per the individual's specific preferences and circumstances. Parents' decision-making is greatly influenced by these essential needs. The different needs that have come across as findings from this research are as follows (Refer to Figure 1) which is derived from the below by applying thematic analysis

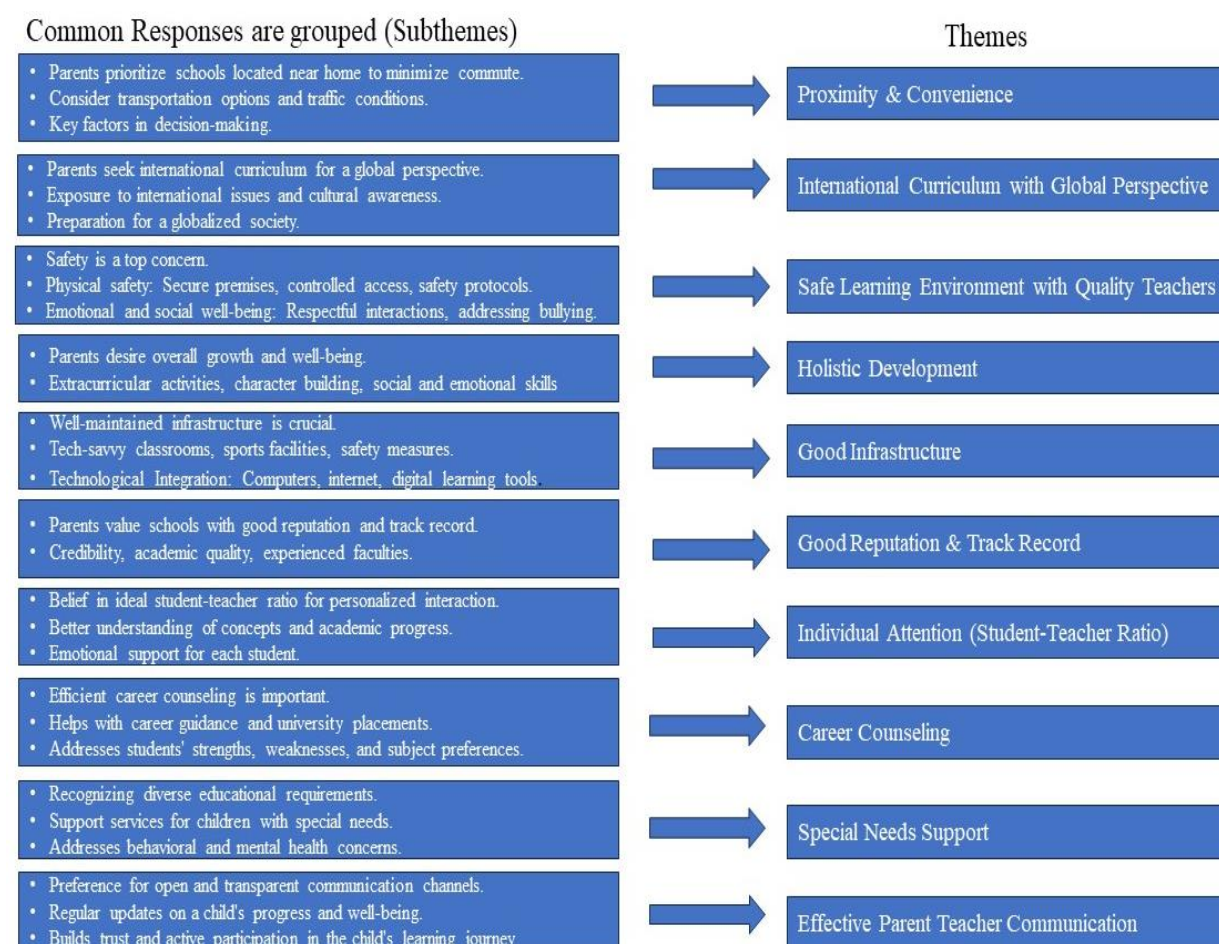


Figure 1.1

a) **Proximity & Convenience** - Parents often prefer a school that is located near and minimizes the commuting time of their children. Various other factors such as transportation options and traffic conditions are key determinants in parents' decision-making. Thus, proximity & convenience become critical factors if an organization planning to launch a new school. It helps an organization to position the school as a convenient and desirable choice.

b) **International Curriculum with Global Perspective** - Parents seek the finest education for their children, and the adaptable nature of the international curriculum makes it an ideal choice.

