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Unveiling Malaysian parents' perspectives on existing quality of early childhood care and education

Introduction. Early childhood care and education is majorly concerning around the world. Malaysian government has formulated childhood care and education national policy and legal framework to protect the rights of childhood. However, the Education Blueprint of Malaysia acknowledged that serious problems still remain with the quality of education and the investment in education is not as high as expected. The objective of the study is to investigate parents' perspectives of quality ECCE programs with regard to center characteristics of environment, teachers, principals, curriculum as well as parent's communication and involvement opportunities.

Materials and methods. Study has selected mix method approach where parent perspectives of existing quality of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the selected states of Malaysia been obtained. The 629 questionnaires samples were distributed among the parent 's having a child in a pre-school and 22 parents took part in the focus group interviews, designed to elicit their perspectives of ECCE programs with regard to center characteristics, environment, teachers, principals, and curriculum as well as parent involvement and communication opportunities

Results. Demographically results shows 60.8% female and 39.2% male participants have contributed with 32% age 31-35 years old, about 38.1% Malay followed by 32.2% Chines and 18% Indian ethnicity races were part of this study. The standard deviation analysis indicated that Parents's perceptive on Centre Characteristics is ($M=4.039$, $SD= 0.796$) Parents' Views on Environment ($M=3.582$, $SD=0.953$); Parents' Views on Teachers and Principals ($M=4.197$, $SD=0.731$) Parents' Views on Curriculum ($M=3.735$, $SD=0.771$) and Parents' Views on Parent Communication and Involvement Opportunities ($M=4.171$, $SD=0.630$). The overall statistical analysis shows parents' perceptive is satisfactory on the quality of ECCE programmes.

Conclusion. Study has concluded that parents have found ECCE programmes much effective where children not only enjoy but their learning improves. Parents have appreciated the quality of hygiene level and facilities in pre-school are up to the mark and standard but further can be improved. Quality of curriculum should have multilingual instruction and play based teaching and learning is suggested by the parent's to improve.

Keywords: early childhood care and education, parents' perspectives, quality, ECCE programmes, Malaysia

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Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) short and long term importance have been recognized in the world. Recently, early childhood care and education awareness has increased in the world [1; 2]. Children who attend high quality ECCE programmes perform better than other children in the development of literacy, language, physical emotion and cognition [3]. Children who have attended ECCE have positive attitudes towards life, friendly relationships with classmates and better behavior in the future [4-6]. High quality ECCE is marked by the contributors that include good environment, high educator qualifications, the wholesome curriculum provided and other factors such as the health and safety, reasonable education fee and convenient location [7]. Conversely, the development of children can be impeded by low quality [8; 9]. Child's first teacher is the parents who have an important role in children's mental, physical, social and career development [10]. Parents will always ensure the best possible educational environment for their children development. Parental perspectives of quality of ECCE programmes do not only influence the decisions and choices for their children but also the enrollment of preschool [11-13]. Parents' experience and the interaction with educators are seen as a part of the quality of early childhood care and education; however, parents are rarely included as participants in research [14].

In the Malaysian context, government has taken steps to develop the early childhood care and education and has formulated the National Education Policies and the legal framework for young children. These policies and frameworks have been introduced to protect the rights of newborns till the age of six, which are crucial early years. As for the education policies, the Education Development Master Plan 2001-2010, the Education Blueprint 2006-2010, and the Education Blueprint 2013-2015 have become the main guidelines for the education sector and securing funding for this sector. However, the Education Blueprint of Malaysia acknowledged that serious problems still remain with the quality of education and the investment in education is not as high as expected [15; 16]. The key research problem is lack of literature and studies on the parental perspectives of ECCE programmes in Malaysia. The purpose of this research is to investigate parents' perspectives of quality ECCE programmes with regard to center characteristics of environment, teachers, principals, curriculum as well as parent's communication and involvement opportunities.

