

Factors that Influence Parents' Choice of Pre-Schools Education in Malaysia: An Exploratory Study

Dr. Zainurin Bin Dahari (Corresponding author)
Mohd Sabri bin Ya

Department of Business Administration
Kulliyah (Faculty) of Economics and Management Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
53100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Email: zainurind@iium.edu.my, Phone: (603) 61964715

Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the important factors contribute most to parents' choice of pre-school for their children. Parents' choice of pre-schools is influenced by various factors that are mostly associated with the pre-school institution itself. Parents have different educational believes and preferences which puts them in a dilemma when making decision for their children pre-school education. It is very important for pre-school businesses to meet the needs of both parents and children in order to attract and retain their customer. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire. The sample consisted of 162 parents who have pre-school children. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify the predictor variables that contributed to the choice of pre-schools. The main factors that influence parents' choice of pre-schools are branding, private-run institutions, safety and security, quality of teaching and hygiene. English medium and religion-based pre-schools are the preferred pre-schools chosen by these parents.

Key words: Pre-School, Education, Malay, Parents, Consumer, Decision Making.

Introduction

Many issues have to be taken into considerations by parents when choosing a pre-school for their children. It involves between planning of getting all the benefits and achievement for their children's future and the total cost they must pay. Parents as manager of the family are responsible for the family organization's success or failure (Robbins and Coulter, 2005). In 2003 the Malaysian Ministry of Education implemented the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English at the primary and secondary school level. This, encourage parents to start looking for pre-schools that prepare their children for proficiency in English. This resulted in many pre-schools that stress the teaching of English to bloom. Branded pre-schools and the branding of pre-schools also began to gain popularity. However, besides language there are many other factors that influence parents' decision in the selection of pre-schools for their children. With the increasing incidences of kidnapping cases and violence towards children, safety becomes a major issue of concern for parents. The advancement of information technology that allows easy access to uncensored materials over the internet, and an expanding borderless society which is exposed to external influence add to Malaysian parents' fear over their children's moral and religious values.

These are among many other issues in which this study will surveyed among parents to determine which of these have an influence over their choice of pre-school for their children. Many parents are in dilemma when it comes to choosing a pre-school for their children. Parents need to consider many factors and determine their priorities (Robbins and Coulter, 2005). Parents have different educational believes and perceptions which influence the choice of pre-school for their children. There are also constraints that may force a parent to choose a pre-school 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 pre-school of choice for their children. With changing consumer patterns traditional pre-school operators are losing their markets to modern early childhood education franchises that are branded and with 'imported' curricula.

Studying modern parents' choice of preschools and why they choose them would enable pre-school operators to understand and cater to their consumers' needs and preferences. Pre-schools with marketing strategies that seek to provide more values than their competitors need to study parents' choice, their needs and desires in order to retain customer loyalty. According to Hawkins et al (2007), satisfied customers are profitable in the long run, which is why it is very important for pre-school businesses to meet the needs of both parents and children. Many prior researches focus on the institutional and performance aspects of pre-schools such as teaching strategies, nutrition and child psychology, but none had studied the connection between institutional features of pre-schools and consumer behavior of parents and children.

This study will fill this research gap by studying the relationship between the choice of pre-schools that parents made and pre-school features and socio-demographic factors that influence the decision. Until recently, most of the research and studies on pre-schools focus on relationships between pre-school education quality and child outcomes. This study aims to identify the behavior patterns of parents as consumers of pre-schools and early childhood education. This research surveys parents' decision making, expectations and the criteria parents' will look for in choosing pre-schools for their children taking into consideration the many issues faced by Malaysian parents today. This survey also looks at the influence of geographical location, socio-demographic and economic background of parents' on their choice of pre-schools.

The research objectives for this study were identified as follows:

- To identify parents' choice of type of pre-schools.
- To identify the factors that influence parents' decision to enroll their children in a chosen pre-schools.
- To determine factors that best predicts parents' choice of pre-schools.

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

- Do parents prefer branded or non-branded pre-schools for their children?
- What are the factors that parents look for in deciding the choice of pre-school for their children?
- Among the factors identified, which factors best predict parents' choice of pre-schools?

Definition of Terms

Pre-school is an institution where children are prepare to enter a social and educational based environment. In Malaysia, children at the age of three and six years old are enrolled at pre-school, to be prepared in a structured academic environment under the supervision of qualified pre-school teacher before they enter year one at primary school. Pre-school institutions include Nursery and Kindergartens (Adnan Abd.Rashid, 1993).

Choice is an optimal decision-making process that is made after considering various relevant factors and forecast the benefits and need that certain product can give or solve (Hawkins etc, 2007).

Parent refers to the natural parent of biology or marriage, adoption, and guardian of the pre-schooled children, whom are committed with the task of child rearing and maintain the relation of parenthood with the children.

Parental Choice is the behavior of parents as a customer of pre-school service, the role of parent was previously confined to those who could afford to pay directly for their children's schooling or send them to private pre-school. The new roles of parents have been granted the right to choose the school their children will attend (Pamela Munn, 1993).

Socio-Demographic Factors include parent's education, profession and income level, number of children per family and religious background. The demographic analysis will help to determine the number of parents that might need or preferred certain type of pre- school for their children but cannot afford it (Hawkins etc, 2007).

Geographical factors such as locality of the house either in the village or town and distance of pre-school from parents' home or work place.

Literature Review

Pre-school Institutions in Malaysia

Pre-school is an institution where children are prepared to enter a social and educational based environment. Pre-school may be considered as preparatory class for year one of primary school. The pre-schools in Malaysia normally take in children from as early as three to six years old. The history of early childhood education in Malaysia could be traced back to the earliest pre-school institutions in Malaysia, which were introduced and managed by Christian missionaries. In those days only children of the rich and aristocrats have the privilege of early childhood education. Only in the 1970s, the Malaysian Ministry of Rural Development introduced government funded pre-schools, commonly known as KEMAS, to children of low-income family living in rural areas (Adnan Abd. Rashid, 1993). Aid for early childhood education also came from Asia Foundation, which funded pre-school projects known as 'HEADSTART' in several rural towns in 1969. The first formal and pioneer pre-schools were launched by the Minister of Education in 1992, which started with 1,131 annex pre-school classes in Government primary schools (Puteri Zabariah et al, 2005).