They want to expose their kids to international issues, help them become more culturally aware, and provide them with the knowledge and abilities they need to succeed in a globalized society. Parents think that by adding cultural, social, and historical viewpoints into the curriculum, international curricula are intended to give students a worldwide perspective. Students gain a broader awareness of the world around them as they study about various cultures, traditions, and global challenges. When students apply to institutions abroad, they are at a competitive advantage. A global thought process and the ability to meaningfully contribute to society are also developed in students through the development of global skills including critical thinking, cooperation, and problem-solving.

c) Safe Learning Environment with Qualified Teachers - Parents prioritize the safety of their children when choosing a school. They select a school that gives the utmost priority to physical safety, and emotional & social well-being. Physical safety includes secure premises, controlled access, safety protocols, and measures to prevent and respond to emergencies. Emotional and social well-being involves promoting respectful interactions, addressing bullying or harassment effectively, and providing support systems for students' mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, qualified teachers contribute to the positive learning experience by incorporating effective and innovative pedagogical practices. Thus, parents prefer schools that employ experienced, well-trained, and knowledgeable educators who can deliver high-quality instruction.

d) Holistic Development - Parents prefer that their child admitted to the school receives overall growth and well-being across various dimensions. They prefer a school that offers extracurricular activities and focuses on character building, development of social and emotional skills and cultivating critical thinking with problem-solving abilities. They desire an environment that encourages individual growth, self-discovery, and the exploration of diverse interests – a comprehensive education that prepares their children for life.

e) Good Infrastructure - A school with good infrastructure always has a competitive advantage and plays a crucial role in shaping parents' decision process in choosing a school for their children. A good basic infrastructure includes well-maintained & tech-savvy classrooms with appropriate furniture, an auditorium, an art room, a music room, a dance & drama room, science laboratories, computer labs, sports facilities, an infirmary, a transportation facility and a play area. Additionally, Technological Integration has now become a necessity that includes access to computers, internet connectivity, interactive whiteboards and other digital learning tools and apps. Also, safety and security installations such as secure entrances, surveillance systems, fire safety systems, emergency response protocols and the provision of on-call doctor facilities are some of the additional prerequisites that have an impact on parents' choices.

f) Good Reputation & Track Record - The good reputation and track record of the international school contribute to its credibility, academic intelligence and overall performance. Parents feel that a school with a good reputation meets or exceeds the expectations in terms of demonstrating high-quality education with experienced faculties delivering strong student outcomes. A proven track record provides a sense of confidence and assurance in their child's educational journey.

g) Individual Attention (Student-Teacher Ratio) - Individual attention is often measured by the student-teacher ratio. It is the belief of the parents that personalized and meaningful interaction between students and teachers is possible with an ideal student-teacher ratio resulting in a better understanding of concepts, academic progress and emotional support for each student.

h) Career Counseling - An efficient career counseling team in the school helps students with career guidance as well as university placements. The career counseling team engages in comprehensive discussions with students and their parents, considering their strengths, weaknesses, and subject preferences. They provide personalized guidance and recommend various courses available at universities available in India and abroad. Parents feel that it helps to explore their child's interests, aptitudes and future pathways. It reassures the parents that the school with strong career counseling support will help children in their future endeavors with suitable opportunities.

i) Special Needs Support - Every child is unique and has diverse educational requirements that need to be fulfilled. Parents of children with special needs seek school which has specialized support services. Additionally, it helps children to overcome behavioral issues and emotional and mental health concerns.

j) Effective Parent-Teacher Communication - Open and transparent communication channels are preferred by the parents as they help them get regular updates and progress reports about their educational accomplishments, social growth, and overall health and happiness of their child. Moreover, it also builds trust and they actively participate in the child's learning journey.

