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Parental perceptions of pre-school education in Malaysia

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PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SCHOOL

EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Pre-school education in Malaysia has expanded significantly over the past twenty years and is currently the focus of increased attention within the Ministry of Education. This study explores and describes the perceptions of Malaysian parents concerning pre-school education. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development, the study examines the potential influence of macrosystem elements on the parents' perceptions, as well as the likely impact of such perceptions upon the home - pre-school mesosystem.

The research was conducted with a group of 21 parents of children in their final year of pre-school education. They were selected from four private pre-schools, employing a range of methodologies, located within a few kilometres of one another in Kuala Lumpur. The parents participated in guided interviews in order to record their perceptions regarding the value or function of pre-school education; the importance of a range of pre-school practices; and the role and nature of the pre-school caregiver. The interview responses underwent computer assisted analysis using the NUD*IST qualitative data analysis software.

Findings indicate that Malaysian parents hold both idealised and actualised perceptions of pre-school education. The former relate to the parents' image of childhood and the type of education they would like their child to receive in an ideal world, whilst the later relate to the type of education parents feel their child needs in order to meet the needs of Malaysian society.

The study concludes by suggesting that parents' knowledge and perceptions of pre-school education are socially constructed and should be judged for their socio-cultural appropriateness rather than their developmental appropriateness alone. Results suggest that efforts should be directed towards assisting parents to reduce the gap between their idealised and actualised perceptions by establishing closer links between the home and pre-school mesosystems.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(I) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature(

Date: ....30-1-98.......................

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1994 I moved to Malaysia with my husband, who had been seconded to his company's Kuala Lumpur office. Through my involvement with local teachers and parents both professionally and socially, I soon realised that pre-school education in Malaysia was totally different to the system of pre-school education in which I had worked in Australia. What interested me most were the parents' expectations of pre-school education. Parents often spoke of the importance of excelling academically at the pre-school level, expressing the opinion that the way Australian pre-schools operate would quite simply never work in Malaysia. These comments, along with a preliminary investigation into pre-school practices in Malaysia as part of my university studies, convinced me that parental perceptions of pre-school education in Malaysia was an area deserving more in-depth examination. This thesis seeks to explore these perceptions in relation to their unique socio-cultural context.

The Background to the Study

The theory and practice associated with the field of early childhood education has undergone frequent and dramatic shifts over the past decade. Of increasing concern to researchers are the issues of how children learn, what should be learned at what age, and how it should be taught. Researchers, governments, principals, teachers and parents have all contributed to the current debate as to what constitutes a sound educational program for pre-school aged children. In its most simplistic form, the debate is often characterised as being between those who advocate teaching children academic skills and content, often via didactic teaching methods, and those who view pre-school education as primarily a socialising experience, advocating learning through a play approach. Spodek characterises these competing conceptions as "academic versus developmental" or "child centred versus content centred" (1991, p. 185).

More often than not it is the parents who are held responsible for the pre-school program's move away from the traditionally accepted notion of early childhood education, which is underpinned by a developmental, play based approach (Brown, 1993; Hyson, 1991; Stipek, Rosenblatt & DiRoco, 1994, p. 5). The literature reports that many educators and researchers are resisting the push by parents towards an increasingly formal and academic pre-school

education, describing such beliefs as being "developmentally inappropriate", and running contrary to the image of sound practice as presented by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). However, there are also those who are beginning to question the field's over reliance upon child development theory alone to explain what, when and how young children should learn (Bloch, 1992; Bowman & Stott, 1994; Catherwood, 1994; Fleer, n.d.; Jipson, 1991; Kessler, 1991; New & Mallory, 1994; Spodek, 1991;). Increasingly, recognition is being given to the importance of political, social, economic and cultural factors in the formation of both parental perceptions regarding education, and the educational programs themselves (Carlson, 1993; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1987, Carlson & Stenmalm-Sjoblom 1989; David, 1992; Harkness, 1980; Ogbu, 1988). Educators and researchers are coming to realise that such factors not only determine the "appropriateness" of parental perceptions, but also the suitability of theory, policy and practice.

The literature suggests that the cultural realities upon which much of our current theory and practice is based are not shared cultural realities (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Jipson, 1991; New, 1994; New & Mallory, 1994; Prochner, 1992; Williams, 1994). For many children, particularly for those from non-white middle class cultural backgrounds, the content and strategies traditionally valued and advocated by child education theorists may simply fail to meet their unique needs, thus placing these children at risk. Many educators and researchers are beginning to argue that the current emphasis upon child development theory as the sole determinant of an appropriate education is not sufficiently cognisant of the impact of complex social, political, economic and cultural factors upon the child and his or her family.

An investigation of Malaysian pre-schools by Hewitt (1994) found that teachers and principals expressed concern over what they saw as the excessively high expectations held by Malaysian parents for the education of their pre-school children. Principals indicated that the majority of parents sought centres which focused upon academic skills such as reading, writing and numeracy. They stressed that a play based curriculum would be viewed unfavourably by most Malaysian parents. Many teachers and principals expressed a concern that in responding to parental pressure to provide children with a formal academic pre-school program, they were acting against what they believed constituted an appropriate education for children at this age.

The question is whose notion of an appropriate pre-school education is more relevant to the needs of Malaysian children - the teachers' or the parents'?

The Significance of the Study

The significance of the proposed research lies in the fact that it will seek to investigate parental perceptions in a culturally diverse setting, and in doing so, expand our understanding and appreciation of the different forms of pre-school education in operation in other countries of the world. Whilst much of the current research has failed to conceptualise the phenomenon of parent perceptions in relation to the broader socio-cultural context, there are some researchers who have enabled the problem to be reconceptualised in terms of the influence of socio-cultural factors upon parental perceptions (Carlson, 1993; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1987; Carlson & Stenmalm-Sjoblom 1989; David, 1992). What is so refreshing about such an approach is that it challenges the prevailing narrow focus which views differences in parental perceptions as being based solely at the individual, family or school level. These researchers have challenged the dominant "way of knowing" and in turn enabled us to view both pre-school programs and parents' perceptions of them from a different perspective.

Pre-school education has, until fairly recently, held a relatively low profile within the Malaysian education system (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 31). The Malaysian government has recently announced plans to amend the Education Act of 1961 in order to ensure higher quality pre-school programs, and greater access to these programs, particularly for children in rural areas. The amendment will call for compulsory basic training for teachers and a standardised pre-school curriculum (De Paul, 1995). It is vital that such a curriculum reflects the unique social, economic and cultural realities of Malaysia, rather than mirroring the traditional white, middle class notion of an appropriate education.

This study has the potential to provide a timely insight into how Malaysian parents perceive the current pre-school provisions and to probe not only *what* parents want from their child's pre-school education, but to also shed light on *why*. Such a research direction was highlighted by Malaysian researcher Mohd. Majzub as being of great importance (1992).

The Purpose of the Study

Very little recent research has been published regarding the nature of pre-school education in Malaysia. Whilst a recent investigation into Early Childhood Education in Malaysia found that parents' perceptions regarding children and education were not respected by either the government or those responsible for program implementation (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 52), there is little research available which describes these perceptions. The purpose of this study, following on from an earlier exploratory study by Hewitt (1994), is to explore and describe parents' expressed perceptions regarding pre-school education in Malaysia, revealing the nature of links between the home and preschool environments. The study will extend upon research conducted in 1980 by Mohd. Majzub (1992) which addressed the prioritisation of pre-school goals by Malaysian parents.

As previously stated, researchers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of taking parental perceptions into account when designing pre-school programs. Furthermore, they are coming to the conclusion that parents' perceptions of these programs are strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors which are often unique to a particular context. The question of what is shaping parental perceptions was identified by Mohd. Majzub as a pertinent issue for future research in Malaysian pre-school settings (1992, p. 63).

This research is based upon the belief that individual perceptions are a manifestation and reflection of both personal characteristics and larger societal forces. In accordance with the focus of the research, the questions to be addressed are;

- What perceptions do Malaysian parents hold regarding pre-school education?

- What impact are these perceptions likely to have upon the home - pre-school mesosystem?

- How is the socio-cultural context of Malaysia reflected in these perceptions?

It is hoped the study will contribute towards expanding the notion of what constitutes "appropriate" perceptions beyond the current confines of child development theory alone. These results may indicate that the notion of an "appropriate" pre-school education, no matter how carefully defined, is an outmoded one, and that educational programs need to recognise and accommodate a range of different perceptions regarding pre-school education.

Definitions of Terms Used

The following terms, which are central to the research undertaking, have been defined in order to facilitate a shared interpretation of the concepts dealt with therein. Other definitions are supplied as necessary throughout the paper.

Parents - whilst the term is used generally throughout the paper to mean mothers or the primary caregiver, in the literature review the term refers specifically to mothers, unless otherwise stated.

Perception - throughout the literature a number of terms are used to describe the beliefs parents hold regarding pre-school education, including attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, opinions, and values. For the purpose of this research, the term perception will be used throughout to refer to parents' expression of their awareness or understanding of the nature or purpose of pre-school education.

Pre-school Education - much of the literature varies in the terminology used to describe the level of education about which the parents' perceptions are sought. Terms include pre-school education, kindergarten education, and pre-primary education. The term pre-school education will be used throughout this paper, and will encompass the year of education immediately before a child enters primary school.

Culture or Socio-Cultural Context – throughout the paper, discussion of the social and cultural characteristics of the research setting, as experienced by the participants, will be based upon the following definition:

> *A way of life shared by members of a population. [It] includes customs or institutionalised public behaviours, as well as thoughts and emotions that accompany and support those public behaviours. [It] includes people's economic, political, religious and social institutions [which require] competencies that guide the behaviours of members of the culture fairly predictably. (Ogbu, 1988, pp. 10-11).*

Summary

In this first chapter I have outlined the practical and theoretical elements which gave rise to this study. The study's significance has been established both in terms of its ability to examine

perceptions beyond the confines of the current research approaches and in terms of its potential contribution to the ongoing development of pre-school education in Malaysia. The purpose of the study, in accordance with the research questions, is to examine parental perceptions of pre-school education in relation to their unique socio-cultural context.

The remainder of the thesis will work towards achieving this purpose. Chapter two, the context of the study, presents a thorough overview of pre-school education in Malaysia in order to acquaint the reader with the current situation. Chapter three reviews the literature relating to the research. Chapter four outlines the conceptual framework that underpins the study, establishing the research focus and direction. In chapter five the methodology employed in the study is detailed, including the chosen approach and research design, the selection of research participants and the procedures for data collection and analysis. In chapter six the results of the study are presented thematically, in order to facilitate the ensuing discussion in chapter seven, where patterns are noted and the results examined in relation to their socio-cultural context. Chapter eight presents conclusions stemming directly from the results and discussion chapters and touches on the implications of the study for practice, policy and future research.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the context within which this study was conducted and in particular, the nature of pre-school education within that setting. After setting the scene with some pertinent background information on Malaysia and its history and culture as it pertains to education, the chapter presents a brief overview of the development and provision of pre-school education in Malaysia and examines the issues of curriculum, training and parental involvement at the pre-school level. The chapter concludes with an outline of the future plans for pre-school education in Malaysia.

Background

Malaysia is made up of two land masses - Peninsular Malaysia which holds over 80% of the country's population and East Malaysia (comprising Sabah and Sarawak) which despite its much larger size, holds under 20% of the population. The population is comprised of three main racial groups; Indians, who make up around 10% of the population; Chinese, who constitute approximately 32%; and the majority Malays or "Bumiputeras". Recent figures reveal a very young population, with 18% in the birth through six years age group (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 1).

Malaysian society is oriented towards national solidarity, with the government placing a great deal of importance upon achieving national unity and equality and harmony between all its peoples. This direction is strongly evident in the guiding principles of the government's Vision 2020 statement, a blue print of national development intended to move Malaysia towards developed nation status. It is also, however, a nation characterised by competition and hierarchical, formal relationships. Respect for one's elders or one's superiors is deeply entrenched in the Malaysian culture, with the moral development of the child being a strong societal value amongst Malaysians (Mohd. Majzub, 1995, p. 61).

The principal source of competition in Malaysian society is deeply rooted in Malaysia's history. After achieving self government from the British in 1955, the Malays controlled the means of government whilst the Chinese dominated the economic and educational systems (Hsu, 1993, p. 11). The Malaysian government subsequently adopted a set of policies which

favoured the Malays, reasoning that British colonial policies had severely disadvantaged Malaysia's indigenous populations. Of particular relevance to this study is the government's "positive discrimination" policy (Hsu, 1993, p. 14), part of its New Economic Policy, in relation to higher education. This policy saw the establishment of enrolment quotas and the reservation of the majority of government scholarships for Malay students in order to guarantee greater representation of Malay students in local universities (Pong, 1993, p. 247). This policy has resulted in many Chinese and Indian students being unable to gain admission to local universities and therefore having to go overseas for their university education. In fact, Pong (1993) found that "Malays were increasingly more likely to attend and complete secondary school than were non-Malays" (p. 245). In citing a study by Wang (1980), Pong suggests that these preferential policies actually raised Malays' educational aspirations, regardless of their examination scores, whilst Chinese students' expectations of university admission varied in accordance with their examination scores (1993, p. 248). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Malaysia is a highly examination oriented culture (Mohd. Majzub, 1992, p. 50), with the formal exams more often associated with education at the primary and secondary levels now becoming a part of many pre-school programs. As Mohd. Majzub explains, the intellectual achievement of the child is highly valued by Malaysian society (1992, p. 61).

The emphasis upon accelerated social and economic development over the past twenty years through initiatives such as the New Economic Plan, the National Development Policy and the series of Malaysia Plans has led to rapid change in all sectors of Malaysian society. More and more the focus is upon the world of technology as Malaysia strives towards developed nation status through its Vision 2020 initiative. Increasing enrolment levels within the science, mathematics and technology streams is, in fact, a major focus of the recently released Seventh Malaysia Plan (Prime Minister's Department, 1996). In particular, the increasing emphasis upon the importance of education in achieving these national goals has led to an increased awareness amongst parents, the government and non-governmental organisations of the importance of pre-school education.

The ongoing changes in Malaysian society have also impacted upon Malaysian family life. In particular employment opportunities for women have increased considerably, with the number of women classified as 'employees' rising from 38.9% in 1970 to 62.9% in 1990 (Sixth Malaysia

Plan: 1991-1995, cited in Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 2). This trend has naturally impacted upon the role of women within the family. The disruption of the traditional extended family structure caused by increasing levels of rural-urban migration and resettlement over the past twenty years, coupled with the move towards living in a nuclear family unit, has also impacted upon family life. It becomes apparent that the increase in demand for pre-school education and child care is a reflection of the fact that today's women are lacking in traditional support structures (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 2). Pre-school education in particular is now fulfilling an important societal, as well as educational, function.

The Provision of Pre-School Education in Malaysia

The first pre-schools to appear in Malaysia in the 1950's and 1960's were organised by church groups and private individuals. The high fees associated with these organisations made pre-school education a privilege of the wealthy. It was not until 1970, under the Community Development Division (KEMAS) of the Ministry of National and Rural Development, that the first pre-schools started to appear in the poorer rural areas. These centres were established in an attempt to provide children from disadvantaged backgrounds with more equal educational opportunities. It was not long before other government and quasi-government agencies also became involved in the provision of pre-school education, further widening the educational opportunities for children from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Ministry of Education has, until recently, had very little involvement in the provision or administration of pre-school education. In 1972, the Curriculum Development Centre began extensive work on a project which culminated in the production of "A Guide For Pre-School Education" (Ministry of Education, 1984). Whilst the Ministry's role has traditionally been limited to the preparation of the curriculum and the registration of pre-school centres, in 1992 they attempted to supplement existing facilities by establishing classes in approximately 1131 schools for children aged five (but more usually six) through their pre-school annex system. The aim of these pre-schools, attached to government primary schools, was to further assist children from low income families to be adequately prepared for school. Whilst the program was terminated after its first year, it has been re-established, and it is anticipated that a further 300 classes will be established in 1997, with a total of 4000 classes operating by the end of the 7th Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) (Fattah, personal communication, January 24th, 1996). Concern has been

expressed, however, that the educational approach utilised, and the use of primary school staff as teachers, has resulted in a program which closely resembles formal primary schooling (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 32).

As can be seen from Table 1, pre-school education in Malaysia is more popular than ever, with centres organised and sponsored by a range of groups, including government, quasi-government and private organisations. The expansion of pre-school services and enrolment over the past 20 years has been significant (see Table 2). The Seventh Malaysia Plan has put the total number of pre-school centres operating in 1995 at 10,350, with some 420,600 five to six year olds enrolled (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 304). However, it is estimated that in this same year pre-school centres still only catered for approximately 54% of the 5-6 year old cohort (Fattah, personal communication, January 24th, 1996).

Table 1
Number of pre-school centres, classes and children by agency, 1992.
(Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 28)

Agency	No. of centres	No. of classes	No. of children
Government	5,925	6,010	221,160
Statutory	185	403	18,140
Religious	134	79	7,253
Private	1,239	5,026	138,588[a]
TOTAL	7, 483	11,718[b]	385,141

Note.
[a] This figure Is likely to be under-reported since many private centres are not registered.
[b] This total does not include classes in the Ministry of education's Annex Program.

Table 2
Expansion of pre-school centres and enrolments 1970-1994.
(Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 22)

Year	No. of centres	Increase across years	No. of children	Increase across years	Children per centre
1970	349		24,801		71
		752%		589%	
1980	2,974		170,955		57
		103.3%		92.3%	
1990	6,046		328,813		54
		54%		26.1%	
1994	9,311		414,670		44

Discussions with a representative of the Ministry of Education revealed that the Ministry is aiming for 100% pre-school attendance amongst 5-6 year old children by the year 2005. It is anticipated that 80% of these children will be catered for by the Ministry pre-school system, and the remaining 20% catered for by the private sector. 80% of the government pre-schools are currently located in the rural areas (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 304) where the indigenous Malay population is represented in higher numbers. For this reason, Malays have tended to have higher levels of representation in government centres than their Chinese and Indian peers, who are more likely to be enrolled in private pre-schools (Ministry of Education, 1984, p. 10).

Private Pre-Schools

Since this research undertaking focuses primarily upon parents of children enrolled in private pre-schools, it is relevant to refer to the role and function of private centres in more detail. Whilst government and quasi-government bodies have attempted to serve the educational needs of disadvantaged populations, particularly those in rural areas, the increased demand for pre-school education in the urban areas has been largely met by the private sector.

Private sector pre-schools are likely to be small operations, consisting of three to four classes. They are managed under sole proprietorship or a partnership, with the owner or one of the partners acting as principal, and employing teachers and assistants to run the educational program. The pre-schools usually rent or own buildings, bungalows or terrace houses for the sole purpose of conducting classes. With no source of government funding available, private pre-schools are generally concerned as much with financial results as they are with educational ones.

Although the proliferation of private sector pre-schools has been permitted (and even encouraged) for their ability to supplement the public sector efforts, there are few measures in place to monitor these institutions. The problems associated with these centres (although not always unique to the private sector) were first highlighted in the Status Report of Pre-School Education (Ministry of Education, 1984), but many are still prevalent today.

A primary concern is that not all private pre-schools are registered, as is required under the Education Act, 1961. Furthermore, even when pre-schools are registered, staffing levels within

the Ministry of Education's Federal Inspectorate are insufficient to ensure adherence to basic guidelines concerning matters such as curriculum, safety and staffing. This lack of supervision is fundamental to many of the other concerns regarding private sector pre-schools.

As has been mentioned, there is a great diversity in curriculum orientations and teaching approaches evident in Malaysian pre-schools, but nowhere more so than in the private sector centres. Whilst Section 20 of the second chapter of the recently revised Education Act (1996) states "The programmes and activities of every kindergarten shall be based on the curriculum guidelines for kindergartens approved by the Minister", it is as yet unclear how such a regulation will be enforced in the private sector. Due to competition for clientele many centres promote the use of "imported" teaching methods such as Montessori or Glen Doman and offer highly academic programs with a heavy reliance on commercially produced workbooks. The difficulty which arises is that the content taught to children in private sector pre-schools is often very similar to that which is taught in standard one classrooms, and this has led to many children entering standard one over prepared, only to become bored and frustrated. This problem is not new however, having been highlighted as an area of concern in the Status Report of Pre-School Education (1984).

As previously stated, a very substantial proportion of teachers employed in the private sector are untrained (see Table 3). In addition, many centre principals have no teaching background. This can have implications in the area of curriculum planning and implementation, especially when one considers that the private sector, as a rule, does not choose to follow the Ministry curriculum guidelines (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 49).

The issue of fees has also caused a great deal of debate and concern amongst the clients of private pre-schools. Private sector centres and particularly those in the urban areas, charge the highest fees of all pre-school centres. This problem has only increased in magnitude over the years. A survey by University Pertanian Malaysia found that parents erroneously equated high fees with a better quality education (Omar, 1994). Despite the negative implications of such a trend upon equitable access to pre-school education, the high fees have at least resulted in private sector pre-schools being far better resourced than their government and quasi-government counterparts, who are faced with greater financial constraints.

Curriculum

The primary source of curriculum for the majority of government and quasi-government pre-schools is the *Garis Panduan Pra Sekolah Malaysia*, or the Pre-School Curriculum Guidelines, developed by the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Development Centre (1988). The guidelines emphasise the total development of the child and cover the areas of physical, social, emotional, mental, spiritual and language development, civic responsibility, aesthetics and creative skills. The guidelines include modules and activity books to assist teachers in implementing the curriculum.

Whilst a recent review of curriculum issues found the guidelines to be "very comprehensive and well-grounded in child development theory" (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 49), it was the implementation of the curriculum which received criticism. Many teachers reported implementation difficulties resulting from insufficient time and resources and high teacher-pupil ratios. However it was found that the vast majority of difficulties, such as coping with children of different ability levels, managing problem behaviour, understanding objectives, maintaining children's interest and monitoring the child's learning, stemmed directly from the inadequate training and supervision of the teachers (Mohd. Majzub, 1995).

Training

The various agencies responsible for the provision of pre-school education (including the Ministry of Education) conduct a range of training programs, usually exclusively for their own staff. The programs differ in length, but are usually of a one to two week duration. The Kindergarten Association of Malaysia (PTM) conducts a six stage training program over a three year period, with each stage being of around two weeks duration, as well as other short pre- or in-service courses. PTM courses are open to individuals from private sector or voluntary pre-schools.

Concern over the standard of pre-school teacher training is not new. A recent investigation of training issues by Ismail (1995) reinforced many of the concerns raised in the earlier 1984 Status Report of Pre-School Education. Ismail concluded that there was no coordination of training programs amongst government and non-government organisations (NGOs), and that training in the NGO and private sectors had not been monitored or certified by any government

agency, leaving teachers under the misconception that their training was being recognised by the government. She also found that the training courses were theoretical in nature, with few links to practice, and failed to encourage the involvement of parents or the community. In assessing the methodology used, Ismail found that training programs ignored locally relevant and culturally based teaching and learning approaches, and emphasised teacher initiated, non-experiential learning experiences.

The latest figures suggest that nearly 33% of pre-school teachers are untrained, with the highest representation of untrained teachers being found in the private sector. Table 3 illustrates this.

Table 3
Number of pre-school teachers and assistant teachers by agency.
(Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 54)

Agency	No. of trained teachers	No. of untrained teachers	No. of assistant teachers
Government	4,531	1,044	2,584
Statutory	188	174	112
Religious	201	91	56
Private	3,043	2,060	1,179
TOTAL	7,963	3,369	3,931

Note. These figures do not include Ministry of Education Annex Program.

In an attempt to improve the quality of pre-school education, the Ministry has recently announced new training requirements for all government employed pre-school teachers. Expressing his concern that some pre-school teachers had only passed standard six, Education Minister Najib stated that all teachers would be required to hold at least the *Sijil Rendah Pelajaran* (SRP - form three exam) and receive some formal training at a Teacher Training College or similar institution, although details of the course have yet to be finalised (De Paul, 1995). However, Ismail's recent review into training issues associated with early childhood education in Malaysia found that "even to be trained may have little significance in terms of the teacher's knowledge, skills and competencies in working with young children" (Evans & Ismail, 1995, p. 54).

Parental Involvement in Pre-School Education

The 1995 Early Childhood Development Study (ECDS) - a UNICEF sponsored review of issues in early childhood education in Malaysia - provides what is perhaps the only profile on levels of parental involvement in pre-school education in Malaysia. The research module on parental involvement (Putri, 1995) represented public, government and private pre-schools in both urban and rural areas via questionnaires and interviews. Although relatively small in its scale, the study clearly showed that levels of parent and community involvement in pre-school education were very low. The activities that parents were involved in were typically of a "social" nature - attending sports days, presentations, festival celebrations and so on. The study found parents knew little about what their child did at pre-school and generally did little to interact with the teachers. This problem has been perpetuated by low levels of participation combined with a "top-down" approach to educational decision making. Educational decisions are made at higher levels, moving down the chain of command, with parents having no role in the decision making process.

In the Seventh Malaysia Plan, the government has committed itself to increasing the awareness amongst parents of the importance of pre-school education in the overall development of their child (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 324). To this effect, the government hopes to increase parent participation in schools and encourage greater collaboration between parents, teachers and the general community. It does not, however, suggest how this will be achieved. Obviously much hinges on our definition of "involvement". Whilst the ECDS makes a number of recommendations as to how parent involvement at the pre-school level can be increased, Putri (1995) makes the valid point that it is first necessary to define what is meant by parent or community involvement (p. 28). The government will need to clarify just what it wants to achieve before it can hope to address the issue of low parental participation levels in pre-school education.

The Future of Pre-School Education in Malaysia

The Status Report of Pre-School Education (Ministry of Education, 1984) and the ECDS (Evans & Ismail, 1995) have both raised a great number of concerns regarding pre-school education in Malaysia. They have also made many recommendations as to how these concerns

can best be addressed in the interests of providing Malaysian children with higher quality, more accessible pre-school education.

In addition to the proposed new training requirements already mentioned, the Ministry of Education is attempting to instigate changes in other areas of policy and practice related to pre-school education through the Seventh Malaysia Plan. The new Education Act, 1996, which replaces the Act of 1961, has given the Minister greater powers to not only establish pre-school centres within Ministry schools, but to monitor the quality of education in the quasi-government and private sector pre-schools. The Act will also introduce "a more flexible approach to the duration of primary schooling between five to seven years" (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 323). With this in mind, a study has been proposed to look at the possibility of lowering the primary school entry age from six to five years. It is likely that such a move could have far reaching implications in the area of pre-school curriculum. The Ministry has also recently reviewed the content of its pre-school guidelines. It is currently in the process of breaking the curriculum into two distinct levels, with one set of guidelines for children under four years of age and another for the pre-school years, serving children in the five to six year old age group.

Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan it is the Ministry's intention to ensure the participation in pre-school education of at least 65% of children in the five to six year old age group by the year 2000 - an increase of around 10% on current enrolment levels (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 324). The expansion of pre-school services to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population is one issue requiring the government's immediate attention. Perhaps understandably, the private sector pre-schools tend not to operate in the rural areas, where children are in greatest need of services. The Ministry has expressed a strong desire to expand its involvement in pre-school education, particularly with a view to improving the educational opportunities of such disadvantaged children. However, with only a little over 1% of the Education budget allocated to pre-school education under the Seventh Malaysia Plan for the period 1996-2000 (Prime Minister's Department, 1996, p. 339), it is difficult to see how such an aim can be met. The ECDS suggests investigating lower cost models of early childhood education. The current policy of providing tax concessions to businesses in exchange for providing their workers with child care needs to be assessed in terms of both the service's quality and its cost-effectiveness. According to Evans and Ismail (1995) another option could be

the utilisation of home based centres where parent fees pay the teacher's salary and the Ministry provides support and training (p. 67).

With increasing demands being placed upon programs of early childhood education in Malaysia, immediate action will be needed if the government is to ensure the sustained growth and effective management of the country's early childhood services.

Summary

The provision of pre-school education in Malaysia has come a long way over the past twenty years, and is currently the focus of increased attention at all levels of Malaysian society. The Early Childhood Development Study (Evans & Ismail, 1995) has provided a comprehensive picture of the current provisions and issues in early childhood education in Malaysia. It has also served to highlight ways in which the nation's early childhood services could be improved. The themes arising in this chapter will serve as a backdrop against which the research findings can be examined.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature, including research relating to parents' perceptions of pre-school education as a way of providing a background from which the current study has been derived. The chapter commences with an outline of how the theory of early childhood education has evolved over the years. It then summarises the existing research into parents' perceptions, moving towards an examination of parents' perceptions regarding pre-school education in particular. This is followed by more specific attention to perceptions pertaining to play, the academic domain and finally the social domain. These three areas have been selected because of their significance to early childhood theory itself. Relevant research from the Malaysian context will then be discussed. The chapter concludes by looking at the phenomenon of parents' perceptions from an ecological perspective, reviewing studies which have emphasised the role of the socio-cultural context in relation to parents' perceptions.