To unify and standardize early childhood education programs run by the various sectors, the national Pre-school Curriculum was introduced and became part of the 1996 Education Act. For Malaysia to be a developed nation by 2020, the government must ensure quality pre-schools for all children in Malaysia. This is because children are the nation's most valuable asset, as 'today's children are leaders of tomorrow'. In the last decade, pre-schools have mushroomed all over the country. Pre-schools in Malaysia are so diverse due to the country's multicultural society and individual needs.

Pre-school institutions may be differentiated based on the medium of instruction (which may be in English, Malay or Chinese), the curriculum approaches, religious orientation, origin (i.e. local or international), or political affiliations (Puteri Zabariah et al, 2005). Current trends identify pre-schools as either branded, usually a local or foreign franchise, or non-branded, which is usually run by individual proprietors. The various types of pre-schools are listed but not limited to the list below:

- Ministry of Education pre-school annexes in national primary schools
- KEMAS (by the Ministry of Rural Development)
- Tadika Perpaduan (by the Ministry of National Integrity)
- KAFA (by State Islamic Religious Department)
- International Schools
- NGO pre-schools, e.g. ABIM
- Private pre-schools, e.g. Montessori, SmartReader, COSMOTOTS, and others.
- Religious based pre-schools, e.g. Tahfiz Al-Qur'an and church-based kindergartens.
- Language based, e.g. Chinese medium, English medium, usually privately run.
- Hybrid pre-schools, e.g. those using a combined curriculum of Islamic studies, English and Mathematics.
- Holistic pre-schools, e.g. those using a combined curriculum of Tahfiz Qur'an, English, Computer studies and Mathematics.
- Politically-affiliated pre-schools, e.g. PASTI by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), and Chinese pre-schools by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA).

The Roles and Contributions of Pre-schools

Pre-school is a child's first formal educational experience and is a very special and important phase in the child's life. Besides preparing a child for year one of primary school, pre-school also provide early training for moral values and social intelligence. According to the Malay saying, "Melentur buloh biar dari rebung", which is translated as "To shape a bamboo tree, it must be bent or molded while they are still shoots", it means that it is easier to teach, shape or to instill moral values and discipline in children while they are young.

Children are like new computers with unlimited memory space. "A child's entry gate to education must be of memories filled with enjoyable challenging and fun-learning experience" (Chun, 2007, p.1).

According to Krupicka (2005) they perform better in literacy tests than their peers without pre-school experience. Pre-school educated children are also more likely to graduate from college or university, and are less apt to get into trouble or participate in criminal activities such as vandalism, drug problems, truant or gangsterism. Studies indicate that, for every dollar invested in high-quality pre-school programs, the community could save as much as nine dollars in future service costs (Krupicka, 2005).

Factors to Consider When Choosing a Pre-school

All parents need to make a big decision when their children reached three years old as now is the time to choose their child's first formal educational experience. Parent's decision processes consist of evaluating children's needs, gather or search for information and evaluates all the available alternatives (McDaniel, 2006). What happens to a child's early life has a profound impact on the child's later achievement in life. Children, who enter school and are not yet ready to learn or not equipped to handle the learning process, will continue to have difficulties later at school if no intervention is taken. Most parents consider children are their most valuable assets. So, pre-school education is seen as parents' investment for their children's future and theirs too. All Parents would like to give the best of everything for their children, including pre-schools. However, there are various factors that may limit a parent's choice when deciding on a pre-school. Identifying these factors will enable parents to make optimal choice and fulfill their needs (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh and Best, 2007).

As customers of pre-school, what do parents look for when choosing pre-schools for their children? According to Wolfson (2000) there are six areas that parents should consider when choosing a pre-school for their children, which in no particular order of importance are location, hours of operation, educational philosophy, teachers' quality and styles, facilities, and instinct! Parents do not underestimate their instincts. All of the points above are important and valid. If after considering these points they do not come to a clear conclusion, parent will go with the place that "feels" the best to them. If they are unsure, they will go back to the final contenders for a second visit. They will look around the room and ask themselves, "Will my child be happy here?" Parents have the right to make the best decision for their child. Besides parents' rights to make decisions for their children, parents should consider the rights of their children too. Some parents argue that children perception of pre-school should be considered in choosing pre-school because children have the right to express their views to improve the situation in which parents place them (Ceglowski, 2007).

Private and Branded Pre-schools

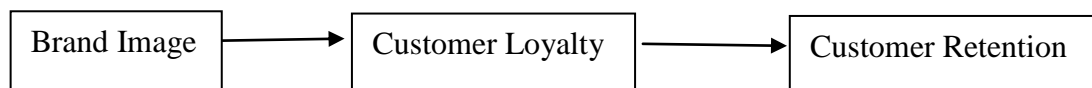
Private and branded pre-school like Smart Readers and Montessori's treat education as business and as a good quality product, it always comes with a price. Consumers perceive that, higher price indicate better quality. Parents who send their children to branded pre-school sometimes want to maintain their social class and that reflect the values of child's family (Halstead, 1994), as parents want their children to be in the group of children who are of equal status and regularly socialize with them (McDaniel, 2006). Aside from well-organized programs, branded pre-schools maintain quality teachers and good facilities. They also invest on advertisements to be noticed by prospective parents as their customers. The ability of the school to meet the child's individual needs and higher standard of education is the reason most frequently given by parents for choosing private pre-schools rather than government funded pre-schools (Halstead, 1994). Other factors why parents choose branded pre-school are because of:

a) Branding creates memory

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, so much so that sometimes pre-school are simply referred to as Montessori and Smarts Reader .

b) Brand image contributes towards customer loyalty and therefore helps customer retention.

Brand image perceptions directly affect customer loyalty, which leads to customer retention (Allen and Rao, 2000). Parents sometimes send their children to same pre-school as their elder children used to attend, because of satisfaction, image and the brand it self.



