

## Education Against All Odds: Exploring the Exceptional Value of Private Schooling in Bamyan Province, Afghanistan

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to ascertain why parents in rural and semi-rural areas of Bamyan province in Afghanistan choose and prefer to send their children to fee-charging private schools while free public schools are accessible. In addition, this study also aims to understand what the primary source of information is when parents choose a school. The focus in answering these questions will be on the parents' perceptions that inform their decision when they choose a school. Therefore, this study investigates parents' perceived indicators regarding their children's schooling costs, facilities, proximity, teacher commitment to school and students rather than the actual measurements (for example, parents' assessment of teacher's competence level and official test results). This research utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative data was derived from 270 detailed questionnaires, and the qualitative data was collected through 10 structured focus group discussions. The results highlight key factors that significantly influence parents' choices, including teaching quality, school management, proximity, and financial considerations. Considerable disparities emerge between private and public schools, particularly in perceived teaching quality, teacher qualifications, student learning support, and discipline. Moreover, the study reveals challenges related to the accessibility of private schools and concerns regarding corruption within public school administration. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and education stakeholders, informing them the development of targeted interventions and strategies to address these challenges and empowering parents to make well-informed decisions regarding their children's education. In a country like Afghanistan, where education is largely controlled and directed by a central system, the voices of parents in the educational process are often overlooked. This research aims to fill this notable gap. By delving into what parents think and feel about their children's education, we're uncovering valuable insights that have been largely absent in past discussions. This is not just about numbers and policies; it is about understanding the human element in education, which is all too vital in a place where centralized decisions dominate the landscape. This paper, therefore, stands out as it brings to the forefront the often-unheard voices of parents, making a significant contribution to the field.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although a considerable portion of research has been dedicated to studying the concept of educational choice, there remains a scarcity of studies specifically exploring school choice in rural regions of developing countries. Afghanistan, in particular, has seen limited research on this topic, especially in its rural and semi-rural areas. Consequently, it is crucial for researchers to carefully consider the selection of compelling arguments when designing their studies, as highlighted by Peter Burnham's assertion that topics should be "interesting, puzzling, neglected, or difficult to understand" (Burnham, 2004). Motivating the author's decision to delve into this research are compelling facts that shed light on the context. Firstly, the Bamyan province, predominantly inhabited by the Hazara minority ethnic group, stands out for the highest expenditure per household on private education compared to other provinces (Lahire, 2018). Nevertheless, paradoxically, Bamyan is ranked as one of the poorest provinces in the country, with a poverty rate of 55.75% and more than 96% of the population residing in rural areas (Akseer et al, 2019). These disparities highlight the urgency of examining the factors influencing school choice in such socioeconomic contexts.

Moreover, an analytical report on education in Afghanistan underscores the need for further research and policy analysis to understand the causes of educational inequity and explore potential avenues for reconciliation (Rasmussen and Kelly, 2016). Specifically, the research addresses the gap by investigating rural parents' perspectives on private and public schools and their educational challenges. The study's significance lies in its exploration of parents' perceptions of quality indicators, including teaching quality, school management, and class size, with the central hypothesis positing that parents opt for private schools if they perceive them to offer superior overall quality compared to public schools. In summary, the omission of school choice in rural areas from research discourse, the specific context of Afghanistan's rural and semi-rural regions, the socioeconomic disparities observed in Bamyan province, and the call for further research on educational inequity in Afghanistan collectively underline the importance and relevance of conducting an in-depth investigation into the factors influencing school choice in rural contexts.

The global Education for All (EFA) initiative has prompted developing countries to strive for universal education. Afghanistan has made notable progress in expanding access to education, with primary school enrollment increasing from 1 million to over 9 million between 2002 and 2019 (Afghanistan statistical yearbook, 2019). According to the Ministry of Education, 9,388,010 students are enrolled in government educational institutions. In comparison, approximately 1,070,798 students attend private educational institutions, with females accounting for 38% of the private school enrollment (ibid). The Gross Enrollment Ratio for the year 1397 (2018) was reported as 100.1% overall, with boys at 115.3% and girls at 83.7%. However, the reports also highlight that over 3.7 million children are still out of school. Despite the progress in enrollment rates, the educational performance in Afghanistan remains concerning, particularly for those living in poverty and rural areas. For example, an assessment of 6th graders from 13 provinces revealed alarming learning outcomes, with only 9% demonstrating grade-level proficiency in math, 12% in reading, and a significant proportion failing to achieve grade-level proficiency in writing tests (Lahire, 2018).