Historical and Contemporary Visions of Early Childhood Education

Throughout history many theorists, educators and researchers have contributed not only to the constantly evolving notion of early childhood education, but also to our notion of the child. Then, as now, such theories often reflect the societal orientations of the day. By understanding past theoretical perspectives we can come to develop a greater understanding of current trends and future directions in education.

The current conception of early childhood education owes much to its founding fathers; from figures such as John Amos Comenius, Jacques Rousseau and Johann Pestalozzi through to Friederich Willhelm Froebel, who is credited with developing the first kindergarten in 1841 and John Dewey.

Whilst such theoretical roots remain a primary influence in the field of early childhood education, it is the work of later theorists that has had the most dramatic influence upon the philosophy and theory associated with the contemporary vision of early childhood education. During the early part of the 20th century, the field of child development was able to build a comprehensive understanding of how children learn and develop due to the extensive

observation of children. This early information base has continued to influence theory and practice to this very day. The role of play continues to be of central importance to many early childhood theorists at this time.

Erik Ericson, in his theory of psycho-social development, proposed that children work through their conflicts by reconstructing them in their symbolic play and that play was therefore a critical element in a child's social-emotional development. Thus, play became a critical element in both child development and early childhood programs. Play was also valued for its contribution to the child's intellectual development. The work of Jean Piaget, arguably the most influential figure in the field of early childhood education, introduced the principles of age and stage appropriate learning. The central focus of his theory was that the child's goal is to make sense of their world. Piaget proposed that in order to do this, the child must be permitted to actively construct their own learning through self initiated and self controlled play and exploration. Play began to be seen as "the child's work", as making valuable contributions to the child's development and way of learning (Meadows, 1986, p. 23). Piaget hypothesised that children pass through four stages of intellectual development, and identified pre-school children as functioning at the pre-operational thought stage (Bee, 1997, pp. 184-187). The major implication of this was that children of this age should learn through the play based manipulation of concrete materials. Piaget believed that the introduction of symbolic learning, such as letter and number work, was inappropriate and perhaps futile at this level of cognitive functioning.

Piaget's ideas, which came to be associated with the "child development" point of view (Williams, 1987, p. 6), have continued to impact upon the field of early childhood. Such classrooms are usually characterised by the presence of "interest centres", a range of freely available manipulative materials and an emphasis upon child directed activity (Williams, 1987, pp. 8-9). The role of teachers is to provide children with the appropriate play materials and experiences which will facilitate their transition to the next stage in the sequence.

There are those who have criticised Piaget's work for its failure to recognise the role of "more knowledgeable others" in extending the child's understanding (Meadows, 1986, p. 36). The work of Lev Vygotsky served to extend theory and practice in early childhood education by addressing this very issue. Vygotsky emphasised the role of the socio-cultural context upon the child's development, believing that knowledge is socially constructed and transmitted (Ebbeck,

1996, p. 10; McInerney & McInerney, 1994, p. 99). Whilst Vygotsky agreed that children pass through broad stages in their development of reasoning, he proposed that the child's optimum level of cognitive development takes place within a "zone of proximal development". This zone represents the difference between what a child can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in collaboration with others (Elliott, 1994, p. 8). He theorised that co-operation on a learning task with a more knowledgeable other serves to "scaffold" the child's learning. Through this scaffolding process, the child's ideas are confirmed and extended upon by guiding them through the problem solving task. Such an approach to learning seems to have a positive effect upon the child's cognitive development (Meadows, 1986, p. 109). Vygotsky's work is currently having a profound influence on researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood education.

Conflicting Views

Recent research into early childhood education is leading the field in new and challenging directions. It suggests that Piaget may have underestimated the capabilities of the young child (Bee, 1997, pp. 189-191; Catherwood, 1994, p. 25; McInerney & McInerney, 1994, pp. 89-92; Meadows, 1986, p. 37; Smith, 1993, p. 51). Perhaps the greatest shortfall of Piaget's work was that it focussed too much upon what a child was incapable of doing at a particular age, rather than upon their increasing strengths and achievements. The cognitive processing of young children is now seen to be essentially similar in nature to that of adults. It is now believed that children are disadvantaged because of unfamiliarity with task content, rather than because they are at a particular stage and therefore lack the necessary cognitive processes. It is becoming increasingly apparent that many of the Piagetian assumptions upon which early childhood theory and practice have been based are either unwarranted, or at least in need of revision. However, this shift in perspective is yet to make any significant impact upon pre-school theory and practice (Catherwood, 1994, p. 25).

There is currently little consensus over the nature of either childhood or early childhood education (McCaig & Sapp, 1988, pp. 33-35; Spodek, 1991, p.185; Walsh, 1991, p. 110). The two sides of the debate today are more often than not characterised by the terms "developmentally appropriate practice" (encompassing the traditional views of education as espoused by Froebel, Dewey and Piaget) and "developmentally inappropriate practice"

(reflecting the move away from a play based curriculum towards a more formal, academic based curriculum). However, these two terms, coined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children in an attempt to improve practice amongst early childhood educators, fail to encompass the true nature of the debate. Kessler (1991) makes the interesting observation that:

> *What appears to be a debate between those who are well informed by current research in child development and those who are not is, in reality, a debate between individuals who hold different values about the purposes of schooling, what counts as legitimate knowledge, and presumably the nature of the good life and the just society. (p. 193)*

As Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik stresses, we can only understand such trends in education when we recognise that education is part of a larger societal context. As our social, political and economic climates change, so too do our views and theories concerning what is important for children to learn (1983, p. 94; Ebbeck, 1996, p. 6). With the current concern in many parts of the world over falling standards of literacy and numeracy, greater levels of maternal employment, an increasingly competitive society, and the impact of technology upon all aspects of life, parents are increasingly looking towards schools to equip their children, at earlier and earlier levels, with the skills which they feel will best enable their child to succeed. The wide range of early childhood programs currently available is indicative of the changing perceptions, beliefs and values of both parents and teachers and of society in general (Rescorla, 1991, p. 9).

This debate, over the nature of pre-school education, is becoming increasingly evident in the Malaysian education system. The Ministry of Education is concerned over the predominantly academic curriculums offered in many pre-schools. Some teachers and principals are actively challenging the prevailing emphasis upon early academic learning and are instead promoting a more developmental, play based approach within their centres.

Parents' Perceptions

Accountability is an accepted facet of today's education system. In attempting to meet the ever changing needs of a diverse community and to assess the viability of current educational provisions, educators and researchers have sought to measure parental perceptions on a range of issues. A review of the literature indicates just how broad this examination has been; parent's

perceptions have been sought on topics ranging from their child's peer relations (Profilet &

Laddil, 1992) through to their child's computer knowledge (Scherer, 1990). Whilst the research

has addressed a large number of topics, some have received more attention than others. Of

particular concern to researchers, it would seem, are parent's perceptions of new program

initiatives (Moore, 1991), their perceptions of their child (Jewsawan, 1993; Potter, 1995), their

perceptions of various support services or agencies (McWilliams, 1995; Mills & Rubin, 1992),

their perceptions of day care provisions (Long, 1996; Sims & Hutchins, 1996) and the

perceptions of parents with exceptional children (Guralnick, 1994; Shaughnessy, 1992). In

addition to these areas (which are by no means exhaustive) researchers have also sought

parents' perceptions on the objectives, directions and features of educational programs in

general (Brogan, 1990; Peck, 1992). This study will follow this line of inquiry, examining parental

perceptions of pre-school education in Malaysia.

Parents' Perceptions of Pre-School Education

Educators have traditionally respected the close relationship between parent and child,

acknowledging not only that parents are the child's first teachers, but also the ongoing influence

parents exert over their child's learning and development. Educators have long capitalised upon

this factor by involving parents in their programs, and also by providing educational programs for

parents. However, the relationship between schools and families has shifted from one of

viewing parents as clients of educational programs, to one of viewing parents as policy makers.

Parents, as the primary caregivers of the child, have a right to be involved in decisions related to

curriculum and policy (Spodek, 1985, p. 249). Teachers can no longer claim to have an

inalienable right to determine the nature of the curriculum which they present to the child. In

Spodek's (1985) opinion one of the major issues in education today concerns "the extent to

which parents' wishes and demands should also constitute a legitimate set of constraints upon

teachers' actions" (p. 250). The trend towards greater accountability and greater community

involvement in educational decision making, coupled with the current conflict over what

constitutes the most appropriate theoretical or pedagogical position at the early childhood level,

has led some researchers to ask what it is, exactly, that parents want from their child's early

education.

Much of the recent literature (Ebbeck, 1981, 1991; Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Hills, 1987a, 1987b; Hyson, 1991; Katz, 1987; Kubala, 1990; Sava, 1987; Stipek, Rosenblatt & DiRocco, 1994), suggests there is little congruence between the goals of parents and teachers. Much of this literature generally indicates that parents have an overly narrow view of education which focuses almost entirely upon academic skills at the expense of other areas of development. Whilst some educators may question the significance, and perhaps even the validity of parental expectations and attitudes such as these, the literature is increasingly reporting that consideration of such factors is of great importance. Educators and researchers alike are coming to realise that it is neither possible nor advisable to ignore parental beliefs and expectations regarding the types of experiences early childhood education programs should be providing, simply because they are incongruent with their own beliefs or with accepted theories of child development (Ebbeck, 1991, p. 171). The success of an educational program at any level is largely dependent upon the support and acceptance of the parents (Ebbeck, 1991, p. 171; Spodek, 1985, p. 248). Ebbeck makes the valid point that parental dissatisfaction with education in general can often start at the early childhood level, where parents are frequently unable to understand the goals of the program (1991, p. 167). The greater the similarity and consistency between parent and teacher goals, the greater the effect those goals will have upon the child's performance (Knusden-Lindauer & Harris, 1989, p. 59).

Whilst it is incumbent upon schools to clarify such goals for parents, they must also be cognisant of what the *parents'* goals are for their child's education. In responding to parents in this way, and perhaps reassessing their priorities along the way, schools can become more responsive to the needs of society at large.

There are relatively few studies, which concern themselves directly with the question of what parents actually want from their child's early years of education. This is surprising when one considers the significant amount of attention the subject of parental attitudes has received in much of the literature. With so many educators expressing concern over phenomena such as hot-housing, academic "red shirting" and child stress associated with the introduction of academics at earlier ages, it is surprising that so few researchers have felt it necessary to investigate the opinions of parents in a formal manner. The research that is available, however,

provides us with an interesting and diverse portrait of what parents want from their child's early years of education.

Parental perceptions in selecting a pre-school.

Existing literature has revealed that very few researchers have examined the manner in which parents select their child's pre-school. Research by Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek and Cone (1990) and Stipek, Milburn, Clements and Daniels (1992), however, does reveal a strong correlation between parents' perceptions towards academics and the types of pre-schools they enrolled their children in. Both studies found a strong tendency amongst parents who were strongly in favour of academic learning experiences to enrol their children in pre-schools with a highly academic reputation. Whether parents selected pre-schools in accordance with their beliefs regarding the value of academic instruction, or whether their beliefs had been influenced by their contact with the pre-school is, however, uncertain.

Hoon (1994) investigated the views and expectations of Singaporean parents regarding pre-school education. She reported the factors influencing the parents' choice of kindergarten, as well as their choice between government and privately funded pre-schools and their reasons for sending their child to pre-school (as opposed to what they hoped their child would learn by being there). Hoon's study revealed that the quality of the service, identified as an academic program, good facilities and trained staff, was important to all parents, although the fees and distance were additional concerns for low socio-economic status (SES) parents; that parents choosing to send their children to private centres generally placed more emphasis upon having trained staff and a strong academic curriculum; and that parents sending their children to government centres were more concerned with the proximity of the centre.

In Hoon's study parents were nearly unanimous in nominating preparation for primary school as their reason for sending their child to pre-school, followed by a desire for their children to mix with other children of their own age (although this second reason was more common amongst the high SES parents). Interestingly, around 60% of the high SES parents indicated they felt social pressure to enrol their child at pre-school so they would not be behind their peers, whereas only 37% of low SES parents reported feeling this way.

As Hoon points out, choosing their child's pre-school is a parent's first educational decision. The perceptions underlying these choices demonstrate the influence of social and cultural factors upon parent's decisions and expectations.

Parental perceptions regarding play.

Whilst play has traditionally been one of the accepted components of pre-school programs and seen as an integral part of childhood, there is scepticism in many sectors as to its value, particularly in the educational setting. Learning is generally equated with work and therefore learning and play are seen as antonyms by many. Research by King (cited in Howells, 1984, pp. 44-45) showed that even pre-school children made consistent distinctions between activities they considered to be "work" and those they viewed as "play", according to whether it was child initiated or teacher assigned or directed. Unfortunately, while "work" or "learning" is viewed positively by society, "play" often is not (Casanova, 1989, p. 22). A study by Bartkowiak & Goupil (1992) served to illustrate this point. In a survey of parents' beliefs regarding various aspects of early childhood education, it was found that items involving the word "play" had lower mean scores than other items, with parents favouring paper and pencil tasks over dough, sand, painting and other play activities. The researchers concluded that the parents viewed learning and child initiated activity such as play, as not being linked in any way. They operated as a dichotomy.

These results reflect the findings of earlier studies, which also discovered a work / play dichotomy within parental perceptions. Researchers have frequently found that parents believe time for free play is unnecessary and reject a play approach to learning in favour of a more structured program (Brown, 1993; Kubala, 1990; Lambert, 1992; Webster & Wood, 1986). Graue (1993, p. 69) suggests that apparent parental dissatisfaction with the traditional pre-school approach, as evidenced by these studies, stems directly from the parents' restricted definitions of learning. Most parents require some form of tangible output to be convinced of a program's rigour.

A study by Rothlein and Brett (1987) makes for an interesting contrast, as not only did parents of 2-6 year olds underrate the value of play, but so too did teachers, with some teachers using it only as a reward after work was finished. These results stand in sharp contrast against

the overwhelmingly positive view of play that is frequently associated with teachers throughout the literature. The results reinforce the view of Cornelius (1989), who stated that "many teachers who espouse to value play, and its multiple gains for the child's cognitive, social and emotional development, frequently fail to schedule and provide for it in the classroom" (p. 33). Perhaps parents are not alone in their inability to understand the importance of play, yet more than anyone else it is parents who are judged harshly for their failure to comprehend or respect what educators and researchers (purportedly) hold so dear.

Parental perceptions regarding the academic domain.

As has already been mentioned, the overriding impression of parents amongst teachers and in the literature is that they value academic, formal learning experiences over all else. Several studies would appear to legitimise such impressions to a certain extent (Hess, Price, Dickson & Conroy, 1981; Hyson & DeCsipkes, 1993; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Rescorla et al., 1990; Stipek et al., 1992; Webster, 1984; Webster & Wood, 1986).

Research has revealed that parents tend to place more importance upon formal or academic skills such as reading, writing, counting or knowing the alphabet (Rescorla et al., 1990; Stipek et al., 1992; West, 1994). In particular, parents have been found to place more value upon academic experiences than do teachers (Ebbeck, 1980; Hess et al., 1981;Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989 Rescorla et al., 1990; West, 1994). It is interesting to note, however, that some studies have found perceptions towards academics to be characterised by some disparity. This would indicate that parents do not place equal value upon all academic learning experiences and indeed, that not all parents place the same value upon academic development.

Researchers have uncovered some interesting patterns in relation to parents' perceptions of the academic domain. Stipek et al. (1992) found that the degree to which parents expressed approval with academic methods was positively related to the increasing age of the child. Perhaps this finding reflected parents' concerns that their child be adequately prepared for their primary school education, although this is not established by the previous research.

Some researchers have endeavoured to delineate the type of parent who is likely to place more value upon academic content and methods. Whilst Stipek et al. (1992) and West (1994) found that less educated parents were more likely to endorse didactic instruction and goals in

pre-school than were higher educated parents, Lambert (1992) concluded that it was, in fact, the higher educated parents who were more likely to consider academics as important. These contrasting results would seem to indicate that assuming the homogeneity of the views or experiences of a particular group without accounting for individual backgrounds can lead to misinterpretation.

Hess et al. (1981) looked at the parental perception question from an entirely different perspective and provided new insight into the issues surrounding parent opinions regarding pre-school education. The authors found that parents rated the importance of various goals in a similar pattern. Independence and social skills were ranked highly, whilst language skills and school related skills were ranked lowly. However, when parents were asked to rank the goals according to which should be emphasised in the pre-school curriculum, their rankings altered considerably. It is the contrast between the two ratings that is of interest. Whilst parents ranked social skills as their most important goal, they believed it should receive *less* emphasis than it was currently getting. Conversely, even though parents ranked school related and language skills as their least important goals, they still believed they should receive *more* emphasis than they were currently receiving. Hess et al. (1981) hypothesised that this discrepancy was a function of the "index of role specialisation" - "the extent to which the respondents view the pre-school as having a highly specialised role in the child's development" (p. 10). Whilst parents did not consider school based skills to be the most important skills, the results would suggest that they perceived it was the pre-school's role to deliver this content – even more, perhaps, than to deliver social goals. This "index of role specialisation" hypothesis could prove to be of great benefit in studies of this nature, particularly in those dealing with a cross cultural context.

An interesting, and final perspective on parental perceptions regarding the academic domain, can be found in a study by Graue (1993). The parents of nine pre-school children were interviewed to determine what they wanted out of the respective classes. They saw pre-school as having two distinct purposes - social and academic. Eight of the nine parents mentioned academics to some degree, with some describing lists of skills they expected their child to achieve, but the majority felt that social development was the purpose of pre-school education, providing the foundation for the affective elements of schooling. They assumed that if their child developed sound social skills, then the academic skills would follow.

A theme evident in many of the studies into parents' perceptions of pre-school education is the parents' fear of "pushing" their child (Graue, 1993). Parents reported experiencing conflicting demands, wanting their child to enjoy their pre-school experience, and indeed their childhood, but also wanting their child to accumulate the academic knowledge necessary to adequately prepare them for first grade.

Parental perceptions regarding the social domain.

Whilst the research examined thus far indicates that parents strongly favour the inclusion of academic content or methods in the pre-school curriculum, this does not necessarily correlate with a rejection of social-emotional development. In fact, social-emotional development was an area for which parents often showed an equal amount of concern. It is therefore an aspect of parental perceptions deserving attention.

Much of the research presents similar findings, with parents consistently rating social-emotional development as an important – if not crucial – aspect of their child's pre-school education. Social skills are perceived by parents to be an important part of the pre-school experience, as well as a precursor of academic ability (Ebbeck, 1980; Ebbeck, 1995; Graue, 1993; Hess et al., 1981; Lambert, 1992; Rescorla et al., 1990; Webster, 1984; West, 1994). The research indicates that parents' perceptions related to the social domain are independent of their opinions regarding other domains, that is, parents may rate academic goals highly, but still rate social skills highly. Social-emotional development, it would seem, is seen by parents to be the main purpose of pre-school education. Furthermore, perceptions regarding socio-emotional development were less variable within and between parents.

It is interesting to note that whilst parents place great importance upon social skills, studies have shown that the majority of teachers still place more emphasis upon this facet of a child's development than do parents (Ebbeck, 1980; Kudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Lambert, 1992). Data gathered from parents in the study by Hess, et al., (1981) presents one of the few instances of parents actually ranking social skills higher than teachers. Not only did parents rank social skills as their most important goal, but they assigned it the highest rank in response to the question concerning how much emphasis it should ideally be given in the pre-school curriculum.

The results of these studies establish a definite emphasis by parents upon the social domain, and indicate that their opinions are closer to the current professional statements which advocate developmentally appropriate practices than we might otherwise believe.

Research in the Malaysian Context

There is very little published research available which examines Malaysian parents' beliefs and opinions regarding pre-school education. Perhaps the most comprehensive effort to address this area was a 1980 study by Mohd. Majzub (1992). The study looked at the differences in goal priorities amongst parents, teachers and experts in Malaysia. The study required parents (n=882) in both urban and rural centres to rank order a group of 30 goal statements from six developmental domains. A strength of this research undertaking was that a total of 60 parents from four randomly selected pre-school centres (two urban and two rural) were invited to participate in the development of the research instrument via informal group discussions on goals they felt were important.

The research established that there was considerable divergence amongst the views of parents, teachers and experts. The study found that parents placed the highest priority upon the moral domain closely followed by the intellectual domain, and the least priority upon the physical domain. As in many of the studies already examined, parents once again rated goals related to the intellectual domain, especially those concerning the acquisition of reading, writing and mathematics skills, higher than did teachers or experts. Similarly, whilst rating the social and emotional domains positively, parents still rated these areas lower than did teachers.

Mohd. Majzub claims that the differences between the values of parents and teachers may result in confusion and lack of continuity for the pre-school child, and suggests that parent education should be a compulsory component of all pre-school programmes (1992, pp. 62-63). She goes on to suggest that further research is needed in order to determine the socio-cultural factors which may influence the parents' prioritisation of goals (1992, p. 63).

An interesting and perhaps unexpected finding of the study was that experts, like parents, rated the intellectual domain second overall, whereas teachers rated this domain fourth overall. This contrasts starkly with the findings of overseas research which almost always sees the experts rating the intellectual domain much lower than other domains. Mohd. Majzub questions

whether these results reflect the fact that many of the "experts" were experts in the field of education in general rather than early childhood education, or whether such results can only be expected from a group of people who have been socialised in a society which is exam oriented and honours academic achievement above all else (1992, p. 61). This again highlights the role of the socio-cultural context upon the transmission of perceptions regarding pre-school education. It is this question which this study seeks to examine more closely.

A more up to the minute but less comprehensive picture of parental perceptions of pre-school education can be gleaned from the recently completed Malaysian Early Childhood Development Study (Evans & Ismail, 1995). The study addressed three main areas - the pre-school curriculum, training issues and parental and community involvement in pre-school education. The sub-study on parent and community involvement (Putri, 1995) was conducted largely with government and non-government organisation (NGO) operated pre-schools, although one privately operated pre-school was also involved. As mentioned earlier, the study revealed extremely low levels of parent and community involvement in pre-school. It also briefly examined parental awareness of certain aspects of the pre-school program. The findings indicated that parents knew very little about what their child did at pre-school, but hoped their child would be taught reading, writing and mathematics skills. The survey completed by the parents indicated that parents made little effort, and were given few opportunities, to interact with the pre-school staff. The study resulted in a total of ten recommendations related to increasing the levels of parent and community involvement in pre-school education. However further research to determine why parents do not participate at this level and what factors may influence low participation levels is warranted.

The Ecological Perspective

An increasing number of researchers are of the opinion that the interpretation of what constitutes an appropriate education must be broadened significantly to allow for the consideration of the needs of the society in which the child lives. For too long, it seems, the focus has been on the individual child. In relating Kessen's view that psychology had failed to produce "an enduring characteristic of the child", Harkness (1980) suggests the possibility that the child may be an inappropriate unit of analysis. She suggests, instead, that the child in

context would be a more valid subject of research (pp. 7-8). It must follow, therefore, that parent perceptions of pre-school education must also be viewed within their ecological context.

The Socio-Cultural Perspective

The research examined indicates that whilst researchers have been at pains to discover *what* parents want from pre-school education, virtually none have asked *why* parents want these things. In their haste to label parents' perceptions as appropriate or inappropriate, researchers have not examined the results beyond their ability (or failure) to comply with current developmental theory, thus failing to look beyond the immediate context of the individual subject. The studies which perhaps provide the most illuminating investigation of parental perceptions are those which enlist a cross-cultural perspective in their approach (Carlson, 1993; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1987; Carlson & Stenmalm-Sjoblom, 1989; David, 1992). These studies take their analysis one step further and attempt to move beyond mere description into the realm of explanation - the researchers examine the broader socio-cultural context and attempt to determine how it is reflected in parental perceptions.

David's (1992) study into the attitudes of British and Belgian parents towards pre-school education is notable for its use of individual and group interviews to gather data. This is a technique rarely used in much of the research in this field, yet has the potential to yield data of far greater depth than the more conventional and frequently employed Likert Scale. David's research found that whilst Belgian parents valued pre-school for its contribution to their child's overall development, particularly in relation to their social skills and independence, none mentioned scholastic achievements such as beginning to read or write, as reasons for their child's attendance. British parents, on the other hand, believed that children should be spending time on "organised work" (such as reading and writing) in preparation for primary school. David, moving beyond merely reporting the findings, sought to determine the factors behind this change. She put this difference in parental attitudes down to increased levels of parental anxiety in the face of a recession-hit Britain, and increasing pressure from both the Conservative government and the media to introduce formal learning tasks at earlier ages. In this way the socio-cultural context can be seen to have influenced parent's perceptions regarding pre-school education.

The findings of David are reflected, and extended upon, in a comprehensive cross cultural study into parents' perceptions of early childhood education undertaken by Carlson (1993), Carlson and Stenmalm (1987) and Carlson and Stenmalm-Sjoblom (1989). The three related studies, conducted over a six year period, examined views held by parents and teachers in Sweden, the United States and England regarding early childhood programs. Their studies examined parental perceptions in depth through the examination and comparison of parental perceptions within five distinct categories; parents general attitudes regarding early childhood education, their views regarding parental involvement, and their ratings of types of materials, activities and caregiver actions.

The findings are an interesting reflection of the social forces operating in each country. Carlson and Stenmalm believe the key to parent perceptions lies in the participants socio-cultural context. Throughout all of their research undertakings, Carlson and Stenmalm have endeavoured to delineate the factors which have influenced parents' perceptions and have therefore, either directly or indirectly, impacted upon their results. The researchers postulate that the "more competitive, individualistic orientations" of England and the United States, and the "more co-operative, group orientations" of Sweden, are clearly evident in the parents' responses when the variations in opinions within the different categories are examined. The fear, violence and uncertainty which so often characterises American society results in parents placing greater emphasis upon achievement and conformity. Alternately, in a secure society such as Sweden, parents are more likely to value creative, intrinsically motivated learning experiences (Carlson, 1993, p. 24; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1987, p. 22).

Carlson and Stenmalm (1987) stress that macro-society orientations (the orientations and values of the larger society) directly impact upon the type of early childhood programs which exist in a particular country. They go on to suggest that researchers need to consider broader dimensions than diversity in ethnic, religious, racial or social background. They feel that researchers should begin, instead, by defining societal orientations such as individualism versus group solidarity, competition versus co-operation, emphasis upon the natural world versus emphasis upon the world of technology, equalitarian versus hierarchical relationships, or formality versus informality (Carlson, 1993, p. 21). Carlson (1993) suggests that an example of how such societal orientations impact upon early childhood programs, and perceptions of those

programs, can be seen in the way Sweden has virtually no private pre-schools. This, she

explains, stems from a concern for equality of opportunity and a belief that high quality education

should be available to everyone. In contrast, the United States places great emphasis upon the

development of private education centres. Carlson concludes that this reflects an assumption

that higher quality care should be available for those who can afford it. (1993, p. 21).

In order for parents and teachers to be able to jointly support the growth and development

of the child, there needs to be some consensus about the fundamental purpose of early

childhood education. As teachers do not have the same emotional investment in children as

parents, it is easy (and reasonable) for them to agree with "expert" theories aligned with the child

centred, child development approach, regardless of the cultural, political or economic context

they find themselves in. Parents, however, often have a different agenda in mind. As Carlson

(1993) suggests:

> *A broader understanding of the relationship of attitudes and beliefs about early*
> *childhood programs to the directions and fundamental dimensions of the larger*
> *society, might develop more sensitivity to the concerns of parents and more realism*
> *in advocating for change. (p. 25).*

The main strength of studies such as those conducted by Carlson (1993), Carlson and

Stenmalm (1987), Carlson and Stenmalm-Sjoblom (1989), and David (1992) is the recognition

they give to the ecological context, and thus to all levels of societal organisation, in the shaping

of parental opinions regarding early childhood education. Their studies conclude that whilst

there are definite variations in perceptions across research groups and amongst respondents,

these differences are more likely to be the result of broader social, political and economic

influences than of variations within respondents at a micro-system level. Carlson and

Stenmalm, in particular, rely heavily upon the work and theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner in

explaining parents' views of pre-school programs. This theory, to be discussed in greater detail

in the following chapter, will provide the theoretical framework for this study.

Summary

Much recent research in the sphere of early childhood education has been motivated by, or

has in some way focused upon, the ongoing conflict regarding the notions of developmentally

appropriate practice (DAP) and developmentally inappropriate practice (DIP). It is hardly

surprising, therefore, to discover that the majority of researchers examining parent opinions have used this very debate as a kind of "frame of reference" for their studies. Researchers have attempted to place parents on one side or another of what is by no means a straight forward division of opinion.