2) Information Search

After the need is recognized, parents engage in the process of information search and gather relevant information that supports their needs. As per the research conducted, it has been observed that parents search information across online and offline resources. Among the 30 respondents, 21 (70%) confirmed that their initial approach was to search online sources to know more about or shortlist schools. Subsequently, 14 respondents out of 21 (66.66%) validate this information through offline sources (Refer Figure 2). On the other hand, 9 respondents (30%) indicated a preference for using offline sources

primarily to know more about or shortlist schools. Subsequently, 7 respondents out of 9 (77.77%) validate this information through online sources (Refer Figure 2)

Data Analysis of Information Source Preferences and Validation Patterns Among Respondents

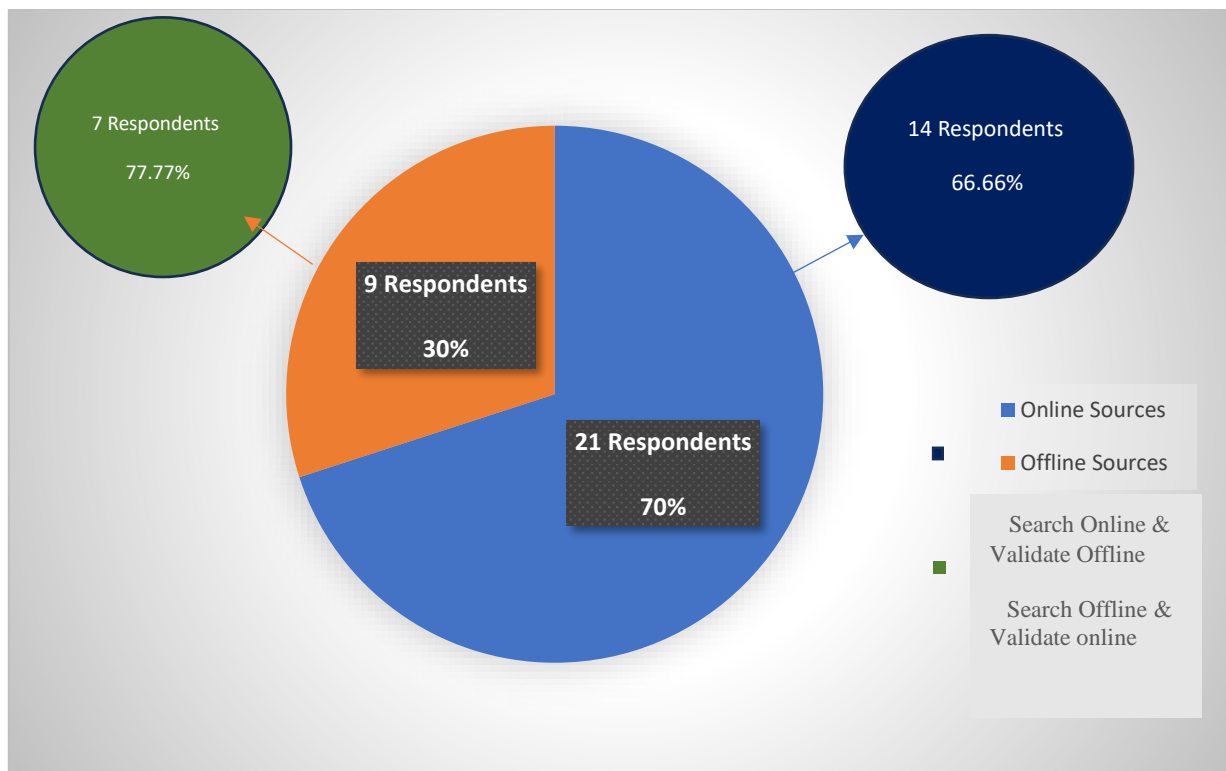


Figure 2

Below are the information sources opted by parents to get in-depth details of the international school (Refer to Figure 2):-