The problem of poor educational performance is exacerbated by gender, geographical, and income disparities. For example, the Ministry of Education reports a substantial 39.6% difference in gross enrollment rates between boys and girls at the primary level (Afghanistan statistical yearbook, 2019). Moreover, certain groups, such as girls, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and rural students, experience significant inequalities in accessing education. For example, reports indicate that approximately 60% of out-of-school children are female, and only 5% of children with disabilities have access to education (ibid).

Besides disparities, Afghanistan's educational system suffers from various challenges, including violence, poverty, internal conflict, ethnic discrimination, and a centralized and inefficient system. The centralized nature of the system limits the implementation of bottom-up initiatives and policy reforms, hindering administrative efficiency (Rasmussen and Kelly, 2016). Additionally, the decrease in the share of GDP allocated to education and the reliance on external resources for funding raise concerns about the government's capacity to address the country's educational needs without private sector support (Ministry of Education, 2011). Overall, while Afghanistan has made strides in expanding access to education, significant issues such as poor educational performance, inequalities in access, and systemic challenges need to be addressed to achieve the goals of Education for All. Prioritizing quality improvement, addressing disparities faced by marginalized groups, and enhancing administrative efficiency are essential steps in creating a more inclusive and effective education system in Afghanistan.

According to the constitution of Afghanistan, every citizen has an equal right to access free quality education without discrimination up to the university level (Constitution of Afghanistan). However, despite this provision, Bamyan, one of the country's poorest provinces, exhibits the highest household expenditure on private schooling among all 34 provinces. This raises questions about why poor parents willingly pay for private schools when free public schools are available. Furthermore, it prompts an examination of whether this indicates a lack of access to quality public education or if parents make decisions based on rumors and social trends. Moreover, it is essential to investigate whether private and public schools have comparable costs. The Asia Foundation reports that the people of Bamyan are among the poorest compared to other regions, with an average monthly household income of around \$60 (Akseer et al., 2019). However, despite the high poverty rate, there is a strong tendency to spend on private education, possibly due to the low quality of public schools or the ambitious aspirations of low-income families for their children.

Bamyan province faces numerous challenges in its education system. Reports indicate that the Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) stands at 85% and the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at 115% (Ministry of Education report). The 30% difference between the NER and GER suggests a significant proportion of delayed enrollments and repetitions, highlighting the need for attention. Furthermore, out of the 346 public schools in the province, 60 lack proper buildings, and many others have substandard facilities. Officials in the Bamyan Education Department express concerns about the lack of attention to teacher shortages compared to other provinces, citing bureaucratic constraints and the need for permission from the central Ministry of Education in Kabul. The overall illiteracy rate in Bamyan province is alarmingly high, particularly in rural areas, where over 96% of the population resides. The literacy rate among individuals aged 15 years or older in Bamyan is only 31.7%, with a significant gender disparity of 45.4% for males and 16.5% for females. With 346 public and 11 private schools operating in the province, more than 135,000 students are enrolled, including approximately 62,251 female students (Ministry of Education).

Bamyan province has a low-grade promotion rate of 62% compared to the national average of 70.2% (Ministry of Education). Additionally, it has the highest dropout rate in the country at 34.2%, while the national dropout rate is 25.4% (ibid). While schools cannot be solely blamed for the high dropout rates, research suggests that the low quality of teaching plays a critical role. The theories of pull-out and push-out explain students' decisions to stay in or leave school. Pull-out factors, such as family preferences and financial opportunities outside of school, may encourage students to drop out (Simic and Krstic, 2017). However, numerous researchers have found that push-out factors related to the school environment, such as social and academic climate, teachers' practices, and teaching quality, are more significant in increasing dropout rates (Blue and Cook, 2004; De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2004). Other factors, including poor relationships between students and teachers and undesirable classroom environments, also contribute to early school leaving (Fortin et al., 2013; Lessard et al., 2004).

Private schools in Afghanistan are predominantly privately owned and operated for-profit institutions that require tuition fees for enrollment. Unlike public schools, they do not receive financial support from the government. Defining private schools in Afghanistan is challenging due to the limited literature on their number and types. However, a study examining private schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan categorizes them into two main types: exclusive high-fee schools and community-based schools supported by local communities and international donors (Barakat et al., 2014). It is worth noting that many of these schools charge high fees and cannot be considered low-cost (ibid). For this study, the focus is specifically on private fee-charging schools. To operate legally, private fee-charging schools in Afghanistan must register with the Ministry of Education. In addition, the Ministry plays a role in overseeing and engaging with private educational institutions. The following is a statement that points to the engagement of the Ministry of Education and the private education institutions, as written in the National Education Interim Plan outline in 2011:

"The Ministry will inspire the private sector to establish schools and non-governmental organizations to contribute to the implementation of general education programs. The Ministry will facilitate the registration of private schools and provide them with services and materials like teacher training and textbooks. The Local Education Departments will be responsible for monitoring the activities of private education institutes under the approved rules and regulations for the operation of private schools" (the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Education, 2011).