Without attempting to generalise the findings to any particular group or setting, certain overall trends can be identified within the literature. There would appear to be a definite trend amongst parents to value pre-school experiences which are "academic" in nature - experiences such as early maths, reading and writing instruction, the use of didactic teaching methods, the inclusion of paper and pencil tasks and the importance of sitting still and listening to the teacher. The majority of research comparing parent and teacher perceptions (Brown, 1993; Hess et al., 1981; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Rescorla et al., 1990; West, 1994) has established that parents consistently rate the importance of such experiences much higher than do teachers. The research similarly suggests that play, traditionally viewed as the young child's fundamental means of learning, is not seen by parents as an important method of learning or instruction (Bartkowiak & Goupil, 1992; Kubala, 1990; Webster & Wood, 1986). Perhaps surprisingly, an increasing amount of research is suggesting that teachers, too, no longer view play as an essential element of the pre-school program (Brown, 1993; Cornelius, 1989; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). Social emotional development, another staple of the traditional pre-school curriculum, is still viewed as highly important by the majority of parents (Ebbeck, 1980; Graue, 1993; Hess et al., 1981;Lambert, 1992), although parents generally do not rate its value as highly as teachers do. One must not forget, however, that these broad trends were not evident in all of the research undertakings. The results of many of the cross cultural studies, in particular, present quite different patterns of parental perceptions.

The research has thus far failed to produce a consistent or enduring impression of parental perceptions of pre-school education. However, in acknowledging recent research emphasising the role of the socio-cultural context in influencing parental perceptions, this is hardly to be expected. As St. Augustine said, "Give me other mothers and I will give you other worlds" (cited in Elkind, 1987, p. 7). We should both expect and accept different perceptions of pre-school education, even amongst parents of a single pre-school setting, as each brings with them a unique set of "ecological baggage".

If research in this field of inquiry hopes to make a valid contribution to current theory and practice, then it must move away from the ethnocentric research approaches so often utilised in the past. Researchers must begin to investigate parental perceptions in relation to their unique socio-cultural context in order to determine their "relevance". In this way, research and practice can move ahead and meet the challenges of a diverse and changing world head on. This research undertaking has attempted to do just that, to examine parental perceptions in order to discover what they can tell us about pre-school education in Malaysia, but also for what they can tell us about the broader socio-cultural factors operating in the country which are impacting upon parents and pre-schools.

This chapter has reported literature and research pertaining to parents' perceptions of various aspects of pre-school education. The literature review and particularly those studies of a cross cultural nature, have provided direction for this study and contributed to decisions regarding the conceptual framework, which is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This chapter explains the theoretical framework upon which the study is based. Firstly the constructionist perspective followed by Bronfenbrenner's theory of the Ecology of Human Development and the conceptual framework, which illustrates the study's scope and direction. The preceding literature review has served to examine two major themes, parental perceptions of pre-school education, and the impact of socio-cultural factors upon these perceptions. The purpose of this study is to bring these two elements together and determine Malaysian parents' perceptions of pre-school education, identifying any broad patterns that appear to be culturally based. It is hoped that conducting the investigation in such a culturally diverse setting will facilitate the identification of unique, culturally based patterns of perception amongst the parents. It will also serve as an interesting model to compare against the Western dominated literature in the area.

This study is guided by a social constructionist perspective. Central to this perspective is the notion that parents' perceptions are actively constructed and constantly evolving as a result of social interaction in a particular environment or culture. The constructionist perspective seeks to describe parental perceptions of pre-school education by examining how the phenomenon is experienced and interpreted by the participants in the study. It is hoped that by enabling the researcher to build an impression of the participants' world view as it relates to pre-school, it will also be possible to construct an image of how these views, and the nature of pre-school education itself, are linked to the larger socio-cultural context of the participants. Central to the constructionist perspective is the notion that the final result is a context bound construction, or story, of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than the ultimate truth (Miller & Crabtree, 1992, p. 10; Vygotsky, 1962).

Two major assumptions underpin this study. The first is that the use of any one interpretation of an "appropriate" education is both restrictive and unrealistic unless it takes account of factors extraneous to the individual and its immediate setting. The second is that parents' perceptions are socially constructed and therefore reflect the broader socio-cultural context in which the individual is located. These two assumptions are derived from the

theoretical framework and in turn influence the elements of the conceptual framework. The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner provides the theoretical framework upon which the study is based, and shapes the ensuing conceptual framework.

The Ecology of Human Development

The theory of the ecology of human development emanates from the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). Bronfenbrenner's concern lies with the tendency of researchers in the field of child/human development to limit their studies to an examination of the characteristics or qualities of the subjects themselves. He feels that whilst such an approach provides the field with excellent information regarding an individual's abilities, temperament and behaviour tendencies, it does little to further our understanding of how the environment impacts upon such factors. The closest most researchers come to considering environmental influences, in Bronfenbrenner's opinion, amounts to little more than "locating people in terms of their social address" (p. 17) such as their family size and structure, social class or ethnic background. The majority of research on environmental influences upon development is usually limited to theories about interpersonal processes, for example modeling, reinforcement and social learning (p. 18). Bronfenbrenner has two main criticisms of the prevailing approach. Firstly, he feels it overlooks the impact of non-social aspects of the environment, such as the activities engaged in by the subjects. Secondly, and more importantly, he feels researchers limit the concept of the environment to the single immediate setting containing the individual. He believes that there are influences external to those immediate settings which could have a profound influence upon the behaviour and development of the individual. Bronfenbrenner theorises that unless such influences are taken into account, "the findings can lead to misleading conclusions that both narrow and distort our scientific understanding of the determinants, processes and potential of human development" (p. 18).

Bronfenbrenner's theory proposes a perspective known as the ecology of human development. He defines it as:

> *The scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active,*
> *growing human-being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which*
> *the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these*

settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are imbedded. (1979, p. 21).

Rather than being limited to a single setting, the environment is viewed as both the immediate and surrounding settings, and the reciprocal exchanges and influences occurring between them. Bronfenbrenner's theory can be graphically represented as a type of nested structure, as depicted in Figure 1.
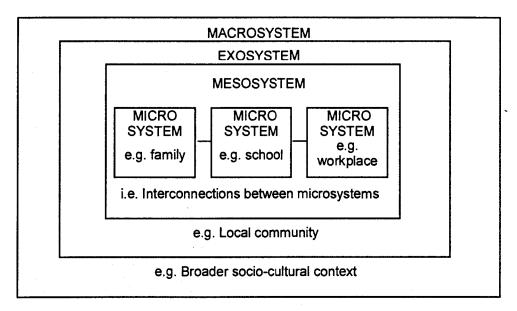
Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development.

The components of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model are;

Microsystem - activities, roles and relationships experienced by an individual in an immediate setting, where people can engage in face to face interaction including home, work, preschool, friends.

Mesosystem - comprises the interconnections between two or more microsystems in which the developing individual actively participates. For an adult, for example, links would exist between family, work and social life. Such links may take the form of knowledge or attitudes existing in one setting about another.

Exosystem - settings which do not actively involve the developing individual, but in which events occur which affect, or are affected by, the setting containing the developing person such as the activities of the local school board.

Macrosystem - the broad culture containing the developing person, combining the lower order

systems and the accompanying belief systems and ideology of the society - the 'blueprint' for

society.   (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Milligan, 1994)

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's theory is most commonly thought of as applying to the systematic

examination of ecological influences impacting upon the development of the young child, it is no

less applicable when examining the ecological influences impacting upon the development of

parental perceptions of pre-school education. At each level of the ecological model are sources

of opportunity and risk for the developing person. One of the greatest sources of risk to the pre-

school child emerges when the mesosystem links between the home and school environments

are weak. This can happen when the service fails to meet the parents' needs, or when there is

conflict over the perceived purposes or goals of the pre-school program.

If research examining parental perceptions fails to take into account the full spectrum of

environmental forces that are operating at all system levels, it will at best only provide a

superficial impression of the situation. At worst, it will continue to perpetuate the narrow way in

which pre-school research and policy has developed and limit the field's ability to direct attention

and action at appropriate levels (Bloch, 1992, p. 16). Findings from thorough ecological studies,

on the other hand, broaden our understanding of phenomena and have important implications

for both research and public policy.

As reported earlier there is an absence of an ecological perspective in much of the

research into parental perceptions of pre-school education. Unfortunately, much of the research

which does acknowledge the environment limits itself to an examination of what Bronfenbrenner

refers to as the microsystem and occasionally the mesosystem. However, many of the studies

which have considered the impact of the environment have relied on psychological tests and

measures, and may therefore lack ecological validity. A further concern is the ongoing fixation

of researchers upon the parent as the experimental subject, rather than upon their perceptions

and the forces which have shaped them. The impact of such perceptions on society at large

and society's reciprocal influence upon these perceptions is likely to have a more profound

impact upon pre-schools than the perceptions alone. Indeed, it is likely that the exo- and

macrosystems exert the greatest influence on parental beliefs and therefore an understanding of

these systems is essential to an accurate understanding of parental perceptions. The

macrosystem, as previously explained, represents the broad socio-cultural influences within a society and as such, its influence upon parents and the education system cannot be underestimated.

The various levels of Bronfenbrenner's model all contribute to the social construction of parents' knowledge. This study, therefore, aims to examine parental perceptions in relation to the broader socio-cultural context from which they emanate. It will do so by determining how elements from the different levels of Bronfenbrenner's model have influenced or shaped these perceptions.

The Elements of the Conceptual Framework

Whilst pre-school education has evolved into an international phenomenon, these programs remain nation and culture specific. One discourse on pre-school education (the Western perspective) tends to dominate the literature and it is therefore often difficult to recognise and describe the diversity of forms of pre-school education present elsewhere in the world (Woodill, 1992, p. 3). Parental perceptions of pre-school education (or any other educational outcome, for that matter) should be neither seen nor judged in isolation from the socio-cultural processes which have produced them (Phillips, 1989, p. 269). Therefore, the cornerstone of this investigation is the notion that parental perceptions are influenced by the factors related to the particular socio-cultural context under investigation.

The following conceptual framework establishes the potential scope and proposed direction of the research and identifies the factors under investigation. The conceptual framework is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2. The subsequent structuring of the framework elements is organised in such a way as to correlate with the levels in Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development. Bronfenbrenner's theory describes exo-, meso-, and microsystem influences, all of which are elements of the macrosystem. Whilst the relationship between these systems is a reciprocal one, the systems are treated in a hierarchical manner in the conceptual framework for ease of analysis.

The Research Focus

Parental perceptions form the core of the investigation and thus directly shapes the research focus. Three main aspects of parental perceptions are addressed during the research.

Firstly, perceptions regarding the value or function of pre-school education are examined. This involves looking at why parents elect to send their child to pre-school, what they hope their child will achieve or learn by the end of their pre-school education, how they choose a pre-school and how they judge the quality of a pre-school. The study then focuses upon perceptions regarding a range of pre-school practices and curriculum issues. Parents' knowledge of their child's pre-school program is examined and finally, parents' perceptions regarding the role of the teacher in their child's education are examined.

Microsystem Influences

The microsystem level of the framework has been divided into two separate, yet related, spheres of influence - the home and the pre-school. The characteristics of these microsystems naturally vary from family to family and pre-school to pre-school. Characteristics of both microsystem settings may potentially influence parents' responses and perceptions of education, pre-school practices and programs.

The Home microsystem is divided into parent characteristics and child characteristics, with both likely to influence parental perceptions to some degree. For example, it would be logical to assume that a parent's educational background or socio-economic status may impact upon the type of education they desire for their child. Similarly, a child's age or the amount of prior pre-school experience a child has is likely to influence the type of educational experiences a parent would desire for their child.

The Pre-School microsystem is comprised of the elements of pre-school education which may influence parental perceptions in this area. For example, a school with a highly academic curriculum may result in parents favouring an academic approach over other less structured approaches. Similarly, a school policy encouraging parent involvement may serve to reduce the gap between parent perceptions and pre-school perceptions, thus reducing conflict between the two settings.

Due to the focused nature of the study, not all of the listed microsystem variables are examined in this study, but they are still worthy of noting due to their importance in the event of any follow up studies. For example, whilst this research looks only at private centres, future research may reveal that parents from public sector pre-schools hold different perceptions.

Similarly, parents' perceptions may vary according to the age of their child - a trend this study would be unable to reveal as it relates solely to parents of children in their final year of pre-school.

Communication between the home and pre-school microsystems is also likely to have a significant influence upon parents' perceptions of pre-school education. This inter-setting contact and communication forms the home - pre-school mesosystem. Mesosystem factors include the amount of contact between the centre and its parents, or the degree to which the parents are cognisant of the various aspects of the pre-school's program.

Both the micro- and mesosystems are in turn influenced and shaped by higher order-systems, namely the exo- and macrosystems.

Exosystem Influences
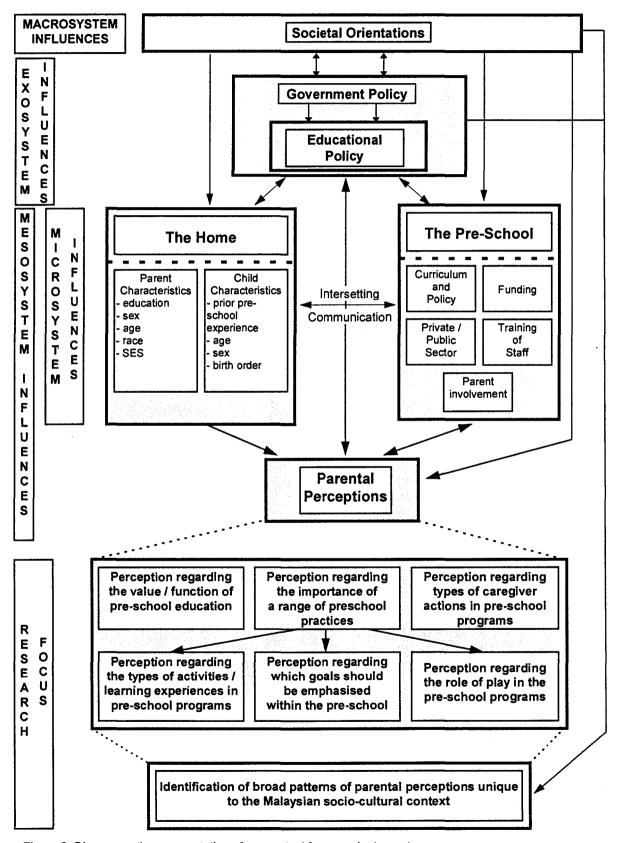
The next level of the conceptual framework addresses the exosystem and is comprised of higher level forces which impact, albeit indirectly, upon parents' perceptions. Government policy and educational policy in particular are likely to be reflected in perceptions via their influence upon the settings in which the parents live and work. For example, the value parents place upon pre-school education may vary according to the degree to which the government appears to support education in the early years. The interview responses will be carefully examined to determine the degree to which parents' perceptions appear to reflect aspects of the exosystem.

Macrosystem Influences

The overriding element in the framework is the macrosystem, which represents broad societal orientations such as ideology, ethnicity, traditions, religion, and culture. These will tend to shape consistencies in lower order systems, and thus their influence cannot be underestimated. Macrosystem factors may impact directly upon the individual and subsequently influence their perceptions. An example of this could be a Malay parent placing a high emphasis upon religious education at the pre-school level in response to living in a Muslim society. Macrosystem factors can also impact indirectly upon parents via lower order systems. This is particularly evident in a country like Malaysia, where the influence of macrosystem factors such as religion and ethnic diversity is clearly apparent in the formation of government policy at the

exosystem level. Therefore it is likely that the social and cultural nature of Malaysia will be reflected in the patterns of parental responses.

Figure 2. Diagrammatic representation of conceptual framework elements.

Summary

The preceding discussion of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks serves to provide the blueprint for this research undertaking. It establishes the scope and direction of the study in relation to the research focus. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's theory of the Ecology of Human Development, it also identifies the way in which the micro- and mesosystems potentially influence parental perceptions. The final data analysis may reveal patterns unique to the socio-cultural context of Malaysia at the macro- and exosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's model. The identification of such patterns may lead to a greater appreciation of the connection which exists between pre-school programs and the larger society.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes in detail the methodology of the study. It commences with an examination of qualitative research approaches and their relevance to the topic under investigation. This is followed by an explanation of how the research methodology was selected and subsequently developed, accompanied by a discussion of the chosen research method, semi-structured interviews. An outline of the research design, a multi-site exploratory study, including elements such as the setting and participants is included. The chapter concludes with a description of the data collection and analysis procedures, with particular mention of the role of the Q.S.R. NUD*IST computer software in the data analysis procedure. Finally, the limitations and ethical considerations arising from the study are discussed.

The Qualitative Paradigm

The research undertaking seeks to conduct a qualitative investigation into the perceptions held by Malaysian parents towards pre-school education. A major function of a qualitative approach is "to discover important questions, processes and relationships, not to test them" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 43). In doing so, qualitative methodology enables the researcher to establish important links between existing knowledge and emerging theory. Furthermore, parental perceptions are likely to be fluid, and constantly changing according to changes within society. Qualitative methodology is well suited to the collection and treatment of constantly evolving data such as this, particularly in the event of a follow up study.

The research methods associated with qualitative inquiry also permit the investigation of issues in greater depth and detail than is possible with other methods that are possibly constrained by pre-existing theories or avenues of inquiry. An advantage of utilising qualitative research methods is their ability to produce a large amount of detailed information about a small number of cases (Patton, 1990, p. 14), therefore increasing the researcher's understanding of a particular issue. In moving beyond mere description, the researcher is able to see the intricacies of the participant's social world, which are often lost in more formalised approaches.

Often the issue of validity is central to the debate concerning the veracity of qualitative research undertakings. The qualitative study does not, however, seek to deliver proof. Rather, the final report presents a description of parental perceptions, as constructed by the researcher - a narrative realisation of what has been observed (Sutton, 1993, p. 425). It has been stated that "data in themselves cannot be valid or invalid; what is at issue are the inferences drawn from them" (Hammersley & Atkinson, cited in Maxwell, 1992, p. 283). As pointed out by Geertz (cited in Sutton, 1993), the data and final analyses are "really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (p. 427). As such the qualitative paradigm accepts potential pluralism of research findings - that the "truth" of a set of findings is flexible and that different conclusions derived from different research methods are equally valid (Sutton, 1993, p. 422). The "truth" or validity of a qualitative investigation's findings lies in their trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of this study (within its stated parameters) rests on the nature of the inquiry process - the analysis and conclusions are so embedded with the data emanating from the interviews that its validity is assured (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 145).

The Research Method

The choice of methodology for this study was driven by cultural considerations and was developed in response to difficulties encountered during the preliminary pilot studies which surveyed parental perceptions via a questionnaire format. The initial pilot studies revealed significant concerns regarding the alarmingly low return rate amongst respondents, averaging less than 20% in both phases of the pilot study. Additional concerns included parents failing to answer many of the questions and the centres themselves failing to distribute all of the surveys. Thus the research method for this study was developed with particular consideration given to the nature of the participants and the cultural context.

Interviews

Guided interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. The content of the interview guide was developed from the questionnaire used in the pilot study, from previous research and from my informal contacts and discussions with Malaysian parents, teachers and school principals. The later proved particularly useful, providing ideas, concepts and words and phrases that stemmed directly from the parent's frame of reference. Such an approach is advantageous as the resulting questions are relatively free of researcher bias and subjectivity

and can increase the likelihood of surveying parental rather than researcher perceptions. Where participants were asked to rate or sequence items, the responses were analysed in terms of the patterns which arose, rather than allocated a score.

It was decided to tape record the interviews as this would not only simplify and speed up the collection of data, but would also facilitate the analysis of the data by ensuring it remained in its original state. A major advantage of having a tape recorded data source is that it enables the researcher to demonstrate accountability to the data, and in doing so, serves to reassure the participants that the researcher has an accurate record of their comments (Seidman, 1991, p. 88). At the commencement of each interview permission was sought from the participant to tape record the interview. All participants agreed to this under the assurance that I alone would have access to the tapes.

Despite the labour intensive nature of interviewing - establishing contact, conducting and recording the interview, transcribing, analysing and reporting - the advantages are numerous. At its most fundamental, the interview allows us to find out about things that we cannot directly observe, and is therefore highly suited to research concerning perceptions, thoughts and attitudes (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Its purpose is not merely to answer questions or test hypotheses, but to attempt to understand "the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 3). As direct quotations are the basic source of raw data (Patton, 1990, p. 24), the interview is generally better at revealing participants thoughts and "telling it as it is" without the contaminating influence of researcher interpretation. One of interviewing's greatest advantages is that it enables the researcher to gather large amounts of information relatively quickly. By interviewing a greater number of participants a wider variety of information can be collected. The in-depth interviewing of a small sample of participants, however, "who all experience similar structural and social conditions, gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants" (Seidman, 1991, p. 45). Thus the benefits of such a method for the purpose of conducting an exploratory study of parental perceptions regarding pre-school education, and in turn answering the research questions, are obvious.

Design

This research undertaking differs from previous studies in that it does not seek to formulate a definitive statement regarding parents' perceptions, believing rather that they are constantly evolving in response to a range of factors. Instead, it seeks initially to examine how parents perceive pre-school education and to conclude by exploring how these perceptions relate to macro- and exosystem patterns evident in Malaysian society. As such, the research closely parallels similar cross-cultural research undertaken by Carlson (1993), Carlson and Stenmalm (1987) and Carlson and Stenmalm-Sjoblom (1989).

The research design, a multi-site exploratory study, has been chosen in order to facilitate the in-depth investigation of parental perceptions within four pre-school settings. The aim of such a research design is to explore not only *what* a particular group of parents perceive, but also *how* parental perceptions are shaped, and to seek to determine the existence of any broad response sets which appear unique to Malaysian society. As such, the exploratory design will enable me to move beyond mere description.

Setting

This research undertaking was conducted within four pre-school centres located within a few kilometres of one another in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The sites were selected with the assistance of local "experts" according to set criteria; the nature of the centre (private); the teaching approach utilised (a variety was sought); the racial composition of the centre (predominantly Chinese, Malay, Indian or a mixture); the socio-economic status of the centre and the clientele for which it catered (predominantly professional middle class); and the age of the children attending. It was felt that the selected centres, as far as was possible, were representative of both the racial diversity of the Malaysian population and the diversity of educational approaches employed within the private sector. A profile of the four centres appears in Table 4. I then approached the centre principals to inform them of the nature of the research and invite their participation. Having agreed to participate, the principal was provided with a consent form (see APPENDIX A). After each principal had read and signed my copy of the consent form, they were provided with a copy for their own reference.

Table 4
Profile of pre-schools participating in the research.

Centre	Approach	Curriculum	Fees	No. of parents participating
1	Entirely Montessori	Entirely Montessori	300 ringgit per month	6
2	3R (academic) supplemented with Montessori	Academic skills and content	150 ringgit per month	5
3	Developmental	Play based curriculum	200 ringgit per month	4
4	Accelerated Learning	Academic skills and content	360 ringgit per month	6

Participants

With the exception of one father, all of the research participants were the mothers of the children enrolled in their final year of pre-school for the 1996 school year. A small number of fathers were present during the interview, but their participation was generally minimal. As can be seen from Table 4, a total of twenty one parents were interviewed. As was pointed out by Seidel, in a qualitative research undertaking such as this the number of parents interviewed is less important than the amount we can learn from a particular interview. He stressed the need to look for intricacies and depth in a small number of cases, rather than a superficial gloss over a larger number. The danger in the latter, he pointed out, was that rather than actually analysing a phenomenon (as was the intention in this research undertaking) we could be reduced to merely counting the occurrences of a phenomenon (1991, pp 110-111). As this was intended to be an exploratory study, the sample selection sought to be illustrative, rather than definitive. It was anticipated that the detailed particulars of a small number of cases would be significant in their ability to highlight larger issues (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 12).

Participants were selected in a manner similar to purposeful random sampling, although in a slightly more restricted way. Access to the research participants had to be gained via what Seidman termed "gate keepers" - in this case the principal of each pre-school centre. The gate keeper is the person with the authority to grant the researcher access to potential participants from a particular site. This method of access can be advantageous, giving the participants a sense of "official endorsement" of the research and their involvement. A potential disadvantage,

however, can be that those approached may feel under pressure to participate (Seidman, 1991, p. 35). This was overcome to some extent by limiting the principal's involvement to the granting of access, and then ensuring that I made the initial contact. The centre principal was therefore requested to provide me with a list of between ten and fifteen potential participants according to certain criteria. The potential participants nominated by the principal were required to a) be representative of the three main racial groups (with each racial group being equally represented in the final list where possible), b) possess sufficient English to participate in an interview and c) be likely to participate in the research if asked. From these lists, five parents were selected randomly from each centre to participate in the research. This sampling method maximised the chances of the final data representing a rich mix of both people and programs. Whilst the final results can in no way be generalised to the entire population, they are likely to be quite comprehensive.

The parents were contacted by telephone, at which time they were advised of how they had been contacted, the aim of the research and what would be required of them, and asked whether or not they wished to participate in the research. It was decided to start with five parents from each centre, with the option of contacting further parents if necessary. As the purpose of the research (and in turn, the method of sampling) was to maximise the amount and depth of information gathered, the sampling operated upon the principle of redundancy (Bradley, 1993, p. 440; Crowley, 1995, p. 64; Lincoln & Guba, cited in Patton, 1990, pp 185-186; Steiner, 1992, p. 19). This meant that no further parents were approached once no new information was forthcoming from the current research participants. In actuality, this saturation point was reached before the initial twenty one interviews were completed, so no new interviews were scheduled.

Participant Profile

In all but one of the interviews it was the mother who acted as the primary research participant. Of the twenty one participants, seven were Malay, eight were Chinese and six were Indian. As can be seen in Table 5, it was not always possible to get an even racial cross section at each centre, although every endeavour was made to ensure the sample was as representative of the larger school context as possible.

Table 5
Participant profile summary.

Centre	1	2	3	4
Race	Montessori	Three R's / Montessori	Child Development	Accelerated Learning
Malay	0	2	3	4
Chinese	2	2	1	3
Indian	4	1	0	1

Of the parents who participated, ten were aged between 26 and 35, one was aged over 45, and the remainder fell into the 36-45 years age group. Over three quarters of the interview participants had a college or university level education whilst the remaining four had completed high school or had some other form of specialised training. The majority of participants (thirteen) were employed in a professional field, with four of these being employed in the field of education - two in pre-school education. Of the remainder, six participants classed themselves as homemakers whilst the remaining two were employed in retail business concerns.

Fifteen of the participants had a son attending pre-school, while six had a daughter attending. A total of thirteen participants had older children who had attended pre-school.

Data Collection

The research was carried out immediately prior to the commencement of second term. This enabled parents, particularly any parents of children in their first year of pre-school, sufficient time to build up a frame of reference upon which to base their responses. Interviews were arranged for a time and place convenient to the participants, usually taking place at the participant's home. This was advantageous as it provided the participant with a secure and comfortable environment in which to be interviewed. Prior to conducting the interview the participants were again familiarised with the purpose of the research. They were also provided with a consent form (see APPENDIX B), outlining their rights should they agree to participate, and guaranteeing the confidential and ethical treatment of all data collected. They read and signed a copy of the consent form and were provided with a copy for their own reference.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured in that an interview guide (see APPENDIX D) contained many of the questions asked of each participant. However, the interview format

allowed sufficient latitude to ask additional questions of certain participants in order to follow up on their specific comments, and extend upon any new themes as they arose. The interview guide was basically a list of items, often phrased as questions, which were raised during the interview. The interview guide enabled me to carry on a guided conversation with each participant. It was especially effective in that it allowed the order of questions to be varied so as to maintain the natural flow of the "conversation" (Jansen, 1992, p. 182) whilst ensuring that a core of comparable data was collected across sites and participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 77; Patton, 1990, p. 280). It provided prompting for less confident participants whilst capitalising on more verbal participants. The semi-structured format allowed for any new issues which came up repeatedly, or were of particular interest to me, to be added to the guide in order to assess the response of other participants.

Wherever possible, open ended questions were used in order to explore and build upon the participant's responses. Seidman (1991) suggests the value of such questions lies in their ability to "establish the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants" (p. 62). Care was taken to ensure that the wording of the open ended questions did not in any way limit the manner in which the participant could respond, and to avoid dichotomous forms which suggested a yes / no answer was required (Patton, 1990, p. 305).

After the completion of the respondent profile (see APPENDIX C), the interviews commenced with non-controversial questions which were easy to answer and required relatively straight forward information. The interview then moved on to the parents' perceptions regarding various aspects of pre-school education and the value of particular goals and learning experiences. The interview included a range of structured questions involving the ranking of goals and the prioritising of learning experiences. The goal ranking was quite a complex process. It was made easier by allowing the participants to physically manipulate the statements, which had been printed on individual cards. The rankings assigned to them by the participants were then recorded on a master sheet (see APPENDIX E). The prioritisation of the learning experiences (selecting what they felt to be the five most and five least important activities) was recorded by the participants on a master sheet (see APPENDIX E).

