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PARENT'S PREFERENCES IN PROVIDING QUALITY EDUCATION TO THEIR CHILDREN AT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has a very significant role in developing cognitive, social, emotional, and language of children and pre-conditions their future academic success. Parents being the primary caregiver and decision makers play a big role in determining the quality education provision at the early childhood level. This research came to test the preference of the parents in offering good education to their children at the Early Childhood Education level within the district and also to compare these preferences in relation to educational background of parents in the District Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The comparative survey based on quantitative research study was used. A self-designed questionnaire was used to gather data on 150 parents of the children in the ECE level with eight dimensions of quality education. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe demographic information and general trends in parental preferences. Mean and standard deviation were calculated to determine the level and variability of parental preferences toward quality education at the ECE level. An independent sample t-test was applied to compare the preferences of graduated and non-graduated parents regarding quality education at the ECE level.

The results showed that the parents were exhibiting excellent preferences on quality education on all dimensions especially on the results of the child development, the qualification and competence of the teachers, positive interaction between the teachers and children and a conducive learning environment. The findings also revealed that there was statistically significant difference between graduated and non-graduated parents, in that graduated parents showed preferences on quality education at the ECE level. This research concludes that parents accord quality early childhood education high values and the background education of parents greatly influences their preferences. The results demonstrate that to provide equal opportunities to quality education in the area, there should be better parental awareness, teacher preparation, and better facilities of ECE.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education, Parental Preferences, Quality Education, Educational Background, Azad Jammu and Kashmir.*

1.INTRODUCTION

The quality of education at Early Childhood ECE Level cannot be ignored, as we all know that at early level of education a child laying the foundation of their education for their upcoming academic future Zareen Shah and Yusuf, (2023). The ECE shaped cognitive, effective and psychomotor development of a child that latter on results in lifelong learning approaches (UNESCO, 2021). At that span of a child's life, parents are the prime source of caregivers, as well as playing crucial role in determining quality and career oriented education to their child. The preference of ECE education for the child is influenced by many factors like socioeconomically status of parents, cultural and linguistic barriers, parental and societal perceptions about quality of education and educational facilities (Moghnieh et al., 2023).

In these years global consideration gradually focused to improve access and quality of ECE, as enlightened in Sustainable development goals (SDGs 4.2), which motivates toward inclusive and equitable early education for every children (United Nations, 2019). However, inequalities in accessibility as well as quality prevails in its way, especially in under developing countries, where parents had to face lots of challenges like financial hurdles, improper infrastructure and inexperienced teachers (World Bank, 2022). Within this context parents perceptions about quality education is influenced by many factor such as experienced teacher, safe and supporting learning environment and diverse curriculum that nurture complex child development (Yoshikawa et al., 2022). These preferences are further influenced by their aspirations for their children's future success, which drives them to seek educational settings that align with their values and expectations.

Researches indicates that participation of parents in choosing and backing their children in early childhood education considerably impact student's outgrowth (Sylva et al., 2020). At that stage parents try to create balance between affordability and quality in education while estimating their preferences for the child, with many compressing constrains such as rising cost of private sector and limitations of public sector institutions (Kim et al., 2023). Moreover, cultural, religious and regional differences also stimulates parent's perception about early education (Singh et al., 2022). These factors highlight the need for comprehensive studies that examine parental preferences and provide actionable insights for improving the quality and accessibility of ECE worldwide.

Statement of Problem

Early childhood education is very crucial for a child to shape their future as well as their development. Parents are the key factor that can play a significant role in choosing quality education for their children. Many research works indicated that parent's preference is significantly influenced by factors such as curriculum, environment, quality teaching, affordability and socio-economic conditions. Limited research conducted on parent's priorities while selecting early schools for their children to provide quality education. Furthermore, the constraining factors like low income, religious and regional factors, language barrier etc. force parents to set their best priorities for their children. With this background information this research was conducted to identify the priorities of parents for schooling of their children at ECE level as well as the constraining factors that restrict parents to their best priorities and preferences for quality of education.