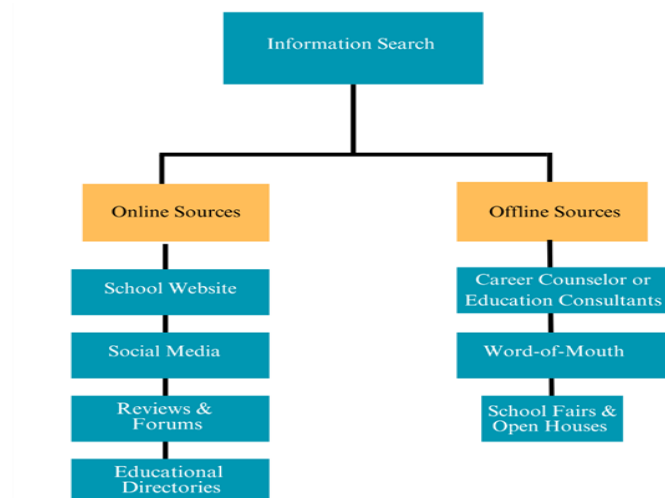


Figure 2.1

a) Online Sources

- i. **Website of School:** The initial step of the parents often involves visiting the school's website to check various details such as school affiliation, curriculum, programmes, school infrastructure, admission process and other information that interests them. Educational institutions need to update the information on their website continuously.
- ii. **Social Media Platforms:** Parents check the different social media platforms of schools especially Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn in India to get information about student engagement activities, student achievements, school achievements, school values and school community. Additionally, it helps to interact directly with school representatives and the opportunity to ask any questions.
- iii. **Online Reviews & Forums:** Parents check Google reviews about the school as well as on third-party websites to gain insight into the experiences shared by existing and past parents. It helps them to get a deeper understanding of the school's reputation and overall feedback. There are many online forums where one can engage in important discussions, share experiences about the school and seek advice from the virtual communities. Online forum usually takes place in Q & A format where parents ask questions related to the school and others who knows the information can reply on the same. These interactions take place with a diverse range of individuals who have initial experience with educational institutions.
- iv. **Educational Directories:** Educational Directories highlight the list of schools as per the area. These directories allow parents to access information about the different schools. Many times the information about a specific school listed on these directories is not updated and thus incomplete information affects the decision-making process of information.

b) Offline Sources

i. Career Counselor or Education Consultant:

Career Counselor or Education Consultants are expert in their field and knows the current trends in education. These counselors or consultants know the various aspects of different schools. They help in understanding the needs of the parents and suggest a suitable option to parents considering all the factors making them navigate the complex decision-making process.

ii. Word-of-mouth recommendations

Word-of-mouth recommendations for international schools are usually generated from past experiences or present exposures of family members, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. The information received from this source has the highest credibility and may provide some valuable insights that can assist parents in the decision-making process. To maintain positive word-of-mouth amongst these groups, it is important to engage the existing parents and at the same time deliver quality education with desired results.

iii. School fairs and open houses

Parents also seek information from school fairs that are organised either in online or physical format. These fairs act as a good platform for parents to exchange the conversation between school representatives from different schools. It allows them to collect brochures, and leaflets and gather initial information about different schools. Additionally, many schools invite parents to open houses where they can explore the campus. It also allows them to interact with the teachers, and senior academic team and gain a first-hand experience of the school's environment and facilities.