The time taken to conduct each interview ranged from 40 minutes to nearly 3 hours. When conducting an interview the concern must rest with understanding the issue rather than sticking

to a predetermined schedule (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 77). I took my cue from the participants; adjusting the length and content of the interview in accordance with the interest evidenced by the participants, but always ensuring coverage of the questions which were directly related to the research questions.

After conducting each interview I listened to the tape and made a brief summary of the main points covered during the interview. Such notes served a number of purposes. Firstly, they provided me with a timely opportunity to reflect upon themes emerging from the interviews and to incorporate these where appropriate in future interviews. These reflections in turn enabled me to begin to formulate potential classification systems for the final data analysis. This step also enabled me to identify areas of confusion on the tape, such as inaudible or ambiguous answers and if necessary, return to the participant to clarify their position or gather further information.

At this point, I presented the principals from the four centres participating in the research with a preliminary summary of the research findings and asked for their comments, which were tape recorded. Whilst not essential to the research questions, their comments proved to be very interesting when contrasted with the parents' perceptions, revealing important implications for both policy and practice in pre-school education.

Data Analysis

An important feature of qualitative data analysis is that it seeks to integrate the various pieces of information, and in identifying commonalties and idiosyncrasies, provides me with a unified, holistic description and interpretation of the phenomena (Hook, 1981). Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research undertaking. In this way I was able to incorporate emerging patterns into the depth interviews, in order to test the accuracy and reliability of my precursory conclusions and to further clarify and enrich my understanding of parental perceptions.

Finally, relevant sections of the tape recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis and in accordance with the qualitative nature of the research, the resulting data were analysed in terms of the patterns generated by the responses. The analysis was facilitated by the utilisation

of an appropriate computer software program, well suited to the analysis of lengthy interview transcripts.

Based upon the findings of the data analysis, I sought to identify response patterns unique to the Malaysian context and concluded by suggesting ways in which these possibly reflect broader socio-cultural aspects of Malaysian society. The reconceptualisation of the results in this way is facilitated by the use of Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development.

Use of the NUD*IST System in Data Analysis

Computers, according to Richards and Richards, have enabled researchers to bridge "the fictional gap between qualitative and quantitative analysis", allowing for the rigorous and convincing analysis of qualitative data, without sacrificing the traditions of qualitative research and analysis (1991, pp. 41-42). As Lee and Fielding (1991 p. 2) have noted, the strength of products such as Q.S.R. NUD*IST (Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) is that they have been developed in accordance with the needs of the qualitative research community.

Similar in essence to the traditional code card system employed in qualitative research, NUD*IST involves the indexing of categories to be stored in a tree structured format. Each lower branch (or "node") is a differentiated aspect of the case or concept above it, hierarchically expressed (Burroughs-Lange & Lange, 1993, p. 7). However, the ability to see the developing analytical scheme at a glance certainly facilitates ongoing theorising by the researcher. In effect, the process of coding is integrated with the process of discovery and exploration, enabling theory construction and testing to be an important and ongoing aspect of early data analysis (Burroughs-Lange & Lange, 1993, p. 10). The number and complexity of categories and the index structure is unlimited. The real advantage of NUD*IST is that the categories, or nodes, can be added to, deleted, or re-arranged at any time with far greater ease and speed than could ever be possible with the traditional manual system. In addition, the results of any inquiry or search can be stored as a new category for easy future reference (Richards & Richards, 1991, pp. 38-53).

The advantages of using a computer based data analysis method over traditional methods are perhaps best summarised by Lee and Fielding, who state;

"Simply by reducing the amount of paper and the extent to which it needs to be shuffled, analytic processes become less unwieldy, more pleasant and less tedious for the analyst. As a result the mechanics of field research should become less likely to get in the way of field research". (1991, p. 3)

By enabling researchers to quickly locate and manipulate words, phrases and categories, NUD*IST facilitates the creative examination of the data. The actual analysis, however, remains the responsibility of the researcher. Whilst NUD*IST can assist with the mechanical or clerical tasks, it is up to the researcher to think, select, judge and interpret the data. It is the researcher, and not the computer, who must decide which words or themes deserve to be focused upon, and how the analysis will proceed (Tesch, 1991, pp. 25-26).

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The research undertaking is small in scope, and whilst the findings are not necessarily generalisable to the larger population of Malaysia, they should still serve to highlight broad themes which are deserving of closer attention and perhaps further research.

Conducting research in a foreign country or culture obliges me to address certain issues. Whilst interviewing people from different cultures enables me to explore rather than share assumptions with the participants (Seidman, 1991, p. 77), it also presents me with a range of unique variables which have the potential to limit the study somewhat. In a country such as Malaysia, with such a diverse range of races, religions and unique cultural practices, it was important for me to be cognisant of such factors if an effective interview rapport was to be established. It is possible, however, that the research participants held back certain information or "coloured" their responses in order to appear more acceptable to a foreign researcher. This in turn impacts upon the trustworthiness of the data, and is thus a potential limitation to the study.

Language is an additional factor that may have limited the research somewhat. It would be erroneous to assume that all of the words or concepts used in the construction of the interview questions had shared meanings. It is likely that the differences existed not only between myself

and the participants, but also amongst the participants, as to the meaning of particular words and concepts. This is likely to have affected both the clarity of the questions and the content of the responses. A perfect example of this was the differing interpretations of the word "play". How a participant defined this word had a direct effect on how they responded to particular questions. Whilst I tried to ensure sensitivity to such differences in interpretation, it is likely that they did limit the study to a certain extent.

It is understandable that the final assumptions can only be as accurate as my knowledge and appreciation of the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Even so, the research should constitute a further expansion of current theory in relation to parental perceptions, and an earnest attempt to incorporate a culturally relevant perspective within the research undertaking.

CHAPTER 6: RESULTS

Introduction

As has been discussed earlier, qualitative inquiry and guided interviews in particular, result in the collection of a large amount of data which presents a rich and varied insight into the phenomenon under investigation. In this chapter the results of the twenty one exploratory interviews are presented thematically in order to systematically examine parents' perceptions regarding;

- the pre-school itself, looking specifically at how parents select their child's pre-school, what qualities they think are important in a good pre-school.

- their reasons for sending their child to pre-school, including what parents expected their child to have achieved by the end of their pre-school education.

- the pre-school curriculum, examining parents' knowledge of their child's pre-school program, and in particular, which goals and learning experiences parents felt were most important.

- play, examining the distinction made by parents between "play" and "work", and the nature and sources of pressure at the pre-school level.

- the teacher's role.

- the links between the home and pre-school environments, with attention to the nature of home-pre-school communication and the level of parent participation in the pre-school program.

Patterns or unexpected responses are noted. The findings serve to construct an image of Malaysian parents' perceptions regarding pre-school education which will, in turn, guide the ensuing discussion chapter.

Choosing a Pre-School

"I looked at maybe ten thousand different pre-schools before I found the right one." (3A)

The diverse nature of pre-school education in Malaysia makes choosing a pre-school an onerous task for most parents. A combination of criteria are cited as influencing their final decision, the methodology employed by the centre appeared to be a guiding force in many cases. Thirteen of the participants made mention of a specific methodology or approach to teaching which was of great importance to them in the selection process. The Montessori and Accelerated Learning methods attracted particular attention:

> *I had planned to send both my children here, because I'm aware of the benefits that the school has to offer whereas I have seen other schools that, they say they are Montessori but it's all, you know, a real show. (1A)*

> *We wanted, essentially we were looking for a Montessori school, okay, there are some pre-schools here which are Montessori and some which are not and some are partly Montessori so we wanted a fully accredited Montessori centre....Basically we went through our own education the way Malaysians are specifically educated during our generation it's like very parrot type, you know, and we heard that Montessori is more sensorial and more mind stimulating and sensory stimulating so we wanted the children to go through this type of experience. (1E)*

> *I read about Montessori and it's something new in the country.... So in this case I decided to try something different so I went over the Montessori concept because what I've read impressed me. (1F)*

Whilst the parents at the Accelerated Learning pre-school did indeed place greater and more consistent emphasis upon the importance of academic content and methods than did parents from the other centres, this was not to the exclusion of social experiences. In fact, only one parent from the Accelerated Learning pre-school said they had chosen it specifically for the perceived intellectual benefits to their child.

> *I would like them to be able to read, okay, and I know that this school they have what you call, Accelerated Learning program.... So I think they will benefit by sending them to this school. (4D)*

The comments of parents from the Montessori and Developmental centres (centres 1 and 3 respectively), which were both known for placing a higher emphasis upon social development, revealed a slightly greater (but inconclusive) leaning towards social objectives than academic.

Other parents, whilst placing similar emphasis upon the nature of the pre-school curriculum, were less convinced that any one methodology was more suitable than another and expressed their concerns:

> *[Accelerated Learning] didn't actually influence my choice, no, because everywhere I go now I see Montessori trained teachers, I mean you get all kind of, but as far as I know there is no one method, one ideal method of teaching pre-school children.... Even if you just concentrate on one method... it might work with some children and it might not work with others, so I prefer one which is all mixed. Just pick out the best of each method. (4C)*

> *Even, even though their kindergarten is good, if my children cannot follow it's not good for them.... So if they are happy then I will take them, if they're not happy then I will take them out of the school. If they don't feel belonging, there's no point. (4D)*

For a little over a third of the parents (nine), location was another influencing factor - quite significant in a city characterised by frequent and wide spread traffic problems. The following comments typified this concern;

> *This was the most important, how near it was to the house, no hassles getting them there. (2E)*

> *I felt that a place which is close by would be more suitable than somewhere, even though it's very reputable, far away. Maybe 10 miles or 5 miles off my home is ridiculous. (1C)*

Some parents (eight) reported relying upon the recommendations of others when choosing their child's pre-school:

> *We asked around from other parents and we found that like the present kindergarten that we have, we found that although they are small but they give personal attention to the children. (3B)*

Such recommendations, serving as an indirect indicator of the quality of a centre, would be particularly reassuring to those parents who freely admitted to knowing very little about the aims or practices associated with pre-school education.

Others relied on their contact with the teachers or principals:

Oh, because (principal) lives right next door... she asked me if I wanted to send (child) there and I said sure. (2B)

When (principal) opened her own school automatically I just send my son there because I know her personally and by reputation so I suppose I have gained confidence in sending my son there. (2C)

It is perhaps surprising that in a country as racially diverse as Malaysia that two parents would have selected their child's pre-school according to its racial composition. One explained the reasoning behind such a decision in the following way:

I like a combination of all races, a combination of all races not just solely one race. And then, you know, I would like my children to have an understanding of these races, if just just Chinese only, just only Chinese, then it's not good for my children also is it. (4D)

The second participant went even further:

I didn't want one which was predominantly Malay or predominantly Chinese. I wanted a good mix of everything. And I didn't want just able children, I wanted them to be exposed to children who are special children. (4C)

Other criteria cited briefly by parents as impacting upon their choice included the class size, the teaching medium and the balance between play and learning.

The Qualities of a Good Pre-School

"The primary concern of the school should be its customer, i.e. the children" (1D)

The curriculum itself was mentioned by nine parents as being an important measure of the quality of the school. Whilst some parents' responses were little more than a passing mention of "the syllabus" or "their program". Others were more specific when it came to detailing the types of approaches or activities they would like to see:

A quite comprehensive kind of basic education like reading, writing music, you know... they even have language classes... Of course there are certain areas like moral values, I think it's good to inculcate these values in the children at early ages. And also of course providing them with physical needs, like have enough facilities so that not only, you know, having lessons in the classroom itself but also for outdoor

activities like visiting. This are also way of learning, you know, for the children and it's very learning from real life rather than looking at the books, looking at the colour books and the picture books. (1E)

I think creativity is also very important which I'm not sure of how much of it is being developed here. I think there's a lack of that actually. I mean I don't see any, I'd love to see like her bringing back her paintings and you know, art work and, but I don't. Well the, other than, other than work materials such as books and stuff I suppose more creative methods of teaching, you know, like maths for example, you don't just have to use books and paper. There's so many ways to teach maths, especially at this young age. (2B)

In view of the fact that individual pre-schools in Malaysia vary so much in their appearance, approach and facilities, it would be useful to know what parents considered to be ideal. When asked what specific qualities they attributed to a good pre-school, parents cited a number of factors, some in more detail than others. Most parents seemed to experience difficulty in formulating an answer to this question, perhaps because as one parent put it, "I don't think you have much choice like... you just have to decide which one is going to suit your needs". (2E)

The majority of parents (twelve) mentioned the equipment available, but were less specific when it came to the types of equipment:

I think there will be some kind of playground equipment for them to, um, some sorts of physical activity other than just reading and writing, outdoor activity, yeah. (2A)

They've got sufficient work materials, you know, the apparatus to help them to learn and also play things. (1E)

I think the school environment coupled with their apparatus. What kind of learning skills do they choose, do they provide for my child. Have they quality materials or are they just very bare minimum necessary which they probably have to share? (1C)

Some parents were, however, a little more specific:

Well a variety of books, books which teach them, you know like maybe the Montessori way and all that, books which they can feel, they can, you know, it's interesting. (4B)

The kinds of toys that they have for the children. That's the things that I would like for the environment. Books, jigsaw puzzles, um, something that's creative and, um, you know, something like water play, sandpit, those kind of things. And things that you won't allow them to have at home (laughs). (4C)

Safety and hygiene were also seen, by nearly half of the parents (nine), to be indicators of the quality of the pre-school. Typical comments included:

A good pre-school has good security, you don't need security guards hanging around - if a school could afford that it would be fine, a real ideal situation. But of course you would expect the school to exercise a certain amount of caution like locking the gate, not letting anybody come in as and when they like.... The environment has to be clean of course. (1A)

You must make the school environment child safe - it's one of the major components of a good pre-school environment. (1B)

First I'd look out for the cleanliness. Secondly, I'd look for the safety, whether it's in the playground or in the apparatus that they have in the school. (4C)

One parent offered a contrary, yet interesting position:

Something that was not so sterile, that you know that somehow your child will not have the freedom to do as, or to learn, to learn, because the place is so clean. That they have some kind of upheavalness about the place, a lived in look about the place, you know.... The place should have to be clean, but not sterile. (3A)

A final concern amongst the participants was the student - teacher ratio, perhaps understandable in a country where it is not uncommon to have up to 40 or 50 children in a classroom. However, the ideal ratio varied greatly amongst participants. Comments and suggested ratios included:

And how many is in the class, that's very important, in each group. I think the, my opinion would be a maximum say below 30 and anything more than that, I feel even with two teachers coping, the child may not receive, may not be able to receive attention or not able to cope what is being taught. (2D)

We don't like pre-schools that they have too many children, too big a playschool we don't like that. We feel that if a kindergarten is too big it becomes more or less like a, like a "mini-school" you see, so much so that I think that the children will not get the sort of attention that is wanted, from the teachers. One teacher should, fifteen children, the ratio is one to fifteen. The maximum they go if it's more than fifteen I feel that they really cannot cater for our children. (3B)

Student teacher ratio I think one to six or one to eight, one to six I think would be quite good you know. Not one to twenty or one to - that small classroom, maybe that's tolerable for a standard one classroom. (1E)

*Basically the teacher should know the child, maybe there should not be such a...
there should be, you know, a balanced child-teacher ratio in order to give the teacher
an opportunity to get to know the child. (1D)*

It is perhaps interesting to note that the parents interviewed did not appear to be concerned over whether or not the pre-school staff were adequately trained. Perhaps this is because parents were aware that there are quite high numbers of untrained teachers and assistant teachers within the private pre-school system. When discussing improvements they would like to see in the pre-school sector, some of the parents did, however, express the desire that some compulsory standardised level of training be introduced in order to ensure pre-school education of a consistently high quality for all.

Other areas mentioned by individual parents included the floor space per classroom, the playground layout, whether the children enjoyed attending the centre, and interestingly, the level of student success attributed to the pre-school. Perhaps the varied opinions were best summarised by the comment of one mother:

*The school should have, the primary concern of the school should be its customer,
i.e. the children. So everything has to be designed to cater for the child, that is what
I'd like. Everything is at their level, the child feels important, you know. That's the
first impression, to find that its very much catered for them in mind. (1D)*

Interestingly, the level of a pre-school's fees was perceived by some parents to be a reasonable indicator of the quality of a pre-school. Parents believed that centres charging higher fees were more likely to have "properly trained teachers" (1A), "more exclusive teaching methods" (1C) and "more apparatus" (1E). One mother summed it up this way:

*The element of fact is there, truth, I mean if you charge high probably the school is
better. (2D)*

A father warned against blindly accepting the existence of such a correlation, saying:

*[Parents] shouldn't have this attitude where if I'm paying RM500 a month, it's got to
be good. As long as we can distinguish, and be able to appreciate that look, it's a
business these people are running. That's why you are paying RM500 because
they've got a place in Damansara Heights, they've got their rental of RM10 000 to
pay. It doesn't mean that the teachers there are up to it. (1D)*

Other parents shared his cautious attitude, expressing a certain degree of cynicism in their comments:

> *I don't honestly think that any of the kindergartens has been set up, purely set up, for the love of educating children. It's for commercial objectives, okay. (1E)*

> *The bottom line is they are all going to profit. Let's face it, they are big business. (2C)*

Nevertheless, in wanting the best for their children, Malaysian parents are willing to spend a great deal on their child's education, even at the pre-school level:

> *I mean it's a big dent in the pocket having to send these two to their pre-school but because parents being parents, they're anxious and they want their children, the best for their children. So we may scrimp on other thing but you know, we just want to make sure that they've got good education from the very young age of two and a half years or whatever. We think it's well worth it.... Of course the guilt is there, if you feel that that is the best for them then you think that, you know, you can still afford it so you do it. (1E)*

It is to be hoped that Malaysian pre-schools do not attempt to 'cash in' on parents ambitions for their children. Parents were aware of the differing standards in the quality of pre-schools in Malaysia and expressed the opinion that, with pre-schools "mushrooming everywhere", there needed to be increased monitoring of pre-schools and a set of enforced minimum guidelines. Such a move would ensure that those who are without choices, perhaps for financial or geographic reasons, still have access to quality pre-school facilities.

Reasons for Attending Pre-School

"I haven't met any child who has not been to pre-school here" (3C)

As already mentioned, despite a tremendous increase in pre-school enrolments over the past 20 years, in 1995 only 54% of 5-6 year olds attended pre-school. Whilst access to pre-school facilities was unlikely to be an issue amongst parents in the research area, the reason why parents chose to send their children to pre-school – what role it had in the child's life - was an issue worth pursuing.

Nearly a quarter of the parents (five) did not believe, for a variety of reasons, it was essential for children to attend pre-school. The majority of these parents reasoned that the job of teaching could be achieved just as effectively by parents who stayed at home:

> *If the mother can sort of teach the child, I mean, basic, basic things, then she should be okay because to me, going to pre-school is not so much of going for formal education, it's just socialising and mixing. (2C)*

> *Every parent's oh, I'm going to put my child in, but not realising that maybe it's not necessary because it depends... If the parents, let's say I, I'm a full time mum... then I feel if I have the interest to teach my child and I'm able to teach my child then probably I won't send the child to pre-school. (2D)*

However, these parents then qualified this opinion, adding that attendance was not necessary until 6 years of age. This final year of pre-school, they believed, was essential for preparing them for "proper" school. Comments included:

> *I think if I could teach my child, had the confidence teaching him then I would probably send the child for only just one year of pre-school before he actually attended standard one. (2D)*

> *You know, working parents do not always have the time to sit down and teach, right, if I was a full time housewife or you know, a full time mother at home then yes, maybe they don't have to go to school until the very last year, final year you know. (4B)*

> *If they don't want to go, don't go. But the year before school, that's important. (3D)*

Despite this belief, the fact remained that all - including those parents classed as "homemakers" - had chosen to send their child to pre-school, and all for longer than just the final year. One parent, however, suggested that in some ways a pre-school education was inferior to a home based education:

> *But if any parent who wants their child to develop properly I think the home is still a better environment because in the school some teachers are just not keen on developing the moral values. They're just keen on teaching like how to learn to read, ABC, alphabet and do the numbers. They get the rudiments out the way and that's it and that is their job done. But they don't really care very much for how the child is developing as a person. (1C)*

The vast majority of parents were in favour of sending their children to pre-school, but often for very different reasons. The reason cited by the majority of parents (twelve) for children attending pre-school was the role it played in their social-emotional development. The opportunity to interact with other children was particularly important to most parents, whose comments included:

> At least they are being stimulated and at least they have the social interaction, at least they have peer group, at least they are interacting with children of their own age, they learn from each other. (3A)

> You have to let them socialise you know when they go to pre-school they socialise and they learn... they will learn how to share things, they will learn to, they will learn to do things in a group than rather than to be alone by themselves, I think pre-school is definitely is a must for young children. (3B)

> Yes, my reason is because I feel that they are more sociable, they gain a lot more confidence, mixing around, and they speak better because it doesn't confine to the people in the house. (4F)

> [If he doesn't attend pre-school] he'll still miss out on socialisation aspects, on peer interaction, on the norms of the society for children of that age what are acceptable behaviours. He will probably miss out on all those because he doesn't have that kind of interaction. Unless of course it is bridged with some level of social interaction with other children, then it is okay. But I don't think that's possible, by and large one would go to a pre-school to be given that kind of head start. (1B)

One mother made a particularly interesting observation which reflected the great shifts that have occurred in Malaysian family life in recent years:

> Also I think now we often have smaller families and our extended family are further away, we all live further apart so it's not like before where you can grow up with your cousins and your aunts and that way you don't miss much, you've been mixing with a lot of people, with children of different ages. These days we take them out so that they mix with other children of their own age. (1D)

A total of eleven parents felt that attending pre-school was important in preparing their child for standard one, or "proper school" as it was referred to by many of the parents. But here, again, differences were noted in the parent's motivations. Seven saw the role of the pre-school as preparing their child for the intellectual demands of standard one, a view typified by the following comments:

So if your child doesn't attend pre-school when he actually attends the normal primary school he's at a loss, because he doesn't know anything and he's starting from scratch and normally he'd be at the bottom of the class...they get discouraged about going to school because they're at the bottom of the class....I think most parents because of that they have started sending children to the pre-school. (1F)

Yeah it is necessary. Partly it's like to let them get used to it here before they start in school. They get, they need to know something before they enter school, basic ABC and what have you. (2E)

I think now yes, because if they don't attend I think they will be backward if they go to a proper school, they are unable to read and they will be you know, feel inferior because all their friends know how to read and know the correct things. (4D)

The remaining four felt the pre-school's role was to prepare their child for the social, emotional and behavioural demands of standard one. Parents' comments reflected a particular concern that their child be able to adapt to what they saw as the regimented and disciplined nature of formal schooling.

So if they go straight to a school they , the schools don't have any kind of... they're not used to that kind of discipline, a system where they have to go to a school for every day. [Pre-school] kind of prepares them, even if it's for one year or two years or three years, whatever. There's some kind of training for the child. He is more or less prepared when he goes to the big school, because he has exposure to other people. (1A)

To prepare them for proper school because schools here are kind of regimented, they're very discipline oriented, very exam oriented. It's sort of, it breaks them into that. (3C)

Because they wouldn't know what it's like to sit in a class and pay attention and sit there for a few hours, you know. How are they gonna suddenly adjust to a school which is a lot, to a proper school which is a lot longer. (4B)

Pre-school gives them confidence. When they go to school proper it's, they don't get intimidated by, by sitting now in this room with rows and rows of people, having a teacher right in front of them, they don't get intimidated because they're more at ease. They would have been used to the regime of going to school and sitting down and then listen to the teacher in front. If they've not gone to pre-school and they've just been at home, it would have been a bit scary at first. (4C)

At this point it should be noted that the notions of pre-school as a vehicle for social preparation and as a vehicle for school preparation did not serve as a dichotomy - in fact seven

of the twelve parents who saw pre-school attendance as an important preparation for standard one also saw it as being important in the development of the child socially and emotionally. It is, however, interesting to note that of the seven parents who saw pre-school as having this dual function, five came from the one pre-school (the Accelerated Learning centre).

Five parents felt that, in addition to intellectual and social preparation, pre-school played an important part in assisting them in their parenting role. Typical comments included:

> *Yes, with parents who are busy... because their parents don't have a choice because they are both working. So I think it's a good alternative because you know that they're not just left at home with the maid. (3A)*

> *That kind of exposure at that age, it's important because parents are working the whole day and they don't have that kind of time to spend with their children. (1A)*

One parent felt that the additional stimulation provided by a pre-school program was reason enough for their child to attend:

> *Well I think they will become a lot more adaptable and sociable. There's a lot more variety of experiences for her which she probably wouldn't get it at home and I think she's under a more stimulating environment, she's with different people, different kinds of circumstances. (1E)*

Parents overwhelmingly rejected the notion that a function of pre-school attendance was to provide "care" for the children of working parents, usually reasoning that they have maids who can fulfil this function. In the eyes of the parents interviewed, pre-school and day care were two very separate entities, with the former serving an educational function and the latter nothing more than a "baby-sitting" function.

It is not unusual for children in Malaysia to commence attending a kindergarten class at the age of two and a half years. When questioned as to what they considered to be the ideal age at which children should start attending pre-school, responses ranged from 2 years to 6 years of age. The majority favoured a starting age between 3 and 4 years of age, explaining:

> *I think about four is, anything beyond three, because a child is pretty independent and not as clingy and all that. After three should be okay. Three, best age I would say is four, but the earliest I think is three, not earlier than that. (1F)*

I think parents should stay with their children until they're at least three, three and a half and then get them out of the house (laughs). I sent my, my eldest son was four and I think that's the perfect age, yeah, two years is enough. (3A)

Other parents referred less to a definite starting age and more towards the kinds of experiences they would expect their child to be involved in at particular ages. Examples of this included:

As I told you earlier, if it's gonna be a Montessori way of teaching then I wouldn't mind if the child starts at three... they teach very differently, they don't force anything, the child is free to do whatever the child wants, and play in the same time. So if its gonna be the Montessori way I would seriously wouldn't mind. And when it comes to five, when the child is five, only then maybe they should start preparing the child for Standard one. (3B)

When they are four, five and six, that is three years of actual work, you know, and I think yes you need that amount of time for them to learn, especially if we have no time for them at home. (4A)

The Purpose of Pre-School Education

"I think basically we expect the child to know the basics." (1E)

When asked what they saw as the purpose of pre-school education – what they expected their child to have achieved by the end of their pre-school education, parents responded in quite a lot of detail. An overriding theme in many of the responses (eighteen of the twenty one interviewed) was the issue of preparing a child for standard one, be it academically, socially or emotionally. The particular aspect of standard one preparation focused upon varied from parent to parent. Some parents appeared to have an "inventory" of skills they wished the child to have, as was revealed in comments such as :

I think basically we expect that the child should know the basics, the fundamentals, such as reading, writing, singing and social activities. Those are very basic behaviours in learning process. So that the foundation is laid for further primary education. If possible they should read books, writing as well, reading and writing. I would love them to even write an essay if possible, in a way to express what they think of a subject, whether it's a short one or a long one, and that will reflect his ability to think logically, to analyse a situation. Really we are not trying to create a genius out of her, but I believe it's very basic. (1E)

At least to be able to grasp the basic numbers, alphabet, maybe simple multiplication and addition, differentiating colours, being able to draw some basic drawings, socialising, wanting to talk and respect, things like that. (1F)

Being able to do basic learning, I mean basic reading, just basic, you know, and maths. Understanding the concept more than actually being able to do the whole thing... Well definitely to know sounds, vowels and all that. Um, to be able to read enough so that she wouldn't have, she'd be able to absorb quickly enough when she gets into the primary school. (2B)

Looking at my child, she is able to read, she is able to count, then do addition and subtraction. I'm quite happy with that so maybe that's what I want, cause that would be, she wouldn't be left out when she goes to standard one, she won't be, you know, she'll be able to cope with the other kids. (4A)

These comments, and others like them, reveal the underlying concern amongst parents that their child be able to cope, and even compete, intellectually in the standard one classroom. Intellectual development was also seen as a component of sound social-emotional health. This view was summed up neatly by one father who stated:

And academically he must equip himself to face standard one....As long as he's pretty much above average, average or above average academically....He should have enough of knowledge so that his confidence is not shaken when he gets to standard one. (1D)

Leading on from this was the concern amongst parents that their child was mentally and emotionally prepared for standard one. Their views reflect the notion that school is a harsh place for a child, particularly if they are inadequately prepared by the pre-school.