Educational Philosophy

Some pre-schools operate based on specific educational goals and criteria that are determined by a specific approach to early childhood education. This is reflected in the curriculum practiced by the pre-school. Other schools do not have a specific approach but have their own personal "philosophy". Two examples of educational approaches are the Montessori and Waldorf schools models. The Montessori's theory of child development involves building the pre-school into a "children's house." The most important belief was that "play" is a child's "work." In a Montessori school, children do not "play," they "work." They do not use "toys", they use "materials." Children are given the freedom to explore their environment independently and choose their daily activities. In contrast, the Waldorf schools base their approach on the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. The emphasis is on daily activities that relate to the "whole child." All teaching is directly connected to life experiences. Waldorf schools place an emphasis on the use of art and nature in the classroom and discourage exposing pre-school children to television and computers. In Malaysia, there are quite a number Islamic pre-schools, mostly managed by Private entity , Government Islamic Department such as JAKIM, Non Government Organization and Islamic base Political Party. Their teaching approaches and philosophy are concentrated on teaching Islamic values and responsibility, such as the Oneness of Allah or Tawheed, 'Fard Ain' and 'Fard Kifayah'.

Curriculum

If the school does not have a specific approach, parent should ask the director about the school's philosophy of education. The following aspects of a pre-school's curriculum should be considered:

a. Emphasis on academic skills

Some pre-schools emphasize academic skills more than others. Is the learning of letters, numbers, and concepts taught according to a child's interest and readiness, or are these skills methodically taught as a necessary part of the curriculum?

b. Parent involvement

Some pre-schools require a certain amount of parent involvement, while other schools prefer that parents "sit on the sidelines" unless needed. Parents, who know the effect and the important of their involvement in their children's educational experiences, will choose a school that welcome parents involvement (Prior and Gerard, 2007). The established pre-school would make extra effort to reach out to parents and developing partnerships with them. If parents do not have time in their schedule to participate in classroom activities and trips, they will make sure this kind of participation will not be required.

c. Approach to child independence and individual creativity

Some schools encourage independence, while others emphasize discipline and order.

Check if the school has a strict daily schedule and if all children must participate in each activity or if the teachers change the school routine according to the needs and desires of the children.

d. Program Integration

Pre-school education program should be well aligned with the kindergarten program or primary school program that children will eventually attend, so that the transition to school is successful for children, parent and teacher (Krupicka, 2005). The question that must be considered when evaluating any educational philosophy is not which philosophy is correct. All approaches have valid points. A parent must ask himself or herself which 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 and get lost in the exact same setting.

Religious Values

With the emergence of Islamic civilization, majority Muslim parents would like to have the foundation of Islamic knowledge for their children. Therefore, they would prefer to send their children to Qur'an reading or Tahfiz pre-school. For Muslim parents who are looking for good moral and religious values in their children, they will look for pre-schools that are associated with the Islamic religion. Currently, there are many Islamic Child Care and Tahfiz al-Qur'an centers, which later will cater or integrate with the Islamic private school, Government Islamic School and Islamic Studies at the University. Waddy (1982), felt that teaching children religion is reckoned as one of the most important aspects of family life and is primarily the responsibility of parents. This view is shared by Zaiuddin Sardar (1988) who stressed that '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. According to Waddy (1982), teaching to children is most effective in story form: tales of brave and generous men and women who did great things for their fellow men, or about rich and poor people who are unequal in possessions and yet are equal before God.

Quality

At quality pre-schools, there is a proper development of physical, mind, creativity and moral values of children. High quality pre-school programs require well-trained teachers with a certificate, diploma or a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Teacher quality is a powerful and consistent predictor of student achievement. Modern infrastructure and facilities inside and outside the building, good relation between teacher and children, and between teacher and parents create an atmosphere for quality pre-school.

a. Qualified Teachers

Parents should ask the director for information on the level of teacher training. How many certified teachers or teachers with bachelor degrees and training in early childhood education are there per child? At least half of the staff in any pre-school must be qualified. Parents can also ask about the experience of the teacher assistants. Often, uncertified yet experienced assistants can be marvelous teachers.

b. Quality of Teaching

When parents visit a school, they should observed how the teachers interact with the children. Do they approach the children with warmth and care and appear happy while doing their job? Do the teachers sit next to the children and work together with them, or do they supervise the children from a far? Once again, parents must consider their children's needs. Some children respond best to teachers that exhibit a lot of physical warmth, for example kissing and hugging. It is important that teaching and support staff are friendly to young children and treated them like family members

Facilities and Infrastructure

Parents will want to consider the physical environment of the school. Are the rooms spacious, airy, clean, well lit and above all, safe? Parents may want to make sure there are sufficient space for the children and teachers to move around. Are there, a wide variety of materials available for the children to use during the school day? They will observe how the room is organized, such as specific areas for different forms of play, sometimes referred as activity centers. These areas usually include arts and crafts, dress-up, block play, a reading corner, and activities for children to work on individually or in small groups. Are there grass areas and enough space for the outdoor play area and sufficient space for children to run around? Is there a variety of outdoor play equipment and is the equipment in good condition and set up safely?

Hygiene and cleanliness

Another important question and factor that parents look forward, are equipments and building areas cleanliness and hygiene? Hygiene and cleanliness are especially important to ensure children's health and safety. Dirty rooms and compounds can course skin diseases and cases of infected by worms to children.

With frequent cases of food poisoning such as cholera at schools because of unhygienic food preparations, dirty eating areas and utensils. Parents would check the cleanliness of pre-school before register their children.

Availability of Transportation

Many pre-schools provide transport service to their customers. This is one feature of the pre-school that would be important to working parents and for many parents living in rural or semi-rural areas, as there is in reality, no practical alternative to sending their child to the local pre-school which is very far from their house or village. Sometimes parents settle with pre-school that provide transport to their children because they do not have the time, the mean and most of all, it is safer.

Safety and Security

With the national broadcast by media of the child abduction case and child lost case of such as the brutal murder of 8 years old Nurin Jazlin Jazimin, whose body was found inside a gym bag on September 17, 2007, more than a month after she went missing and 5 years old Sharlinie Mohd Nashar, who was missing since Jan 9, 2008. Safety and security features of pre-school are becoming important features and factors for parents in deciding the pre-school for their child. Parents are looking for pre-school which provides a safe and congenial environment for the well being of their child. Safety features such as how many CCTV inside and outside the building, how many security guards employed and how many are on duty each shifts, are the compound of pre-school fully fence-up.