3) Evaluation of Alternatives

It has been observed that parents compare schools based on their specific needs and preferences in ascending order of priority. 18 out of 30 respondents (60%), give first preference to the geographic location of the school and the preferred education boards. Parents further narrow down their choices after analyzing their other needs & preferences which is different for every parent (Refer Figure 3). Also, 23 respondents out of 30 (76.66%) confirmed that the first determining factor in finalizing the school decision depends on the cost and financial considerations and the school's reputation (Refer Figure 3.1).

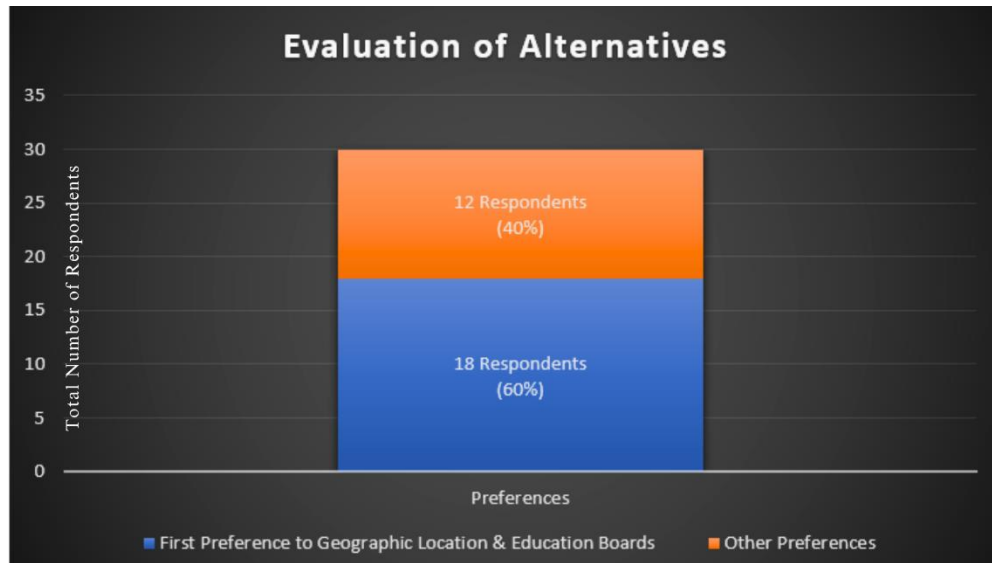


Figure 3

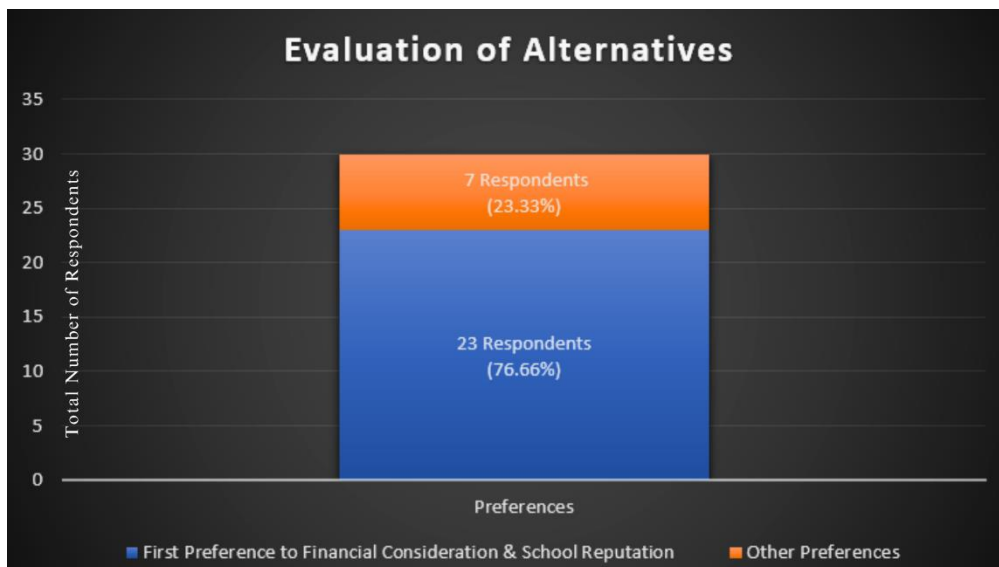


Figure 3.1

4) Purchase Decision (Admission Decision)