I would like my child to be independent for one thing because he's going to school for a couple of hours a day, where you've really got to be independent. It's not like pre-school any more where the teacher sort of pampers you, it's a really independent kind of world. I would like to see independence, I would like to see him confident with himself, being able to cope not only with maths and language, but cope with situations where a teacher scolds him and things like that. More, shall I say, tough, a tougher person. That's what I would like to see for my son. Because it's a different kind of environment entirely. (1A)

In pre-school they can fidget and the teacher don't really correct them so harshly, but in the school there have been cases where teachers are very strict with the young child when they don't seem to be able to sit still. With self development they're

ready, you know, ready to take what's coming ahead and it can be tough if they're not ready. I think a child should feel confident when they go to school and they should be excited about it. (1C)

I want him to be confident, walk into that terrible government school he's got to go into, a government school with a not too very smart teacher they've got out of a rural, someone who's worse, fifty times worse than the pre-school teacher I'm talking about. Someone who shouts at kids, who has no appreciation whatsoever of what a teacher should be. So he's got to go out there, that's why up on the list just now there was confidence, social skills. (1D)

But I think that the more important thing is that he understands what school is all about and that he knows that he's gonna go into more serious school so that he won't be - won't frighten him to speak, getting him to understand that they're going to bigger school and it's just the beginning... that's more important. (2D)

If by the time that she leaves pre-school she has to be able to be, er, sort of independent... when she enter into her actual standard one. She has to be, she has to be prepared mentally that she's going to start school, you know, in a very serious sense and not like what she's done in pre-school where she can play. (3B)

The remaining comments related to the belief that the child's social-emotional development, in and of itself, was an important end result of pre-school attendance:

To be able to, to mix around with other children, you know, to be able to socialise... That's what we just hope for when we put them into pre-school. (3B)

For me, I just want one thing, socialising. Because at home there's not much socialising right, so I want them to learn how to share, how to queue up for things, to take turns, and then how, to know there's some, some children are better than them, stronger than them, they are not the only ones strong, these are the things that I want. (3D)

Well for my children that they have confidence in themselves, in their ability, that socially they can adapt in any situation any given situation... that they won't be intimidated by unfamiliarity, by unfamiliar surroundings, that all in all that they have confidence. That aura of I can deal with anything kind of feeling... So it doesn't have to be so formalised in kindergarten so much because they will learn in school and they will do it at home, but the confidence part, I feel good about myself. And that I can get things done, no matter what, you know, it's not beyond me to cope. That's what I want for my child. (3A)

Of the eight parents who felt social-emotional development was an important purpose of pre-school education, seven also saw preparation for standard one as an important end result of pre-school education. This would seem to indicate that parents do not see these as mutually exclusive goals. One mother who had nominated both academic standard one preparation and social-emotional development as important purposes of pre-school education explained it this way:

> So it's social... If they left pre-school and could read and write but had poor social skills, would I feel the pre-school had done it's job? Definitely not, definitely not. Reverse? That's separate, I wouldn't mind that you know, because the primary education is still there. (4A)

Knowledge of the Pre-School Program

"I don't really know what the methods are." (2A)

Discussion with parents regarding what sort of activities and experiences their child was exposed to revealed that very few parents felt they had an understanding of their child's pre-school program. Whilst seven parents characterised themselves as having a "fair" understanding of their child's program, some of their comments were limited:

> I think I know about it to a certain degree. Enough for me to understand the pre-school philosophy and what it entails, and I feel it's good for my child. (1B)

> Well at least I would say about half of it, you know what kids are like when you say 'How's your day at school today'. Nothing (laughs). But I do get like feedback from his teacher. Normally when I pick him up I go in for a chat with the teacher. We're very welcome there. (3C)

> I have, I won't know a lot but a fair bit, a fair bit of what they're doing because they do come back and tell me about it. Mostly writing, reading, singing, pasting, colouring. (4F)

Four of the parents were a little more aware of some of the specifics of their child's program, as was reflected in comments such as:

> I know right now this year because my son's going to be in standard one next year that the method of teaching is more structured, they sit around, they do more phonics, numbers, more instructional, they learn to add, they just prepare them for proper school. That's good the last year of pre-school to do that I think then they

*won't get caught so short. My three year old is more of a let's see if you want to do
this and if you don't feel like it it doesn't matter, you can do it another day and you
know she loves it. And it's free play, imaginative play, its, I think my three year old
gets more of that and my five year old like he's outgrown that, he wants to learn now,
he wants to know and the school is there for him to do that. (3A)*

*Not very much but I, I do know that the principal always emphasises on the right
brain and the left brain and I know that they do have piped in music when they, you
know, things like baroque and all that to get the children to relax so that they can
accept more of what the things taught. And I think in the way they teach is they tend
to encourage the children and praise them a lot, so it's supposed to give them a lot of
confidence. So that environment is (inaudible), and that sort of thing would not be so
school like but, you know, with a lot of love and everything around them, you know.
(4B)*

*I think Montessori, I think it's, the method's used is more like getting a child to do a
lot of things on his or her own. I think it's not so much on the academic part like
learning your ABC or learning your mathematics correctly, it's more like self built
learning. (2D)*

The majority of parents, however, readily admitted to having a limited knowledge of their
child's pre-school program. Their comments reveal that the knowledge they do possess has
come from questioning their child or personally approaching the teacher - not always easy for
parents who are both working. Parents revealed their confusion in such comments as:

*Not very well, we haven't really learned enough about it. I've read a little about it but
I'm not really well adept about it.... We know that there's a lot of apparatus there,
well I can only guess that certain things are meant to do certain functions, okay, but I
don't think that we have gone through the whole process with a teacher or the
principal who explains this is meant to do this and this is meant to do this....I think to
start the whole thing off probably what we should have done was insisted to be told
actually what Montessori aims to do, okay. I know it's more, I've got only an idea it's
going to be sensorial and that kind of thing but what is the end effect. I think it would
be good for parents to be told. (1E)*

*I mean like, other than the child coming home and saying oh this and this happened
in school and the mother asking what happened in school, that's it. (2B)*

Paradoxically, of the thirteen parents who reported selecting their child's pre-school
primarily for the teaching method it employed, eight (five from the Montessori based centres and
three from the Accelerated Learning centre) admitted to having no real knowledge of what the

method actually involved. Parents of children attending Montessori based centres were particularly unacquainted with its methods. Indeed, some parents appeared puzzled over the apparent obsession with Montessori in Malaysia, and expressed concern over whether such methods were necessarily appropriate in the Malaysian context:

> *That's what we hear is supposed to be the best thing... I think generally the more so called "in" schools which a lot of parents are looking at, you know, to send their children to, tend to have a Montessori base. So if they have it then it must be good.... I don't think it's because they know about what the method is all about, I just think its, it's you know, they associate Montessori with probably yes, something from overseas. (2B)*

> *In a way it can be very good but on the other hand whether it's a plus point for the Malaysian children I'm yet to really come across parents who've said yes it's good because number one, Montessori is very very new in Malaysia and if you look at the Montessori system used here I don't really know whether the teachers who claim to be Montessori teachers are really that well trained over here.... Everyone, if you ask every parent that comes across a pre-school with the word put up Montessori, all the parents 'Oh, that's the school I want my child to attend'. (2D)*

One father expressed his frustration over this issue in a highly detailed response:

> *There's a point which to me is a very valid point. [The Malaysian] is trying to import European or American or, you know, types of education because he isn't sure what his child wants or should get at this point in time himself...maybe we are doing the wrong thing here, we've got to see whether we ourselves are doing the right thing... the Malaysian parent is basically saying yeah, that's right, I want him to know x, y and z at this point in time because I think in the UK or in Australia or anywhere like that children there are being taught x, y and z at this point in time. We could be wrong, we could be completely wrong. That's another thing. Have we interpreted [the method] correctly?.... I honestly tell you I don't know, I wouldn't profess to know although I'm supposed to be this educated parent who should really know how Montessori teaches, why they're teaching that method and whether it's the right thing for my child - I don't! I'll be honest, I'll be the first to say I don't....Again, you are talking about a Malaysian person who's a non-interfering sort of person, an Asian, who tends not to go to the school, who tends not to go and make a big thing about it because the Asian sits back and says "This is Western therefore this must be good. This Montessori school, this London style of teaching, it's got to be good for my son", but maybe it's not. (1D)*

In view of these responses it is perhaps not surprising that of the seven parents who suggested that schools had a responsibility to educate parents on the pre-school program and its methods, six came from the centres with a Montessori base. Their suggestions included:

> *I think it will be good... if they could have a kind of instruction course for the parents, just maybe one hour or so with either the headmaster or the principal, explain to the parents what the school would be doing to develop their child or their children, what are the facilities and you know, and how maybe the parents can further help their children to improve, not just depending on the school. (1E)*

> *Pre-school education is a big start for us as well, when the child starts, we've got to go through a learning process as well with the child. (1D)*

The Prioritisation of Pre-School Goals

"So these are the things that I am sending him to the kindergarten for." (2E)

In order to determine what parents felt to be the most important goals of pre-school education, they were asked to sequence a set of fifteen goal statement cards from most through to least important. Five of the goal statements related to social or behavioural type goals, five to intellectual or learning type goals and five to miscellaneous type goals (for a full list of the goals, see the Research Instrument in APPENDIX D). The parents were not made aware of either these groupings or the emphasis of any particular goal statement card. Parents were reminded that they were to rank the goals specifically in relation to their importance in the pre-school program, that is, they may have considered a particular goal as generally important, but not believe it was the pre-school's duty to develop it.

The actual ranking assigned to each goal by each parent can be viewed in APPENDIX F. In order to simplify the discussion of the results from this part of the research, the rankings have been condensed into five levels and assigned descriptors. Items ranked by the parents from one to three have subsequently been termed 'very important', rankings four to six 'slightly important', rankings seven to nine 'neither important nor unimportant', rankings ten to twelve 'slightly unimportant' and rankings thirteen to fifteen 'very unimportant'. As has already been discussed in the methodology section, the reason for not using these Likert style descriptors with the parents was because the pilot phase established a tendency amongst the parents to rate all

goals as very important. It should be noted at this point that only twenty responses are dealt with here as one parent did not complete the task correctly.

Social / Behavioural Goals

The graph which appears in Figure 3 shows the parents' ranking of the five goal statement cards which were representative of social or behavioural type goals.
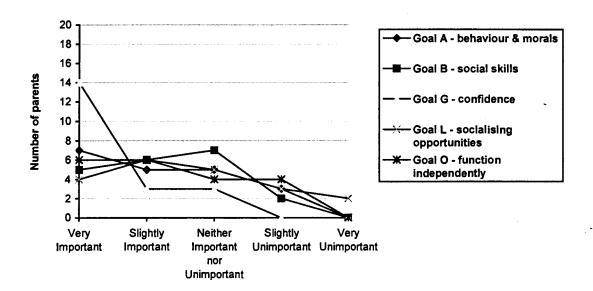
Figure 3. Simplified rankings of social / behavioural goals.

The consistent ranking pattern characteristic of the social - emotional goals indicates that parents were in agreement as to the relative importance of goals from this domain. On average half the parents ranked these goals in the slightly or very important ranges, with progressively fewer parents ranking them in the unimportant ranges. These results show social domain goals (ranked third by parents in Mohd. Majzub's 1980 study) to be considered highly by parents.

What is of significant interest is goal G, concerning the development of confidence and self esteem, This goal was ranked higher by parents than every other goal, with all twenty parents ranking it at or above the midpoint. In their comments parents revealed why they considered this particular goal to be such a vital part of their child's pre-school education:

> *I feel that is very very good because no matter what kind of situation you put them in,*
> *if they have confidence and self esteem they'll get on with anything. They're happy*
> *children they're secure. They have belief in themselves, that's really good. (3A)*

If they can believe in themselves, and their confidence... well they know what they're doing you know and if they make any mistakes they know they can correct it themself, it's a mistake that they made themselves, you know....I believe that children should be more confident of themselves and then they won't be, you know, they won't be so scared to ask questions, or to correct somebody if they feel that they're wrong. (4C)

The remaining four goals did not differ significantly from each other in the ranking distribution, with more parents ranking them at the 'important' end of the scale than at the 'unimportant' end. Some parents placed these goals towards the end of their rankings because they felt it was the home's responsibility to develop them. Such comments included:

Okay, I mean this can be done at home, these sort of things start at home, good behaviour and moral values starts at home. (3D)

Usually [social skills] blends in very naturally with the children so it's not something that you really need to teach or anything, I mean yes the opportunity is there, it's already there, you know. (4B)

Others felt these remaining goals (A,B,L and O) were an important part of the pre-school program. Good behaviour (goal A) was seen as increasingly important as the child's range of social contact increased, as one parent explained "so they, they learn that it's not just their parents that react that way to them but other people as well" (2B). One parent felt that increases in the number of families with both parents working and spending less time with their children meant that many "would expect that in pre-school they teach basic things like not telling lies and you know, good manners and bad manners" (2D). Another parent raised the issue that respectful behaviour and tolerance of different morals was of particular importance in Malaysia because "we are living in a multi-ethnic environment" (1B). He went on to explain that attention to behaviour and morals education was crucial "much more because of Islam and all that which is everywhere as it's the official religion of the country" (1B).

Independence (goal O) was generally valued for its contribution to the child's confidence and self esteem. Parents felt an independent child was less likely to be affected by peer pressure or bullying. Emphasis was placed upon "getting them to accept responsibility" (3D) at this age. Fundamental to all this was the parents' realisation that "they are going into the world

where I will not be there to help them" (4D). Independence was seen as a key factor in easing this transition.

Goals B (social skills) and L (socialising opportunities) were seen by one parent to be the foundation of "the kind of community you want to see... a caring society" (1B). For the majority, however, their value lay in assisting the child to interact and establish positive relations with others:

> *Well I think that it's important that they learn to socialise because that's going to carry him throughout, through life actually. (1D)*

> *Basically that's what we want from the child, I mean, being at home the child wouldn't be able to really socialise and (inaudible) much, but there at school they mingle around. It's basically also that we ourselves have gone through life, after a certain while I mean you start a career, you begin to realise that education or a high level of education itself is not good enough. You've got to have a mixture of, it can only take you so far, you've got to have a mixture of other aspects of life, you see. (4A)*

Intellectual / Learning Goals

In Figure 4 are the condensed rankings of the goal statements which related to intellectual or learning type goals.
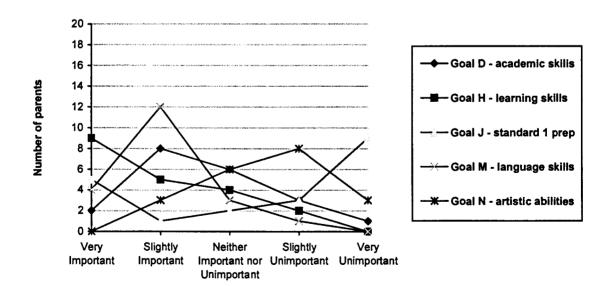
Figure 4. Simplified rankings of intellectual / learning goals.

One is immediately struck by the great variation in ranking amongst the different goals. The goal which is perhaps most surprising is goal J, related to standard one preparation. Only six people ranked it in the 'important' range, whilst twelve ranked it in the 'unimportant' range. This is despite the importance placed upon this goal by parents when discussing the purpose of pre-school education. When asked why they didn't rank this goal more highly (despite the importance they placed upon being prepared for standard one), the parents' comments were quite revealing:

> *Prepare for standard one? I think it's everybody's vision, why did I bring it down? I think if he can do all those (pointing to other goal cards) then he's ready for this anyway. If he's going to Standard One then he has to go to Standard One, but pre-school, preparing your children for Standard One, not in that sense of the word. Whilst that should be one of the objectives but I don't think that should be a major objective, or even a hidden objective. (1B)*

> *Read and write, well, this is important but I think this, reading and writing is everyday, you never stop learning your maths, you never can, you do it every day and it's continuous, there's no end to skill. And everyday is teaching so I think it sort of comes, the child will learn somehow, be able to learn and read. The day one that he goes to school he's already learning to read. He may not know his ABC now but he may know ABC at the end of the year. So I'm not exactly care if a child develops it now. (2D)*

Interestingly, one mother explained that she had ranked this goal towards the end because she felt that trying to achieve it in pre-school was too late. She believed that "preparing the child does not start from the day they go to school... it's up to the parents to start them off". She explained that skills such as reading and writing should begin at home at a much younger age because "... you can't just give the child to a teacher and say 'Look, they are in pre-school, they are five, they have got two more years to go to school so please teach them'". (2C)

The two goals which were highly ranked by parents related to developing the child's learning skills (goal H) and language skills (goal M), which were ranked in the very or slightly important ranges by fourteen and sixteen parents respectively, with fewer people ranking them in each of the lower positions. Language skills were seen as vitally important to success in education. The concerns of approximately half of the parents lay mainly with their child's communicative competence:

Language skills to communicate, again if they have language skills they can, they'll have confidence and self esteem, if they can communicate their wants and their desires. (3A)

Oh, because language is their way to express themselves. To express and to understand. Even if, you can't teach them, let's say you want to teach them basic maths technique, right, but if, if their language skill is not too good, then it's you know, when it comes to problem solving they won't be able to solve because they won't be able to understand you know, what is required. (4C)

Because whatever they're gonna learn in school they have to be able to understand what is being said. (4B)

For the remainder, it was their child's communicative competence in *a range of languages* which was most important. This is understandable when you consider the diverse linguistic nature of Malaysia. Many children now speak English at home. The medium of instruction in virtually all private pre-schools is English (with elective out of school classes in Bahasa, Mandarin or Tamil available at some centres), whilst the national language, and the medium of instruction in government primary schools and all tertiary institutions is Bahasa Malaysia. This puts those children of non Malay background, who are unlikely to be exposed regularly to Bahasa at a distinct disadvantage on entering the government school system. Language ability is therefore seen as the foundation to education in Malaysia, particularly by those for whom Bahasa is a second or even third language:

Especially this Bahasa thing, you know, he has to be able to understand because we had a problem with [first child], she went and then the medium of instruction was mostly in English, she learnt, even her numbers all was in English, so when she went to standard one the teacher was speaking in Bahasa only, and she was you know, all messed up. (2E)

Yeah, it is very important, especially Malay, because she speaks English at home so that's not a problem. Malay is important because all our, I mean once she goes to standard one everything is going to be in Malay.... What I would want is maybe they have a session where they all speak Malay, you know, they are all supposed to speak Malay for ten minutes, so maybe that's where they'd learn. (4A)

Bahasa instruction was nominated by eight parents as being an area of the pre-school curriculum requiring more emphasis - an issue of particular concern amongst the Chinese parents interviewed.

The majority of parents ranked academic skills (goal D) at 'slightly important', with progressively fewer people ranking it in each of the lower categories. Even so, only ten parents in total ranked it in the range of "very" or "slightly important" - an interesting result considering the importance parents placed upon the development of academic skills when discussing the purpose of pre-school education. Some parents were of the opinion that the transfer of academic knowledge was the pre-school's responsibility:

> So these are the things that I am sending him to the kindergarten for. So I expect them to, you know, do these. (2E)

> [Basic academic skills are] what actually they, they should learn in pre-school, to prepare them. (3B)

> That's, I suppose that's what most people want out of pre-school. Because you know, I don't know, I think mothers make the worst teachers to their own children. (4C)

Parents saw these basic skills as the building blocks to further learning, and a way of easing the child into the demands of formal schooling:

> [Academic skills are] important too so that they won't be left behind when they go to school. That's part of the, I think that's part of the confidence too, that they, at least they know something, it's not something new that 'Oh my god we're in standard one I don't, everybody else knows this and oh I'm gonna go home and cry!, I need my mum', that kind of thing. (3A)

The development of artistic abilities (goal N) was least favoured amongst parents. Whilst still not ranking it particularly highly, seven parents expressed the belief that art and music were valuable components of the pre-school program, with some feeling it was important to develop such abilities whilst the child was young:

> The pre-school should actually give a start to [artistic skills and music abilities]. The pre-school years are very critical years for children and their capacity to learn and acquire interest in those years. So I think if you give them a natural inclination in that area I think they can then develop it. (1E)

> Children, they have so much potential in [art and music], its (inaudible) to develop it further. It's very important, especially at that age, because if you, you know, nurture it at that point in time you have a lot more creative people around. (2B)

One even considered artistic skills to be an important avenue of success for the child who is academically less inclined because, as she put it, "to be successful in life...it doesn't mean that you only have to be good in studies - you can dance, you can play the piano...have other things, other skills" (2C). The remaining seven parents who commented on this goal were quite negative in their views. Whilst acknowledging that children enjoy such experiences, they were not seen by parents as being particularly necessary:

> *Nothing, I don't think that should be, they will pick it up later on, you see. That one is not important at all. (3B)*

> *This, singing, I think it has to be inborn. Not all children are born with a natural liking for music or they have, what they call this, an ear for music, you know...so it's not important. Art, this, art is important because they learn to express themselves, but not a priority because there are other ways, you know, the child is able to speak or work it out in different ways. You don't need to. No, it's okay, art is not that important. (4B)*

Miscellaneous Goals

Figure 5 shows the parents' ranking of the five goal statement cards which were representative of miscellaneous type goals. Whilst the miscellaneous goals elicited fairly consistent responses from parents, their perceptions of these goals were less favourable. The miscellaneous goals all had relatively low levels of approval amongst the parents interviewed, with the majority ranking them in either the 'slightly' or 'very unimportant' range.
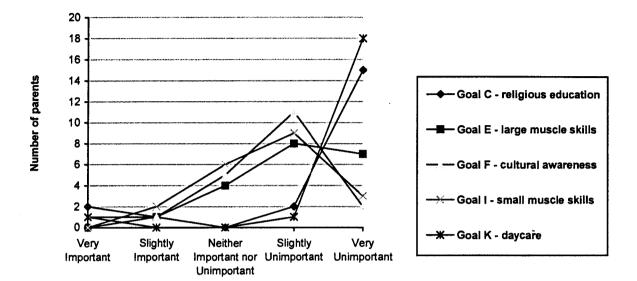
Figure 5. Simplified rankings of miscellaneous goals.

Goal C (religious education) provoked an extreme response in the majority of parents. Seventeen of the twenty parents ranked religious education in the 'unimportant' range for largely the same reasons, featured in the following comments:

I don't see it as a function of pre-school. I see moral values and spiritual values as different. Spiritual values can be taken care of by the religious establishment. That's not a kindergarten's job I don't think. (1E)

This is being taught at home, and gradually, and also in churches on Sunday, and being in a Muslim country I think this is very hard to teach this at pre-school level having so many religions, you know, which religion do you teach. So that's the least important. (4B)

That one I think it basically should be the parents can do it at home. Because it's no point the pre-schools doing it for you but the parents can do it together with the child at home because religion is something that, like, a way of life. So with me, if you gonna want and go for real religious education then you should put, you put them into a religious school, not a pre-school. To me, pre-school is more for basic, basic education. (4C)

The only parents who did consider religious education to be an important goal of pre-school education were Malays. Of the seven Malays interviewed, three ranked religious education within the first two ranges:

> *I think that's most important, a lot, a lot important too but not the most important. To start from a very young age so that its instilled in them, brainwashed, I don't know, values again, morals. (3A)*

> *Religious means everything here, where you can have self esteem, it's also teaching morals, like us, we are Islam, Islamic Muslim people have to be courteous, able to control oneself, able to (inaudible) and pray like five time a day, and then able to recite all these holy verses. This is a must for them you see. (4D)*

> *I think that religious education is also very important at pre-school... of course being in Malaysia you have all kinds of multi-racial and all these things so, like being in this particular school at the moment she doesn't have what I wish she could have... it is difficult for me to find another school, and it will also be very tiring for her cause we'd have to send her to two schools...I mean to me that that's the beginning of moral education and principles and life and things like that and I think that's critical for children... But I think for religious education it would be more between the age of five and six you'd start introducing it. (2B)*

Other Malays, whilst acknowledging their religion's importance for them personally, agreed with the non-Malay parents:

> *I put this here because I think religious is something very, how do you say, it's a sensitive thing, especially here when you have so many religions and so many races.... I want her to go and learn a little bit extra, so that's why I put her in this pre-school. Like if you go to a normal pre-school...I don't think it will work, because they need a full time (inaudible) in doing religious education. (2C)*

Nevertheless, spiritual education, and for Muslim children, Islamic Religious Education, remain important components of the Ministry of Education's Pre-School Curriculum Guidelines which are prescribed for use in all Malaysian pre-schools.

Daycare (goal K) also provoked an extreme response among parents, with nineteen of the twenty parents ranking it in the 'unimportant' range. One parent, however, rated it in the 'very important' range, saying "This should be the first one I think for most parents – a safe environment while they go to work" (3D). However, for many parents there was no sense in utilising a pre-school for this purpose, for as they were quick to point out:

To provide a day care centre for the child, no I don't use school as that because I've got a full time maid at home, I've been lucky we've got that so that is why I don't need. (1F)

Whilst agreeing that "care" had to be a fundamental responsibility of the pre-school, parents rejected outright the notion that this alone was an important goal of pre-school education:

Of course I expect that when my child goes to the pre-school they will be in a safe environment but that's only incidental, I mean it's only part and parcel of the whole thing you know, but that's not why I want to send my children there. (1E)

Small and large muscle skill development (goals I and E respectively) were seen more as incidental elements of the pre-school program than things which the pre-school was responsible for developing. For the majority of parents (ten out of seventeen comments) the value of small muscle skills was to ensure success in writing, colouring and to a lesser extent, cutting. But most felt that such skills were developed adequately in the home environment:

I think those kind of things we can do it at home, it doesn't need special kind of training to do that. (1E)

I agree with that, even to be able to hold a pen so that he will build up his writing. I think like holding crayons, ability to hold, that is every day thing, it's not just at school that I want my child to do, knows how to hold a pen, that is part of (child) going to school but I think this accomplished in the house as well, that's why I think I don't expect it to be more important to the school. (2D)

Similarly, gross motor skills were seen by most parents to be part of a child's natural development, and not requiring adult intervention unless, as one parent put it, "they have very weak body" (1C). Fifteen of the twenty comments on this goal all basically represented the same view:

This comes naturally. I don't think you need to develop it. (4B)

This one is, I would say it's not important but this is not a proper education it's just what they do every day, you know, to help themselves out in their exercises. (2C)

I mean I put it last because I feel like the home environment is, you can do that. (2E)

And from a parent who was employed as a pre-school teacher:

This [large muscle skills], I feel is, I wouldn't say it's not important...I mean a child, if he's walking he walks you know what I mean, you don't have to teach him to walk, that kind of thing. Because a child who does not come to a kindergarten physically is just as good as a child who has come at a very early age. (1A)

Parents' view of this goal is consistent with the degree of emphasis that Malaysian pre-schools place upon physical development. Equipment such as balls, balance beams, hoops and the like are not a feature of the outdoor environments of Malaysian pre-schools.

Five parents felt that gross motor skills should not be overlooked at pre-school, with comments such as:

I think in the more structured way they will learn to maximise, to exploit what they already have. Of course there will be natural development even if they don't go on the monkey bar, but if these apparatus are available much earlier to them they are able to know they're own strength and know much more. (1B)

That helps them be co-ordinated and they learn better that way, they have more self confidence when they are able to do all these wonderful things, you know. I think in the long term that they have respect for their bodies, that they'll always find that they need to do things, take part in sports and activities and they're not just sitting around with nothing. I feel it's really really good to have respect for your body. (3A)

I don't think pre-school needs only to be learning their, developing [academic] skills. They need some exercise for development, development it doesn't mean reading only. Development means hopping, skipping and all those things, do acrobatics and all those things and this functions to your brain too. That accelerates your brain you see, with your fingers moving that is very important because you are teaching your brain, or else your brain will not have exercise. (4D)

These parents value gross motor skills for their contribution to a fit and healthy body. For one mother, with a particularly unique comment, their value did not stop there:

This I don't think they very much worry, you know, exercising. I think they should be doing more of these because yesterday I read that all these physical movements help them to, you know, enhance their learning ability. I just read it. But the crawling, those monkey bars exercises it helps them to learn even faster. So I think the school is, they just have once a week P.E. which I don't think is, it's not enough. (2A)

Although there is no way of knowing what position this parent held prior to reading the article, this could be a pertinent example of just how malleable parental perceptions can be.

The final goal in this section, goal F, related to the provision of a culturally relevant education. One would perhaps expect that in a country as racially diverse as Malaysia that this would be considered quite important. But whilst only two parents ranked it in the 'very unimportant' range, only two ranked it as 'very' or 'slightly important'. In the majority of cases the parents' "lukewarm" ranking of this goal did not reflect their comments, which revealed a genuine concern that their child develop awareness and respect for other cultures:

> *I think we live in a multi-racial society and racial tolerance is something that, the value of social tolerance, racial tolerance I think we want to instil it in our children. So I think again it's a good start for them, from very young. (1E)*

> *Well we are multi-racial, we have to understand one another, what is right for this one, this race, is not right for the other race, so we have to respect differences. (4D)*

It would seem that it is the very diversity of the nation's culture that lies at the heart of some parents apparent apathy towards this goal. Five parents acknowledged the importance of the concept, but seemed to feel it was something the children simply absorbed by virtue of living in a multi-racial society, rather than something which required teaching or planning for:

> *So all this is already done at home, so without, subconsciously without the children knowing it...they have been doing it and they just carry to school what they have learnt at home. No, no, this is just, I think, is more a parenting thing and a natural thing. (2C)*

> *This one is also not necessary in school because they see it on the television all the time and they know that there's different festivals, especially in a multi-racial country like ours, and they know, they are already aware of it when they go to school that there are differences in the children, you know. They know that this child celebrates this festival, this child goes to a mosque to pray and things like that so it is not something that they really need to emphasise in the school. (4B)*

The strong emphasis upon tolerance and respect for each other's cultures which appears in both the Seventh Malaysia Plan and the Vision 2020 principles virtually guarantees the continuing presence of this goal in pre-school education.