Many private schools in Afghanistan have expressed concerns about their relationship with the Ministry of Education and the government's educational policies. They argue that the government's approach to private schools is unfavorable, lacking subsidies or grants for parents who choose private schools, particularly those in rural areas. As a result, private schools have become market-driven entities, raising concerns about the quality of education they provide (Barakat et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of conclusive evidence or investigation to determine the extent to which government promises are implemented in practice (ibid). Private schools in Afghanistan are required to follow the national curriculum. However, many also offer additional subjects such as English and computer classes. Most students enrolled in private schools are at the primary level, which spans from grades 1 to 6. The primary education system in Afghanistan consists of two cycles, each lasting three years. The curriculum in the first cycle includes religious studies, the first language (Dari or Pashto), mathematics, physical education, and arts. The second cycle, from grades 4 to 6, introduces subjects like natural science, geography, history, and a secondary language. At the end of grade 6, students must pass an examination to qualify for admission to lower secondary school (Ministry of Education website).

The subsequent sections of this paper will provide an overview of the structure and content. It begins with a literature. The subsequent segment details the methodology employed in the research. Next, the focus shifts to presenting the findings and results of the study. This is followed by an in-depth discussion, wherein the implications and significance of the results are explored concerning the research objectives. Finally, the paper concludes with a concise summary and a thought-provoking conclusion, tying together all the key elements of the study.

### *Important factors for parental choice*

The socioeconomic status of parents plays a significant role in private school enrollment. Research suggests that parents with higher education levels are likelier to choose private schools for their children (Glick and Sahn, 2006). In addition, wealthier households tend to send their children to private schools, particularly boys (Talance, 2017). However, some argue that private schools can enhance educational services in society (Aslam, 2009), while others believe they widen the socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor, as the latter may not afford private schooling (Karlsson and Mansory, 2004).

The location of private schools is influenced by factors such as infrastructure and population. However, the presence of female teachers with secondary education also contributes to the establishment of private schools (Andarabi, 2006). Moreover, an increase in private schools leads to a higher likelihood of enrollment in private schools for both genders (Nishimura and Yamano, 2013). Private school tuition fees vary across regions. For example, private school fees in Pakistan are affordable, even for low-income people. In contrast, in Bamyan province, Afghanistan, the average annual tuition fee is relatively higher, representing a significant percentage of the GDP per capita (Alderman and others, 2001; Andarabi and others, 2006).

Private schools are generally considered to have better quality and more efficient management than public schools, leading to higher test results and learning outcomes at a lower cost (Bedi and Garg, 2000; Goyal and Pandey, 2009; Kingdon, 2007; Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006; Tooley et al., 2010; Wadhwa, 2009). This efficiency may be attributed to specific management and pedagogical methods employed by private schools, as well as the positive influence of peer groups formed by children from educated and affluent families (Andarabi et al., 2008; Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2014; Talance, 2016). In addition, parents' choice of private schools is often driven by dissatisfaction with public school quality rather than limited access to public schools (Chisholm, 2004; Fiske and Ladd, 2004; Reschovsky, 2006). However, there is limited knowledge about parents' perspectives on school choice in rural areas and the decision-making factors in such contexts (Watkins, 2004).

Gender disparities exist in private school enrollment, with some parents showing a preference for sending boys to private schools due to perceived higher financial returns in the future (Purewal and Hashmi, 2015; Sawada and Lokshin, 1999). In addition, household structure, such as the presence of younger siblings or children under five years old, also affects girls' enrollment in school, particularly in low-income families (Glick and Sahn, 2000, 2006). Access to information is crucial for parents to make informed decisions about school choice. Lack of information can hinder parents, especially those with limited education, from making the right choice for their children (Heyneman and Stern, 2014). In addition, in a market-oriented approach to school choice, parents are responsible for addressing social injustices and educational quality (Gerwitz, Ball, and Bowe, 1995). However, parents may lack the necessary competencies or data to select the best school, and choice can only be practical if parents and students have access to desired programs (Bosetti, 2007).