Class Size

Small class size is becoming more vital to quality educational program as children prefer more space to move and rest. Most pre-school will provide places between 12 to 24 children and there should be no more than 26 children in one room. Another factor to look at is low teacher-pupil ratio, there should be a limit on the number of students per class and the number of students per teacher. Parents should observe how many adults are in the classroom, in relation to the number of children. There should be one member of staff for every eight children aged 3 to 6 years old.

Nutrition

There is a relation between food with the development of child growth and their brains. Studies show that nutrition is one of the factors for bringing up smart kids. Proportionate and rich protein food helps the development of the child's body and internal organs. A healthy body produces a good brain and a balanced mind. Parents will want to inspect the menu or what type of food is served everyday in a pre-school and how many times per day, before they decide which school to send their children

Location

Location is a very important factor in parents' choice of pre-schools. Young children should not spend long periods of time in transit. There must be a specific reason for children to travel a significant amount of time to go to pre-school. While driving forty minutes to get to the "best" school, may seem reasonable in theory, in reality, parents are always hurrying to work, or when another child is sick in the car, most parent may not find it practical. Parents will limit themselves to schools closest to their homes or working place. Some organizations take social responsibility by providing pre-schools in the same building of their working area or department.

Hours of Operation

Parents may want to check the hours of each program or whether the school has an after-school program. If they need coverage until three o'clock in the afternoon they will eliminate programs that end at one. Parent should also check what are their options in each location. For parents who are both working, say, working in a bank, they will look for a full-time pre-school or pre-school teachers who are sometimes willing to take care of their children until late evening when they have to work overtime.

Costs and Affordability

The population of parents at large in Malaysia, will sent their children to the pre-school at the government primary school, Tadika Kemas, Tadika Perpaduan or pre-school that are available at the office building or provided by their employer. Middle class parents will look for affordable pre-school nearby their house or office. But, some rich parents will purposely send their children to expensive or branded pre-schools because they can afford and see the association or belief of what money can give, the qualities and benefits this branded institutions can gives.

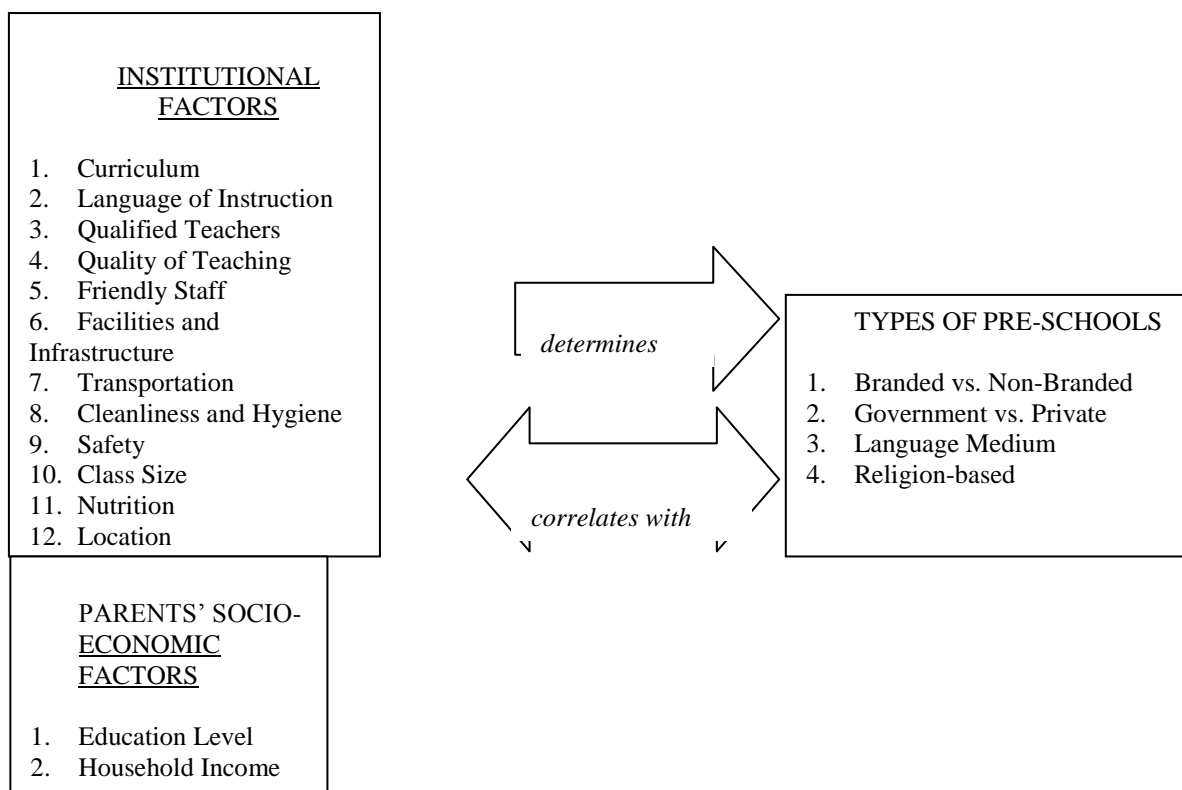
Parents' Socio-Demographic Background

Parents' socio-economic background is an important factor that determines parents' choice of pre-schools for their children. Rising cost of education and services may force parents to settle for an affordable pre-school rather than one that they would prefer.

In Malaysia, Government run pre-school of such as ‘KEMAS’ only charge RM10.00 per month for each student. While private or branded pre-school normally charged more than RM200.00 per student, this is hard for low income earner parents specially to those who have more than one child in the family. Parents’ educational level also determines the choice they make for their children’s education. Educated parents tend to be involved in their children education at pre-school or at home. They will look for school with Global component includes classroom practices and environment that promote children’s growth and learning (Ceglowski, 2007). College or University graduate Parents will search for quality pre-school and set the extra expenses in their budget for these purpose.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study took into consideration all possible factors from the literatures and from observations to derive the dependent and independent variables for inferential analysis. The dependent variable is parents’ choice of pre-schools and the factors that determine parents’ choice of pre-schools and socio-demographic background of parents constitute the independent variables The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework for Factors that Determine Parents’ Choice of Pre-Schools



FACTORS THAT DETERMINE PARENTS’ CHOICE

PARENTS’ CHOICE OF PRE-SCHOOL

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework for Factors that Determine Parents’ Choice of Pre-Schools

Research Design and Methodology

(a) Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the type of pre-school chosen by parents, which is categorized as either a branded or a non-branded pre-school, government or private, language medium type, or religion-based school.