Prioritisation of Learning Experiences

"If I had a choice I wouldn't cross anything out." (2B)

During this part of the interview the parents were asked to select, from a list of 27 learning experiences, what they considered to be the five most and five least important learning experiences, and explain their choices. The range of experiences listed were representative of the experiences available in Malaysian pre-schools. Seven of the experiences could be characterised as teacher directed or formal in nature, nine as child directed or play based, and eleven as informal or miscellaneous in nature. The parents were not informed of the category assigned to each activity or experience and the 27 items appeared in a random manner. For ease of analysis, however, the results have been dealt with according to the three categories - teacher directed, child directed and informal learning experiences - and presented in graph form.

Teacher Directed / Formal Learning Experiences

As can be seen from the graph in Figure 6, learning to read and teacher directed instruction in phonics, the alphabet and counting and math were considered very important by many parents. Most parents felt these were skills which were important for success in standard one, and which they felt unable to teach adequately by themselves. Typical comments included:

> *Because if he doesn't learn to read then he's going to be at a loss when he goes on to primary one and all that so I think one of the reasons we send them to pre-school is for them to learn to be able to read and write and count. Counting & Maths / Phonics & Alphabet - that also because it's the three R's that we have, reading, writing and the three, one of them is maths, is very important part of their studies at school. (1F)*

> *Counting / maths - Parents, you know I, we have different way of teaching things and I don't think half of us have the patience anyway so I feel the teacher would know the best how to impart this knowledge to them, you know, on how to count and maths skills. (4B)*
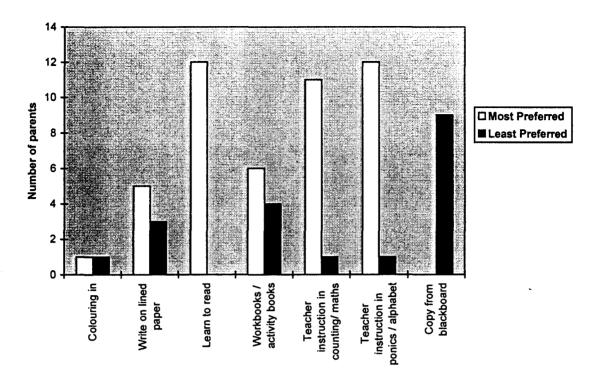
Figure 6. Participants' prioritisation of teacher directed / formal learning experiences.

Of the six parents who selected workbooks as most preferred, four felt their importance lay in the self discipline they developed in the child, with a typical comment being:
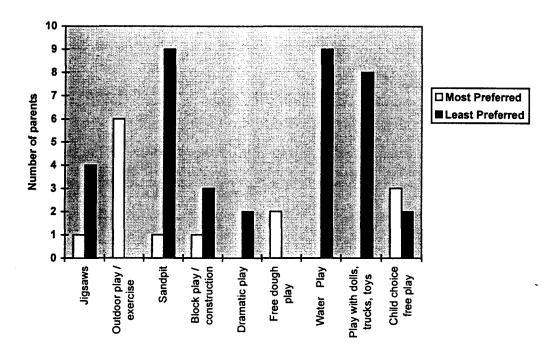
> To actually have the habit of completing whatever one starts, I think that's got to
> acquire that kind of habit from very early. It's for the discipline. (1E)

Those who rated this activity as least preferred generally felt workbooks to be too regimented and something which the children would encounter all too often in the years of education ahead. As one parent put it:

> You can do that for the rest of your life, my god, why would you want to start now?
> (3A)

Child Directed / Play Learning Experiences

As can be seen in Figure 7, apart from the item relating to outdoor play and exercise, which was viewed quite favourably by parents for its contribution to a healthy mind and body, the majority of child directed learning experiences were viewed unfavourably by parents.

Figure 7. Participants prioritisation of child directed / play learning experiences.

Sandplay, water play, toy play and to a lesser extent jigsaws, all revealed high levels of "least preferred" ratings. Parents consistently indicated they felt such activities to be either inappropriate at this age or more suited to the home environment:

Well, they'll have grown out of that unless they are very young children, 2 years or 3 years. (1B)

At six years old I don't think they should be digging or playing with sandpit, you know, they can do it at home. (4E)

Jigsaws - Because I think he does jigsaw puzzles in the house so I think he doesn't need to go to school to do that. Dolls, trucks, toys - No, because all children have toys in their own house and whenever they're back from school, their free time that's what they're using, so you don't have to waste time by going to school to do the same thing. (1F)

Playing with water, I mean you get that enough of exposure at home with taking a bath every day etcetera. (2B)

Whilst a few parents indicated their approval for free play and child chosen activity for the emotional benefits it had for the child, others were concerned that it was wasted time:

They have lots of free play at home, they should be involved in teacher directed things. (3C)

It is difficult to say whether these results reflect parents' genuine rejection of play as a learning medium, or merely their unfamiliarity with play theory.

Informal / Miscellaneous Learning Experiences

Figure 8 depicts the parents' prioritisation of the seven learning experiences which were categorised as informal or miscellaneous in nature. It was this group of learning experiences that produced some of the most widely varying and unexpected responses. Learning about nature and creative art and craft experiences were each selected by eleven parents as 'most preferred'.
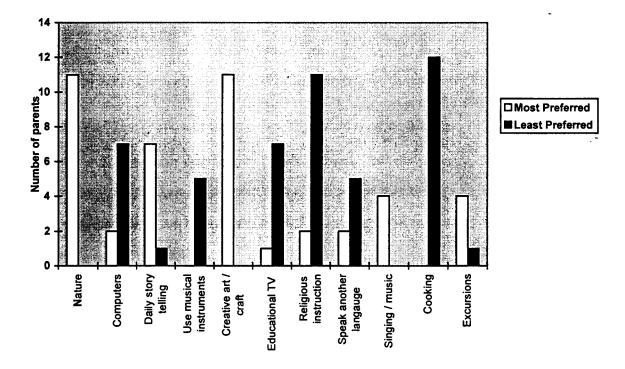
Figure 8. Participants prioritisation of informal / miscellaneous learning experiences.

In explaining why nature study was so important to them, parents expressed the desire that their children develop a love of nature.

> The child should be free to find that out at a young age that plants are very important, so they don't grow up to be concrete jungle animals, I want them to be more at home with nature. (1C)

> Well I think that learning about nature, learning about ;life in general you know, plants, animals, environment, is very important for the child to associate themselves with what the world is all about, what life is all about. (2B)

Many were also of the opinion that such learning was vital at a time when environmental degradation was so common, saying:

Much more nowadays because particularly in the urban situation we have so much pollution I think this is important.(1B)

They can also learn to be environmentally friendly, don't just kill a plant or throw garbage, you know that children learn to be more responsible when they are taught these things at a young age. We are very guilty of damaging our environment with the packaging that we throw about, the things that we use are not environmentally friendly, detergents and things. So I want them to be socially responsible. (1C)

Despite having very little support as a *goal* of pre-school education, creative art was favoured for its contribution to the child's creativity, imagination and initiative:

I want them to be very creative, to be able, you know, with this creative craft and experience you know they make their mind work, they can play with their mind, they can make their mind creative and they can visualise all these things. (4D)

Daily story telling was another area viewed favourably by many parents. They acknowledged the almost magical ability a story has to capture the child's attention. As one parent explained "when the teacher tells the story, she's already won that child's interest in education". And from another:

When you are a child you have imagination, when you tell stories, especially when you use different tones and different ways of saying, you start and just sit and the mind can just go wandering. And you can see from their faces, that's what I like about these kinds of things. (2C)

Less popular with parents was cooking, which parents perceived as "not necessary" and even "a danger". Pre-school children were generally considered too young to be involved in such a task. Religious education, too, was considered "least preferred" by many parents, due to the difficulty associated with its teaching in a multi racial society. It was considered by all to be the responsibility of the home.

Despite the heavy emphasis by the Ministry of Education upon the need to familiarise children with technology, the parents interviewed in this study viewer its use at the pre-school level unfavourably. The use of computers and educational TV alike were seen as unnecessary

by a third of the parents. Whilst most parents accepted the importance of computer literacy, they were of the opinion that the children were too young at this point. Their concerns included:

Those things that I marked as not important like using computers, we are working towards a computer literate society but our child I wouldn't want to expose her to too much computers because of the hazardous effect on their eyesight, on their health, because sometimes they get very engrossed in using the computer. (1C)

Maybe later in school time, but not at the pre-school, cause then you, every time you plug straight into the computer it's so interesting so you'll never develop in terms of socialising, in terms of building up - the computer is in the home and I don't think that's important....They just watch, whether he absorbs is another thing, you don't know. (2D)

It was perhaps interesting that despite the increasingly technology driven nature of society in general, parents did not feel the need to push their child to compete or excel in this particular area. Whilst technology education remains a government priority in Malaysia, it seems that its impact is yet to be felt at the pre-school level.

Perceptions of Play

"Play is more voluntarily interesting, he likes what he's doing and he's happy doing it because he wants to do it, and it brings him immense satisfaction." (1B)

The graph in Figure 9 illustrates parents' images of play and represents the responses of nineteen parents. The images of play ranged from the simple joy of playing through to the incidental learning opportunities which play sometimes provided.

Figure 9. Parents images of play.

The responses were relatively evenly dispersed across the six images, with the images of fun and creativity being attributed to play slightly more often. These images were often mentioned in relation to a variety of materials or activities children could be involved in, ranging from pasting and jigsaws to music and cooking. The parents which suggested exercise as their image of play limited their descriptions of play to physical activities such as climbing, running or balancing. Whilst four parents did associate play with learning, only two attempted to describe the form such learning might take. Both limited their description to the learning of social skills such as responsibility, initiative and self discipline, as in the following example:

> *When children play what does that mean? They're learning, they can experience, they enjoy themselves, they learn to be responsible and initiative, they may be creative, if they play together with other children they learn to discipline, socialise. (1E)*

Another four parents saw play as a good opportunity to develop friendships and socialising skills. In a game of chasey, explained one mother, "social skills are being developed there, they are learning respect for each other, learning to live with another party" (1A). Only one parent, with a background in education, mentioned that play was something children chose to do voluntarily, as opposed to having it imposed upon them by others.

More often than not parents saw play and learning as two separate entities, varying in the amount of time they felt each area deserved. Of the nineteen parents who commented on this theme, fourteen felt there was a definite distinction between work and play, with the later usually being viewed less favourably, as a break from work. When asked what role play should have in the pre-school program, one parent was quite generous, suggesting that after "fifteen minutes of phonics, fifteen minutes of maths for every child" they could "maybe have an hour of play" because if "the child sits down and just reads and writes all day he's going to hate it". The remaining parents saw play as having a more minor role in the program, ranging anywhere between five and 45 minutes per day. The following comments provide a cross section of opinion:

> *Maybe when they finish their work they can play for 10, fifteen minutes. That's okay, yeah. (4F)*

Let's say - they're only studying three hours, so, I say half an hour to 45 minutes, 45 minutes would be enough to play. (4B)

I think say about 20% of the time playing and 80% of the time actually sitting down to structured learning. I mean we've got no choice because we've got to prepare him for the primary school. (1E)

I think not more that two hours a week, that's all that should allocate for playtime in the school. The rest of the time should be spent like reading, writing, colouring, developing creative arts, maybe language skills, social skills. (1F)

One parent, in fact, felt there wasn't room in the pre-school day for play:

If you're gonna have play you have to extend the hours....cause in pre-school, in the kindergarten you only spend three hours, half an hour eating, you know, once they have playing, break time, you actually have only two hours with the kids, you can't do very much with them. They take time to write, they take time to listen to instructions, there's not much time to teach. (4E)

The main concern for the majority of these parents was that their child receive sufficient instruction in academic skills to prepare them for standard one. The remaining five parents interviewed on this topic saw play and learning as mutually compatible activities. They explained that much of the "teaching" which occurs in a pre-school class can be achieved just as effectively through play type experiences, although they fell short of giving actual examples of this in most cases:

Play can be turned into so many ways of work as well. It depends on the teacher's imagination and exploration of how she can use play to teach maths for example....If it's presented through play, presented in a way which is quite simple and straight forward with as much material, apparatus as such, in that way the child is able to understand better. (1B)

You can incorporate play into anything, into studying, into developing all the skills that we mentioned, playtime, can be not just playtime but a learning experience as well. I think that they should have play play, play learn, and learn learn. There should be a balance. (2B)

Academics and play, that's what I wouldn't stop, you know, this developing their skills through play, because through toys a child would develop their physical dexterity and mental capabilities. Through play and you know it's an indirect way of, well actually educating them. But it's an enjoyable way of doing it. (4C)

Ironically, none of these parents mentioned learning when discussing their image of play. Whilst the numbers were too small to draw definitive conclusions, it was noted that of the parents who linked play with learning, or whose image of play was associated with learning (eight parents in total), all attended a school which was either partly or entirely Montessori in its approach. It was perhaps unexpected that all but one of the parents from the Developmental Centre (centre 3) felt there was a definite distinction between work and play, despite the fact that the centre principals claimed to espouse play based developmental approach to learning. As one may have expected, every parent from the Accelerated learning pre-school felt that only minimal time should be allocated to play, with the rest of the time being reserved for academic instruction. This group of parents demonstrated great consistency in their beliefs throughout the interviews - having previously indicated that standard one preparation was the most important reason for pre-school attendance and the most desirable end result of pre-school education (although not to the total exclusion of social development).

Overall the results tend to indicate that the parents interviewed had a fairly restricted definition of both play and its role in the pre-school program.

Pressure at Pre-School

"Hurrying the children - you may stand to gain but I don't think the child stands to gain much."
(1B)

Of the twenty one parents interviewed fifteen felt too much emphasis was being placed upon intellectual development at the pre-school level. They expressed the hope that this could be "relaxed a little bit" (1A), feeling sure that skills such as reading and writing would come to the children just as easily in standard one. "I don't know", said one parent, "from what I've seen the pre-schools nowadays are also another rat race....I feel they should stop all this" (2C).

One mother summed up the concerns of many this way:

I think they'll have more chance of being, a program being too rigid as they go into school, proper school you know. So give them a chance to just let go, play. You know, look at our houses now, they're becoming into link houses all the same, no compound, no play area, before in those days we had like the villages, the kampongs, the children just roamed around, I mean look at our Prime Minister, I mean he didn't live in a house like this he lived in the kampong, he was brought up in

the kampong and they become Prime Ministers without Montessori (laughs). And
these kids they learn to read at three and two and then what are they going to do
when they go to school and how are they going to adapt socially, you know. (3A)

The parents' responses indicated that this is an issue which is not going away in the foreseeable future.

Whilst the Ministry of Education does not advocate high pressure, academic pre-school programs, it became increasingly apparent throughout the course of the interviews that many of the research participants felt under a great deal of pressure to have their child academically prepared during their pre-school years. Fifteen of the twenty one parents interviewed made some reference to this during the course of their interview. When these parents were asked why they felt there was so much pressure to succeed academically, their responses fell into one of three categories. Figure 10 presents the three main areas which parents identified as contributing to the increasing academic pressure at the pre-school level, as well as the overlap where parents nominated more than one cause.
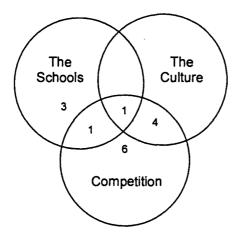
Figure 10. Areas identified by parents as contributing to pressure at the pre-school level.

The results show that the notion of competition, be it between parents or for the nation's development, seems to be a driving force behind the parent's desire to see their child succeed academically at the pre-school level. Their anxiety is revealed in comments such as:

Everybody wants to be better off as fast as possible, you know, if you don't send
your child to pre-school they say 'Why you keeping your son or your daughter at
home? They are not going to learn very much with the maid'. The child might take
longer to learn in school. And socially when you meet other parents you find that

there's always this talk about how the child is doing at school, even at four, five, six years old. (1C)

Sheer keeping up with the Jones'. I think competitiveness. Also competitiveness in education now, you know, getting into university. Fear that the child will be left behind, will not be able to cope. Are we doing the right thing? What happens in Malaysia, without entering politics, but this Vision 2020 thing, it's a little bit of pressure put on the community, you know. (1D)

Yes I think it is necessary because nowadays there is so much of competition, especially in Malaysia between children going to primary school that the pre-school has become more or less a necessity, it's no longer a luxury any more. (1F)

Um, actually all these things are, have been drummed into us, I mean okay I am a - parent of a second generation kid, I have been drummed into me by my parents to study, study, study, to get a good job and get good pay, good house, that sort of thing, so I suppose my, parents of my generation are also doing it to their kids so that is why they want it. I don't know, I suppose having a good education and a good job is like a status, a status in life as a Malaysian. (2C)

Cause every, every parent feels it's a competition, so I want my child to know her ABC before yours. And if everyone, every parent has that, then you, the pressure is on the child. (2D)

One mother had a more expansive view of the situation:

I think it goes in a circle, it goes from the, maybe it's because our country is just developing and progressing so they need to come up with good people to run the country right, so there's pressure on the schools. The school puts pressure on the children, the children they have parent who are pressured, so it goes like that and, and it's so competitive, right. If that child gets straight A's I must have straight A's also for my child, things like that. So in the end pre-school becomes a school just to get ready for you academically, only that, to be able to cope with school, proper school, proper school, that's it. I feel it, I feel it, I say, I mean, whose mothers wouldn't want to see their child to be way in front right, if not, if you don't push your child he'll be way behind life and Vision 2020...you don't want to be lagging behind. So this all puts pressure on me. (3D)

Many parents lamented the need to push their child, worried that it was inappropriate but at a loss to know what else to do:

Basically like at our level they are comparing, you see so and so's kid is doing so well, you start to compare even though you don't want to pressure. If I as a parent

don't push her now, probably she won't do well in her later years and maybe the fault will come back to me as a parent, you didn't push me hard enough. So I have to go along, although I might differ in my opinion. As a parent I am at a loss actually. People here they like to compare, maybe they mean well but I don't like it, it's putting extra pressure on the child. It's a little bit sad. Children are caught in the rat race too early. (2E)

The fact that culture was always associated with competition as contributing to pressure at the pre-school level may have been due to the fact that many parents saw competition as an integral part of Malaysian and Asian culture in general. One Chinese mother felt that for Chinese people, "it is the scholastic achievement that will determine their path in life" (1C), explaining that throughout Chinese history it has traditionally been the scholars who have achieved greatness. She went on to say that the competitive way of looking at life, particularly in education, was more evident in the Chinese people - "they're always saying how well is your child doing is how well they will fare in life" (1C).

Two Malay parents shared this mother's view, agreeing that the Chinese appeared to equate high academic results with success, and that it had subsequently "become an obsession with everybody" (2B). She went on to say "... and I think generally in Asia it's, the focus is like that. You can go anywhere... everybody is so focused on studies, results, excellence and success" (2B).

Pre-schools themselves were also cited by parents as perpetuating the problem, often intentionally. As the private pre-schools are commercial ventures as much as educational institutions, there is keen competition between centres to attract parents, and in turn, income. The parents interviewed felt that by succumbing to parent pressure to provide academic programs, pre-schools were compounding the problem. Their concern was reflected in their comments, including:

I've seen a lot of pre-schools emphasising more on academic skills, the acquisition of the 3-R's as such. Why, again largely because of parental pressure. Many of the pre-school administrators themselves do not want to rule out the acquisition of academic skills in their brochures and all that and do highlight it a lot as a result of community pressure. Although secretly they know this is not the way it should be, but they oblige and to some degree close one eye and they're actually hurrying the children along. Very few schools actually apply the brakes and say 'No, this is our policy, this is our objective, you want it or you don't want it, take it or leave it'. Very few schools do that. (1B)

Some kindergartens they really go into standard one syllabus, you see, which I think
they are pushing the children really. Even if there's a government guideline to them
that they have to a certain degree, but some they go overboard and they, they do
whatever. They thought, you know, they are helping parents but children will get
bored when they go into standard one, they feel they are too intelligent to be in
standard one already. (3B)

One parent even expressed the belief that some teachers were providing high pressure academic programs because "they are just plain lazy or they couldn't be bothered". She reasoned that to arrange a balanced, play based program was "no joke" and that things "like pasting and cutting, it takes time, and I don't think the teachers have the patience". She came to the conclusion that the amount of work required "does not balance up with the pay that they get" (2C). It is also possible, however, that teachers continue to provide such programs because they believe that the parents, who are paying quite considerable levels of fees, want or expect such preparation from their child's pre-school. It is likely that such programs will continue to flourish unless the Ministry strictly enforces its pre-school curriculum guidelines, particularly amongst the private sector pre-schools.

Figure 11 shows the percentage of parents from each centre who expressed a concern regarding pressure at the pre-school level and reveals an unexpected result. Whilst the majority of the parents from the first three centres mentioned concerns related to this theme, only two of the six parents from the Accelerated Learning pre-school (Centre 4) made any comment. In view of the fact that these parents were consistently in favour of academic and standard one preparation in pre-school and had chosen to send their child to a centre that promoted an accelerated learning curriculum, it may be that they did not perceive pressure in the same way as the other parents. In effect, they may not have perceived such pressure as being anything out of the ordinary. It appears likely that parents chose this type of pre-school based on the academic rigour of the program and therefore they were less concerned about pressure.
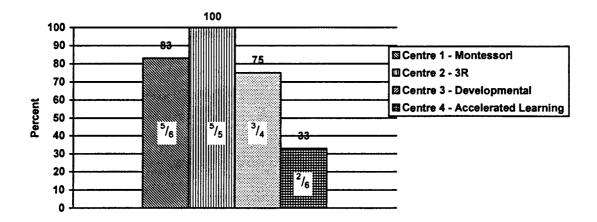
Figure 11. Percentage of parents expressing concern about pressure at the pre-school level.

The Role of the Pre-School Teacher

"She has to put all these little pieces together just like a puzzle and make them whole children by the time they get out of pre-school." (3A)

The parents interviewed generally had a high regard for their child's teacher, and for the teaching profession itself. As would perhaps be expected, parents wanted a caring, patient individual with a love of both children and teaching. The teacher was considered by parents to be an important role model for the child and as such needed to display appropriate behaviour and speech at all times. Many parents commented on the importance of the teacher's ability to talk with the children at their level as a friend. The range of parent opinion was probably best captured in the following comment:

> The teacher actually has got to know what she is talking about, she has to know about your child. She has to have a more human approach. She must know every one of those childs, she must know how to handle them, know what to say to get to him. Even the day to day things. Hopefully they have a more human approach, they don't cut the human factor off because a teacher must actually be a friend to the child. (1D)

Parent's perceptions of the role or responsibility of the pre-school teacher ranged from easing the transition from home to pre-school, to preparing the child intellectually for standard one. Some of the comments of the eleven parents who commented on this issue included:

> Giving assurance to the children that even when the parents are not there, they are like mothers to them, a mother to them. (2D)

They should be my friend, my son's friend, someone that they can turn to, not someone who's a disciplinarian that they cannot turn to if they're scared of anything you know, if something is bothering them that they can turn to the teacher. (3A)

Well, they are taking on the role of a, I wouldn't say that they are, they are like a teacher, the role of a teacher, but also that of a second mother I would say. Besides teaching academic skills they're teaching moral values, social skills and all that, which a parent also tries to teach the children at home. (3C)

She should continuously be re-appraising each child based on curriculum, based on child development, how best she can present and attract the child to learning, to enjoy his pre-school time. (1B)

Basically her job is to prepare the child for proper schooling, one, and two is to maybe develop in the child a love for reading, writing, and for school basically. (1F)

Whilst some parents had voiced the opinion elsewhere in the interview that as they were paying considerable sums for their child's pre-school education and that the responsibility for that education rested solely with the teachers, eight of the twenty one thought differently. These parents were of the opinion that the education of their child was a responsibility which they shared with their child's teacher. In particular, parents were keen to know how they could assist their child at home. The following comments are representative of this view:

So I think she's the go between, really the go between for us, you know, we teach some basics at home but I think the teachers are the ones who actually, you know, they're an extension of us, you know, the parents. (4B)

Yes I think parents and teachers are fully responsible for shaping the child, okay, so whatever the teacher, the kindergarten teaches, has got to be reinforced at home so that you know, the effect is there. So whether, the only way the parents can actually chip in is to know what the school is, you know, what kind of things are being taught at school and how to reinforce that at home. So there's got to be an interactive process between parents and the teachers. (1E)

Two parents, both from the 3R centre (centre 2), felt a combined approach was necessary in order to supplement the teacher's efforts, feeling that their children would be insufficiently prepared for Standard One if they did not step in:

Somehow I feel like we cannot expect too much from our Malaysian kindergartens. We have to put in our own effort and train our children. It's just like more for fun and play, fun and play, you know, they're not really prepared for real school you know. I

feel like maybe, I don't know, as a parent I feel like when they go to school they are really lost. (2E)

Regardless of their motivation, there were a number of parents in Malaysia who were keen to play an active role in their child's pre-school education. From the comments of the majority of parents it is clear that the pre-school teacher and the teaching profession in general are held in high regard by parents.

Home - Pre-School Links

"We've sort of like left it to, like they know best, I'm sure they know best." (1D)

Home-Pre-School Communication

Nineteen of the twenty one parents interviewed felt that there needed to be better practices in place to improve the level and quality of home-pre-school contact. They reported that the main opportunity for communication was largely limited to the parent-teacher meetings which, depending upon the school, were held between one and three times per year. Most indicated they would appreciate more regular feedback, but felt that unless *they* approached the teacher, such feedback was unlikely to be forthcoming, as was revealed in comments such as:

> *From my point of view there is some contact, yes, but not enough of it. It's adhoc sometimes unless you are assertive enough to go and ask 'How is my son doing?' or otherwise you have to wait for that parents - teachers meeting which is only a few minutes because there are a lot of, a big queue of parents waiting to see the teacher, so it is really a rush job. (1B)*

> *I think proper communication, effective communication between the parents and the school must be established so that there could be proper message given or proper guidance to be given to the parents. (1E)*

> *No, no, unless we go and find out ourselves... I think it was just for a few, three or four months, and I don't recall the teacher's telling us this is what your child is like or calling us, I have to go find out myself. (2C)*

A number of parents were of the opinion that it was their responsibility to approach the school, and said they felt quite welcome in their child's pre-school. Interestingly, all of the parents from the developmental centre felt this way and were very positive in their comments, some of which included:

Ah between the parents and the school, I don't know about other parents, but I'm one parent who makes a point or takes the time to talk to the principal because it's very very personal. Some parents may not have the time or they may not feel the need or they, the expectation is there and they say you know, this is pre-school and these are the things that the teachers should do. But for me as a parent I take the time to actually talk to (principal). You have to, you have to, yes definitely you have to go in. (2D)

I mean sometimes the teachers have so much to do. But I think the parents need to do their part too, they can't just expect the teachers to you know, sometimes they say they call but they don't, so I do the calling....Yes I think the teachers are like, to me I feel like they're so relieved because...maybe it is on their minds, but they just don't have the time. (3A)

Um, okay, I feel that um it has to be parent and school role, both of us. If I don't ask, probably I won't get any information...I have to inquire once in a while and also I think they have to tell me what's going on at the pre-school...The parents and teachers have to work together. (3D)

There were other parents, however, who due to work commitments were less able to approach the school for feedback and were not able to establish close links between the home and pre-school environments. Some of their concerns were expressed as follows:

The thing is the teachers don't tell, I have to find out because that's what's happening I think. I think not only to me but to most parents. So if the parents, let's say if they are working, they just drop the child off every morning, and you don't see the teachers, that means you will never see the teachers. Unless you come in after. (2C)

Not really, maybe we haven't asked them, but they haven't really come and...It's that we don't make much free time and probably that's one of the reasons, both of us are working... we drop in for like in the morning I will go in and see about (child) and they are quite busy, so you feel like you are taking up their time... Most days we just ask how is he progressing, is he paying attention, that's all we do... when we go in I feel like we're always interrupting them, being a nuisance to the teacher and taking up their time, maybe it's not the right time to come. But then since we're working, we can only come at a certain time like in the mornings, take half an hour. But like I said you feel like you are intruding, maybe we should have come during the lunch time or at a certain time. (2E)

One parent, a pre-school teacher herself, expressed a concern regarding what she saw as the honesty of parent - teacher communication, saying:

I would like to be able to talk to the teacher as and when I liked. Of course, I would not impose her every day or that kind of thing, but at a reasonable time when she's free. And I would like her, of course, to be frank. I know of some schools who, although the child is not happy they say the child is happy because they are afraid that the parents will take their child away and things like that. As a parent I don't think it's fair, because the child may have a problem. And of course it is good that when they see a parent they bring up all the best points and speak in very positive terms, but certain things that need to be highlighted should be highlighted for the interest of the child. (1A)

Parent Participation

Despite the recommendations of recent research and government reports, there are still extremely low levels of parent participation in Malaysian pre-schools. None of the parents interviewed reported being involved in their child's pre-school in any practical way apart from one, who had been invited to assist with supervision on an excursion. Despite not seeming to have any clear idea of exactly what sort of involvement would be required, some parents appeared enthusiastic about the prospect, with comments such as:

I would love to because parents often can learn from the environment what the child needs cause sometimes what the child wants and what the child needs it's not communicated properly between parent and child and if you're in the school you actually can see the needs clearer and then you feel a greater sense of, you want to do more, your understanding is clearer now than before. (1C)

I think a good idea but maybe it's not really been practised, it needs time to catch up. I think basically the parents have not asked and the teachers have not volunteered. It is that kind of situation... Somebody has to make the first move. It's like chicken and egg kind of thing, each is blaming the other, nobody has moved. (1F)

I wish it did, I wish it had more of that. Like inviting parents to participate in school activities when they're having certain classes....I would like to get involved if they have like, oh we're having a cooking day today, would any parents like to join us, you know, and I think that would be great. Even if they had like for mothers who were not working to be volunteer teachers for example. Not to teach teach, because they wouldn't have the right skills maybe, but to participate in the classes, you know. (2B)

Other parents were not so sure, with some feeling their involvement may be problematic:

And some schools don't allow the parents to come to sit in for any of their sessions for fear that they might pick up or they become criticised, you know, critical in the methods they're using. They say "Oh, you entrusted me, you pay us to teach your

child then you should leave us to do the teaching, and you be the just the silent observer". (1C)

As a mother if I go and help in the class where my children is, my child might not feel, might feel uneasy, number one, and might cling to me and if the teacher is strict maybe the mother will feel Oh, what are you doing, you know... I don't know whether as a mother I would tend to help my child more than the others, you know what I mean. (4E)

Parents' Perceptions Across Categories

When we compare the response patterns described are discussed in each of the previous sections (as has been done in Table 6), it becomes apparent that pre-school education means different things to different parents.

