

PARENTS' CHOICES OF PRESCHOOL FOR THEIR CHILDREN: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Various issues need to be taken into consideration by parents when choosing preschool for their children. Looking at the choice of modern parents towards preschools and why they do it makes the problem that requires a study need to be done. Therefore, this situation has become our main objective to examine the issues and challenges in preschool education in Malaysia and suggests recommendation to enhance quality. This is a preliminary study involving a purposive sample of 50 involving preschool providers, teachers, university lecturers, postgraduate and undergraduate students who have completed their practicum in preschool. The data was obtained through a roundtable focus group discussion. The findings of the study indicate several pertinent issues involving the main factors that influence parents' choice of preschools are types of preschool and institutional factors such as curriculum, branding, private-run institutions, safety and security, quality of teaching and English medium and religion-based preschools are the preferred preschools chosen by the parents. Thus, this study has implications for the emerging trends and implications for preschool education in Malaysia in the future. Recommendations are forwarded to enhance the quality of preschool and early Child Care and Education.

Key words: Preschool, Public, Private

1. Introduction

Many issues need to be addressed by parents when choosing a preschool for their children. It should be noted, it involves the design to get all the benefits and achievements of the future of their children and the amount of costs to be paid. Parents as manager of the family are responsible for the family organization's success or failure (Robbins & Coulter, 2005). In 2003, the Ministry of Education implemented the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English at primary and secondary level. This causes parents to distract by looking for a preschool that prepares English proficiency for their children. This resulted in many preschools that stress the teaching of English to bloom. Branded preschools and the branding of preschools also began to gain popularity. However, besides language there are many other factors that influence parents' decision in the selection of preschools for their children. With increased kidnapping and violence against children, safety is a key issue for parents. The advancement of information technology that allows easy access to materials that are not extinguished through the internet and the narrower societies exposed to external influences adds Malaysian parents fearing the moral and religious values of their children.

This phenomenon is among many other issues in which this study will be reviewed among parents to determine which has an influence on their preference for preschools for their children. Most parents are dilemmas when choosing preschool for their children. Parents need to consider many factors and determine their priorities (Robbins and Coulter, 2005). Parents have different educational beliefs and perceptions which influence the choice of preschool for their children. There are also constraints that may force a parent to choose a preschool that is less preferred, because of availability and affordability. Some parents could be persuaded by promising claims made by marketing propaganda such as advertisements and brand names. If the various factors could be identified it would be helpful for parents to decide on a preschool of choice for their children. With the change in consumer patterns, the traditional pre-school operators lose their market for children's education franchise childhood and modern branded with "curriculum" imported.

Studies on the choice of modern parents preschools and why they choose them will allow preschool operators to understand and meet their consumers' needs and wants. Preschools with marketing strategies that strive to provide more value than their competitors need to study the option of the parents, their needs and requirements in order to maintain customer loyalty. According to Hawkins et al (2007), satisfied customers are profitable in the long run, which is why it is very important for preschool businesses to meet the needs of both parents and children. Many previous studies focusing on aspects such as pre-school institutions and performance of teaching strategies, nutrition and child psychology, but none who studies the link between preschool institutions and characteristics of consumer behavior of parents and children.

This study will fill this research gap by studying the issues and challenges that occur in current preschool education and pomegranate parents to choose the best preschool for their children. Until recently, most of the research and studies on preschools focus on relationships between preschool education quality and child outcomes. This study aims to identify the behaviour patterns of parents as consumers of preschools and early childhood education. This research surveys parents decision making, expectations and the criteria parents will look for in choosing preschools for their children taking into consideration the many issues faced by Malaysian parents today. This preliminary study also examined the influence of geographical location, background, socio-demographic and socio-economic status of parents and is also

discussed along with equity and their right as a Malaysian citizen. Therefore, the research objectives for this study were identified as follows:

- to identify the factors that influence parents decision to enroll their children in a chosen pre-schools.
- to identify the critical issues and challenges that influence the parents' choice of preschool

The following research questions were formulated based on the research objectives:

- What are the factors that parents look for in deciding the choice of preschool for their children?
- What are the critical issues and challenges that influence the parents' choice of preschool

2. Literature Review

Early childhood education for children aged 4-6 years comes under three ministries, i.e. the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development; and the Department of National Unity. The pioneer in the setting up of preschools is the Ministry of Rural Development which began in the early 1970's. There are currently 8307 preschools set up by this ministry which are commonly known as the KEMAS preschool. KEMAS preschools are located in rural or suburban areas and are set up based on requests by local authorities.

Under the Department of National Unity, PERPADUAN preschools were established in urban areas where 'RukunTetangga' (a friendly neighbourhood scheme) existed. At present, there are 1496 PERPADUAN preschools. In 1992, the Ministry of Education (MOE) started setting up preschools as an annex to existing primary schools through a pilot project. This was extended to the entire nation in 1993 and currently, there are about 5905 of such preschools. Other providers of preschool education include also the State Religious Department and ABIM (AngkatanBelia Islam Malaysia).

In 2003, MOE set the National Preschool Curriculum which all preschools, public and private are required to follow. The National Preschool Curriculum is based on the principles of Rukun Negara and the National Philosophy of Education; and aims to develop the following skills in children:

- Social skills
- Intellectual skills
- Physical skills
- Spiritual skills
- Aesthetic values (Creativity and Appreciation)

2.1 Categories of Preschool Providers

According to Rosmah (2009) Malaysia has three Ministries involved in the early childhood education, namely Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, as well as Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister Department. Preschool education is focusing for the 4 - 6 years old group. However, preschool also can be set up by the private sector and today it has been seen as an alternative to give quality education to children especially by affordable parents.

2.1.1 Ministry of Education Preschools

Preschools are set up by MOE to increase accessibility to preschool education for families with very low income in sub-urban, rural and remote areas. Eighty per cent of such preschools are built in rural areas as an annex to existing public primary schools and caters to children from the age of 5 years. MOE also provides the following subsidies:

- A daily allocation of RM1.50 every school day per child for food prepared by the school.
- An annual allocation of RM100.00 per child for learning materials. As each preschool class can receive up to 25 children, that means the school can receive up to RM2,500 per year for the purchase of teaching and learning materials.

Through the National Education Act 1996 (Akta Pendidikan Kebangsaan 1996 - Akta 550, 2005) preschool education was officially declared part of the school system. All public and private preschools/kindergartens are required to implement the National Preschool Curriculum formulated through the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education (effective January 2003).

The implementation of any additional curriculum by private preschools requires permission from the Head of Registrar, MOE. There is no restriction on the medium of instruction used at any registered preschool but the national language must be taught as a subject. Public preschools require a minimum of 10 children aged 4-6 years to start a class. MOE aims to set up a preschool at every national primary school in the future.

2.1.2 KEMAS Preschools

KEMAS preschools are set up by the Department of Community Development (Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat) of the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development to provide preschool education to children aged 4- 6 years, particularly those from families with very low income. Classes are conducted at the community halls (rented or provided free), housing estates, private property, shophouses (rented) or at premises built by the Ministry.

Each enrolment requires a minimum of 10 children per class and a maximum of 30 is allowed. The operation of KEMAS preschools is funded by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. Every child receives RM1.50 per day for food and RM100 per year for learning materials. An additional food allowance of RM150.00 per year is given to very poor families.

KEMAS preschools have been using the National Preschool Curriculum since 2003 and emphasises on reading, writing and arithmetic, developing individual potential, instilling moral values, building character and self-awareness; and developing physical, health, cleanliness and safety skills.

2.1.3 PERPADUAN Preschools

PERPADUAN preschools are set up by the Department of National Unity and Integration. They were first set up in 1976 beginning with 25 classes in urban and suburban areas, specifically in areas with 'Skim Rukun Tetangga' - a 'friendly neighbour' scheme.

Each preschool class has a Preschool Coordinating Committee made up of members of the local community who provide advice on the operation of the preschool and organise various

activities for parents. PERPADUAN preschools are established with the objective of nurturing unity values at an early stage so that children will love their country and adapt themselves to live harmoniously in a multi-racial community. PERPADUAN preschools have been using the National Preschool Curriculum since 2003. The aims of PERPADUAN preschools are:

- To nurture and foster the spirit of harmony, neighbourhood spirit, unity and nationality among children of different races
- To inculcate positive spiritual and moral values in the children's everyday lives thus creating perfect personalities and characters to become good and valuable family members
- To encourage a comprehensive, integrated and balanced development in children aged 5 and 6 years via informal learning processes - "learning through play"
- To strengthen relations and cultivate unity among parents and the community through the PERPADUAN Preschool Coordinating Committee and co-curricular activities.

Classes are conducted at community halls (rented or free of charge), housing estates, private property, shophouses (rented) or built by the Ministry. Each enrolment requires a minimum of 20 children and a maximum of 35 children is allowed. The classes are funded by the Department of National Unity and Integration which also provides a daily allocation of RM1.50 per child for food and RM100.00 yearly for learning materials.