Taking admission to a school is a long-term financial commitment as parents plan to enroll their child for an extended period or through higher grades and therefore they assess all the basic expenses such as tuition fees, transportation fees, security deposit, bus transportation charges, books, etc. These expenses vary from school to school and thus cost & affordability plays a very important role in the admission decision. They also take into account the potential tuition fee increases changes in financial circumstances or financial sacrifices in the future. The second influential factor in driving their admission decision is evaluating the school's value for money and return on investment. Parents carefully assess the quality of education, facilities, extracurricular offerings, school's academic performance, university placement, overall

school reputation and other support services provided by the school. The third influential factor is the emotional investment of parents where they consider whether the school's culture, values, and educational philosophy align with their child's well-being and happiness. The fourth influential factor is the assurance of a positive ongoing consequence on their child's development journey and future opportunities.

Moreover, the decisions made by parents regarding their children's enrollment are influenced by additional crucial factors, including admission deadlines, the academic calendar, seat availability, transition opportunities, relocation considerations, and waiting lists for highly sought-after schools. Thus, all these factors play a crucial role in making an informed or timely decision regarding their child's future.

5) Post Purchase Evaluation (Post Admission Evaluation)

After the admission process is finalized and their child commences their education in the chosen school, parents enter a phase of post-purchase evaluation. Parents provided responses in an open-ended manner in the survey conducted, sharing their thoughts without constraints. These responses were subsequently categorized into the aforementioned dimensions.



Here is an elaboration of the post-purchase behavior based on research (Refer Figure 4):

- 1) **Satisfaction Assessment:** Parents assess their satisfaction level with the chosen school based on their own experience as well as their child's experience & overall development. They try to evaluate whether their needs and expectations are met by the school.
- 2) **Academic Progress:** Monitoring: Parents' requirement is constant communication and feedback from the school about their child's overall performance including grades, class participation, involvement in co-curricular & extra-curricular activities, etc.

3) **Parent & Student Engagement:** Parents also anticipate whether the school organizes parent and student engagement programs, fostering a sense of community and involvement in their child's educational journey. This also strengthens the bond between the parent and the child.

4) **Complaint Resolution:** Parents expect the school to resolve issues and concerns effectively and on time. Timely resolution of issues and concerns can significantly impact the parents' satisfaction, loyalty and retention.

Thus, the process of post-purchase evaluation occurs after the admission is completed and when the child starts attending the school. Parents assess and reflect on their decision of the chosen school by gauging their level of satisfaction, scrutinizing the school's performance in meeting their expectations, and considering the overall experience of their child in the educational setting. It allows parents to identify areas of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and make any necessary adjustments or improvements to ensure the ultimate learning experience for their child.

Conclusion

The parental decision-making process for choosing an international school involves a careful evaluation of various factors. This research article highlights the significance of varying needs of the parents to shortlist & finalise the school for their children and this has been highlighted by adopting John Dewey's consumer decision making model. The study also explores the information-gathering techniques used by parents while making decisions. Parents' quests for knowledge are greatly aided by online resources including school websites, social media, online reviews, and educational directories as well as offline sources like career counsellors, word-of-mouth recommendations, and school fairs. This study offers a thorough insight of the choices parents in India make while choosing K–12 institutions. The study is a useful tool for school administration and the K–12 education sector as well as for parents by identifying and emphasising these key components and phases. It provides teachers and administrators with the information they need to meet parents' expectations, promoting an atmosphere that fosters kids' overall development in settings like international schools. The findings from this research can help schools adjust their programmes and communication tactics to better suit the requirements and preferences of potential students as the educational landscape changes.

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