Overall, some interesting results appeared when comparing the reasons parents gave for sending their child to pre-school with what they hoped their child would achieve at the end of their pre-school education (the purpose of pre-school education). All of the parents who saw standard one preparation as an important reason for attending pre-school also saw standard one preparation as an important end result of pre-school education. On the other hand, of the twelve parents who felt social-emotional development was an important reason to attend pre-school, only six selected social-emotional development as a desired end result of their child's pre-school education. These results raise some interesting questions. Is social-emotional development a less strongly held conviction than parents would have us believe? Or is there a chasm between what parents consider to be the ideal pre-school education (a place of social development) and the reality of education in Malaysia (the need to be prepared for standard one above all else)? This possibility will be discussed further in the next chapter.

The goal ranking activity served to highlight what parents expected the pre-school to achieve with their child. As can be seen in Table 6, social and behavioural goals were viewed by parents as being of far greater importance than goals from either the academic or miscellaneous categories, which were more likely to be ranked by parents as unimportant. The miscellaneous goals were viewed particularly unfavourably. Apart from the distinctive ranking of the goal related to religious education, which was only ranked favourably by a few of the Malay parents, the way the goals were ranked was consistent across races and pre-schools.

Table 6 *Examining the consistency of parent attitudes across categories.*

Partici-pant	Reason for attending pre-school	Purpose of pre-school education	Top 5 goals	Most preferred activities	Least preferred activities
1A*	Academic	Academic	Academic	Academic	Informal
1B*	Social	Social	Social	Play + Informal	Play + Academic
1C*	Social	Social + Academic	Social + Academic	Informal	Informal
1D	Social	Academic	Social	Academic	Informal
1E#	Social	Social + Academic	Social	Academic	Play
1F*	Academic	Academic	Academic	Academic	Play
2A	Academic	Academic	Social	Play + Informal	Informal
2B*	Social	Social + Academic	Social	Informal	Informal
2C	Social	Academic	Academic	Academic	Play + Academic
2D	Academic	Academic	Social	Informal	Informal
2E*	Academic	Academic	Academic	Academic	Play
3A*	Social	Social	Social	Informal	Academic
3B*	Social	Social + Academic	Social	Informal	Informal
3C	Academic	Academic	Social	Informal	Informal
3D*	Social	Social + Academic	Social	Informal	Academic
4A^	Academic + Social	Academic + Social	Social	Academic	Play
4B*	Academic + Social	Academic	Academic	Academic	Play
4C	Academic + Social	Academic	Social	Informal	Academic
4D^	Academic + Social	Academic + Social	Social + Misc.	Academic	Play
4E*	Academic	Academic	Academic	Academic	Informal
4F	Academic + Social	Academic	N/A	Academic	Academic

A number of interesting trends became evident when the five categories in Table 6 were juxtaposed. One pattern that did become apparent was that parents who had older children who had attended pre-school previously (see Figure 12) were more likely to place emphasis upon academics and standard one preparation than those parents for whom pre-school was a new experience (see Figure 13). Of the thirteen parents who had already sent previous children

through pre-school, seven had a definite or total leaning towards academics over all five

categories in Table 6. Of the eight parents who were putting their first child through pre-school,

all but two placed total emphasis upon social development. It would seem from these results

that having previously put children through pre-school extends parents' socially constructed

knowledge regarding pre-school education and is therefore a microsystem factor which may

influence parents' perceptions.

Figure 12. Preferences across categories of parents who have had previous children attend pre-school.
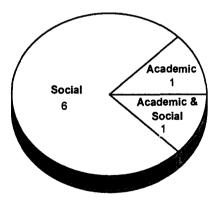
Figure 13. Preferences across categories of parents putting their first child through pre-school.

Of the twenty one parents interviewed, only eleven (marked *) were consistent in their

preferences across all five categories. Of the seven parents who identified social development

as their desired end result or purpose of pre-school education, six remained totally consistent in

their attitude throughout the interview. The remaining parent (marked #) was consistent in her

preference for social development in all areas except for most preferred learning experience,

where she selected academic activities and rejected play type activities. Whether this reflected

the parent's genuine preference for academic learning (perhaps less likely in view of their goal rankings) or simply a restricted definition of play or of what constitutes learning, is unclear. The latter explanation is perhaps more likely as this was one of the parents who rejected the current trend towards high pressure, academic pre-school programs.

Of the fourteen parents who identified academic or standard one preparation as the purpose of pre-school education, only five were consistent in their preference for academics across all five categories. Interestingly, a further two (marked ^) were generally consistent until it came to the goal ranking task, at which point they rejected academics in favour of social goals. This would perhaps indicate that whilst parents place much importance upon the child being intellectually prepared for standard one, they believe that academic skills cannot compensate for inadequate social development, particularly in relation to self esteem, independence and socialisation.

The perceptions of the remaining seven parents in this group were not fixed across categories. In fact, the interview responses collected during this study indicate that, in many cases, Malaysian parents hold multiple and often conflicting constructions regarding pre-school education. But despite the apparent contradictions, parents' constructions are all potentially meaningful in accordance with their life experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 128).

Principals' Responses

At the conclusion of the parent interviews the principals from the four participating pre-schools were presented with a preliminary summary of the results and asked for their impressions. Two main themes were commented on quite extensively by all of the principals - the intellectual versus social development debate, and the extent and nature of parent involvement and intersetting communication.

Certain aspects of the results quite surprised some principals, particularly the value parents placed upon social-emotional development in the pre-school program. These principals believed, just as those in an earlier study (Hewitt, 1994) had done, that parents had no concern for their child's social-emotional development, or any awareness as to the importance of such development. Principals were genuinely pleased that parents were concerned with this area of development, as was revealed in their responses:

Oh!! I see!! (Surprise in voice and expression) Everybody says that? Oh!! I am surprised because they, you know, they're so concerned with the academics and yet the first [goal] that comes to them is social! (Centre 4)

Really? No, I would have expected them to say reading and writing - just because that's what we get a lot of parents talking to us about. I suppose those who do not come to us, this [social development] is what they are thinking about. So it is good, because, I'm happy, I'm happy that that's what they want because it's what we are trying to achieve with them also. (Centre 2)

Certain aspects of the results, however, were less of a surprise to principals, particularly when it came to parents' perceptions concerning the role of academics and standard one preparation in the pre-school. The principals were not at all surprised at the parents' prioritisation of the learning experiences - but whilst they fully expected the play type experiences would be rejected in favour of the academic type experiences, most were surprised at the parents' rejection of computer education. A typical comment was:

Really, because here there is a lot of them asking why don't you start something [in computer education]. (Centre 1)

Principals seemed resigned to the fact that intellectual development, academic content and standard one preparation would always be of central concern to parents:

This is what, this is what I'm saying, they only sense this is a place for preparing them for standard one....Finally what they all want is the children reading and writing. I mean they don't care what we use, if it's just paper and pencils day in and day out it doesn't matter, you know what I mean?....That is what they are all going to want because they want their child to be, like what I say, everybody wants them to be the top of the class, and that's very important. (Centre 1)

At the back of their minds, at age three, they still feel that sending them to school means it will start them to learn to read and write. (Centre 3)

One principal, referring to a meeting she had recently had with the head of the local primary school, even appeared to sympathise with parents:

[The teachers] straight away grade them and say "She can read, she can't read. She can write, she can't write." and then put them into the category of slow learner. Now, I wouldn't want that, to have my child classified as slow learner although my kid may be socially well balanced, but because of this - no, I mean I can't blame parents

for feeling that way....I think there is a big fear in every parent that their kid is not going to cope. (Centre 3)

The comments of the principal from the Developmental centre indicated that she understood the fundamental difference between parents' idealised and actualised perceptions (as described by this study):

I'm not really clear exactly what they want, they seem to want so much....It's very much they want and they want, but to find them committing 100%, they, they don't seem to be able to do that. At the end of it, and you wait till December comes, they starting to worry. The crunch will be on that very first day of school in standard one, I think that's the best time to meet parents to find out whether, you know, everything they say, their true feelings, because on that day one of that school they want their children reading. All the social skills are gone, you know, they're not looked at. That pre-school can do it, this pre-school cannot do it. And then when they meet the teachers, the teachers confirm this....They want their children to get the best of everything...They want the kids to be socially balanced but they also want their kids to be able to read and write when they get to standard one because the pressure is so great on them. And it is no joke, this is true. You just see how worried they are...in the social time their kids play well, enjoy learning and they like it at that time. But at the end of the year they've forgotten all that, they've forgotten that the kids have enjoyed themselves in pre-school, the kids have made lots of friends....At the end of it, it's who cannot read and write....They've forgot, as soon as they get to standard one and their kid cannot read and write at standard one, all these good things have gone out of their thinking. (Centre 3)

When the issue of parental involvement and communication between the home and pre-school settings came up, the distance between the parents and the pre-schools became obvious. The principals seemed to be of the opinion that the responsibility for intersetting communication lay squarely with the parents, as these comments revealed :

I mean if they were really interested they would come and ask us, right? Because we feel that we are doing a good job and we feel that we don't have a problem...I do have some who come back to find out what's happening...but that is maybe ten, fifteen percent of the parents, not even half of them. (Centre 2)

You don't see the parents - they send their kids by buses, they have drivers. (Centre 3)

If most of them are working, probably about 90% are working, and then it's quite difficult in a sense. (Centre 4)

It is likely that the parents' limited knowledge of the pre-school curriculum contributed to low levels of inter-setting communication, for as one principal suggested:

> *Maybe it's just that they don't know what to come and ask...that part of it intrigues me*
> *because I think there we are going wrong. We need to have a night to actually talk*
> *to them and let them know, they should be aware of their child's development.*
> *(Centre 1)*

Unfortunately, when it came to the issue of increased levels of parental involvement in pre-schools, the principals did not share the parents' enthusiasm for the idea. The concerns voiced by some of the parents were, in fact, restated by some principals:

> *I know it's slightly different over here....It might be a little bit difficult, it might make*
> *teachers feel uncomfortable. We don't really encourage that because then again we*
> *are trying to instil independence in the child. (Centre 4)*

> *You know, that is something that I really don't encourage that much...you see, you*
> *can imagine a parent sitting down there, you know, and just looking at the teacher*
> *while she's teaching. Most teachers found that very uncomfortable. Even the*
> *children, they don't want to look at us then. They are looking at that lady who is*
> *sitting down there and all the time their attention is there and her child is running to*
> *her. So it is very difficult for us. We have tried....it was like we couldn't get along*
> *with things. Maybe, the whole thing is very different here, that concept has not*
> *caught on like sort of here. It would be nice, but it doesn't work...it was very*
> *upsetting for the whole class. (Centre 1)*

The feedback obtained from the four principals participating in this study, whilst minimal, is still sufficient to provide an interesting profile of what *principals* think parents perceive as important in their child's pre-school education. It also serves to indicate where parents' perceptions diverge from those of teachers, and thus identify possible sources of conflict within the home - pre-school mesosystem. Further research comparing parent and teacher perceptions of pre-school would be invaluable in opening communication between both parties.

Summary

This study has established that the perceptions of Malaysian parents regarding pre-school education vary considerably depending upon the aspect of pre-school being discussed. Whilst the child's social and emotional development was seen as vitally important to the majority of parents interviewed, of overriding importance to most was that their child be prepared for the

intellectual and emotional demands of the standard one classroom. Parents' responses appeared strongly related to unique aspects of Malaysia's socio-cultural context. This relationship, and the patterns within the responses, will be discussed further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the exploratory investigation of parental perceptions regarding pre-school education in Malaysia. The qualitative interview data gathered during the research undertaking is discussed in relation to the specific research questions underpinning the study. The discussion commences with an examination of patterns arising in the parent's responses, with particular attention to the way these patterns reflect the social realities of Malaysia. The discussion then focuses upon the home - pre-school mesosystem, looking at inter-setting knowledge, communication and participation. The discussion will conclude with an examination of how parent perceptions reflect the broader socio-cultural context of Malaysian society. Where appropriate the pre-school principals' responses to the results will be incorporated and discussed.

The results of the twenty one interviews conducted during the course of this research undertaking have assisted with the construction of a richly detailed picture of a small group of parents' perceptions regarding pre-school education in Malaysia. Of particular interest to me, as a foreign researcher who had been residing in Malaysia for nearly two years, was the way in which the results differed to my preconceptions. Having spent quite a lot of time discussing pre-school education with local parents and professionals on an informal basis prior to commencing the research, I was fully expecting the interviews to reveal a total emphasis upon the formal, academic aspects of pre-school education. I had also anticipated that parents would overwhelmingly reject the social-emotional domain. Whilst academic content and preparation for standard one did, indeed, feature strongly in parents' responses, this was not at the expense of the child's social-emotional development. The pattern of results encountered, however, offers a new insight into both Malaysian society and the phenomenon of parental perceptions.

Parents' Perceptions of Pre-School Education

In many respects, Malaysian parents are similar to parents elsewhere in the world. The proximity of the centre and the recommendations of other parents were important factors in choosing a pre-school for their child. The methodology employed by the centre, however, appears to be a deciding factor for many parents. Imported methods, such as Montessori, Glen

Doman and Accelerated Learning are particularly popular with parents. The influence of this factor reflects the diverse nature of pre-school education in Malaysia. What is unusual is that, despite placing so much emphasis upon the methodology employed when choosing a centre, the majority of parents admitted to knowing little about what the various methodologies entailed. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the social desirability of attending a pre-school utilising imported methods, such as Montessori, influenced parents' selections. When this was discussed with the school principals, one was quite sure it did;

> It's a fad here, it's like fashion, and they read about Montessori in the paper but they really don't know what Montessori is all about. (Centre 2)

In the largely unregulated sector of pre-school education the opportunity is there for unscrupulous operators to mislead parents by claiming to be using imported methods such as Montessori when they in fact are not. This concern was not lost on one father, who said;

> But hopefully the pre-school philosophy and curriculum is not what it says in the paper but it is also actually applied in the true sense of the word in all sincerity, because a large percentage of pre-schools have beautiful fliers which have beautiful words all from here, there and everywhere. But very few schools actually apply all that. (1B)

The qualities that Malaysian parents attribute to a good pre- school also proved to be quite straight forward - a well equipped, safe and hygienic environment, a balanced curriculum and a student - teacher ratio that would facilitate rather than hinder the student - teacher relationship. One additional aspect cited by parents was the assumed link between fee levels and the quality of service provided. Some parents expected such a relationship, while others were more cautious, concerned about the increasingly commercial nature of pre-school education. Generally parents expressed the desire to provide their child with the best education possible, regardless of the financial burden it placed upon them. Parents saw the financial investment as a reflection of the emotional investment they have in their child. A good pre-school education, whatever the cost, was viewed as a major starting point in their child's journey through the education system. Considering that Malaysian parents appear to know very little about pre-school programs (Putri, 1995) it may be difficult for them to determine whether or not they are getting value and more importantly, quality, for their money.

Like parents anywhere, Malaysian parents wanted their child's pre-school teacher to be a caring, patient person with a love of teaching and children. But above all parents expected the teacher to have an intimate knowledge and understanding of their child and be able to interact with them at their level. Parents carried the theme of nurturing into what they saw as the role of the teacher, expressing the belief that the pre-school teacher is as much a friend and second mother as an educator.

It was surprising that parents expressed the belief that the education of their child did not rest solely with the teacher. They saw it rather a responsibility which they shared with the child's teacher. It is unfortunate, therefore, that teachers in Malaysia appear so reluctant to utilise this valuable resource. From the comments of the majority of parents it is clear that the pre-school teacher and the teaching profession in general are held in high regard by parents.

Patterns in Parents' Perceptions Across Categories

Although each aspect of the interviews revealed information of interest, it is when the parents' perceptions regarding the nature of pre-school education and the related curriculum issues are compared that one can begin to appreciate the broader patterns which emerged. Table 7 presents a synopsis of the results which appeared in Table 6 and facilitates the identification of these patterns.

Table 7
Summary of Table 6, Examining parents' perceptions across categories.

Reason for attending pre-school	Purpose of pre-school education	Top 5 goals	Most preferred activities	Least preferred activities
Academic – 33%	Academic – 57%	Academic – 30%	Academic – 52%	Academics – 14%
Social – 43%	Social – 10%	Social – 60%	Play – 0%	Play – 33%
Combination – 24%	Combination – 33%	Miscellaneous – 0%	Informal – 38%	Informal 43%
		Combination – 10%	Combination – 10%	Combination – 10%

In identifying the reasons why parents chose to send their child to pre-school and ranking the various goal statements, parents placed more emphasis upon the social domain. Yet when identifying what they felt to be the purpose of pre-school education (what they expected their child to have achieved by the end of pre-school) and the types of learning experiences they most wanted their child to be exposed to, parents showed a definite preference for the academic

domain. A superficial examination of these results indicates that parents hold contradictory and seemingly incompatible perceptions concerning pre-school education.

The work of Hess, Price, Dickson & Conroy (1981) and in particular their Index of Role Specialisation, begins to address this apparent inconsistency. The Index of Role Specialisation can be described as the difference between what parents personally feel is important and what they feel is an important role of the pre-school. Parents' responses can be characterised as "an index of the extent to which the respondents view the pre-school as having a highly specialised role in the child's development" (Hess, et al., 1981, pp. 9-10). Simply put, parents may feel a particular experience or objective is important, but not feel it is the pre-school's place to provide for it. It is likely that the majority of Malaysian parents genuinely believe social development to be an important reason for sending their child to pre-school and an important goal at this point in their child's development. However, they may feel that the *role* of the pre-school is to equip their child with the intellectual skills necessary to ensure their academic and emotional readiness for the demands of the standard one classroom. This study indicates that, for the majority of parents interviewed, the specialised role of the pre-school is viewed in terms of its utility value – the degree to which it prepares the child for the demands of the education system ahead. For other parents, however, whilst in most cases acknowledging their preference for the academic preparation, the specialised role of the pre-school was the development of their child's social skills.

If we examine the results from each of the four centres, focusing upon the consistency of parents' attitudes across the various categories (see Table 6), it seems that parents from centres 3 (Developmental) and 4 (Accelerated Learning) come closest to sharing a consistent "Index of Role Specialisation". The responses of parents from centre 3 seem to support the view that social development is the specialised role of the pre-school, whilst the responses of parents from centre 4 indicate a shared belief that academic development is the specialised role of the pre-school. These results suggest that, in these two centres, parental perceptions were consistent with what their child's pre-school was promoting.

Idealised and Actualised Perceptions

Further to the work of Hess et al., the parent responses collected during this study lead me to propose the existence of a perception dichotomy which takes into account the individual's socio-cultural context. The results suggest that Malaysian parents hold both an *idealised* perception of pre-school education (their vision of pre-school as they would like it to be in its perfect form) and an actualised perception (the pre-school education they think their child – or their society – requires in reality). The notion that parents hold both idealised and actualised perceptions of pre-school education correlates closely with the concept of an Index of Role Specialisation, formulated by Hess et al., (1981). What parents feel is *important* is expressed in their idealised perceptions of pre-school, whereas what parents view as being the *essential outcomes* of pre-school education – the pre-school's role in society and the child's development – is expressed in parents' actualised perceptions.

Parents' reasons for sending their child to pre-school and the types of goals they think are important (columns 1 and 3 in Table 7) relate to ideals, what is important in theory. These perceptions relate to the society's view of the child, and its notion of childhood – the belief that at this stage of the child's life certain experiences are important or valuable. What parents perceive as the purpose of pre-school education and the types of learning experiences they want their children involved in (columns 2 and 4 in Table 7) relate to reality, what is important to the child if they are to meet the demands of their society. These perceptions relate to the broader socio-cultural context and the impact of higher order systems upon the child – the knowledge, skills and attitudes a child is going to need to facilitate their transition to the next level of the system (in this case, the standard one classroom).

If we look at the parents' interview responses, when discussing their reasons for sending their children to pre-school and the types of goals they would like emphasised, there was a tendency amongst many parents to emphasise the social domain. In effect, parents were expressing their idealised perception of pre-school education. When it came to what they wanted their child to have achieved at the end of their pre-school education and the types of activities they wanted their children involved in on a day to day basis (the actualised reality of pre-school education) parents were much more in favour of an academic emphasis. Similarly, whilst fifteen parents expressed concern over the increasing levels of academic pressure in pre-

schools (reflecting their idealised perception of pre-school education), many of these same parents emphasised the importance of academic experiences and outcomes in their child's education (their actualised perception of pre-school education). A further example can be found in the parents' responses to the theme of play in the pre-school. Whilst some parents did express the belief that play was important for children (their idealised perceptions), not a single parent felt play activities were important in the pre-school program, with the majority seeing it as a fill in between more formal learning tasks (their actualised perceptions).

The notion of idealised and actualised perceptions has the potential to extend the dialogue on parental perceptions. This dichotomy eliminates the need for researchers to describe parental perceptions as either appropriate or inappropriate, as it acknowledges the influence of the prevailing socio-cultural climate upon parents' beliefs and values. These potential sources of influence and their likely impact upon parental perceptions of pre-school education, will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

The Role of the Pre-School in Shaping and Perpetuating Parents' Perceptions

A further theme which arose from the results of this study was that the pre-school, albeit unintentionally, shapes and even perpetuates parental perceptions regarding certain aspects of pre-school education. In analysing the response patterns revealed in the learning experience prioritisation task it became evident that certain activities were extremely well supported by the parents whilst others were rejected. Much of the available research has suggested that the types of experiences valued or rejected by parents are a direct reflection of their understanding (or lack of understanding) of sound educational practice, and that by educating parents, their perceptions will more likely reflect good practice (Ebbeck, 1980; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Stipek, Milburn, Clements & Daniels, 1992; West, 1994). One must remember, however, that these perceptions are not formed in a void – they are shaped during the parents' exposure to a wide variety of influences.

When the results of the learning experience prioritisation task were viewed in relation to the findings of Mohd. Majzub's (1995) curriculum study, an interesting pattern became evident. In surveying the practice of a large number of teachers from both rural and urban pre-schools, Mohd. Majzub found that of all the experiences provided in Malaysian pre-schools, some

consistently received high frequency of planning, whilst others consistently received low frequency of planning. Thus children – and their parents – were more likely to be exposed to certain activities than to others. When the results of this study were compared with those of Mohd. Majzub it was revealed that the activities which were selected as most preferred by parents in this study (pre-reading, writing and number skills, story telling, art and craft and field trips) compared closely with those which Mohd. Majzub found to be most frequently planned for by pre-school teachers. Similarly, those activities selected as least preferred by parents in this study (cooking, music, dramatic play and sand and water play) were found by Mohd. Majzub to be less frequently planned for by pre-school teachers. In view of these findings, it would seem likely that parents' knowledge of pre-school education is socially constructed and that their perceptions of pre-school programs are significantly influenced by the nature of the pre-school program offered. A change in programming on the part of pre-schools may build upon the parents' constructed knowledge and indirectly lead to a change in parents' perceptions of the importance of certain activities and programs.

The Home - Pre-School Mesosystem

As has already been established, Malaysian parents (in this study and others) had a very limited knowledge of what their child's pre-school program involved, and an inability to understand the various methodological and curriculum issues. As Ebbeck (1991) has pointed out, when parents are unable to understand the philosophy or goals of a program, they are likely to become dissatisfied not only with the particular service, but later with education in general (p. 167).

Unfortunately, Malaysian parents' unfamiliarity with pre-school education stems directly from their minimal contact with the pre-school service itself. Whilst the Seventh Malaysia Plan (Prime Minister's Department, 1996) aims to "increase awareness of parents on the importance of pre-school education in their child's development" (p. 324) and calls for "greater parental involvement in their children's education" (p. 324), it is a call that pre-schools seem ill equipped or unwilling to heed.

This study found that there were very low levels of parent involvement in pre-schools, and very few opportunities for home - pre-school interaction on any level. Parents in this study did

not feel that the parent - teacher meetings, held anywhere between one and three times per year, were sufficient to give them a thorough understanding of the pre-school program or timely information regarding their child's ongoing progress. The majority of parents interviewed felt the level and quality of home - school communication needed to be improved. Most parents felt the onus was on them to approach the pre-school, but often felt unwelcome or intrusive. As it is increasingly common for both parents in the family to work, the opportunities for home - school communication were further reduced.

The problem of minimal levels of inter-setting communication was further compounded by low levels of parental participation in the pre-school program. Beyond being invited to attend sports days or end of year concerts, there is virtually no parental involvement in Malaysian pre-schools. Only one of the twenty one parents interviewed reported being involved in their child's pre-school (in this case, assisting with supervision on an excursion).

Parents themselves were ambivalent about their involvement in the pre-school. Whilst many appeared enthusiastic about the prospect, others were unsure, feeling their involvement could be problematic for their child (who may misbehave or get singled out) or for the teacher (who may resent the intrusion and feel threatened). The main source of difficulty seems to stem from the fact that parent involvement is still an unknown entity in Malaysia. Teachers' understanding of schooling is that they are responsible for the education of the children in their care, not the parents. Similarly, parents are of the opinion that, at least during school hours, it is teachers and not parents who are responsible for formally educating their child. It seems that this understanding has been jointly constructed over time. Unlike Australia where parent participation in education is taken for granted, Malaysian parents and indeed teachers have no clear or shared understanding as to what form this participation might take on. The perceptions of those interviewed ranged from "[joining in] a cooking day" to having parents "be volunteer teachers". The teachers and principals have different interpretations again of parental involvement.

The findings of this study indicate that little common ground exists between the parents and professionals interviewed. When presented with the preliminary research results the pre-school principals were quite surprised by the parents' perceptions, but particularly by their responses to the goal ranking task. The principals had perceived the parents as overly concerned with

academic and intellectual development, and in keeping with Western early childhood theory, condemned such a focus as inappropriate. Furthermore, the principals had assumed incorrectly that the parents had no appreciation of the importance of the child's social-emotional development. These opinions were voiced by the principals interviewed in an earlier exploratory study by Hewitt (1994). Whilst the principals' goal rankings and learning experience preferences were not collected in this study, the results suggest that parents' perceptions differ widely to those of principals and teachers.

The success of a program is largely dependent upon the support and acceptance of the parents (Spodek, 1985, p. 248) and the success of the children in that program often depends upon the similarity and consistency between parent and teacher goals (Knusden-Lindauer & Harris, 1989, p. 59). The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner asserts that the development of a child can be influenced, either positively or negatively, by the relations between the immediate settings in which the child operates, in this case, the home and pre-school microsystems. Bronfenbrenner suggests that when mesosystem links (links between microsystems) are weak, as can happen when there is conflict over the perceived purposes or goals of the pre-school program, the child is at risk. This view is shared by other researchers, who agree that addressing the similarities and differences in the perceptions of parents and teachers and establishing open communication between these two parties, is crucial in providing continuity between the home and pre-school environments (Smith & Hubbard, 1988; Van Cleaf, pp 3-4, 1979). It is vital that parents and teachers come to some consensus about the purpose and goals of pre-school education if they are to be able to jointly support the growth and development of the child. Cross cultural researcher Carlson (1993) suggests that in becoming more aware of the link between parents' perceptions regarding pre-school education and the directions of the larger society, teachers may become more sensitive to the concerns of parents and less aligned with the Western child centred, developmental approach (p. 25).