2.1.4 Preschool Education for Children with Special Needs

Preschool education for children with special needs come under the Ministry of Education which is in charge of programs for special schools and special integrated primary schools for children; and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development which is responsible for implementing other special programs.

In 2000, existing special schools started an early intervention program on their own initiative for children aged 4-6 years. In 2003, MOE approved the conversion of these early intervention programs at 28 special schools to preschool programs for children with special needs. The 28 programs consist of 22 for the hearing impaired, 5 for the visually impaired and 1 for those with learning disabilities.

The Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development run programs for severely disabled children with the aim of enhancing their quality of life in line with the National Welfare Policy and National Social Policy. Special grants are also given to NGOs that help run these special programs for children below 4 years old.

2.1.5 Preschools Operated by Private Sectors and NGOs

Preschools operated by the private sector complement the government's efforts in providing quality education to children aged 4-6 years. These preschools are required to adopt the National Preschool Curriculum as stipulated in the National Education Act 1996. The medium of instruction at these preschools ranges from Malay language to Chinese, Tamil or English. The curriculum emphasizes on communication and social skills that prepare the children for primary (formal) education. Additional programs offered must be approved by MOE. The fees for a private preschool range from RM20 to RM1000 per month.

3. Methodology

This is a preliminary study involving a purposive sample of 50 involving preschool providers, teachers, university lecturers, postgraduate and undergraduate students who have completed their practicum in preschool. The data was obtained through a roundtable focus group discussion. In the discussion session the participants were asked to participate in a round table discussion where the session was to get their views on issues and challenges in education at preschool. The qualitative data was collected through discussion is noted using coding [Group]. The round table was conducted and sponsored by the Department of Early Childhood Education, Sultan Idris Education University. The focus group discussion was guided by the open-ended questions "What are the issues and challenges faced by preschool children and preschool education affecting quality? Each group discusses the same questions at the same time as other groups. At the end of the discussion each group responses were tabulated and emerging themes were identified in the following domains: (a) issues related to parental choice (b) preschool curriculum and related issues (c) preschool management (d) teaching and learning (e) parental involvement.

4. Result

4.1 Round 1: Parents' Choice of Preschool?

Dalam round 1 the respondents were asked melontarkan idea dan pandangan mengenai factors that influence the parents to make decision in choosing preschool that they preferred.

(a) Parents' decision to choose a particular type of pre-school is influenced by a variety of factors

- [Group 1] "The impact of a good branding strategy on consumer memory can be long lasting and almost permanent. Branded pre-school names like Montessori and Smarts Reader have stuck on the memory of their customers, especially Malaysian parents." "Some parents have a trust towards private branded preschool such as Little Caliph, Al-Baghadadi, Pasti and so on because the institutions provide teaching in English and Islamic education."
- [Group 2] "Parents send their children to same pre-school as their elder children used to attend, because of satisfaction, image and the the teachers are friendly to young children and treated them like family members."
- [Group 3] "Some parents will prioritize these things first before registering their children the safety and security, quality of teaching, hygiene and cleanliness, religious value and qualified teachers."
- [Group 4] "Other things that parents are concern are transportation provided, distance from home to school and fees."

4.2 Round 2: Preschool Curriculum

The feedback indicates a need to learn more languages to be seen as a global player in the future.

- [Group 1] "Children need to learn a third language. In order to compete at the international level, the child must be multilingual with English, Korean or Japanese and their native language."
- [Group 2] "Yes, we need two or more languages: French and English is essential to communicate effectively."
- [Group 3] "Malay preschool children become Muslims to learn Arabic, and younger ones start to be better." (R3)

- [Group 4]"Children need to be exposed to many languages other than the mother tongue. Therefore, create multilingual at preschool."
- (b) The issue of importance is the curriculum orientation as described below:
- [Group 1]"Preschools have to promote overall and holistic child development; Children need to be encouraged to participate in various sports and schools club. "
 - [Group 2] "The curriculum should emphasized on value and the appearance of personality that seems to be visible more curriculum is hidden."
 - [Group 3]"Each stakeholder needs to understand the role of teachers, community leaders, and parents in developing quality preschool education. They need to be given opportunities to discuss issues regarding the curriculum and the making the curriculum alive."
 - [Group 4]"There is a need to ensure co-curricular activities prepared to develop the ability and talent of every child Today preschools try to produce super-kids and they become like a robot in learning. There is too much focus on academic study while the preschool level should be implemented and learn by exploration. "
- (c) The response also revealed that the curriculum should be pragmatic and global in nature such as:
- [Group 1] "The curriculum has to impose higher orders thinking skills to prepare children for the future. Children should be able to make a cause and cause problems solving. I think most of the pre-schoolers in the city are under pressure academic achievement in Mathematics and English. "
 - [Group 2] "The curriculum needs to include knowledge about Malaysia, Asia and the world and not limited to learn about Malaysia only."
 - [Group 3] "Preschool children should master cognitive skills problem solving, creative thinking skills. Of course we need young thinker "
 - [Group 4] "The curriculum must comply the global skills such as ICT skills and higher order thinking skills, including conflict resolution."

4.3 Round 3: Issues on Management

Response on monitoring highlighted the need to have accurate surveillance of quality of preschools and self-assessment of teachers

- [Group 1]"We need to increase staff to run adequate supervision at preschool centres. Although the government sets the requirements to carry out the National Standard Preschool Curriculum as a guideline we have no way monitor whether this instruction has been complied with because there are too many preschool centres and less supervisor."
- [Group 2] "There is a need to get feedback from every stakeholders in the community about quality preschool education in urban and rural areas."
- [Group 3]"Preschool teachers are their leaders in Malaysia preschool centre. Therefore, there is a need to develop a strong leadership skills and self-reflection and self-assessment."
- [Group 4]"Parents should also be actively involved in providing feedback on the quality of preschool children attending. "

4.4 Round 4: Teaching-Learning in Preschool Classroom

Response on the efficiency of teachers in teaching and learning. The climate is also recorded that surrounds some aspects including career path, lack of menteachers and teaching competencies

- [Group 1] "Preschool teachers with skills in English are indispensable. Teachers have no confidence to communicate in English. "
- [Group 2] "How can a preschool teacher model be good? When they cannot use it without any mistake. "
- [Group 3] "Some teachers do not know how to integrate the theory into practice: when asked about premise theories relating to activities they cannot get from what they call"
- [Group 4] "In certain academic-oriented centres certain classes are more teachers directed than centralized children; when teachers ask to ensure basic skills are transferred without losing time and children are paying attention"
- [Group 1] "Why are there so few male preschool teachers? Males should be encouraged to teach such pre-schoolers that they can model male behaviour."
- [Group 4] "Classes in preschool centres are usually a group of ages and do not meet mixed abilities. Children with special needs are not included in the normal preschools due to administrative reasons."
- [Group 3] "Preschool teachers need to teach a variety of approaches in preschool classes; although there is also need creativity in teaching using a variety method to avoid boredom and bad response from children."
- [Group 2] "Academic qualifications of preschool teachers are still not up to the mark; the government aspires to all preschool teachers to university graduates and obtain their diplomas by 2020; but it remains to be seen."
- [Group 1] "Indeed, most preschool teachers have the intrinsic motivation to teach children; however, they also need job satisfaction and begin to compare with their peers."
- [Group 3] "The integration of ICT in teaching and learning needs to be realized."

4.5 Round 5: Educational Philosophy and Value

The impression of philosophy has been given in relation to national unity, diversity and gaps between lucky and disadvantaged presidents.

- [Group 1] "As Malaysia is multiracial and as a national unity, it is important that regardless of the preschool type there must be a curriculum designed for interaction among all ethnic groups. "
- [Group 2] "What is being emulated and implemented by the government like RIMUP is praiseworthy; however, there should be a more systematic and concrete effort to integrate ethnic groups in the preschool center."
- [Group 3] "Philosophy of childhood in Malaysia must ensure the unity of the nation and the integration and respect for all cultures." "Although there is a curriculum difference between basic preschools universal features how children learn cannot be neglected or side-by-side."
- [Group 4] "The government is ambitious of 100% quality preschool by 2025; hence the gap between rich and poor preschools needs to be studied and the gaps reduced at that time."
- [Group 2] "The National Preschool Philosophy needs to address the issue of developing world-class preschool centers. We have to make free preschool attendance

and compulsory for all. We need to create multilingualism as compulsory features of the preschool program. We should ensure the spirit of 1 Malaysia is inculcated accordingly.”

4.6 Round 6: Education for all and Equal Right

Education for all viewed very high are important for social justice and are affected by many factors

- [Group 1] "There is still a gap between preschool schools in rural and urban areas: lack of preschool facilities in rural areas compared to cities:” There is a drive to reach infrastructure requirements by 2015 like access to the internet"
- [Group 2] "Preschool attendance is not 100%; at the moment only 60% have the opportunity to attend preschool."
- [Group 3] "Various groups need to be well adapted to preschools, including Down's Syndrome, mentally retarded, autistic and slow learner."
- [Group 4] "Street children and children without their home have no place to go; they have no chance of going to school because of their status."
- [Group 1] "Preschools vary across states, according to gender and socio-economic status and location."

4.7 Round 7: Partnership/Parent Involvement

Parental involvement response indicates a more meaningful role of parents in preschool schools education.

- [Group 1] "There is a need to improve parental education as parents are partners in educating their children. However parents are busy with their work and have no time to focus on their children preschool or parents are too shy to come forward."
- [Group 1] "Are all preschool centres educating parents on curriculum followed by preschool? It appeared only a school of preschool of rich parent."
- [Group 1] "Parental involvement is limited to involving themselves in the field; donating to buy props for concerts and cake making bread for parents day nothing is more meaningful."
- [Group 1] "Parents need to voice feedback to make sure preschool is improving its program continuously."
- [Group 1] "More males need to take part in Parents-Teacher Conference "" Why males are not interested to teach at preschool school?"

5. Discussion and Suggestion

The findings revealed the issues and challenges of preschool education in Malaysia. The findings show the issues around both macro and micro levels and are closely linked to the important areas of education. Therefore, the problems or issues mentioned need to be addressed for improvement delivery of preschool education for the betterment of its services. Issues also indicated the need to reflect and improve preschool management. There must be a need to assess preschool scenarios in all components both formative and summarized. There is also a need for higher teacher quality and upgrading of teacher professionalism. All preschool teachers should be graduates to be seen as credible and knowledgeable.

Programs that need to be improved by providing quality early learning for children, home visiting and early literacy families of programs that require funding and coordinated support. The aspiration to put Malaysia into a world of quality education requires teacher

training to state teacher qualifications and proficiency in English Language and a world class preschool teacher training involving the universities.

To end our discussion of issues and challenges, researchers cite some previous studies for our comparison with this study. Among them are:

- 84.0 % chose Branded Preschools as opposed to non-branded preschools (13.6%) as in Zainurin&MohdSabri(2011). Brand image perceptions directly affect customer loyalty as in a study done by Lily Muliana& Mohamed Nor (2013).
- 71.6 % of participating parents chose English Medium preschool and 27.8% parents chose Malay Medium because of English as a global language and research medium as in (Zainurin&MohdSabri, 2011).
- Out of 162 Malay parents in a study done by Zainurin&MohdSabri(2011), 95.1% parents decided on Islamic-based preschool as their choice of preschool for their children. Teaching children religion is reckoned as one of the most important aspects of family life and is primarily the responsibility of parents as in (Norfaezah et al., 2017). Knowledge (Ilm') is one of the most fundamental and powerful concepts of Islam, the absolute source of knowledge and the judge of validity is the Qur'an as in (Paezah&Faridah, 2017).
- A parent must ask himself or herself what kind of approach will work best for their child. Some children flourish in a school that allows them independence to choose their daily activities. Other children will simply be bored. Most of the private preschool enriched with variety educational program as in Safani et al., (2016).
- Currently, parents settle with preschool that provide transport to their children because they do not have the time, the mean and most of all, it is safer. Nevertheless, parents living in rural or semi-rural areas, as there is in reality, no practical alternative to sending their child to the local preschool which is very far from their house or village as in Anna Christina (2009).
- Teacher should friendly to young children and treated them like family members. The results from regression analysis showed quality of teaching and qualified teachers are predictors for the choice of a branded preschool. This result is consistent with the observation made by Jensen & Hannibal (2000) that high quality preschool programs are associated with well-trained and qualified teachers.
- It was found that 52.5 % of the participating parents chose a private-run preschool compared to a Government-run preschool (44.4%) for their children. The trust given by parents to private-run preschools due to their business strategy and game plan that keep upgrading their facilities and services to maintain their competitiveness and market niche (Thomson et al., 2008).

6. Conclusion

This study has identified some of the problems that have become issues and challenges for preschool education in Malaysia. Therefore, policy makers and practitioners as well preschool providers at all levels of society should be collaborate to address the underlying problems. Indeed, there were several restraining forces mentioned that may impact on the quality of preschool delivery. We are aware that the aspirations of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 can be given as a guide and motivate the transforming power of the ideal cannot be achieved or be solved without a comprehensive plan of action to correct the situation in preschool. Preschool education in Malaysia is mentioned in this regard learn. Also,

conversations about quality always have to be done emphasizing that quality programs include parental involvement and healthy psychological wellbeing and safe environment. This study is still limited and it is expected that similar future studies should start with more in-depth analysis about the preschool scenario in Malaysia.

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