Examining parents' perspectives regarding public and private primary schools in Bamyan province is crucial in light of these challenges. This study explores the factors influencing parental choice between private and public primary schools in Afghanistan, focusing on proximity, cost of schooling, teaching quality, efficient school management, class sizes, and access to comprehensive information. It also investigates how parents perceive schools and the sources they rely on to gather information for making informed choices. By considering these key factors, we gain a holistic understanding of the decision-making process. This research aims to provide insights for policymakers and educational stakeholders committed to improving Afghanistan's education system. Before conducting the study, a comprehensive evaluation of pertinent literature such as academic articles, research reports, and policy documents was undertaken. Through an analysis of the literature and contextual factors, the independent variables that impact parental choice were identified. They encompass six key independent variables that influence the parental choice between private and public primary schools in Afghanistan. The distance from their homes to the school is a critical consideration, as convenience and accessibility are essential in their decision-making process (Andarabi, 2006; Nishimura & Yamano, 2013).

Additionally, the cost is a significant concern, as parents assess the affordability of private schools versus public schools by taking into account tuition and other expenses (Alderman & others, 2001; Andarabi & others, 2006). Teaching quality is also paramount, as parents seek out schools with highly competent and dedicated teachers that provide quality education. The general quality of education and teacher

competence shape parents' impressions and ultimately impact their decisions. Efficient school management is an absolute necessity for parents when selecting a school for their child. They highly prioritize institutions with a clear and organized structure, strong leadership, and a positive learning atmosphere (Bedi&Garg,2000; Goyal& Pandey,2009; Kingdon,2007; Muralidharan&Kremer,2006; Tooley et al. 2010& Wadhwa,2009; Andarabi et al., 2008 & Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2014). Smaller class sizes are also favored, as they provide increased individual attention and meaningful interaction between students and teachers (Chisholm, 2004; Fiske and Ladd, 2004; Reschovsky, 2006). Parents can make informed decisions when provided with comprehensive and credible information from sources such as school websites, word-of-mouth recommendations, and government reports (Watkins,2004). These factors significantly influence parental preferences between private and public elementary schools and serve as the foundation of the conceptual framework outlined in this study. It is crucial to have a complete understanding of these factors to fully comprehend the intricacies of school selection.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and analysis

This research employed a comprehensive approach to investigate the research questions, incorporating both quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews. While both types of data were utilized, the analysis primarily focused on the quantitative data, which enables statistical analysis and offers numerical insights into the factors influencing parental decision-making in selecting public or private primary schools in Bamyan province. The quantitative data provided a foundation for understanding direct and observable factors. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of qualitative data, as it helps uncover hidden and nuanced factors that influence parental choices. The author, drawing upon relevant literature on parental choice, developed the questionnaire utilized in the study. The selection and formulation of questions were primarily based on key literature sources, including studies conducted by authors Alderman et. Al (2001) and Tooley et. Al (2007). Additionally, a study conducted by Shirani on private and public schools in Kabul (Shirani, 2014) provided valuable insights and served as an important reference for shaping the questionnaire.

These questionnaires included a parent questionnaire, a teacher questionnaire, a principal's survey, and an interview guide for conducting focus group discussions with parents. In contrast, the interview guide for the focus group discussions focused on open-ended questions. The questionnaires also included inquiries about the participants' demographic information, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the samples.

The study aimed to gather specific information regarding the driving factors behind parents' choice of schools and the sources of information they considered influential in their decision-making process. By incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approach, this study aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that shape parental decision-making regarding school choice.

### Site and samples

This study focused on primary schools, as most private schools in Bamyan province cater to students from grades 1-6, with plans for future program expansion. Additionally, most students in private schools are enrolled at the primary level. Notably, all public or private schools have an open boundaries policy, allowing parents to choose any school as long as space is available freely. The selection process involved randomly sampling public and private primary schools to ensure a representative sample. The random sampling procedure was carried out as follows: First, a selection was made from the school lists provided by education officials. Out of the 11 private schools, the study randomly chose 10 private schools

and 10 public schools from a pool of 50 public schools. Subsequently, each selected school provided us with a comprehensive list of all parents associated with their respective institutions. From these lists, the study randomly handpicked 10 parents from each of the 10 selected schools. In summary, 20 schools, comprising 10 private elementary schools and 10 public elementary schools participated. Moreover, a sample size of 100 parents was taken from both private and public schools, resulting in 200 parents participating in the study.