The Impact of the Socio-Cultural Context Upon Parental Perceptions

The significance of the socio-cultural context and the way in which the ecological context has potential to shape parental opinions, whilst not extensively documented by researchers, is a key consideration in any discussion of parental perceptions.

The socio-cultural context includes factors such as the historical, demographic, social, political, and economic characteristics of a society, as well as its religion and traditions. It is these elements which enable us to understand why things are as they are. In monocultural studies, such elements are often invisible to researchers due to the fact that they are invariably from the same culture as the subjects, and thus share the same cultural values and beliefs. In acknowledging and responding to the importance of socio-cultural factors upon the development of parental perceptions of pre-school education, and correspondingly, upon the development of children, researchers will serve to expand the notion of appropriateness.

Whilst the values of a culture are not visible, they shape individual and group behaviour by setting certain expectations (Williams, 1994, p. 156). The fundamental purpose of education in any society is to equip the young with the knowledge, skills and values which will enable them to be a productive member of the dominant culture (Kessler, 1992; Ogbu, 1988; Zhang & Sigel, 1994). It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that parents may guide children's development in a manner consistent with both family and broader cultural values. These competencies are not invented by each new generation of parents. Rather, they have been developed over time, in response to the unique cultural tasks with which the population is faced (Ogbu, 1988, p. 17). As such, parents' perceptions are culturally defined and evolve in response to changes within the socio-cultural context (Spodek, 1991, p. 12). It is in the best interests of the education system to acknowledge parental and societal orientations, for as Spodek cautions, "a program that is effective, but whose goals are not consistent with societal values, may not be considered worthwhile" (Spodek, 1986, p. 35). There needs to be consistency between the purpose of the program and the values of the society if the program is to be popular and supported. Indeed, educational programs need to identify and accommodate differing perceptions at both a societal and a local level if they are to be truly responsive to the needs of parents and children.

This study has revealed that the parents interviewed hold a range of views about pre-school education, and that these views are not necessarily in agreement with developmental or psychological theory. Hallden describes these unique frames of reference as "folk psychology", being socially constructed and generated by the prevailing culture (1991, p. 331). Thus, parental perceptions may be culturally appropriate without being developmentally appropriate. The "appropriateness" of parental perceptions can only be determined by examining them in relation

to the socio-cultural context from which they emanate. Unfortunately, most studies are not based upon an appreciation or awareness of the cultural specifics of the subjects. New (1994, pp. 68-69) cites the alarming dearth of studies which represent culturally diverse populations or which consider their results within a socio-cultural context. In limiting themselves to studying parental perceptions from the white middle class point of view described earlier, researchers are forced to conclude that many parents' beliefs are inappropriate, due to their failure to espouse these white, middle class values (Ogbu, 1988, p. 19). Furthermore, by adhering steadfastly to a traditional child development perspective, researchers are ignoring the fact that changes in society have most likely resulted in fundamental changes in these same white, middle class values and competencies. It may well be that approaches that were valid in the past may no longer meet the needs of today's children, even those of "traditional" white middle class backgrounds. As a result, the parental perceptions evident in this study cannot be classified as "inappropriate".

Parents' Perceptions as a Reflection of the Broader Socio-Cultural Context in Malaysia

In order to develop an understanding of how the socio-cultural context may impact upon parents' perceptions of pre-school education, it is first necessary to appreciate the broader orientations of Malaysian society at the macro- and exosystem levels. The information presented at the beginning of Chapter 2, The Context of the Study, has served to acquaint the reader with some of the elements of the Malaysian socio-cultural context which are of relevance to this investigation. The results, and their subsequent discussion, highlights the existence of certain relationships between parents' perceptions of pre-school education and the broader socio-cultural context, particularly at the macrosystem and exosystem levels.

Overall, the competitive orientations of Malaysian society are clearly reflected in parents' reported perceptions. The parents themselves identified the prevailing culture of Malaysia, and Asian countries in general, as contributing to the achievement press at the pre-school level. The concern amongst parents that their children be adequately prepared for standard one by the end of the pre-school year and the emphasis placed upon formal, academic learning experiences is perhaps to be expected. After all, these parents have been socialised in a high-pressure environment which values academic achievement and examination results above all else. In

expressing what have been termed their "actualised" perceptions, parents are revealing the competencies which they feel are valuable within the Malaysian macrosystem, based upon their socially constructed knowledge of Malaysian society.

Parents' "idealised" perceptions, revealed in the reasons they gave for sending their child to pre-school and in the goal ranking task, highlights yet another facet of the Malaysian macrosystem. The value placed by parents upon their child's social and emotional development appears strongly related to Malaysia's goal of producing well rounded, socially responsible citizens in line with its vision of creating a caring society. It is also likely to be a response by parents to the apparent breakdown of the extended family unit within the Malaysian culture. The comments of parents in this study indicated that the changing nature of Malaysian society had impinged upon their child's ability to form a range of rich and varied social connections within both the family and community spheres. Therefore the responsibility had fallen to the pre-school to provide their child with socialising opportunities and equip them with the social skills necessary to cope in society.

At the exosystem level, the influence of the government's preferential education policy upon parents' perceptions cannot be underestimated. This policy, and its potential future impact upon the child, was mentioned by a number of the parents, and in particular by non-Malays. If parents perceive that the opportunities available to their children are restricted in some manner, then their response may be to push their child that much harder in the hope of improving their child's prospects. In fact, government policy in general was cited by many parents as being a factor which contributed to their feelings of having to push their child. For some parents the pressure of living in a developing nation with all its associated targets and goals left them fearing their child would be left behind if they were not equipped with the necessary skills as early as possible. This concern amongst parents that their child be able to cope with and contribute to a rapidly changing society was probably also a driving force behind the parents' rejection of a play based approach to learning. With the government emphasis upon science, math and technology, a play based program may to appear frivolous to parents.

Educational policy is another exosystem element which has evidently impacted upon the perceptions of Malaysian parents. In fact, parents' limited knowledge regarding pre-school and their minimal participation in pre-school programs is a direct reflection of the hierarchical

structuring of the nation's education system. Educational policy and practice is formulated and implemented in a top-down fashion, in effect denying parents a voice in the educational decision making process. With the Ministry of Education tolerating so many different forms of pre-school education and lacking the infrastructure necessary to ensure consistent adherence to its Curriculum Guidelines across all centres, it is little wonder that parents are unsure as to what their child's pre-school program involves, or should involve. This uncertainty over what they should reasonably expect from their child's pre-school program may be the reason why so many parents have turned to "imported" methods of pre-school education. Despite knowing little of the specifics of such programs, parents believe their child will at least be receiving a pre-school education comparable to those offered in countries such as Australia, England and the United States.

If we examine the information gleaned from this study and compare it with similar cross-cultural studies (Carlson, 1993; Carlson & Stenmalm, 1987; David, 1992) we can begin to appreciate that the pre-school education experienced by these Malaysian families (and their perceptions of it) is in some ways fundamentally different to the pre-school experience of families in other parts of the world. As Carlson (1993) explained; "The mesosystem, the early childhood program and the families of young children and the macrosystem, the society in which the program is found, interact in complex and multidimensional ways to shape each other." (p. 25).

Whilst Malaysian parents' perceptions of pre-school education, and indeed Malaysian pre-school programs themselves, may not always fit with current early childhood theory, this does not make the perceptions any less valid. Their appropriateness can only be measured in terms of their fit with the prevailing cultural, political and economic climate.

Summary

This chapter has examined the research results in relation to the three research questions which guided the study;

- What perceptions do Malaysian parents hold regarding pre-school education?

- What impact are these perceptions likely to have upon the home - pre-school mesosystem?

- How is the socio-cultural context of Malaysia reflected in these perceptions?

The discussion has served to highlight both patterns and unusual inconsistencies within the parents' responses. These have in turn revealed the existence of important links between parents' perceptions of pre-school education and the socialising influence of the macro and exosystems of the society in which they have been brought up. The results indicate that the appropriateness of parental perceptions of pre-school education should not be judged along child development lines alone.

The themes which have arisen throughout this discussion chapter have directly shaped the ensuing conclusion chapter.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

It is difficult to make judgements regarding parental perceptions towards pre-school education without making parallel judgements regarding the value of particular approaches to education. Often the appropriateness of parental perceptions is measured by determining their fit with prevailing theory and practice. Many of the research studies reviewed thus far concluded by suggesting that where parents' perceptions were not consistent with the position espoused by developmental theory or educational psychology, the parents should be "educated" regarding appropriate practice in early childhood education (Ebbeck, 1980; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Stipek, Milburn, Clements & Daniels, 1992; West, 1994). But the very notion of educating parents with a view to making their perceptions more congruent with current theory is denying them their right to involvement in their child's education (New, 1994, p. 79). It is also denying the possibility that there exists more than one interpretation or dimension of "appropriateness".

The major limitation of much of the research into parental perceptions, particularly those studies that seek to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate beliefs, is that it relies on an overly narrow interpretation of an appropriate perception. This interpretation, framed by the NAEYC Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1987), is based upon a notion of child development built largely on studies of white, middle class American children (New, 1994; New & Mallory, 1994; Ogbu, 1988). This in turn leads to the erroneous assumption that Western middle class competencies "emerge as the highest form and ideal against which the competencies of [all] populations must be measured" (Ogbu, 1988, p. 16).

When we look at the expressed perceptions of the parents in this study, they would appear at first glance to fall into the "inappropriate" category, in that they do not always fit with the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. However, to judge parents' perceptions against this dimension alone (as so many researchers have done in the past), would be to disregard the parents' socially constructed knowledge which has shaped these perceptions. Perhaps the concern, therefore, should lie not with parental perceptions but with the manner in which the field continues to define the notion of "appropriate" perceptions. The major stumbling block would appear to be the ongoing predilection of researchers to regard appropriate and inappropriate perceptions as set, universally agreed upon entities, and thus as binary opposites.

Perhaps we should cease to ask whether perceptions regarding an educational program are "appropriate" and ask instead whether they are "relevant". What we must come to accept is that all tasks and accomplishments are not equally valid in all cultural settings. In fact, the same educational approach which prepares a child well for living in a particular setting may place a child in a different setting at risk (Bowman & Stott, 1994, p. 126; Ebbeck, 1996, p. 6). An example of this can be seen in many developing countries where, because of the high early dropout rate amongst pupils, it is vital to provide fundamental skills in the most time efficient manner through direct instruction. In this situation, a play or discovery learning approach may not be relevant, and would fail both the child and society in general (Prochner, 1992, p. 14). Jipson (1991) cites many more such examples of the conflict that so often exists between "expert" theory and cultural reality. We cannot measure parental perceptions against the NAEYC notion of appropriateness without taking into account possible sources of conflict between the two value systems. In doing so, we place children at risk and may be creating an environment that stresses rather than supports children and their families (Williams, 1994, p. 163). It is possible that the clichés associated with early childhood education – such as play being a child's work - may simply no longer be appropriate, particularly in an international context.

For too long, research in the field of pre-school education has tended to stress maturational over cultural outcomes. No one is suggesting that researchers should ignore the developmental dimension of pre-school theory and practice altogether, but no set of educational beliefs should be judged worthwhile or otherwise on the basis of one dimension alone. This study has attempted to highlight some of the ways that a particular society's orientation can influence what its population deems relevant or worthwhile (in this case from an educational perspective). Perhaps the most significant finding arising from this study is that parents appear to hold both idealised and actualised perceptions regarding pre-school education. Many parents appeared to be somewhat torn between their idealised and actualised perceptions. This was revealed in their comments, lamenting the need to push their children but feeling they had no other option. Perhaps increased contact and communication between all parties – parents, pre-school teachers, standard one teachers and Ministry of Education representatives – could assist in narrowing the gap between parents' idealised and actualised perceptions. Schools, too, must be

cognisant of the manner in which they reinforce parents' actualised perceptions via the program and learning experiences they provide. By involving parents in the planning and decision making processes pre-schools can further reduce the gap both between parents' idealised and actualised perceptions and between the home and pre-school environments.

Perhaps Malaysian parents' perceptions of pre-school education are no less valid than those of researchers. Content and method can and should differ according to the particular socio-cultural context. What is important is that children receive a pre-school education that meets both their present circumstances and future needs on both an individual and broader socio-cultural level. We must support the rights of parents to advocate on behalf of their children for just such an education. Children, parents and the field of pre-school education can only benefit from ongoing research addressing these issues.

Recommendations for Future Research

Whilst this investigation has revealed a number of interesting trends and patterns in relation to Malaysian parents' perceptions of pre-school education, it is important to remember that the study is only a small scale exploration of this phenomenon. It is therefore not possible to generalise the study's findings. It would be useful to replicate the study with a larger sample size, and indeed a more diverse sample (for example, urban parents of low SES, parents in rural communities, parents from government pre-schools), in order to determine whether or not the findings of this study are representative of larger populations within Malaysia.

The scope of the research could be extended in a number of ways in order to provide a new perspective on the existing findings. Research could be undertaken with parents of younger children in order to determine whether parents' perceptions alter as the child's age increases (especially in view of this study's finding that parents putting their second child through pre-school place more emphasis upon academic content and preparation for standard one). In view of the emphasis placed upon standard one preparation by many of the parents in this study, it may be interesting to replicate this research with parents of children in standard one in order to determine whether or not they felt their child's pre-school experience had adequately prepared them for formal schooling.

This study highlighted some significant issues in relation to the links between the home and pre-school environments. Further research could be undertaken to determine whether increased contact between the home and pre-school microsystems or increased involvement in the pre-school alters parents' perceptions of pre-school education. Similarly, research could be conducted with parents *and* teachers in order to establish what they perceive as being *their* role in the child's education, as well as what they perceive as being *each other's* roles in the education of the pre-school child.

The findings of this study have been examined and discussed in relation to the broader socio-cultural context which shaped and produced them. These perceptions, particularly parents' actualised perceptions, did not always reflect accepted child development theory. This highlights the need for research which investigates the relevance and suitability of Developmentally Appropriate Practice in a range of socially and culturally diverse settings before continuing to judge programs (and parents perceptions of them) as either appropriate or inappropriate.

Whilst the findings of this study are representative of the perceptions of a small group of Malaysian parents, the perception dichotomy formulated during the study (idealised and actualised perceptions) is likely to be applicable to the study of perceptions in a range of environments and fields. Further research could serve to determine the usefulness of this model.

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APPENDIX A

SCHOOL'S ADVICE OF AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

Parental Perceptions of Preschool Education in Malaysia

A Research Project by Louise Hewitt

School's Advice of Agreement to Participate

My name is Louise Hewitt and I am currently in Malaysia conducting research into pre-school education as part of my Master of Education degree. Specifically, the purpose of my research is to explore and describe parents' expressed perceptions regarding pre-school education in Malaysia. The research has the full support of the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia.

Four private pre-schools will be requested to participate in the research. The research will involve the parents of children in their final year of pre-school education. All parents will be interviewed regarding their perceptions of various aspects of pre-school education. The interview will include a covering letter informing them of the nature and purpose of the research, and assuring them that neither they, nor the pre-school, will be identified in any way in the final report. Parents will be made aware that their participation is voluntary and they are under no obligation to participate.

As principal of this pre-school, you will be asked to compile a list of parents who you think may be willing to be interviewed. From this list, approximately five parents will be selected randomly and invited to participate. The interviews will occur at a time and place convenient to all parties.

It is hoped that involvement in this research will provide parents with the opportunity to think about and discuss their beliefs and concerns regarding pre-school education. It is also anticipated that the final report, which is to be submitted to the Malaysian government, may assist in the ongoing development of pre-school education in Malaysia.

Your involvement in this research undertaking would be greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions regarding this research project, I would be more than happy to discuss these with you. I can be contacted on ████████

Yours sincerely,

Louise Hewitt (Dip. Tch., B. Ed.)

I _____ have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising I may withdraw at any time.
I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided neither I nor the pre-school are identifiable.

_____
Principal or authorised representative   Date

_____
Investigator   Date

APPENDIX B

PARENT'S ADVICE OF AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

Parental Perceptions of Pre-school Education in Malaysia

A Research Project by Louise Hewitt

Parent's Advice of Agreement to Participate

My name is Louise Hewitt and I am currently in Malaysia conducting research into pre-school education as part of my Master of Education degree. Specifically, the purpose of my research is to explore and describe parents' expressed perceptions regarding pre-school education in Malaysia. The research has the full support of the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia.

Four private pre-schools (approximately five parents from each) have been invited to take part in this research. Should you agree to assist with this research, you will be asked to participate in an interview regarding your perceptions of various aspects of pre-school education. The interview, conducted at a time and place convenient to all parties, will take between 30 minutes and an hour to complete. The interviews will be taped (subject to your approval) to ensure that your comments are recorded accurately. You will remain anonymous throughout the research undertaking, with no names (either of participants or of the pre-schools from which they were selected) appearing in the final report. The final report will seek to describe and summarise the various opinions expressed by parents throughout the research undertaking - in no way will any response or opinion be judged as correct or incorrect.

It is hoped that involvement in this research will provide parents with the opportunity to think about and discuss their beliefs and concerns regarding pre-school education. It is also anticipated that the final report, which is to be submitted to the Malaysian government, may assist in the ongoing development of pre-school education in Malaysia.

Your involvement in this research undertaking is greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions regarding this research project, I would be more than happy to discuss these with you. I can be contacted on ███████

Yours sincerely,

Louise Hewitt (Dip. Tch., B. Ed.)

I _____ have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising I may withdraw at any time.
I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

_____

Participant 's signature   Date

_____

Researcher's signature   Date

APPENDIX C

RESPONDENT PROFILE

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Participant No:_____

Respondent: Mother   Father

1) To which age group do you belong?
a) Under 25
b) 26 - 35
c) 36 - 45
d) Over 45

2) Indicate the highest level of education you have received
a) Some high school
b) Completed high school
c) Trade school
d) Other training (police, nurse etc.)
e) College
f) Some university
g) Graduated from university
h) Other (please specify) _____

3) What is your occupation? _____

4) What racial group are you from?
a) Malay
b) Chinese
c) Indian
d) Other (please specify) _____

5) Give details of the family members living in your home (include parents, grandparents, children and so on).
Parents   G/Parents   Sons - Ages   Daughters - Ages
          Other

6) Please indicate the number of sons and daughters you currently have enrolled in pre-school.

Born 1990   _____ son/s   _____daughter/s
Born 1991   _____ son/s   _____daughter/s
Born 1992   _____ son/s   _____daughter/s
Born 1993   _____ son/s   _____daughter/s

7) Do you have any other children who have attended pre-school in the past? Please give details (sex, age etc.).
          Sons - Age   Daughters – Age

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW
SCHEDULE

Parents' Perceptions of Pre-School Education in Malaysia

Please be aware that this interview relates to your beliefs regarding pre-school education in general, not just the pre-school your child is currently attending.

NOTE: Questions one through to seven appear in the Respondent Profile Sheet.

8) How did you choose your child's pre-school? (for example, because of its location, reputation, teaching / learning program, facilities, etc.)

9) How much do you feel you know about your child's pre-school program?
A lot
Some
Very little
Nothing at all

10) Do you believe it is necessary for children to attend pre-school? Why or why not? What difference would it make to them if they didn't attend?

11) What do you believe should be the most important purpose of pre-school education? Please order these statements from most to least important.
(Sort goal statement cards)

12) Describe what you would like or expect to see in a high quality pre-school program.

13) What do you hope or expect you child will have learnt or achieved by the time they leave pre-school?

QUESTION 11

To instill good behaviour and moral values in the child
-to develop the child's sense of honesty
-to develop the child's ability to tell right from wrong
-to develop the child's ability to identify good and bad manners

To develop social skills
-to teach the child to share, co-operate and take turns
-to teach the child consideration for others
-to develop the child's ability to solve conflicts without adult assistance

To provide the child with religious education
-to teach the child the basic prayers of their religion
-to increase the child's awareness of the teachings of their religion

To develop the child's basic academic skills
-to teach the child to recognise numbers and count
-to teach the child to recognise letters
-to introduce the child to basic phonics (the sounds the letters make, that words start with)

To develop the child's large muscle physical skills
-to develop the child's skills at hopping, jumping, skipping, balancing, climbing etc.
-to increase the child's fitness level
-to develop the child's ball skills (throwing, kicking, catching, rolling, etc.)

To provide children with a culturally relevant education
-to increase the child's awareness and appreciation of other races and cultures
-to introduce the child to the traditions and customs of other races and cultures
-to teach children tolerance and acceptance of such differences

To develop the child's confidence and self esteem
-to assist the child to feel happy and secure
-to develop the child's belief in his or her abilities
-to help the child feel good about themself

To develop the child's learning skills
-to foster a love of learning within the child
-to foster a sense of curiosity within the child
-to develop the child's ability to solve problems without assistance

To develop the child's small muscle physical skills
-to develop the child's ability to hold and control a range of writing/drawing tools e.g. pencils, crayons, brushes, pens, etc.
-to develop the child's ability to hold and control a pair of scissors

To prepare the child for Standard 1
-to teach the child to read and write
-to teach the child to do basic maths, including addition and subtraction
-to develop the child's ability to sit for long periods listening or doing desk work

To provide day care for the child
-to provide the child with a safe environment and basic care while parents are at work

To provide the child with socialising opportunities
-to develop the child's ability to mix and play cooperatively with other children
-to develop the child's ability to initiate conversation or play with others

To develop the child's language skills
-to increase the child's vocabulary
-to develop the child's ability to listen carefully and understand what is said
-to develop the child's ability to express himself clearly

To develop the child's artistic abilities
-to develop the child's enjoyment and skill at singing
-to develop the child's awareness and appreciation of music
-to develop the child's ability to express themselves creatively using a range of art materials

To develop the child's ability to function independently
-to develop the child's ability to freely choose from a range of activities
-to develop the child's willingness to accept responsibility
-to teach the child to clean up and put things away after using them

Please take some time to read through the list of learning experiences often found in pre-schools. Feel free to add any activities you feel should also be included but are not on the list.

From the list;

14) Which **five** learning experiences do you consider to be the **most important** in a child's pre-school education?

Why do you think these particular experiences are so important?

15) Which **five** learning experiences do you consider to be the **least important** in a child's pre-school education?

Why do you think these particular experiences are so unimportant?

QUESTIONS 14 AND 15

Learning Experiences

Colouring in sheets / colouring in books

Jigsaw puzzles

Learning about nature - plants, animals, the environment etc.

Using computers

Daily story telling by teacher

Daily opportunities for outdoor play and exercise using a range of equipment - balls, hoops, bats, climbing equipment etc.

Digging or playing in the sandpit

Learning to write on lined paper

Playing with blocks, Lego, construction toys

Learning to use musical instruments

Creative art / craft experiences with a range of materials - paper, paint, glue, etc.

Free dramatic play using dress up clothes and props

Learning to read

Free play or making things with dough or clay

Completing tasks in workbooks / activity books

Playing with water

Playing with dolls, trucks and other toys

Watching educational programs on television

Religious instruction

Learning to speak another language

Time for free play, with the child choosing what to do

Teacher directed instruction in counting and maths skills

Daily singing and music experiences

Teacher directed instruction in phonics and the alphabet

Cooking experiences

Copying work from a blackboard

Going on field trips and excursions

Others (please specify) _____

_____

_____

_____

16) What goals or activities do you feel should receive more emphasis in pre-school programs than they currently do? Why?

17) What goals or activities do you feel should receive less emphasis in pre-school programs than they currently do? Why?

18) When you think of the term "play", what image does it conjure up in your mind?

19) What role do you believe play should have in the pre-school program?

20) What role do you believe academic skills such as maths, reading and writing instruction should have in the pre-school program? How should these skills be taught?

21) What role do you believe homework and examinations should have in the pre-school program?

22) What do you believe is the role or duty of the pre-school teacher? Please give reasons for your answer.

23) What personal qualities do you believe a good pre-school teacher needs?

24) What role do you think parents should have in their child's pre-school education?

25) Do you believe there is enough contact between the home and pre-school environments?

26) How would you like to be kept informed of your child's progress at pre-school?

27) As a Malay / Chinese / Indian, do you feel Malay / Chinese / Indian children have any unique needs or face any special difficulties as part of their education?

28) How, in your opinion, could pre-school education be improved? What changes would you like to see?

29) Are there any other comments you would like to make?

APPENDIX E

RESEARCHER RECORDING SHEETS - QUESTIONS 11, 14 & 15

Researcher Recording Sheet - Question 11, Ranking of Goals

Participant No: _____

To instill good behaviour and moral values in the child

To develop social skills

To provide the child with religious education

To develop the child's basic academic skills

To develop the child's large muscle physical skills

To provide children with a culturally relevant education

To develop the child's confidence and self esteem

To develop the child's learning skills

To develop the child's small muscle physical skills

To prepare the child for Standard 1

To provide day care for the child

To provide the child with socialising opportunities

To develop the child's language skills

To develop the child's artistic abilities

To develop the child's ability to function independently

Researcher Recording Sheet - Questions 14 & 15, Prioritisation of Learning Experiences

Participant No: _____

Learning Experiences

Colouring in sheets / colouring in books

Jigsaw puzzles

Learning about nature - plants, animals, the environment etc.

Using computers

Daily story telling by teacher

Daily opportunities for outdoor play and exercise using a range of equipment - balls, hoops, bats, climbing equipment etc.

Digging or playing in the sandpit

Learning to write on lined paper

Playing with blocks, Lego, construction toys

Learning to use musical instruments

Creative art / craft experiences with a range of materials - paper, paint, glue, etc.

Free dramatic play using dress up clothes and props

Learning to read

Free play or making things with dough or clay

Completing tasks in workbooks / activity books

Playing with water

Playing with dolls, trucks and other toys

Watching educational programs on television

Religious instruction

Learning to speak another language

Time for free play, with the child choosing what to do

Teacher directed instruction in counting and maths skills

Daily singing and music experiences

Teacher directed instruction in phonics and the alphabet

Cooking experiences

Copying work from a blackboard

Going on field trips and excursions

Others (please specify) _____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX F

SUMMARY OF GOAL PRIORITISATION ACCORDING TO PARTICIPANT, CENTRE, RACE AND CHILDREN ATTENDING IN THE PAST

Participant	Centre	Race	Chn. prev. attend	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
							R	A	N	K	I	N	G					
1A	M	I	-	G	O	J	H	D	M	A	L	B	N	F	E	I	K	C
1B	M	I	-	M	H	O	G	A	I	E	N	L	B	D	F	J	K	C
1C	M	C	-	G	A	H	B	M	N	L	F	D	I	O	E	J	K	C
1D	M	I	-	G	L	B	A	H	M	D	J	O	E	I	F	N	K	C
1E	M	C	-	G	H	O	A	L	B	D	N	M	F	I	E	J	C	K
1F	M	I	1s 2d	J	H	M	D	N	L	B	G	F	O	A	C	E	I	K
2A	3R	C	2d	G	L	B	H	D	O	I	E	M	J	A	N	F	C	K
2B	3R	M	-	C	A	F	B	M	G	O	N	I	H	J	D	L	K	E
2C	3R	M	1d	H	M	G	L	D	N	I	B	A	E	O	F	J	C	K
2D	3R	C	1d	G	A	O	L	M	B	F	H	E	N	I	D	J	C	K
2E	3R	I	1d	J	D	M	H	O	I	G	A	B	L	N	F	E	C	K
3A	D	M	-	B	H	O	G	C	M	A	E	N	I	F	K	L	D	J
3B	D	C	2d	J	A	G	B	O	L	H	D	M	N	E	I	F	C	K
3C	D	M	1s	G	H	A	M	B	D	I	O	L	E	F	C	N	K	J
3D	D	M	1s1d	G	L	K	O	A	F	B	N	D	I	M	H	C	E	J
4A	AL	I	-	L	B	G	O	M	H	D	F	N	J	A	I	E	C	K
4B	AL	C	1s	G	H	A	M	D	J	I	L	B	O	N	F	E	K	C
4C	AL	M	1s1d	G	B	A	O	D	M	H	F	J	I	N	L	E	C	K
4D	AL	M	1d	C	O	D	E	A	M	H	G	I	F	B	L	N	J	K
4E	AL	C	1d	H	G	J	D	M	L	O	A	B	F	N	E	I	K	C
4F	AL	C	1d	N/A														

Note: M- Montessori; 3R - Reading, Writing & Arithmetic; D - Developmental; AL - Accelerated Learning.
I - Indian; C - Chinese; M - Malay.
S - son; d - daughter.