Objective of Study

1. To examine parents' preferences in providing quality education to their children at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.
2. To compare parents' preferences in providing education at the ECE level based on their educational background in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Research Questions

1. What are the parents' preferences in providing quality education to their children at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in Azad Jammu and Kashmir?
2. Is there a significant difference in parents' preferences in providing education at the ECE level based on their educational background in Azad Jammu and Kashmir?

Significance of the Study

The research would be important because it delves into the preferences of parents wishing to grant education to their children on Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in Azar Jammu and Kashmir

and specifically in Bagh. Early childhood education is crucial in cognitive, social and emotional development in a child hence, the preferences of parents in early childhood are crucial in enhancing education practices and policies. The results of this research would be useful to educational planners and policymakers since they will be able to utilize the findings to design and execute helpful ECE programs that support the expectations and needs of parents. It may also help school administrators and ECE providers to enhance quality of early childhood education by taking into consideration factors that are of importance to the parents. Moreover, the study can be handy to parents, because it would create their awareness on some of the significant elements in education at the ECE level, and help in making aware decisions on the education of their children. The study can also add to the available literature as it would be able to offer empirical evidence to the research in Azad Jammu and Kashmir region where little research has been done on parental preferences concerning early childhood education. Lastly, the paper will provide information that can be used by future researchers interested in undertaking additional research regarding early childhood education, parent involvement, or educational preferences in such cases.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is commonly known as an important period in cognitive, social, emotional and language development of children. Literature underlines the fact that parents constitute the core role in making decision regarding the provision of early education and their preference toward the children are significant determinants of children being exposed to ECE. Research indicates that the preference of parents is determined by the beliefs they hold regarding child development, perceived advantages of early education, and the context-related limitations (cost, accessibility, and availability of services) (Saleem et al., 2022). Knowing the preferences of parents is therefore fundamental in enhancing an early childhood education systems and also in making sure that the services meet the expectations of the family.

The existing literature suggests that parents do have some factors to consider when deciding on the issue of early childhood education. These are quality perceptions, safety, learning environment and the developmental outcomes with early education. The process of decision making of parents is however limited by a lack of information and practical obstacles. The researchers of Sandstrom et al. (2024) discovered the tendency of parents to use informal indicators like relatives and community members instead of formal ones and impact preferences shaping and implementation. This indicates that preferences of parents are not necessarily the best but possible options in the available constraints.

Recent research in different parts of the world points out that educational background of parents is a major determinant of their interpretation of ECE and their inclinations. More educated parents tend to be more conscious of the long-term cognitive and social gains of early education and have a tendency to lay emphasis on aspects of learning and developmental outcomes. Conversely, parents with low educational levels might prioritize a restricted number of practical and immediate issues, like child safety, affordability and proximity because they do not have equal access to information and resources (Burns et al., 2022). These variations imply that the parental education determines the quality perceptions as well as the ability to make informed judgment on the ECE.

Research shows that in the Pakistani world, there is an increase in awareness among the parents concerning the value of early childhood education, although the differences in preferences can still be observed. Khowaja and Kang (2021) have indicated that parents usually consider ECE as effective in the realization of overall development in children, but parenting behaviors vary regarding the definition and importance of quality at the ECE level. The influences of factors like parental education, socioeconomic status as well as previous educational experiences on these perceptions are also important. Thus, although many parents may appreciate the importance of early education, they can hardly give it due to the economic and structural difficulties that they may encounter.

According to more recent studies, which have been given in Punjab, Pakistan, the preference that parents have toward early childhood education has a very close relationship with their the education level. The authors of the research conducted with Qayyum et al. (2024) have discovered that accessibility and basic facilities are more significant among parents with a low level of school education as opposed to higher-level parents who set more

importance on structured learning, teacher competence, and developmental activities. This data helps to prove the point that parental education among the determinants in creating preferences and expectations towards early childhood education.

It is also pointed out in the literature that a systemic problem of early childhood education in Pakistan also influences parental preferences. The available literature that explores the issue of early childhood care and education in Pakistan singles out the lack of sufficient access, unequal quality standards, and insufficient parental awareness as key challenges. These aspects affect the choices of parents, possibly limiting their actions regarding preferences in regard to quality education (Pakistan Critical Analysis of Early Childhood Education, 2025). In this situation, necessarily, parents tend to be influenced by their desires instead of their will.