The random sampling process was also implemented for the selection of teachers and principals. From the comprehensive list of all teachers associated with the previously selected 10 private schools, a random selection of 30 teachers was made. Similarly, the same procedure was followed for the 10 public schools, resulting in the random selection of 30 teachers from that pool as well. Moreover, from the list of 10 principals representing the private schools and another list of 10 principals representing the public schools, the study randomly selected five principals from each category, yielding a total selection of 10 principals. In addition, a subset of 20 parents was randomly selected from the initial sample of 200 parents to participate in focus-group interviews. The final sample included 270 participants, providing a diverse and comprehensive dataset for analysis. Out of the 200 parents who participated in the study, 120 were male, and 80 were female. Among the 60 teachers included in the study, 28 were male, and 32 were female. Furthermore, out of the 10 principals considered, nine were male, while one was female. The survey questionnaires primarily consisted of closed-ended questions, capturing specific details related to official and unofficial school costs, available services provided by the schools, teachers' years of experience, teacher-student ratios, and parents' perceptions regarding private and public schools. Among the key questions in the parent's questionnaire two prominent ones were:

1. "What is the primary reason for selecting your child's current school?"
2. "What is the main source of information you relied on when choosing your child's school?"

### **Confirmability and limitations**

This study's data collection process used survey questionnaires to gather comprehensive information. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaires, two local education experts from the Education department of Bamyan province carefully reviewed them. Feedback and suggestions from these experts were incorporated, and revisions were made as necessary. This rigorous review aimed to enhance the quality and accuracy of the data collected, strengthening the study's overall validity. By employing a combination of closed-ended survey questions and open-ended interviews, the research aimed to gather a wide range of information and perspectives, enabling a thorough exploration of the factors influencing parental school choices in Bamyan province.

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings:

Firstly, the heterogeneity of rural landscapes in Afghanistan must be considered. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be generalizable to other rural areas of the country due to variations in ethnicity, culture, religion, demographics, and population density. For instance, the population in Bamyan province is predominantly Hazara ethnic, which differs from other regions predominantly inhabited by different ethnic groups. Secondly, it would have been valuable to compare students' grades on a nationally standardized test to assess the quality differences between different types of schools. However, the absence of such a national assessment in the country prevented us from including it as an indicator of educational quality in schools. Thirdly, there were some limitations in accessing complete and accurate data. Discrepancies and missing information were observed in the reports provided by the Ministry, potentially affecting the statistics presented in this research, such as the precise number of students and schools per province and nationwide. Lastly, when examining the parents' level of education, only one parent's education level (either the mother or father who completed the questionnaire) was considered. Therefore, the analysis of parental education in this study is limited and may not fully represent the

educational backgrounds of both parents. These limitations highlight the need for caution when interpreting the study's findings and suggest areas for further research to enhance the understanding of parental school choices in different contexts.

### **Analytical approach**

The researcher used Excel for quantitative data analysis, comparing response patterns between public and private schools to identify significant differences. Methods included T-tests, mean calculations, and population averages with a significance level of .05. Qualitative data was analyzed using open coding to identify themes related to parental decision-making factors. Combining closed-ended surveys and open-ended interviews provided a comprehensive exploration of the factors influencing parental school choices in Bamyan province, offering valuable insights for policymakers and education practitioners.

## **RESULTS**

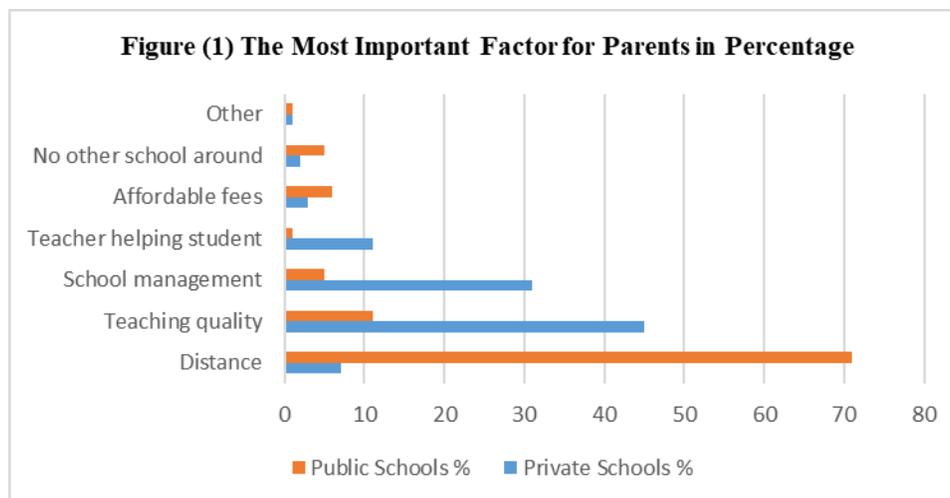
The results section of this study is organized into three parts. Firstly, descriptive statistics will be presented to provide an overview of the participants' background characteristics. The second part will focus on the main research question: the primary reasons parents choose the current type of school for their child. The final part will examine the main sources of information parents use when making decisions about their children's school type.

