



A Study on Factors Influencing Parents' Choice of Preschool Education in Malaysia

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This study investigates the factors that influence parents' decision on which preschool for their children to enter. Responses from parents are discussed in a qualitative method through unstructured interview. The result clearly indicates that preschools which provide a better environment are chosen by educated parents with middle to high socioeconomic status. The respondents that were studied were sampled from parents at a private preschool in the Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. The findings indicated that there were five factors parents reflect on when making choices for their children to enter preschool. These five factors are: programme, location, school fees, teachers' qualities and school environment influence on the parents' choice. The findings also show that most parents gave good feedback and were satisfied with the preschool administration. It is recommended that future study should focus more on how the preschool teaching and learning method can be improved. This is in order to help parents to get better results, interest and motivate them to value the contribution of preschool towards their children knowledge and learning.

Key words: *Preschool, Preschool Education, Preschool Education Factors.*

Introduction

Parents' decisions to enrol in a preschool for their children is a tough one because it is very personal. Sometime parents feel anxious about the decision as they focus more on their children's development and future achievement. In Malaysia, the early childhood centres all over the country, especially in urban areas are growing very fast. This is due to high demand from parents, public awareness and from the government. As the education industry grows



parallel with the increase of the child population in Malaysia, competition among preschool operators becomes more intense. Preschool operators have been promoting their schools in many ways to attract parents to enrol their children in their schools. The establishment of preschool is to provide early child an education program from age 4 to 6 years (Lili Muliana Mustafa & Azman, 2013; Ceylan & Aslan 2018). According to the Law of Malaysia Education Act 1996 (Act 550), preschool education refers to an educational programme for children from four to six years old (Ministry Education of Malaysia, 2012), however, most Malaysian children start schooling at the age of three. Three to four years old are usually placed in nursery and five to six years old in kindergarten (Triopsakul, 2018).

There are many issues that need to be taken into consideration and parents have to determine their priorities before they can make the decision about which preschool they want to enrol their children in. This includes their desires for their children's future achievement (Beamish & Morey, 2013; Dündar & Koç, 2018), and the cost they have to pay for the education as well as the school teaching approach, and its method (Dahari & Ya, 2011). This will result in the improvement of the school effectiveness, productivity, and ensuring high standards of services which will lead to a higher quality education (Zandi and Haseeb, 2019). Ensure a varied choice of preschools will benefit the preschool operators as well as parents and children (Setamanit, 2018). All preschools are required to use the National Preschool Standard Curriculum 2010 (KSPK) as specified in Malaysian National Education System under the Education Act 1996 (Act 550). The main focus is on the child-centred teaching and learning process. The Standard Curriculum proposed six major teaching and learning approaches which are learning through play, thematic approach, the integrated approach, inquiry and discovery, contextual learning, and project-based learning.

The Malaysian government has made efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education as well as increasing the preschool enrolment rate. Statistics on preschool education from PPPM Year 2014 report shows that 42,866 total numbers of preschool classes were available in Malaysia in 2014. It also indicates that a total of 412,098 preschool children had registered with government preschools and 421,863 children were with private preschools (Ministry Education of Malaysia, 2014). This shows that investment in education has become a parental priority and this has become the reason why many parties are interested in opening private preschools. These preschool operators are trying to capture middle class and the rich families. This led to another question which is why parents are very particular when selecting preschool for their children.

There are various types of preschools available to cater to the various requirements of the parents. Parents can choose to enrol their children in preschools that are set up by both government and non-government agencies, and the private sector. The government agencies



that provide preschool education are the Ministry Education of Malaysia (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW), and the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) under the Prime Minister's Department. These preschools are known as tadika or tabika. Tadika KEMAS under The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKLW) through the Community Development Department (KEMAS) is for low income families in the suburban, rural, and remote areas (National Review Report, 2015).

There are preschools that are run by the Islamic religious organizations and are known as Taski. These Islamic based preschools such as KAFA, and PASTI are managed by Government Islamic Department such as JAKIM (Malaysia Islamic Development Department), State Islamic Religious Department, as well as non-government organization such as Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), and Islamic base political party such as Islamic Party of Malaysia or known as PAS (Ministry Education of Malaysia, 2008).

The private preschools are owned either by individual or organizations. They have to adhere to the National Preschool Standard Curriculum 2010 (KSPK) as specified in the Malaysian National Education System under the Education Act 1996 (Act 550), and must register with the Ministry Education of Malaysia (MOE). Among the well-known preschools are Smart Reader Kids, Q-dees, REAL Kids, Little Caliph, and Genius Aulad.

Early intervention in preschools has been proven to be effective in closing the gap between low and high income group by giving the children from low income family chances to succeed in the education whereby they could get better test scores, higher university graduation rates, higher job secure rates, and higher remunerations (Michie, 2014; Chang'ach, 2018).