(b) Independent Variables

The independent variables are identified as factors that influence parents’ choice of pre-schools, which are: Curriculum, Language of Instruction, Qualified Teachers, Quality of Teaching, Friendly Staff, Facilities and Infrastructure, Transportation, Cleanliness and Hygiene, Safety, Class Size, Nutrition, Location, Operating Hours, Costs, Parents’ Education Level, Household Income

Questionnaire

The research instrument used to collect data is a questionnaire (Appendix 1), which consists of three parts as detailed below:

- Part (a) Parents’ Socio-demographic background
- Part (b) Information on Pre-School

Part (c) Parents' choice of pre-school and influencing variables

Sampling

Samples consists of parents selected from an urban (Klang Valley) and a rural district. Sample selection was based on available or convenient samples since only parents who consented to respond to the survey were selected. A minimum sample size of 150 was taken.

Data Collection

Survey questionnaires were distributed to parents who had children enrolled in a pre-school or who would be enrolling their children in a pre-school. Parents respond to the questionnaire personally. There was no time limit imposed for responding to the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed and collected back on the same day.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a computerized program to generate inferential statistics.

Descriptive analysis was used to analyze all variables

Correlations analysis was performed to explore relationship between variables, and

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis was carried out to identify predictor variables for parents' choice of pre-school

Data Analysis and Findings

Socio-Demographic Background of Parents

The socio-demographic profile of the 162 parents surveyed is summarized in Table 4.1. All the parents surveyed were of Malay ethnic origin. The sampling population were in the age range of 23 to 47 years (Mean = 34.22, SD=6.89). The ratio of females to males in the total sample was 113 females (69.8 percent) to 49 males (30.2 percent). The education levels of the pre-school parents surveyed were Primary education (0.6 percent), SPM certificate holders (11.7 percent), Diploma holders (31.5 percent), graduates with Bachelor's Degrees (54.9 percent), and parents with Master's degrees (1.2 percent). The occupational background of the parents surveyed were, 0.6 percent work with a private company, 96.9 percent work with the Government of Malaysia, 1.9 percent were business owner and 0.6 percent were self- employed.

Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Parents

Variable		Frequency (N=162)	Percent (%)
Ethnicity	Malay	162	100
Gender	Male	49	30.2
	Female	113	69.8
Education	Primary Education	1	0.6
	SPM	19	11.7
	Diploma	51	31.5
	Bachelor's Degree	89	54.9
	Master's Degree	2	1.2
Parent's Occupation	Private Company Employee	1	0.6
	Government Employee	157	96.9
	Business Owner/Entrepreneur	3	1.9
	Self-employed	1	0.6
Family Income/month	Below RM2, 000.00	11	6.8
	RM2, 000.00 - RM4, 000.00	85	52.5
	RM4, 001.00 - RM6, 000.00	43	26.5
	RM6, 001.00 - RM10, 000.00	21	13.0
	More than RM10, 000.00	2	1.2

Table 4.1 shows 6.8 percent of the parents earned a monthly combined family income of below RM2,000.00. The majority of the parents surveyed were from the income group of between RM2,000.00 and RM4,000.00 (52.5 percent). These groups of parents are the average to income earners with purchasing power and have the ability to choose the ideal pre-school for their children and to maintain status quo (Halstead, 1994).

Location of Pre-Schools

This study found that, most parents (53.7 percent) send their children to a pre-school close to their homes, a distance of less than 3 kilometers from home. Another alternative for parents is to send their children to a pre-school close to their work place. 36.4 percent of the parents send their children to a pre-school that is less than 3 kilometers from their place of work (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Distance of Current Pre-school

Variable		Frequency (N=162)	Percent (%)
Distance of pre-school from home	Less than 3 km	87	53.7
	3 km – 5 km	25	15.4
	5 km – 10 km	15	9.3
	More than 10 km	9	5.6
Distance of pre-school from workplace	Less than 3 km	61	37.7
	3 km – 5 km	26	16.0
	5 km – 10 km	14	8.6
	More than 10 km	36	22.2

Parents' Choice of Pre-schools and Decision Factors

Parents' decision to choose a particular type of pre-school is influenced by a variety of factors, of which were mostly associated with institutional factors of the pre-school. Therefore, in Part C of the questionnaire parents were asked to rate the importance of each decision factor before deciding on their choice pre-school.

Objective 1 (One): Parents' Choice of Pre-Schools

Results from descriptive analysis on parents' choice of types of pre-schools (Table 4.3) is given to answer Research Question 1.

Choice of Branded versus Non-Branded Pre-schools

This study finds that if parents were given the freedom to decide on their choice between Branded and Non-branded pre-schools, 84.0 % chose Branded Pre-schools as opposed to non-branded pre-schools (13.6%). Parents as consumer tend to have emotional feeling on their relation with brand. That is why parents trust branded pre-schools.

Choice of Private-run versus Government-run Pre-schools

It is found that 52.5 % of the participating parents chose a private-run pre-school compared to a Government-run pre-school (44.4%) for their children. The trust given by parents to private-run pre-schools 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).

Table 4.3: Parents' Choice of Pre-schools

		Frequency (N = 162)	Percent (%)
Brand	Non branded	22	13.6
	Branded	136	84.0
Operator	Government-run	72	44.4
	Private-run	85	52.5
Medium	English Medium	116	71.6
	Malay Medium	45	27.8
Religion based	Islamic based	154	95.1
	Non-religion based	5	3.1

Choice of Language Medium

When asked to select their choice for medium of pre-school, 71.6 % of participating parents chose English Medium pre-school and 27.8% parents chose Malay Medium. Today's parents prefer to introduce English in the early stage of their children's life because they understand the importance of English as a global language and research medium.