Methodology

Mixed-methods research approach was adopted to investigate parents' perspectives of existing quality of early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes in Malaysia. The study was conducted in the selected states of Malaysia: Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang, Kedah, Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Sarawak, Sabah. It was conducted with preschool parents from private and government preschool in Malaysia. The questionnaire for parents (P1/POL for parents) from the research project entitled "Development of a Comprehensive and Integrated Model of Quality Malaysian ECCE" was used in this study. A total of 629 questionnaires were distributed to participants and 543 usable questionnaires were acquired to investigate the general quantitative outcomes of the study. In addition, 22 parents engaged in five groups of the focus group

interview. The in-depth information from qualitative data was gained to explain and support the quantitative data. Descriptive and thematic analyses were employed in the present study. The first stage was to analyse the demographic information, and the mean of items of parents' perspectives of ECCE programmes from six aspects: centre characteristics, environment, teachers, principals, curriculum and parent communication and involvement opportunities. In the second stage, the data of focus group interview were comprised to audio recordings, then transcribed data and did thematic analysis which incorporated an inductive approach. At the end, the number of responses based on the themes was counted and then reported descriptively. The demographics of the study are shown in Table 1. The participants represented different ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malay (n=207, 38.1%), Chinese (n=175, 32.2%), Indian (n=97, 17.9%) and others (n=64, 11.8%)

Table 1**Demographic Data of Parents**

Demographic Representations	N (n=543)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	213	39.2
Female	330	60.8
Age		
<30	119	21.9
31-35	174	32
36-40	132	24.3
>40	25	16.6
Unknown	18	3.3
Ethnicity		
Malay	207	38.1
Chinese	175	32.2
Indian	97	17.9
Others	64	11.8
Education Level		
SPM/Diploma/STPM	189	34.80
Degree	251	46.22
Master/ PhD	96	17.68
Unknown	7	1.28
Average Household Income		
<RM4000	211	38.85
RM4001-RM6000	132	24.3
RM6001-RM10000	117	21.5
>RM10000	73	13.4
Unknown	10	1.85
Average Fee for ECCE Centre		
<RM50	46	8.5
RM51-RM500	332	61.15
RM501-RM1000	130	23.9
>RM1001	31	5.7
Unknown	4	0.75

Results and Discussion

With regard to the research question ‘What parents’ perspectives of existing quality ECCE programmes with regard to centre characteristics, environment, teachers, principals, curriculum as well as parent communication and involvement opportunities in their child’s preschool?’, a total of 543 questionnaires returned and 22 parents stated their answer when they joined the focus group interview. Likert scale 1-5 used where 1 is poor and 5 is best.

1 Centre characteristics

Table 2 presents the means of items of parents’ perspectives on centre characteristics of their child’s ECCE centre.

Table 2

Mean Scores of Parents’ Views on Centre Characteristics

Items	Mean	SD
It is important that the ECCE centre my child is attending is registered with the government.	4.374	.678
My child has a positive experience in his/her ECCE centre.	4.232	.603
The ECCE centre that my child attends provides quality care and education.	4.192	.634
It is important that the ECCE centre incorporates the use of technology (projections, audio-visual lessons, ICT etc).	4.123	.823
The teaching aids and learning materials at my child’s ECCE centre are adequate.	4.039	.620
I am happy with the care and education my child receives for the fee paid.	4.035	.709
The fees collected in my child’s ECCE centre inclusive of learning materials, stationery, enrichment classes, fieldtrips etc.	4.013	.812
The fee charged in my child’s ECCE centre is reasonable.	4.00	.697
The ECCE centre my child attends provides proper nutrition and a balanced diet.	3.998	.728
There are field trips and outdoor activities for experiential learning at my child’s ECCE centre.	3.978	.796
The facilities (outdoor and indoor) such as classroom design and playground at my child’s ECCE centre are adequate.	3.908	.753
The ECCE centre that my child attends includes/accepts children with special education needs.	3.449	.936

According to Table 2, the majority of parents realized the importance of centre’s registration with the government ($M=4.374$, $SD=0.678$) and offering the use of technology ($M=4.123$, $SD=0.823$). Their children like to go to preschools and enjoy the life and the experience ($M=4.232$, $SD=0.603$) in kindergartens which provides quality care and education ($M=4.192$, $SD=0.634$). Majority of parents satisfied the teaching and learning materials ($M=4.039$, $SD=0.62$) and education fee in their child’s preschool ($M=3.998$, $SD=0.796$). However, some parents are not satisfied with the diet ($M=3.908$, $SD=0.753$) and the facilities ($M=3.908$, $SD=0.753$) as well as the special education needs ($M=3.449$, $SD=0.936$) provides in their child’s centre.

To further explain the quantitative results, qualitative analysis was done and it revealed three themes for the centre characteristics. The themes were enjoyment, experience and hygiene level. Parents highlighted that children like to go to kindergarten. Children learn

and have fun at the same time in the kindergarten. Other things that parents mentioned for enjoyment were warm, peer relationships and the activities that the preschool offered.

"We know she's really comfortable here, we are very comfortable here as parents."

"Whether they are enjoying themselves, are they having fun there. They learn a lot of things there also."

Hygiene was divided into two subthemes, satisfaction and lack of satisfaction. During the interview, this question was raised, 'If you had to rate the hygiene level between 1 to 5, 5 being the best and 1 being poor, how would you rate it?' Some parents rated the hygiene level at 4.5 out of 5. Some parents rated the hygiene level at 5. It indicated that parents were satisfied with the hygiene in the centres which their children attended. But some parents rated lower when they answer this question that means they were not satisfied with the hygiene level in their child's preschool.

2 Environment

As shown in Table 3, majority of parents thought their children were happily involved in their activities ($M=4.206$, $SD=0.587$) in the ECCE centre which is safe and health ($M=4.179$, $SD=0.648$) and provide children with child-sized furniture ($M=4.122$, $SD=0.671$) and toilets ($M=3.961$, $SD=0.771$). However, some parents were not satisfied with the indoor and outdoor activities ($M=3.582$, $SD=0.953$) in their child's ECCE centre and they thought the centre do not have ample indoor and outdoor space for children ($M=3.895$, $SD=0.812$).

Table 3

Mean Scores of Parents' Views on Environment

	Mean	SD
Children are happily involved in their activities.	4.206	.587
The ECCE centre my child attends is safe and clean.	4.179	.648
Staff are interacting with children in a gentle, caring and non-discriminating manners.	4.169	.652
Furniture in activity areas is child-sized and safe.	4.122	.671
Children have designated spaces to keep their personal belongings.	3.983	.767
Toilets are child-sized, sufficient and dry.	3.961	.771
Children's work displayed is at child's eye level.	3.937	.676
The centre has ample indoor and outdoor spaces for children with sufficient natural lighting and ventilation.	3.895	.812
The centre has a variety of outdoor activities such as sand and water play, climbing, sliding and gardening.	3.582	.953

There were three themes for the environment in qualitative analysis. They were technology, learning and teaching environment, and school activities. Technology was divided into two subthemes, adequate support and lack of support. Parents who adequately supported the use of technology in preschool believed that it is good to expose children to technology. Also, technology could be of teacher assistance to teach children and it is beneficial to blend technology in the learning process. However, some parents complained that some preschools emphasize technology but lacked technical resources. Some parents prefer traditional teaching or gaming activities to using technology because they think that their children are too young to use technology.

"I think it (technology) is important, if they know how to blend it to the learning process."

"I mean like, I don't really concern about the audio visual and everything because they are really young. Before I will go inside and see what the things that they will do, what kinder of activity they will do inside and what kind of facility but not all those audios visual not important for me."

3 Teachers and principals

Table 4 presents parents' perspectives on teachers and principals. It is clear that parents thought the qualification of teachers ($M=4.197$, $SD=0.731$) and principals ($M=4.037$, $SD=0.796$) were important. However, majority of parents were not aware of the qualification of teachers ($M=3.595$, $SD=0.869$) and principals ($M=3.652$, $SD=0.914$) at their child's ECCE centre.

Table 4

Mean Scores of Parents' Views on Teachers and Principals

	Mean	SD
It is important for parents to know the qualification of the teachers at the ECCE centre.	4.197	.731
I am aware of the qualification of teachers at my child's ECCE centre.	3.595	.869
It is important for parents to know the principal's education qualifications.	4.037	0.796
I am aware of the principal's educational qualifications at my child's ECCE centre	3.652	0.914

The themes of teachers' and principals' experience, relationship and disposition as well as the leadership of principals came out. Parents believed that teachers' and principals' experience is important. Some parents even said that experience and competency are more important than qualifications. They concluded that teachers and principals are supposed to have good relationship with children which is critical for the children's wellbeing and developments. In addition, some parents said that principals should be responsible and have leadership in the kindergarten.

"Umm, I actually know their qualification, but that doesn't play a very big role because it's just a piece of paper to me, you can have a PhD, but if you cannot handle the kids than you know you are not a good teacher. So yea."

"I think, she has already answered that, you know in general we should have a good and meaningful relationship with everyone in the world...mutual respect..."

"Knowledge wise also sometimes we need a leadership."

4 Curriculum

According to Table 5, some parents are pleased with the curriculum practice in their child's preschool ($M=4.085$, $SD=0.637$). However, they believed that the curriculum lack the flexibility to cater the needs of children from diverse family background ($M=3.735$, $SD=0.771$) and to the needs of children with special education demands ($M=3.681$, $SD=0.785$).

In addition, pertaining to the curriculum implementation, parents appealed to improve the quality of curriculum. When parents answered the question, 'What do you like about your child's centre's practices with respect to the curriculum?' Some answers were that multilingual instructions as well as play based teaching and learning. Some parents hold

the idea that the curriculum is not academic based. Even during academic side parents expected that children can learn and enjoy themselves at the same time.

Table 5**Mean Scores of Parents' Views on Curriculum**

	Mean	SD
I am pleased with the ECCE centre's practices with respect to the curriculum.	4.085	.637
I am aware of the curriculum used at the ECCE centre where my child attends.	4.028	.693
There are practices with respect to curriculum at my child's ECCE centre that can be improved.	3.930	.665
The curriculum offers flexibility to cater to the needs of children from diverse family backgrounds.	3.735	.771
The curriculum offers flexibility to cater to the needs of children with special educational needs.	3.681	.785

"It's not academic based. Umm and it's a little bit of everything else, they get to play but it's not just playing they learn during their play, they learn how to share even during academic side, its teaching through play so they enjoy and they learn at the same time, so it's not just sitting there and doing books, books, books."

"I think err the main goal for this school is to... to make... to have something which is best for the child and not just something for them to pursue their life, not just academics not just play, it's a mixture of everything so that they... they are maybe... I mean they can be independent and you know they can be independent and they can see life better and..."

5 Parent Communication and Involvement Opportunities

Table 6 indicates that majority of parents realized the responsibility (M=4.254, SD=0.664) and the importance of parental involvement (M=4.171, SD=0.630) to ensure the quality ECCE for their children. However, they were not satisfied with the parental involvement level in their child's centre (M=3.871, SD=0.743). They thought the opportunities to be volunteer in activities organized by their child's preschool are not always provided (M=3.814, SD=0.891) and they expected that ECCE centre should have parental workshops to assist them in supporting their child's learning at home (M=3.773, SD=0.967).

Table 6**Mean Scores of Parents' Views on Parent Communication and Involvement Opportunities**

Parents and teachers have a shared responsibility to ensure quality learning for all children in my child's ECCE centre.	4.254	.664
Parents play an important role in ensuring the implementation of quality ECCE.	4.171	.630
Parental involvement brings about quality ECCE.	4.168	.698
There is effective communication between my child's ECCE centre and parents.	4.162	.687
There is good parent-teacher partnership for my child's development and learning in the ECCE centre.	4.114	.699
Regular assessments are conducted and reported to the parents about the child's learning and development.	4.112	.729
Parents at my child's ECCE centre are well- informed on children's holistic development and learning.	4.110	.686

The ECCE centre welcomes ideas and suggestions for improvement from parents.	4.013	.762
The ECCE centre has provided me with information on how I could help my child at home.	3.963	.843
The level of parental involvement at my child's ECCE centre is high.	3.871	.743
Parents are provided with opportunities to volunteer in activities organized by my child's ECCE centre.	3.814	.891
Parental workshops are conducted to assist parents in supporting their child's learning at home.	3.773	.967

The themes were two-way communication, decision making, learning at home and volunteers from qualitative data. Two-way communication was divided into two subthemes, effective communication and weak communication. Concerning effective communication, teacher and parent communication was good based on parents' opinions. However, parents who thought they had weak communication with preschool complained that they had more communication with teachers through messages rather than face to face. They would not like to use WhatsApp to communicate with teachers. Some parents complained that they don't have a choice of making decisions in their children's preschool. On the other hand, they hope that teachers in kindergarten can help them to guide their children learning at home

"You can't do that (make decision), so you have a choice of decision, you decide and then you stay with it. You don't like it maybe you can discuss with the principal maybe they feel they are going to stick to it then you don't like it maybe you say "I am sorry, maybe I think I will have to take my child out" that's as good as you can get"

"Maybe they can offer their services of course and then it depends on the management lah to weather to accept open eh you know but not arr just go in and (laughter) and everything you know, then they will say "this one, what is this mother doing (laughter) better go and take care of your family...."

Theme of volunteers has active participation and negative participation. Concerning effective participating, parents brought out various ways how to join volunteering activities such as attending sports day and school events. They were willing to be a volunteer to help teachers. The majority of the comments relating to weak participation was that parents were willing to be involved in the activities with preschool but they had some limitations. Some parents did not actively participate in their children's preschool activities because of a busy work schedule or because of the way the kindergarten was managed.

Discussions and implications

Parents have favourable perspectives towards the quality of their child's ECCE centre. Figure 1 listed the themes of parents' perspectives of quality ECCE programs.

The quality of hygiene level and facilities in some ECCE center should be improved form parents' perspective. Hygiene is a term for various practices to help preserve children's well-being and health through acts of cleanliness. Proper hygiene in a preschool is critical for children to keep them healthy [17; 18]. Moreover, the well-designed facilities enhance child development and preschool quality as well as affects the children's enrollment [19-21]. Some parents think that the centre lack ample indoor and outdoor space. Preschool should provide children with ample indoor and out door space to do a variety of activities

such as sand and water play, climbing, sliding and gardening, which can enhance children's physical and mental development [22-24]. The rapid advancement and development in technologies, permanent changes take place in the field of early childhood care and education [25]. Children in preschools using age-appropriate technology have significant improvements in both mathematics subject and early literacy skills [26; 27]. Since the children are too young, teachers need to guide and teach them to learn with interest and information technologies should be used in the area of pedagogical activity in a preschool. Teachers and principals in centre of early childhood education should be professional, well trained and experienced that promote children standards, skills and knowledge [28]. Most of the participants (parents) do not know the qualifications of teachers and principals in preschool. In this context better parents have the knowledge of pre-school teachers and principal's education information so they can support their work [13; 29].

Figure 1 Themes of Parents' Perspectives of Quality ECCE Programmes

Curriculum implementation needs to fit the comprehension level, abilities, and interests of the young children from the aspects of physical, intellectual, culture, society, emotion, and creativity [30; 31]. Parental involvements directly affect children's development. According to the study of [32] good parent-teacher relationships and right parental involvement in children's early developmental years were associated with greater academic motivation and learning, and stronger social and emotional skills in future life. Based on Epstein's Framework of Six Types [33] this study also conclude that it is important for families and preschools to corporate together to boost children's development in Malaysia.

Conclusions

Parents' perspectives on their child's ECCE programmes, majority of children enjoy their life and the experience in kindergartens which offers good learning and teaching environment. Parents consider the quality of hygiene level and facilities in a preschool and they expected preschools to improve the quality of environment. However, most parents were satisfied with the quality of teachers and principals but they thought the quality of teachers and principals could still be improved. Parents appealed to improve the quality of curriculum which should have multilingual instruction and play based teaching and learning. Parents were aware of the importance of parental involvement in their children's daily activities at home and in preschool. However, challenges were faced when they engaged in early education both at home and in preschool. Some parents complained that they had limitations to participate in activities in preschool. Furthermore, their children's preschools lacked workshops to help them to teach their children at home. For the advancement

of quality early childhood care and education in Malaysia, it is recommended that the government should support preschools to provide educational resources to meet the needs of children and parents. Additionally, it is worthwhile to ascertain the practice and methods to guide parents collaborate with teachers and principals in a preschool.

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