Studies that are specific to Azar Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) further depict context afflicting issues that can affect the preference of parents. Research on the topic of early childhood education practice at AJK shows that there is a gap in educational practices and resource provision, which may impact the perception of quality and the expectations placed by early childhood education among parents (Shah and Yusuf, 2021). Though few, such researches imply that the preferences of parents in the area are prone to be based on the local educational realities, socioeconomic influences, and the level of parental education.

It can be noticed that parents appreciate the developmental advantages of early childhood education, although their choices depend on a complex of factors, all correlating with each other, such as the educational levels, access to information, the socioeconomic status, and the quality of existing services. The educational background of parents is always a significant variable that influences the perceived quality and makes choices regarding early education. Although the number of studies conducted at the national and international levels is increasing, little empirical information is devoted to the preferences of parents at the ECE level in specific regions, like Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Such a gap should be mitigated in order to create context-bound initiatives to enhance early childhood education and equitable access to quality education opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative research approach to investigate parental preferences for providing quality education to their children at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level. A comparative survey design was used, as the study aimed to compare the preferences of parents with different educational backgrounds (graduated and non-graduated) regarding quality education at the ECE level. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for the collection of standardized data from a large group of respondents and facilitates comparison between groups.

Population of the Study

All parents of students at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level at the District Bagh, Azar Jammu and Kashmir, constituted the population of the study. These parents were deemed pertinent respondents since they are at the center of decision-making in regards to children education and the environment at the early education level.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

This study involved purposive sampling technique to make sure that it is inclusive of parents of various educational backgrounds in that is, graduated and non- graduated parents. This method has been chosen in a way that it would allow gaining meaningful comparisons between the two groups and a representation of a variety of parental views. The number of parents in the sample was 150 parents whose children were in the ECE level. It was found to be a sufficient sample to be used in quantitative analysis and meeting study objectives.

Research Instrument

There was the collection of data through a self-developed questionnaire that was meant to assess parental preferences to quality education at the ECE level. The questions included in the questionnaire were closed ended and were formulated following a Likert scale of measurement to obtain the perceptions and preferences of parents on the essence of quality education aspects, including methods of teaching, learning environment, teacher qualification, school facilities, and the development outcome of the child. The questionnaire was created based on

the relevant literature to provide the relevance with the concept of quality education on the ECE level.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire was pretested by the experts of the educational and research methodology field so as to maintain the content validity. Their recommendations were used so as to enhance clarity, relevance, and completeness of the items. The measure of reliability of the instrument was evaluated by a pilot study on a small sample of parents that were not taken up in the end sample. Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability and the instrument was identified to be reliable in collecting data.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was achieved by means of personal visits of the sampled parents. The researcher also informed the respondents of the purpose of the research himself and made sure that the respondents understood the questionnaire items. The reason behind the use of this method was to enhance the response rate and accuracy of response. The research was voluntary and respondents were guaranteed to remain confidential and anonymous.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe demographic information and general trends in parental preferences. Mean and standard deviation were calculated to determine the level and variability of parental preferences toward quality education at the ECE level. An independent sample t-test was applied to compare the preferences of graduated and non-graduated parents regarding quality education at the ECE level.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in terms of ethical standards which were adhered to strictly. All the participants were informed before data collection was done and their consent was obtained. The participants were notified about the intention of the study, and their right to decide to withdraw anyhow was honored. Anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents was observed and all data gathered were used in academic research only.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was restricted to parents having children at the ECE level in the District Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The educational background (graduated and non-graduated) of parents was also to be compared only and no other aspects like income level or occupation were taken into account.

RESULTS

The section is a report of the research which was carried out to examine parent's preferences in offering quality education to their child at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in District Bagh, Azar Jammu and Kashmir. A structured questionnaire that was developed based on eight dimensions of quality education was used to collect data on 150 parents. Data analysis was done by use of the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to describe the preferences of parents and inferential statistics used were to compare the preference of graduated and non-graduated parents.

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	54.7
	Female	68	45.3
Educational Background	Graduated	78	52.0
	Non-Graduated	72	48.0
Age Group	Below 30	34	22.7
	31–40	56	37.3
	41–50	42	28.0
	Above 50	18	12.0

The demographic features of the respondents who took part in the study are introduced in Table 4.1. The table consists of the information connected with the gender, education background and age group of the parents giving an overview of the sample composition used in the analysis. In relation to gender, in the sample of 150 respondents it was established that 82 parents (54.7) were male and 68 parents (45.3) were female. Such distribution shows that both male and female parents were fairly represented in this study. The small biased representation of men in the study sample would be attributed to the fact that fathers are perhaps more accessible or involved in data collection; nonetheless, the existence of a high number of women representatives would mean that the exclusion of the women viewpoint would not cause a problem of underrepresentation. With regard to the level of education, 78 parents (52.0) have a graduation and 72 parents (48.0) did not graduate. The relative equal distribution of the two groups enhances the validity of the comparative analysis carried in the research. This is enabled by the balanced representation, which could provide a meaningful comparison of preferences on quality education at the ECE level depending on the educational background of parents, which was one of the main aims of the study. Relating to the age category of the respondents, the responses point out that 34 parents (22.7%), came below the age of 30 years. The majority of the respondents, 56 parents (37.3%), were in the category of 31-40, which was the most represented group. This indicates that majority of the respondents were at the active level of parenting with young children being at the ECE level. Besides, 42 parents (28.0%) were residents of the 41-50 age group, and 18 parents (12.0%), were older than 50. The diversity in this distribution indicates that there is varied age difference amongst the parents thus bringing in diversity in views on early childhood education.

Table 4.2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Parents' Preferences across Eight Dimensions (N = 150)

Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Teaching and Learning Methods	4.15	0.60
Learning Environment	4.27	0.57
Teacher Qualification and Competence	4.33	0.54
Teacher Child Interaction and Care	4.29	0.56
Educational Facilities and Resources	4.10	0.63
Child Development Outcomes	4.38	0.51
Parental Involvement and Engagement	4.18	0.59
Overall Perception of Quality ECE	4.22	0.58

Table 4.2 provides the mean scores, the standard deviations of the preferences of the parents to quality education at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level in eight dimensions. The average level of parental agreement is measured by the mean values and the standard deviations show the level of variability in the responses of parents. In the case of the dimension of Teaching and Learning Methods, it has a mean of 4.15 and a standard deviation of 0.60. It is high because it shows that parents do agree that there are effective teaching and learning strategies including play-based, activity based and child-centered that are important in the ECE level. The standard deviation demonstrates that the responses are moderate, indicating that although the majority of parents are on an agreement, there are differences in the intensity of the statements. The learning Environment dimension score means 4.27 and standard deviation of 0.57. This increased average indicates a high parental concurrence on the significance of safe, clean and enabling learning environment amongst young children. The standard deviation was also fairly small, which suggests that parents had rather similar answers, which proves that they shared the opinion

concerning the importance of the learning environment at ECE level.

Teacher Qualification and Competence dimension registered a mean score of 4.33 with a standard deviation of 0.54. This finding is indicative of the fact that parents hold a high value on the professional qualification, training, and competence of teachers in early childhood education. The low standard deviation depicts high agreement among parents that means that the majority of respondents always appreciate the value of qualified teachers as another element of quality ECE. In the case of Teacher-Child Interaction and Care, the standard deviation of the mean is 0.56 and the mean is equal to 4.29. The high mean value shows that the parents value highly the essence of caring, supportive and positive relationships between the teacher and children. The standard deviation indicates a reasonably stable reaction, which may outline parents, as being concerned with the emotional and social condition of kids at the ECE stage. Educational Facilities and Resources dimension have a standard deviation of 0.63 with a mean score of 4.10. Even though this area has the lowest mean of the eight, it still reflects high levels of parental consensus when it comes to the need to have proper facilities, learning material, and play equipment. The standard deviation is higher than others, indicating a small difference in the views of parents, who may have access to facilities differently, depending on the learning environment. The dimension with the greatest mean score was that of the Child Development Outcomes at 4.38 and standard deviation of 0.51. This observation suggests that parents have the firm conviction that high quality ECE is a key factor when it comes to the development of children in terms of cognition, social, emotional, and language growth. The small standard deviation portrays a high degree of agreement among the parents concerning the developmental outcomes of early childhood education. The mean score and standard deviation in the dimension Parental Involvement and Engagement are 4.18 and 0.59 respectively. This finding confirms that the parents tend to be in agreement on the significance of their participation in early childhood education and communication with teachers as well as their involvement in educational decisions. The mean standard deviation is moderate which implies that there is certain difference in the degree in which parents feel prepared or inclined to be engaged.

The overall perception of quality ECE dimension has a mean of 4.22 and standard deviation which is 0.58. The high mean shows that parents have a high overall positive quality education perception at ECE level. The standard deviation indicates that there are consistent responses of parents implying that they share a common belief in the value and importance of quality early childhood education. All in all, the findings revealed in Table 4.2 reflect the fact that parents attach great importance to quality education at the Early Childhood Education level in all the eight dimensions. All means scores are above 4.00 which implies high degree of agreement and the standard deviations are relatively small, which demonstrates consistency in parental perceptions. These results confirm that parents attach an extensive value to academic and developmental issues of early childhood education.

Table 4.3: Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Graduated and Non-Graduated Parents

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Teaching and Learning Methods	Graduated	78	4.30	0.52	3.20	.002
	Non-Graduated	72	4.00	0.65		
Learning Environment	Graduated	78	4.40	0.48	3.45	.001
	Non-Graduated	72	4.12	0.61		
Teacher Qualification and Competence	Graduated	78	4.47	0.45	3.95	.000

	Non-Graduated	72	4.18	0.60		
Teacher Child Interaction and Care	Graduated	78	4.42	0.50	3.60	.001
	Non-Graduated	72	4.14	0.62		
Educational Facilities and Resources	Graduated	78	4.22	0.58	2.75	.007
	Non-Graduated	72	3.97	0.68		
Child Development Outcomes	Graduated	78	4.55	0.43	4.10	.000
	Non-Graduated	72	4.20	0.58		
Parental Involvement and Engagement	Graduated	78	4.32	0.53	3.10	.003
	Non-Graduated	72	4.03	0.64		
Overall Perception of Quality ECE	Graduated	78	4.36	0.50	3.40	.001
	Non-Graduated	72	4.07	0.63		

Table 4.3 indicates the outcomes of the independent-samples t-test that was used to compare the preferences of the graduated and non-graduated parents with regard to quality education level at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level according to eight dimensions. The table reports group sizes (N), means scores, standard deviations, t-values and the p-values under each dimension with which there is a detailed comparison of the two groups.

In the case of the dimension of Teaching and Learning Methods, there was higher mean score (M = 4.30, SD = 0.52) of graduated parents (N = 78) than of non-graduated parents (N = 72). The larger mean value signifies the fact that the parents who had graduated expressed greater levels of agreement with the significance of the play-based instructional method, the activity-based instructional method, and the child-centered approach to the teaching methods. The t-value received is 3.20 which represents a significant difference between the two groups, and the p-value (.002) will be less than the significant level of 0.05 which will show that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups.

The dimension of Learning Environment, the means of the graduated parents were 4.40 with standard deviation 0.48 and the means of non-graduated parents were 4.12 with standard deviation 0.61. The reduced standard deviation in the parents of the graduates implies that they have a higher degree of consistency in their answers. The t-value of 3.45 was used to show that there is a significant difference between the groups and the p-value (.001) shows that the difference in preferences between two groups is statistically significant.

In terms of Teacher Qualification and Competence, the mean score produced by the graduated parents was 4.47 (SD = 0.45) and the non-graduated parents had a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.60). This reflects that graduated parents are more concerned with the training of the teachers, their professionalism and expertise in teaching. T-value of 3.95 is quite high indicating a high difference between the groups and the p-value (.000) is used

to confirm this difference is very statistically significant. Graduated parents reported a mean score of 4.42 (SD = 0.50) in the dimension of Teacher-Child Interaction and Care, whereas, the non-graduated parents were reported to have reported a 4.14 (SD = 0.62) mean score. The distinction implies that more emphasis is made upon emotional support, caring behavior, and positive teacher-children interaction in graduated parents. The difference between the groups is evident as the t-value is 3.60, which is the number indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups, whereas the p-value (.001) also illustrates the statistically significant difference between the groups.

In the case of Educational Facilities and Resources, the average of graduated parents was 4.22(SD=0.58) and non-graduated parents = 3.97(SD=0.68). Granted, where both of the groups proved to be in agreement as far as the significance of facilities and resources are concerned, graduated parents showed a more favorable inclination. The t -value of 2.75 shows moderate difference in the groups, with p-value (.007) being significant to show that the difference is statistically significant. The dimension of Child Development Outcomes showed the highest mean score of all dimensions among the graduated parents (M = 4.55, SD = 0.43), and the mean score of 4.20 among the non-graduated ones (SD = 0.58). This finding indicates that the graduated parents are more convinced that ECE contributes to the cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. The t-value was also high (4.10), meaning that there was a significant difference in the two populations; and the p-value (.000) was low, showing that it is highly significant.

Regarding Parental Involvement and Engagement, the mean score among the graduated parents was 4.32 (SD = 0.53) versus the mean score of 4.03 (SD = 0.64) among non-graduated parents. It implies that the involvement in early childhood education, communication with the teacher, and taking part in making educational decisions are more important to the graduated parents. The t-value of 3.10 shows that there is a significant difference and the p-value (.003) is evidence of the differences being statistically significant. Lastly, in the case of the Overall Perception of Quality ECE there was a mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.50) on the report with graduated parents and a mean score of 4.07 (SD =0.63) on the report with non-graduated parents. This implies that the parents who are already graduated have a more powerful general view concerning the significance of quality education at the ECE. The t value of the 3.40 represents an evident difference of the two groups and the p-value (.001) demonstrates that the difference is statistically significant. The findings in Table 4.3 show that the means scores of quality education in all the eight dimensions of ECE level were higher among graduated parents in all instances. The statistically significant p-values of all dimensions imply that the level of education of parents has an important role to follow regarding preferences towards quality early childhood education.

Findings and Discussion

The research indicate that parents in the District Bagh, Azar Jammu and Kashmir value high the significance of offering quality education to their children at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level of education. The use of eight dimensions in analysis revealed that parents had strong preferences regarding quality education with all the mean scores being above.400 based on a five-point Likert scale. It means that parents, as a group, have a relatively positive observation of the importance of early childhood education and demonstrates that they understand the vital role this practice has in the development of children in general. The parents offered a special appreciation to successful teaching and learning practices, learning conditions, trained teachers and positive teacher-children relationships meaning that parents would rather see quality education as a multidimensional concept and not from one viewpoint.

Among the most noticeable ones, the study shows that the outcomes of child development became the most valued one. In the opinion of parents, good ECE was pivotal to the cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic growth and development of the children and a successor in further academic performance of the former. This observation can be confirmed by the current research that puts an emphasis on early childhood education as a critical time in the brain development and lifelong learning process. The high focus on developmental outcomes among parents implies that they do not think of education at the early level only as a preparation of the later formal schooling, however, they see the process of early learning as whole and thus being able to form personality, behaviors, and learning skills of children.

Findings also show that the teacher factors, such as teacher qualification, professional competence, teacher and child interaction were highly placed by the parents. There was a high level of agreement between parents that quality education in the ECE level requires trained, experienced, and caring teachers. This result confirms previous research which determines teacher quality as one of the most relevant measures that determine good early childhood education. The preferences of parents indicate the conviction that teachers are important in enhancing the learning, emotional as well as social competencies of children at the early years. The other notable conclusion is the focus given by parents on the learning environment and methods of teaching. Parents favored secure, uncorrupted, and nurturing learning conditions and play based and activity based teaching methods that suit young children. This implies that parents know what to do on a developmentally appropriate practice and understand that children learn well in terms of interaction, play, and exploration. These preferences are aligned with modern education views that promote the use of child-centeredness in early childhood education. The comparison analysis with respect to the education level of the parents showed the statistically significant differences in all the eight dimensions of quality education. The mean scores recorded by graduated parents were always higher in comparison with non-graduate parents which implies that there were better preferences in quality education at the ECE level.

This implies that, the formal education of the parents is influential in developing the perception and expectation that they have towards early childhood education. Graduate parents can be more exposed to educational ideas and knowledge on child development that can contribute positively to the knowledge of the quality indicator in early education. Even though even the preferences of non-graduated parents indicated the presence of positive perceptions towards quality education, their mean scores were also relatively lower which could be ascribed to the lack of access to information, socioeconomic factors or a lack of opportunities to take control over the formal educational systems. This observation does not mean that the parents do not care about the education of their children, however, the effects of the surrounding factors on parental perceptions are emphasized. These findings underscore the importance of awareness and parental guidance programs in order to help every parent to learn how to access good early childhood education.

Conclusions

According to the results and findings of the research, it can be concluded that parents of District Bagh, Azar Jammu and Kashmir attach a lot of value in giving quality education to their children at the Early Childhood Education (ECE) level. It is revealed that parents had high preferences to quality education on all the dimensions reviewed meaning that they were very much aware of the importance of education during the early childhood in the cognitive growth, social growth, emotional growth, and language growth of children. This is indicated by the consistently high mean scores which are a result of parental acknowledgment of ECE as a preliminary phase to subsequent academic achievement and lifelong learning. According to the study, the quality ECE results have the greatest value among parents in terms of complete child development.

This proves that parents are aware that early education is not only basic and it is very important in terms of the comprehensive growth of children. Moreover, parents insisted greatly on the significance of teacher qualification and competency, good teacher-child relationship, as well as, facilitating learning settings, which implied that quality of education at ECE would be considered as an amalgamation of effective teaching strategies, competence, and nurturing care. The additional notable conclusion made as a result of the study is that the educational level of parents has a great determining factor in their preference regarding quality education at the ECE level. Graduated parents also portrayed more preferences in all dimensions than non- graduated parents.

This means that increased education qualifies a parent to be more informed about quality of indicators that characterize early childhood education as well as formulates their expectations as far as teaching strategies, learning conditions, and developmental achievement are concerned. Non-graduated parents expressed their positive preference in the study, however, it also indicates that they are concerned about the education of their children despite being aware of or informed differently. The paper concludes that parents are the most important stakeholders in the early

childhood education and their preferences should be taken into account during designing and delivering ECE programs. Such disparities in parental awareness and offering informed parental participation in the process could help in enhancing the effectiveness and quality of education during early childhood in Azar Jammu and Kashmir.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and to address parents' preferences in District Bagh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

- It is recommended that awareness programs and parental education sessions be organized to enhance parents' understanding of quality indicators in early childhood education. Such programs should focus on the importance of play-based learning, child development outcomes, and positive teacher–child interactions, particularly targeting parents with lower educational backgrounds to bridge the awareness gap.
- Teacher training and professional development should be strengthened to ensure the availability of qualified and competent ECE teachers. Regular in-service training programs should be introduced to enhance teachers' knowledge of child-centered teaching methods, classroom management, and emotional support for young children, as parents strongly value teacher competence and care.
- Policymakers and educational authorities should prioritize the improvement of learning environments at the ECE level. This includes ensuring safe, clean, and child-friendly classrooms, reducing class sizes where possible, and providing adequate learning materials and play resources to support holistic child development.
- Schools and ECE centers should promote active parental involvement and engagement by establishing effective communication channels between parents and teachers. Regular parent–teacher meetings, workshops, and feedback mechanisms can help parents participate more actively in their children's early education and align educational practices with parental expectations.
- Efforts should be made to improve access to quality ECE, particularly for families facing socioeconomic constraints. Government and private stakeholders should collaborate to reduce financial barriers and ensure equitable access to quality early childhood education services across the region.
- Future research is recommended to explore additional factors influencing parental preferences, such as socioeconomic status, occupation, and cultural influences, using larger and more diverse samples. Such studies would provide deeper insights and support the development of context-specific strategies to enhance the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education.

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