Choice of Religion-Based Pre-schools

Out of 162 participating Malay parents, 95.1% parents decided on Islamic-based pre-school as their choice of pre-school for their children. Majority of Malay parents preferred the Islamic-based pre-school because they believe good moral will help their children succeed in this world and hereafter.

Objective 2 (Two): Importance of Institutional Factors as Decision Factors

An answer to Research Question 2 is summarized in Table 4.4, which shows parents' rating of the importance of each decision factor. The rating scale ranges from a minimum of 1.00 to a maximum of 5.00, this table answer the research objective (2) of identify the factors that influences parent' decision to enroll their children in a chosen pre-school.

Table 4.4: Importance of Decision Factors

Decision Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fees	3.45	1.01
Curriculum	4.45	0.71
Safety/security	4.75	0.59
Qualified teachers	4.46	0.70
Quality of teaching	4.57	0.64
Nutritious Food served	4.45	0.73
Hours of operation	4.12	0.77
Friendly staff	4.32	0.74
Hygiene/cleanliness	4.57	0.66
Distance from home	3.90	0.89
Religious values	4.52	0.76
Language medium	4.24	0.74
Transportation provided	3.25	1.12
Infrastructure & facilities	4.26	0.74

N = 162, Min. value = 1, Max. value = 5

The most important factors as indicated by the highest scores rated by parents are: Safety and security (Mean = 4.75, SD 0.59), Quality of teaching (Mean = 4.57, SD = 0.64), Hygiene/cleanliness (Mean = 4.57, SD = 0.66), Religious value (Mean = 4.52, SD 0.76), and Qualified Teachers (Mean = 4.46, SD = 0.69). The least important factors or features of pre-school as rated by participating parents in the survey are: Transportation Provided, Mean = 3.25 (SD 1.12); Distance from home, Mean = 3.9 (SD 0.90); and School Fees, Mean = 3.45 (SD 1.14).

Objective 3 (Three): Correlations between Decision Factors and Choice of Pre-Schools

The answer for Research Question 3 is revealed in correlations between decision factors and choice of Pre-schools. Choice of branded, private-run or government run pre-school are shown in Table 4.5(a) . The results showed significant positive correlations between fees and the choice for a government-run pre-school (Pearson Correlation coefficient, $r=0.202$, significant level, $p \leq 0.01$) this relate the cheaper fees rate of government funded pre-schools compared to private pre-schools, and between hours of operation and the choice of a government-run pre-schools ($r =0.201$, $p \leq 0.01$) because of regular hours and sufficient staff. There were significant but negative correlations between the importance of fees and the choice for a private-run pre-school ($r =0.196$, $p \leq 0.05$), and between hours of operation and the choice for a private-run pre-school. The negative correlations could be due to the perception that private pre-school are more of profit oriented rather than community services or social obligation. No significant correlation was found for all the other variables.

Table 4.5(a): Correlations between Decision Factors and Choice of Pre-Schools

		Branded	Private-Run	Govt-Run
Importance: Fees	Pearson Correlation	.037	-.196(*)	.202(**)
Importance: Hours of operation	Pearson Correlation	-.016	-.184(*)	.201(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.836	.017	.009
N		167	168	168

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation between decision factors and choice of English and Malay medium pre-school is shown in Table 4.5(b). The results showed significant positive correlations between religious values and the choice for Malay medium pre-school ($r=0.165$, $p \leq 0.05$) this because of the perception that not many religious teachers are English educated. No significant correlation was found for all the other variables.

Table 4.5(b): Correlations between Decision Factors and Choice of Pre-Schools

		English Medium	Malay Medium	International
N		162	162	162
Importance: Religious values	Pearson Correlation	-.082	.165(*)	-.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.287	.031	.602

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4.5(c) shows the correlation between decision factors and choice of Islamic-based and non-religion based pre-school. Significant positive correlations were found between religious values and the choice of Islamic-based pre-school ($r = 0.303, p \leq 0.01$), this finding show that parents that concern with religious values and the morality of their children chose Islamic-based pre-school for their children. Significant positive correlations between the factor of infrastructure and facilities and Islamic-based pre-school ($r = 0.19, p \leq 0.05$), this finding indicate that parents are looking for Islamic-based pre-school that have good infrastructure and facilities. Negative correlations were found between religious values and non religion based pre-school ($r = -0.268, p \leq 0.01$). Since the majority of participants for this study are Malay Muslim parents, it is apparent that they will not send their children to non religion based pre-school if they are concerned about religious values of their children. No significant correlation was found for all the other variables. Walford (1991) wrote that at present, parents ‘strong’ choice is in private schools or established schools, which matches their religious or philosophical beliefs.

Table 4.5(c): Correlations between Decision Factors and Choice of Pre-Schools

		Islamic-Based	Non-Religion Based
Importance: Religious values	Pearson Correlation	.303(**)	-.268(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	169	169
Importance: Infrastructure & facilities	Pearson Correlation	.189(*)	-.128
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	.097
	N	169	169

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation (Spearman’s rho) between decision factors and education level, and income level is shown in Table 4.5(d). The results showed significant positive correlations between fees and education level ($r=0.162, p \leq 0.05$), nutritious food served and education level ($r =0.177, p \leq 0.05$), hygiene/cleanliness and education level ($r =0.170, p \leq 0.05$), religious values and education level ($r =0.258, p \leq 0.01$), infrastructure & facilities and education level ($r =0.218, p \leq 0.01$). This result shows that educated parents do not mind about the amount of fees they have to pay for their children’s education and are very concerned about hygiene, cleanliness, religious values, infrastructure and facilities of pre-school. Significant positive correlations between nutritious food served and income level ($r =0.203, p \leq 0.01$) show that higher income parents are concerned about the nutritious food served to their children at the pre-school. No significant correlation was found for all the other variables.