### **Descriptive statistics**

Regarding parents' educational level, the results indicated no significant difference in illiteracy rates between the two groups. In public schools, the illiteracy rate was approximately 27%, while in private schools, it was around 15%. The T-test analysis revealed no significant disparity in parents' education levels between the two school types. The study collected information through the parents' questionnaire to gain insight into household income levels. The data revealed that approximately 20% of parents sending their children to private schools belong to low-income households earning less than \$65 per month. On the other hand, most parents in public schools (about 42%) reported earning between \$65 and \$130 per month. Interestingly, only 20% of parents in private schools fell within this income range. To assess the significance of the difference in income levels among parents, the study employed a t-test. It found that the p-value was less than .05, indicating a statistically significant difference in income between parents.

### **The most important reason for parents to send their child to the current school**

The survey asked parents to identify the primary reasons for choosing their child's current school. This information was crucial in examining distance, teaching quality, school management, teacher-student interaction, affordability, and availability of alternative options. The findings supported the assumption that private schools offer better quality education in rural areas. When analyzing the responses from both public and private school parents, it was evident that teaching quality played a significant role in the decision-making process. Approximately 45% of parents who opted for private schools emphasized the importance of teaching quality (Figure 1).



In addition, around 31% cited good school management as a determining factor. These findings highlight the perception of higher quality education in private schools among parents in the study. On the other hand, the data also revealed that a substantial majority, over 70%, of parents from public schools were primarily concerned with proximity to their homes. Distance emerged as the most influential factor for parents in public schools, indicating the preference for conveniently located schools. Interestingly, a minimal percentage, less than 10%, expressed concerns about the affordability of private schools. Additionally, only 11% of parents in public schools stated that they chose public schools based on their perceived sound quality, suggesting a perception of lower quality in the public school system than in private schools.

However, it is essential to note that proximity to home emerged as the most significant factor discouraging parents in public schools from choosing private schools. In addition, some parents mentioned financial constraints, as they could not afford the tuition and transportation fees associated with private schools. Nonetheless, when asked if they would consider switching to a private school if the government covered the expenses, a significant proportion, approximately 78%, of parents in public schools expressed a high level of interest in enrolling their children in private schools. These findings shed light on the potential appeal of private schools if financial barriers were addressed. The data indicates that private school parents were primarily motivated by teaching quality and school management factors. Conversely, parents in public schools placed greater emphasis on proximity and financial considerations. The study highlights the complexities of parental decision-making in choosing between public and private schools in rural areas, with various factors influencing their choices.

Through site observation, the research identified considerable challenges families face regarding the location of private schools. These schools are predominantly situated in the commercial hub of Bamyan district, which lacks residential areas. As a result, not all students have convenient access to these private schools due to the considerable distance between their homes and the school premises. This issue poses a significant burden for parents in the province as they navigate the transportation logistics of sending their primary school-aged children to these schools, amplifying safety concerns. A parent expressed his preference for X private school but highlighted the significant challenge of commuting to that particular school. He said:

"We prefer X private school, but commuting to this school is a big problem if we decide to send our son there. My son is in grade 3, and no public transportation is available in our province. Therefore, we cannot send him on foot; it takes about 1 hour and a half to reach this school on foot".

The study also included a question in the survey to understand the perceptions regarding the outputs and inputs of both public and private schools. The significant differences that caught the attention were regarding quality indicators such as teaching quality, teachers' qualifications, commitment to being present in the classroom, and support for students learning.

Regarding teaching quality, approximately 80% of parents from private schools expressed satisfaction with the teaching quality. In contrast, only 33% of parents from public schools shared the same view. Additionally, 66% of parents from private schools believed that teachers in these schools are well-qualified, with only 1% reporting teacher absences or lack of support. In contrast, only 31% of parents from public schools indicated that teachers in their schools receive adequate training.

Furthermore, approximately 32% of parents from public schools reported frequent teacher absences. Also, around 29% felt that teachers in public schools do not provide sufficient support for students learning. For instance, one parent mentioned that "public schools do not adequately accommodate students with learning disabilities, and teachers do not provide extra assistance to those needing support for better learning." These findings shed light on the perceived disparities between private and public schools regarding teaching quality, teacher qualifications, and support for students learning.

Approximately 70% of the parents surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the discipline in public schools. In comparison, only 30% believed that public schools maintain good discipline. In addition, the teachers in public schools tended to be older, and their traditional teaching style and interactions with students resulted in the imposition of strict rules, which made them less favored by parents. For instance, a parent who had enrolled their child in a private school mentioned their dissatisfaction with the discipline in public schools, indicating a preference for the alternative educational environment provided by private schools. He stated,

"I am seeking a school that provides my child with competent teachers who respect and value their students. Unfortunately, in public schools, teachers often underestimate and disregard their students, lacking respect."

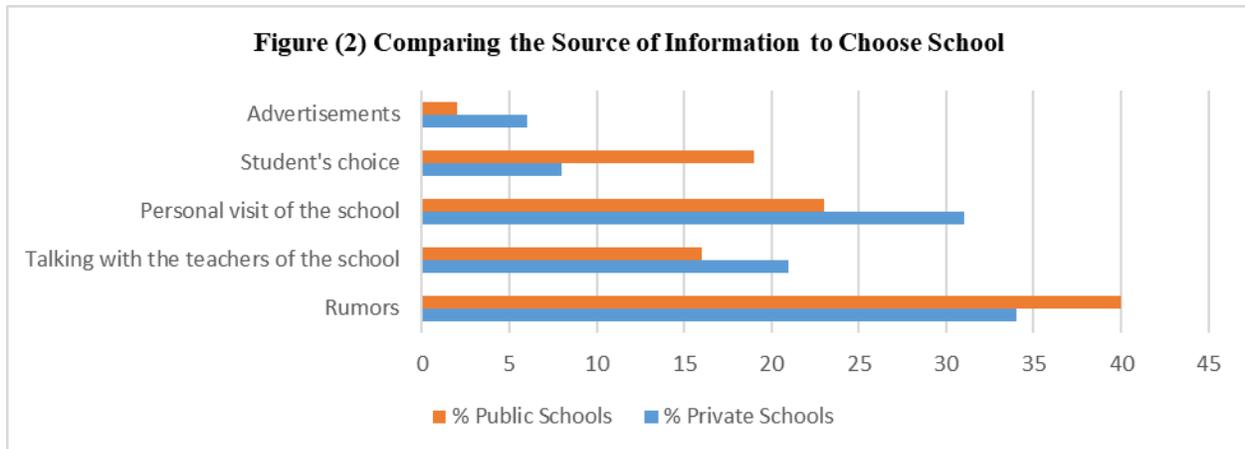
Some parents expressed their apprehensions regarding corruption within the administrative offices of public schools, which they believed contributed to the subpar quality of teaching. According to their accounts, certain teachers were not selected based on their qualifications and examination performance but rather through nepotism and personal connections. The data revealed that approximately 20% of parents had lodged complaints regarding corruption within the administrative offices of public schools.

### **The primary source of information for parents when they choose an elementary school**

The analysis in Figure 2 differentiates parents based on the range of resources they use to inform their decision-making process. Among parents from private schools, approximately 34% reported relying on rumors, such as conversations with friends and information from social networks. In contrast, the percentage slightly increased to 40% for parents from public schools. The p-value, which is higher than 0.05, indicates no significant difference between the resources used by parents from both public and private schools when selecting a school for their children.

These findings suggest that rumors play a role in informing parental decisions in both groups, highlighting the importance of understanding how parents gather and interpret these rumors. The accuracy and quality of information accessed by parents who heavily rely on such sources can vary significantly. For instance, research by Schneider and Buckley (2002) found that parents often depend on informal networks to gather information about schools, including word-of-mouth recommendations, which can be influenced by personal biases or incomplete information.

Moreover, while rumors and informal sources of information may provide valuable insights into local perceptions of school quality, they may also perpetuate misinformation or stereotypes. This underscores the importance of providing parents with access to reliable and evidence-based information about school performance and offerings. Policymakers and educators should consider developing strategies to guide parents in accessing credible information about schools, such as through official school websites, community forums, and educational workshops. This approach can help mitigate the potential risks associated with relying solely on rumors and empower parents to make more informed decisions about their children's education.



Source(s): Author's chart

This study investigated the factors influencing parents' decisions to choose private schools over free public schools in Bamyan province, Afghanistan. The research involved 270 participants, including parents, teachers, and principals from the predominantly Hazara minority group. The study revealed that teaching quality was a primary consideration for parents choosing private schools, highlighting the perception of better quality education in private schools in rural areas.

Proximity to home was crucial for parents choosing public schools, indicating a preference for conveniently located schools. This finding suggests that parents prioritize accessibility, which is often related to transportation and safety concerns. Private schools were often situated in commercial areas, making them less accessible to the poorest families. Despite this, a considerable proportion of students in private schools came from low-income families earning less than \$60 per month. The study revealed perceived disparities between private and public schools in terms of teaching quality, teacher qualifications, and support for students' learning. Parents from private schools expressed higher satisfaction with teaching quality and teacher support compared to those from public schools. Public school parents reported issues such as teacher absences and inadequate support for students' learning. Discipline was another area where disparities were evident. Public school parents expressed dissatisfaction with discipline, while private school parents perceived better discipline. Concerns about corruption within public school administration were also expressed, with reports of nepotism affecting teacher selection and quality.

Finally, both private and public school parents relied on rumors and social networks for information when selecting schools. This reliance raises concerns about the accuracy of the information and highlights the need for providing reliable data to parents to make informed choices regarding their children's education.

## DISCUSSIONS

The study found that parental school choice in Bamyan province is influenced by a combination of factors such as teaching quality, proximity, and financial considerations. These insights are significant for understanding the complexities of school selection in rural areas and can inform educational improvements in Afghanistan.

**Teaching Quality:** A significant proportion of parents, especially those who opted for private schools, highlighted teaching quality as a primary consideration when selecting a school for their child. This aligns with existing research that emphasizes the profound influence of teacher effectiveness on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Improving teaching quality in both public and private schools could lead to better educational outcomes for students.

**Proximity to Home:** Parents from public schools emphasized the importance of proximity to home, indicating a preference for schools that are conveniently located. Research by Gropello (2006) in Latin America shows that shorter distances to school improve attendance rates and academic performance in developing countries. Addressing accessibility issues can enhance educational engagement for students in rural areas.

**Perceived Disparities:** The study revealed perceived disparities between private and public schools in terms of teaching quality, teacher qualifications, and support for students' learning. Parents from private schools reported higher satisfaction in these areas compared to parents from public schools. This reflects similar patterns found in other contexts, such as Pakistan, where disparities in teaching practices and school infrastructure exist between private and public schools (Aslam & Rawal, 2020). Addressing these disparities can lead to more consistent educational experiences across different school types.

**Sources of Information:** Both private and public school parents reported relying on informal sources such as rumors and social networks when making school choices. This reliance highlights the importance of providing parents with reliable and evidence-based information to facilitate informed decisions. Research by Kelley Fong (2018) demonstrates how parents in Boston assess and mobilize information from their social networks when selecting schools, often privileging information from those they trust and perceive as having similar priorities (Fong, 2018). Additionally, a study published in the *American Journal of Sociology* highlights that parents' beliefs and the structure of their social networks can significantly predict their involvement in their children's education, suggesting that these networks not only affect school choice but also broader patterns of parental engagement (Morgan & Sorensen, 2007). These findings underscore the importance of providing parents with reliable, evidence-based information to counterbalance the anecdotal and potentially biased information they might receive through informal channels. Ensuring access to accurate information can help parents make better choices for their children's education. By addressing these findings and implementing improvements based on them, policymakers and educational practitioners can enhance the overall quality and accessibility of education in Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the factors influencing parents' decisions regarding their children's education in rural areas, with a focus on public and private schools. The findings highlight

the importance of teaching quality, school management, proximity, and financial considerations in parents' decision-making process. While teaching quality and school management were significant factors for parents choosing private schools, proximity to home and financial constraints were key considerations for parents opting for public schools. The study also reveals perceived disparities between private and public schools in teaching quality, teacher qualifications, support for students' learning, and discipline.

The findings underscore the challenges faced by parents in accessing private schools due to their location in commercial areas, which can create transportation and safety concerns. It also highlights the need for transparency and fair practices within public schools' administrative offices to address corruption concerns and ensure the quality of teaching. Moreover, the study revealed the reliance on rumors as a primary source of information for parents when selecting an elementary school for their children. This emphasizes the importance of providing accurate and evidence-based information to parents, enabling them to make well-informed choices.

Overall, these findings can inform policymakers, education stakeholders, and school administrators in rural areas in developing strategies to address the identified challenges and meet the diverse needs of parents and students in selecting schools. By focusing on improving teaching quality, addressing concerns related to discipline and corruption, and providing reliable information, efforts can be made to enhance the quality of education and support parents in making informed decisions about their children's education. While private schools can contribute to addressing the issues of low quality and corruption in public schools in Afghanistan, it is crucial to address equity of access for marginalized groups such as girls, minorities, and people experiencing poverty. In addition, not every household can afford private schools and transportation, emphasizing the need for comprehensive solutions that address these equity concerns. This study contributes valuable insights into the complex dynamics surrounding school choice in Bamyan province. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of addressing quality, affordability, and geographic accessibility to provide equitable educational opportunities for all children in the region.

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