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the factors that influence parents' choice of preschools.

Research Question

- What are the factors that influence parents' choice of preschools?

There are many issues that need to be taken into consideration and parents have to determine their priorities before they can make the decision regarding which preschools they want to enrol their children in. This includes their desires for their children's future achievement (Beamish and Morey, 2013), and the cost they have to pay for the education as well as the school teaching approach and its method (Dahari and Ya, 2011). Therefore it is important for



preschool operators to meet the needs of both parents and children in order to attract and retain them as their customer because satisfied customers are profitable in the long term (Dahari and Ya, 2011; Beamish and Morey, 2013). The public and private centers are very different in their goals and how they run their program and centers in many aspects such as teaching and learning, teacher qualifications, teacher---child ratio, curriculum and operation schedule.

Literature Review

Each parent has their own educational believes and preferences (Dahari & Ya, 2011). The variety of school approaches has make it hard for them to select which learning environment is the most suitable for their children since different preschools will work best for different types of students (Zarybnisky, 2010; Chellia, 2018). School choice is a process whereby parents exercise their rights in choosing the schools that they want to send their children to (Lawrence & Mollborn, 2013). Parents search for information as much as possible and evaluate all the available options before they decide which school will be best for their children (Parker, 2007; Chianese, 2018).

There are many factors that parents will consider and which influence their decision. According to Wolfson (2013) there are six areas that parents should consider when choosing a preschool for their children which are location, hours of operation, educational philosophy, teachers' quality and styles, facilities, and their own instinct. Research by Dahari and Ya (2011); Eboh, Abba & Fatoye (2018) on factors that influence parents' choice of preschools education in Malaysia indicates that branded, private, English medium, and religion-based preschool are basically favorable for Malay parents. Apart from these factors, other major factors that influence parents' choice of preschools are safety and security, quality of teaching, and hygiene. In addition, some parents believed that children perception of the preschool should be considered because they have the right to express their views about the place that their parents choose for them (Nobanee, 2018).

According to Rose and Elicker (2008), and Gamble et. al (2009) research on parental decision making about child care elements such as teachers' characteristics (warmth, trustworthy, and supportive), teacher's education level, and play-based curriculum have been considered by parents when describing their preferred preschool. Alsaudi (2016) stated that factors influenced parental decision making are class size (small number of pupils), quality of instruction, and student-teacher relationship. Most of the research has shown that factors that influence parents' choice of preschools are different depending on the parents' background as well as geographical area.



Methodology

The purpose of this study is to have a better understanding of how parents decide on preschools for their children as well as their opinions towards preschool education based on Malaysian culture and education system. After reviewing various sampling techniques used in qualitative research, purposive sampling was chosen for this study. It was based on research judgment which believed that the selected samples have the ability to provide the required data. A total number of seven participants who are parents of children that enrolled in selected preschool participated in the interview. One of the participants is male and six are female. They are mature parents with an age above 36 years old. All of them are Chinese except for two participants; one is Malay and one is Indian.

The interviews were semi-structured, one-on-one with open ended questionnaires. In qualitative research, the information was gathered using descriptive data instead of numerical form. This method is most suitable for this study because it explored and described parents' opinions towards preschool education which are subjective and to collect a wide range of information without limitation of answers. Interview was the main data collection instrument and the data was analyzed thematically.

Analysis

Choosing a preschool for a child can be challenging. All parents want the best for their children. There were several factors that influence the parents' decision on which preschool they want to enrol their children in.

Programme

Most of the participants mentioned programme is as one of the important factors that they will take into consideration before they decided on which preschool to enrol their children in. The following scripts are the evidence.

“For the younger age, actually I more preferred in the playschool. Not too much in the academic. I think the small kids still want some play time for them.” (Madam X)

“..... and he is actually a special need. So basically in Malaysia, there is not a lot of preschool that is ready to except special need kid.” (Madam B)

“.....because I think he is a bit delay.... I think he cannot cope because it is more to academic.....” (Madam F)



Playschool is the example of programme that parents are looking for in a preschool. It is considered as a child-centred approach whereby children can choose the activities that interest them. They learn at their own pace, and lessons are conducted based on their abilities. Parents wanted their children to have fun in school. Apart from that, some of the parents will search for school programmes that can cater for the needs of their children. This is most applicable to parents with special needs children. They believed that their children will not be able to cope with the academic syllabus.

Location

Location was another factor that was taken into consideration before they decided on which preschool to enrol their children in. The location of the school must be very convenient for them and they preferred the school that is nearby to their house. The following scripts are the evidence.

“.....of course the location is very important because young kid I don't want to travel so far in the early morning, rushing.” (Madam X)
“The first thing is as I said is location. Must be convenient, no point for me to travel like from here almost to KL. I mean if I travel, then I come also like so tired.”
(Madam J)

Parents believed young children should not spend long hours on travelling time to school. This might affect the children's mood since they are tired after a long journey. It is also not convenient for children to wake up very early in the morning. Parents need to rush for work in the morning as well.

School fees

Another factor that influences parents' choice of preschool is the school fees. Different types of school have different fees structures. This is based on their programme, the material they provide, and the facilities that they provide. The following scripts are the evidence.

“I will look at the price first of course, because if I can't pay then I means like no matter how good is the school, I think I unable to send my child to the school.” (Madam W)
“.....then the fees if we will be able to pay. Affordable I mean.” (Mr K)



Parents will consider enrolling their children in school if they feel they can afford to pay the school fees. This is generally true about middle-income group parents. They want to get the best education for their children since they have the capabilities to choose. However, since they have budget constraints as well, they need to choose the school for which they can afford to pay the fees.

Teachers' qualities

Staff especially teachers and the school principal also have been among the factors that parents will consider before choosing a preschool for their children. According to research by Rose and Elicker (2008) on parental decision making about child care, elements such as teachers' characteristics (warmth, trustworthy, and supportive), teacher's education level, and play-based curriculum are considered by parents when describing their preferred preschool. This includes the teachers' qualities such as skills, experiences, and attitude. The following scripts are the evidence.

*“.....the principal also is very important. I talk to them I know already.....
the most important thing is how the teachers deliver to the student....
depend on the quality of the teachers. I also see the teacher-student ratio.”*
(Madam J)

*“When I look at the teachers or the principal, I will analyze their
characteristic first.If the school is very good but the teachers don't have
the experience it will be very difficult for them to handle my child.”*
(Madam W)

Parents preferred teachers who have knowledge and ability to control as well as have patience with their children's behaviour. Teacher-child ratios also influence parents' decision making. They want small classes so that teacher can give more attention to each and every child. The school principal is responsible for the management of the school as well as the selection of teachers. They should have knowledge regarding the school curriculum and must be able to convince parents why they need to enrol their children at the school.

School environment

There were parents who will check up on the school environment before they choose a preschool for their children. For them good environment is essential for children. The variety of school approaches makes it hard for them to select which learning environment is the most suitable for their children since different schools will work best for different types of students (Zarybnisky, 2010). School choice is a process whereby parents exercise their rights in



choosing the schools that they want to send their children to (Lawrence & Mollborn, 2013; Cossiga, 2018). The following scripts are the evidence.

“.....then later I will see the school environment.....Then of course the school cleanliness.” (Madam J)

“Of course I find that the environment wise is very suitable and very comfortable and I believe my son will be happy learning here.” (Madam B)

They wanted their children to feel comfortable and happy to go to school. When children are happy, they will not throw tantrums and refuse to go to school. A good environment is welcoming to the children and may include a spacious area, modern equipment and facilities such as an adventure playground. Cleanliness also is very important. Young children are very sensitive. They may fall sick easily and this will also affect their safety and further there are chances that accidents may happen.

Parents usually will gather information from various sources before they make the decision on which preschool they want to enrol their children in. This will guide them to get a clear picture about the school programme and the school location. They get their information mostly from the internet, through direct enquiry at the school, recommendation from friends or families, and through the reports in the newspaper.

Discussion

Parents have a significant influence on their children’s development and future achievement. It is important for parents to make the right decision regarding their children’s education especially preschool because during this age children develop more rapidly and learn quicker than at any other time in their life (UNICEF, 2010). Rational choice theory explains why and how people make decisions. It suggests that individuals have preferences and choose which option they prefer according to what options are available to them (Levin & Milgrom, 2004; Dandan & Marques 2017). In other words, people make decisions about how they should act by comparing the benefits of different options of action. As a result, patterns of behaviour will develop within the results from these choices. School choice is a process whereby parents exercise their rights in choosing the schools that they want to send their children to (Lawrence & Mollborn, 2013).

The limitation of this study is the ethnic difference of its participants. It was hampered by the inadequate numbers of Malay and Indian parents. In this study only one parent was Malay and one Indian while the majority of the parents were Chinese. At the time of the interview



coincidentally some of these parents were on vacation or at outstations. Future research needs to include more Malay and Indian parents to balance up the numbers so that the researcher can study whether this has significant effect on the findings.

Conclusion

Parents in this study believed their children gained from going to preschool at early age because they noticed changes in their home and with their children in communication and behavior. However, parents also expressed their concern about their children's future. Most of parents started comparing several preschools and made certain considerations according to the information that they had gathered before they decided which preschool they wanted to send their children to (Hsieh 2008; Deacon & Van Rensburg 2018). There were seven participants in the interview which was relatively a small number. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to population in this area. For future research a mixed method is recommended to get a large number of participants through a quantitative methodology.

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