Table 4.5(d): Correlations between Decision Factors and Socio-economic Background

		Education Level	Income Level
N		162	162
Importance: Fees	Correlation Coefficient	.162(*)	-.012
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033	.877
Importance: Nutritious food served	Correlation Coefficient	.177(*)	.203(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	.007
Importance: Hygiene/cleanliness	Correlation Coefficient	.170(*)	.040
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.598
Importance: Religious values	Correlation Coefficient	.258(**)	-.017
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.824
Importance: Infrastructure & facilities	Correlation Coefficient	.218(**)	.057
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.460

a. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

b. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Factors that Predict Choice of Pre-Schools

Regression analysis was used to explore further the relationship between decision factors and the choice of a pre-school by parents. In the regression model used, the fourteen decision factors (independent variables) are regressed against the dependent variable, 'Islamic branded', which is the choice of a Branded, Islamic-based, English medium and private-run pre-school. Results from the multiple linear regression analysis are shown in Tables 4.6 (a), (b) and (c). The results in Table 4.6(a) and Figure 4.1 show there is a positive linear relationship between parents' choice of pre-schools and the decision factors. Overall, the decision factors explain 11.4 percent variance in the choice of an Islamic branded pre-school by parents (R Square, $R^2 = 0.114$, $p = 0.166$). Although the R-square value obtained in this regression model is rather low and did not achieve the set significant level of 0.05, it has indicated a relationship that warrants further research. Two factors made a unique, and statistically significant, contribution to the prediction of the choice of an Islamic branded pre-school. The variable, Quality of Teaching made the largest unique contribution with standardized coefficient, Beta = 0.359 at significance level $p \leq 0.05$ (Table 4.6(c)). The second variable that made a significant contribution to the prediction of the choice of pre-school is Qualified Teachers (Beta = -0.345, $p \leq 0.01$). All the other variables did not make a significant contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable. The results from regression analysis showed quality of teaching and qualified teachers are predictors for the choice of a branded pre-school. This result is consistent with the observation made by Jensen and Hannibal (2000) that high quality pre-school programs are associated with well-trained and qualified teachers. Since teacher quality is a powerful predictor of student achievement (Jensen and Hannibal, 2000), parents naturally place high importance on teacher quality and quality of teaching.

Table 4.6(a): Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.337(a)	.114	.032	.93824

Table 4.6(b): ANOVA Table

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.075	14	1.220	1.385	.166(a)
	Residual	132.925	151	.880		
	Total	150.000	165			

a Predictors: (Constant), Importance: Infrastructure & facilities, Importance: Fees, Importance: Distance from home, Importance: Religious values, Importance: safety/security, Importance: Transportation provided, Importance: Hours of operation, Importance: Curriculum, Importance: Friendly staff, Importance: Hygiene/cleanliness, Importance: Language medium, Importance: Nutritious food served, Importance: Qualified teachers, Importance: Quality of teaching
 b Dependent Variable: Islamic Branded

Table 4.6(c): Coefficients Table

Model	Predictors	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.396	.730		4.649	.000		
	Importance: Fees	-.131	.078	-.139	-1.690	.093	.861	1.161
	Importance: Curriculum	.179	.137	.133	1.309	.193	.566	1.768
	Importance: safety/ security	-.133	.169	-.082	-.788	.432	.547	1.828
	Importance: Qualified teachers	-.474	.175	-.345	-2.707	.008	.361	2.770
	Importance: Quality of teaching	.535	.218	.359	2.455	.015	.274	3.646
	Importance: Nutritious food served	-.036	.160	-.027	-.222	.824	.396	2.524
	Importance: Hours of operation	-.187	.115	-.151	-1.620	.107	.674	1.483
	Importance: Friendly staff	-.163	.140	-.126	-1.168	.244	.502	1.992
	Importance: Hygiene/cleanliness	-.045	.159	-.031	-.282	.778	.485	2.064
	Importance: Distance from home	.074	.095	.069	.778	.438	.740	1.352
	Importance: Religious values	.138	.116	.110	1.187	.237	.685	1.460
	Importance: Language medium	-.122	.136	-.095	-.897	.371	.522	1.917
	Importance: Transportation provided	.069	.079	.081	.864	.389	.674	1.484
	Importance: Infrastructure & facilities	.184	.132	.144	1.390	.167	.550	1.818

a Dependent Variable: Islamic Branded

The choice of pre-school most preferred by parents from this survey is the pre-school that emphasizes safety and security, that gives good quality of teaching and emphasizes the importance of hygiene and cleanliness to their children's environment. Majority of Malaysian parents chose to send their children to a private-run and English medium pre-school. While, most of Malay parents prefer a holistic pre-school, specifically an Islamic-based, English medium pre-school with good facilities and infrastructure, as their choice of pre-school for their children.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The objective of this study is to determine the important factors that influence the selection for the choice of pre-school among parents in Malaysia. This study will help the pre-school business owner or operator to understand the criteria, factors and features that parents evaluates in choosing the choice of pre-school for their children. The results can become market indicators for pre-school operators and for the future pre-school business prospects. The understanding of parents' choice of pre-schools will help the education businesses understand customers' needs better and improve customer satisfaction and their loyalty. For parents, this study will help them to evaluate pre-school features that provide the best facilities and qualities and make the process of selecting the choice pre-school for their children faster and easier. The demographic backgrounds of parents have some influence on the pattern of parents' choice of pre-schools. Parents who are educated and earning a stable income are willing to spend their time and money to choose the best pre-schools for their children. Most of the middle class Malay parents interviewed prefer to send their children to English medium, Islamic-based private pre-schools.

When implementing the use of English in the subject of Mathematics and Science in the primary and secondary schools, the Ministry of Education as the provider of pre-school education for the lower income group or rural parents, should also provide English medium pre-schools to its population. In the findings of this study, parents express the need for English-medium and Islamic-based pre-schools. Alternatively, the government could provide qualified English teachers in Government funded pre-schools to be fair to all citizens, especially to the rural poor and non-English speaking parents. Concentration on providing better English teaching at Government-run pre-school will help to materialise the National Vision Policy that aims to achieve a 60:40 ratio of science to arts students by 2020 (Malaysia, 2001). This study identified the important decision factors that determine parents' choice of pre-schools. The findings based on the three research objectives are as follows:

- Malay parents seem to prefer branded, private-run, English medium and religion-based pre-schools.
- The top most important decision factors that influence parents' choice of pre-schools are: Safety and security, Quality of teaching, Hygiene/cleanliness and Religious value. Ethnic background, religion, occupation and family income also influence the choice of pre-schools made by parents. The higher income Malay parents chose private-run, English medium and Islamic based pre-schools for their children, while the lower income group go for Government-run and Islamic based pre-schools.
- There is positive linear relationship between parents' choice and decision factors. Two predictors for parents' choice of pre-schools are quality of teaching and qualified teachers.

Significance of Findings, Implications and Future Research

Parental choice from this study can be considered as one of the market indicators for pre-school business. This result has implications for the pre-school operators who need to understand their customer's expectation of their services. The survey results informed that there is a good opportunity for those who are interested in the education business, especially there is good prospect in English medium pre-school and Islamic English medium pre-school. As for Islamic English medium pre-schools, this study can give them confidence to expand their business, to conquer the Muslim market or to start franchising their businesses, becomes home grown brand and go global. Parents can use this study as a guideline in choosing the choice of pre-school for their children. Further study of this topic can be developed into a systematic directory of top pre-school in the state or country, where the factors or choice rating can be used as part of the grading of pre-schools.

The survey instrument or parts of it may be used as an assessment tool to evaluate pre-school programs and features. The data obtained from this study would be valuable as baseline data for the pre-school providers and parents. The results provide important base statistics on factors and features of pre-school business and education specifically, from which future studies could rely on for population statistics, or for data comparison. For future research, a larger sample size should be taken to improve the results for regression analysis. Removing insignificant variables could reduce the number of independent variables. The regression model can be improved with a smaller number of variables. This study may also be considered a take off point from which longitudinal studies may proceed if there is sufficient and concerted effort from the stakeholders of the pre-school providers to improve pre-school education services and its business competitiveness as a whole.

Limitations of Findings

There are limitations in doing this research that need to be acknowledged. The first limitation is the amount of data collected is relatively small, out of 250 questionnaires sent out, only 162 participants responded or returned the questionnaire to the researcher. This probably gave rise to the insignificant results obtained in the regression analysis. The regression analysis can be improved with a larger sample size, and a smaller number of independent variables. Most of the responding parents are government servants, which gave a biased result. Therefore the results obtained in this study could only be generalized to this particular population group.

References

- Abhinav Sharma (2009). Time for local brand to rise to the occasion. *TheSun*, February 26, 2009, p.14.
- Adnan Abd. Rashid (1993). A Study of Parent Expectations on Teachers' Requirements in Teaching at Islamic Pre-Schools (TASKIs) in Federal Territory. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, International Islamic University of Islam, Selangor.
- Allen, Derek. R. & Rao, Tanniru R. (2000). *Analysis of Customer Satisfaction Data*. Wisconsin: ASQ Quality Press.
- Bartlett, J.E., Kortrlik, J.W. & Higgins, C.C. (2001). Organizational Research: Determining Appropriate Sample Size in Survey Research. *Information Technology, Learning and Performance Journal*, 19(1), 43-50.
- Ceglowski, D. (2007). "Play a Lot": Children's Perception of Child Care. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 22(2), 183-187.
- Gestwicki, C. (2007). *Home, School, and Community*. New York: Thomson Delmar Learning.
- Gomez-Mejia Luis R., Balkin David B. & Cardy Robert L. (2004). *Managing Human Resources*, (4th Edition). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Halstead, J.M. (Ed)(1994). *Parental Choice and Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Hawkins, D.I, Mothersbaugh, D.L., & Best, R.J.(2007). *Consumer Behavior: Building Marketing Strategy*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Iman Mohamed Baianonie (1988). The Islamic way to raise the children. Retrieved November 17, 2008, from http://www.islamawareness.net/Parenting/parenting_article005.html
- Jamaliah Hashim (1999). Students' Perception of Physical School Environment in Selected Schools of Seremban. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, International Islamic University of Islam, Selangor.
- Jensen, Mary A. & Hannibal Mary Anne. (2000). *Issues, Advocacy, and Leadership in Early Education: Quality in Child Care Centers*. MA: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Krupicka, R. (2005). The Case For Pre-School: Universal Preschool Access. Retrieved December.1.,2007.,from <http://radio.weblogs.com/0116176/stories/2006/10/05/theCaseForPreschool.html>
- Malaysia (2001). *The Third Outline Perspective Plan 2001–2010*. Kuala Lumpur: EPU Malaysia.
- McDaniel, C., Lamb, C.W. Jr., & Hair, J.F.Jr.(2006). *Introduction to Marketing* (8th Ed.). Ohio: Thomson South-Western.
- Muhammad Abd. Rauf (1991). *The Muslim Mind Foundation and Early Manifestation*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Munn, P. (Ed.) (1993). *Parents and school: Customers, Managers or Partners?* London: Routledge.
- Neufeld, G. & Mate, G. (2005). *Hold on to your Kids: Why Parent Need To Matter More Than Peers*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Pallant, Julie (2001). *SPSS Survival Manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS for Windows*. Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Prior, J. & Gerard, M.R.(2007). *Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education: Research into Practice*. New York: Thomson Delmar Learning.
- Puteri Zabariah, Bustam Kamri & Raja Hamidah (2005). *Tadika Berkualiti*. Bentong: PTS Professional Publishing Sdn Bhd.
- Robbins, S.P. (2005). *Organizational Behavior* (11th Edition). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Robbins, S.P. & Coulter, M. (2005). *Management* (8th Edition). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Thompson, A.A Jr, Strickland III A.J & Gamble J.E. (2008). *Crafting and Executing Strategy: The Quest for Competitive Advantage, Concepts and Cases*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Vina Adriany (2002). Parents' Perception Towards Self-determination in Pre-school Children. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, International Islamic University of Islam, Selangor.
- Waddy, C. (1982). *The Muslim Mind*, London: Longman Group Limited.
- Walford, G. (1991), *Weak Choice, Strong Choice and the New Christian Schools*.
- In Halstead, J.M. (Ed)(1994). *Parental Choice and Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- West, A. (1994), *Choosing Schools – The Consumers' Perspective*. In Halstead, J.M. (Ed)(1994). *Parental Choice and Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Wolfson, E.B. (2000). *Parent Center: A step-by-step guide to choosing a pre-school*. Retrieved December.1.,2007.,from <http://www.wholefamily.com/aboutourkids/child/preschool-1.html>
- Ziauddin Sardar (1988). *The Future of Muslim Civilization*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications.