

## PARENTS' PERCEPTION AND EXPECTATION OF ISLAMIC PRIVATE PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Islamic private preschools have been gaining popularity in Malaysia over the past years. The increasing number of Islamic private preschools indicate that the demand from parents is high. Moreover, some parents even look for branded Islamic preschool for their children. This study was conducted to investigate parents' perception of the branded Islamic private preschool and what do they expect from their children's learning experiences in the chosen preschools. The participants of this study consist of six parents from three selected Islamic preschools. In depth semi structured interviews had been employed by the researchers to collect the data. Based on the findings, parents perceive that Islamic preschools have a significant role as an early educational centre to inculcate Islamic teachings for their children. The study also found that parents expect the well-being of their children spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally through their learning experiences in the chosen preschools.*

Keywords: private preschools, Islamic, parents, expectation, perception

### Introduction

Early childhood education is very crucial for the development of the children. Children learn a lot from their experience during the early years of life. Mastura Badzis (2006) mentions that "the concern over early childhood education is very important due to the fact that children grow and develop more rapidly in their first six years than at any other time in their lives." Interestingly, many parents in Malaysia show their concern with the selection of preschools for their children. Zainurin Dahari (2011) found that most Malay parents are willing to spend their time and money to choose the best preschools for their children. With such a wide selection of preschools to choose from; such as preschools run by the Ministry of Education, Department of National Unity, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, governmental organizations such as Bahagian Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS), Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Islamic Religion in each state, Muslim organizations such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), and those run by the private sector, the parents are spoiled for choice when choosing a preschool to send their children to (Kamogawa, 2010).

The concern of parents to pursue quality and better services from preschools has led to the rapid growth of private preschools in Malaysia. Lily Muliana Mustafa *et al.* (2013) mentioned that an overwhelming majority of parents prefer to send their children to private preschools compared to public preschools in order to gain quality education. Meanwhile, the number of Islamic private preschools has also increased significantly over the years. The increasing number of Islamic private preschools indicates that the demand from parents is high. In addition, some parents are consciously concerned of the brand attached to the Islamic private preschools and do not hesitate to pay high fees for their children's education. Hence, this study was conducted to investigate parents' perception of the branded Islamic private preschool and what do they expect from their children's learning experiences in the chosen preschools.

Previous studies indicate that parents' perceptions and expectations from their children's achievement in education positively affected their academic performance (Fouziya Qadiri & Sarika Minhas, 2009; Cleveland *et al.*, 2013). Expectation contributes to the development of positive connection between parents and their children (Powell *et al.*, 2012). Parents who expect their children to do well convey that expectation to their children and provide appropriate support at home. Various studies have been conducted at preschool level to investigate parents' views and expectations from preschool education (see Sahin *et al.*, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2010; Laloumi-Vidali, 2006; Petrie & Holloway, 2006; Weikart, 2000, Hewitt, B. L., 1998). However, there is still not much research done on the parents' perceptions and expectations in a more specific type of preschool such as Islamic private preschools especially in Malaysia.

### Method

This study is qualitative in nature. Merriam (2009) states that basic qualitative research is used to understand the meaning of a phenomenon for participants through interviews, observations and document reviews. A basic qualitative research was conducted in this study because the aim was to understand and describe the perception and expectation of parents about their selected preschool institution for their children. The participants of this study consisted of six parents from three selected Islamic private preschools. Creswell (2008) asserted that it is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases.

Because of the need to report details about each individual or site, the larger number of cases can become unwieldy and result in superficial perspectives. The researchers had identified the three selected preschools based on their popularity in Malaysia and the fees charged. The range of the monthly fees for each preschool is between 400 to 760 Malaysian Ringgit (93 to 177 US dollars) which is very high for Malaysian parents whereby the mean monthly household income was 6,141 Malaysian Ringgit (1430 US dollars) in 2014 (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal). However, it should be noted that 65% of Malaysian households earn less than 6,000 Malaysian ringgit per month.

The researchers had employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect the data. All the interviews were recorded and the transcript for each recorded interviews were prepared to be analysed. At the next stage, all the transcripts had undergone the coding process. To validate the finding, member checking had been conducted by the researchers. Member checking is the process in which the researcher asks the participant in the study to check the accuracy of the findings by taking the findings back to the participant (Creswell, 2005). In terms of reliability, two experts were appointed as co-raters to identify the main ideas of the discourse units. The reliability of the researcher's coding was calculated by finding the percentage of agreement between the coding of the researcher and the two co-raters on the random selection of discourse units for each interview question. For six interviews, the average of inter-rater reliability for each interview was calculated as more than 80%, which can be considered as relatively high. This indicated that the coded transcriptions were reliable.

## Findings and Discussion

### a) Parents Perception towards The Role of Islamic Private Preschool Education

Based on the findings, all participants perceive that Islamic preschools have a significant role as an early educational centre to inculcate Islamic teachings for their children. For this reason, they prefer to send their children to Islamic-based private preschools. This result is parallel to that of the study conducted by Zainurin & Mohd Sabri (2011). All of the parents agreed that it is important for the children to be exposed to the basic teachings of Islam or *Fardhu 'Ain* at the early stage of their life. Below are some excerpts from the interviews made with the parents:

"their (the preschool's) role is very important to inculcate (the) basics of *fardhu 'ain* and also prayers and readings from the Quran." (SM1)

"because we are Muslims, then of course we want to strengthen (the) fundamental aspects and basics (of religion) in our children at an early stage." (SM2)

"... they (religious preschools) expose the basics of Islamic teachings to our children because at other secular kindergarten... they lean towards... they stress on the academic aspects such as the ability to read fast, calculate fast and science. In Islamic kindergartens, they teach more... (they) expose the children to the tenets of religion which should be inculcated from small." (BB1)

The parents also highlighted the importance of the Islamic learning experience was not provided at home only but also extended and complemented by the learning experience at the preschool. One of them said,

"Islamic kindergartens are important for children's education because, for example, if (they are) at home, education has to be holistic... when they study at kindergartens, the kindergartens do not emphasize Islamic education, and they (the children) are quite confused... for them to adapt... because of Islam itself. (LC1)

"... we want (Islamic) education (that is given) at home to continue (at school)... to continue at the early level" (LC1)

Parents also express their concern with the quality of education and facilities that they expected from the chosen Islamic private preschools. In this case, their perception were influenced by the brand image of the preschools that they have selected as mentioned by Lily Muliana & Mohd Nor Azhari (2013).

### b) Parents Expectation

Parents were asked about their expectations from their children's development spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Based on the interviews, the researchers categorised their expectation into four different aspects as follows:

#### i) Spiritual Development:

Regarding spiritual development, parents give extra attention to identity building as it anchors children to their root, i.e. identity as Muslims. They expect their children to know and stay true to their root and take it wherever they go when they grow up as the following excerpts show:

"spirituality is like their roots which they will carry with them always. If they have spirituality, they will be able to survive/cope wherever they go." (BB1)

“if possible we want to build our child’s shield so that they will be safeguarded from things that they are not supposed to know...” (SM1)

Apart from religious identity, parents also pay extra attention to the application of Islamic teachings. They expect from these private preschools to inculcate Islamic teaching and values for their children. Most of them are proud and satisfied when their children are able to recite simple *suras* (chapters) of the Quran or prayers and lead congregational prayers. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

“...now he is more alert. For example, whenever his cousins say some negative things or things which we feel are inappropriate, he would say, ‘Eh, it’s not good say things like that.’ That’s because he learnt it at school, so he practices it at home. It’s a positive thing.” (BB2)

“One of the advantages of this kindergarten is it has more elements of memorization (of the Quran). It also starts teaching of learning the Quranic recitation with the foundation recitation of *Iqra*. So, it follows levels. Level one, level two and so on until the child is able to read the Quran well. There’s also congregational prayers which will train everyone to become an *imam* (leader in prayers). Everyone will be given a chance, I mean every boy will have the experience to be an *imam*... and he can do it. My own son will practice that at home. He can read all the verses and the recitations in prayers (on his own). *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God).” (BB2)

## ii) Physical Development:

As for physical development, parents expect to see the well growth of their children. Some of them concerned with the food and they expect the preschools to provide a healthy meal and halal food for their children to ensure the well-balanced growth. Some of the parents said:

“We expect that since it is an Islamic kindergarten, the food provided is healthy and halal food. Also clean. “*halalan toyyiban*” meaning that we hope that when they eat these kind of food, they will grow well physically. I mean they will not be eating junk food or other non-nutritional food.” (LC2)

These private preschools offer more outdoor activities by exploring nature and organizing educational trips to factory, workshop and many more. Outdoor activities as recommended by *sunnah* (Prophet Muhammad’s traditions) like swimming is encouraged and practiced as one of the outdoor syllabus. Parents seem to approve these kinds of outdoor activities as children benefit from such activities. One of the parents expected to see more *sunnah* activities to be carried out by the Islamic preschool. He mentioned:

“perhaps in Islamic preschools they should give more attention to the traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Horse-riding, archery and the like. So whatever the Prophet practiced could also be incorporated. This would be good for their physical growth.” (SM1)

Other positive feedbacks from parents are outdoor activities enhance their children’s psychomotor skills and nurture creativity in arts. The parents were happy to find out that their children were interested in the activities as they expected.

“I expect that there are more outdoor activities...” (LC1)

“For the children’s physical fitness, there will be physical activities every Tuesday. There’s also handicraft sessions whereby the children will use their hands and fingers. My child likes that very much. Yes, he likes arts and creative things. He likes to create new things based on his imagination. I see a change in him (in that aspect) ...” (LC2)

“there’s also handicraft at the kindergarten... My child likes origami. When she comes home sometimes she insists or rather forces us to provide her with these kind of things. So we have to buy origami paper till it finishes.” (SM2)

## iii) Intellectual Development

Most of the parents expected their children to have the ability to read and write simple sentences or recite some *du’as* and simple quranic verses. They understand that at preschool level, not much can be expected from young children. For them, the most important thing is that their children would love to learn as a preparation before going to a primary school. Below are what some of them say in this regard:

“For me what’s important is that my child likes to go to school. If they like to go to school that’s good enough... because at the kindergarten, I don’t expect they learn like those at primary school. For me, I send my child so that they will be exposed with the world before they enter school, that’s it. I don’t expect at kindergarten that my child will be top in the class...” (BB1)

“... when he comes back from school, I see that he opens his books. He reads in front of me. So I’m really impressed with his progress. In terms of his Quranic reading, I notice that his teacher will make a mark at where he is reading at (in his *Iqra*’ book). So, when he comes home, I can see where he is at. In terms of his prayers, he memorises a lot of prayers... whatever he learns in school, he practices it at home too.” (BB2)

However, some parents are very ambitious and have a high expectation from their children. For instance, one parent expected that preschool syllabus would train his child to become an open-minded and a learned person when she grows up.

“... in terms of the syllabus, I prefer that it different from that of other kindergartens. So that when they grow older they not like average kids. At least her thinking is more open. In terms of economy for example, she also learns about how to manage money, how to invest. Haa, this is because this (preschool) is for the rich people.” (SM2)

“... when they are taught from young how to manage money, then when they are older they will be ‘economy-literate’ or ‘money-literate’, meaning that they know how to invest.” (LC1)

#### iv) Emotional Development

Based on the interviews, parents really expect the best for their children’s emotional development. All of them wanted the preschool to provide meaningful learning experience for the children so that they will feel happy and have fun in learning. The parents also expect their children to develop social skills and make friends, to have self confidence and stable emotion. This can be clearly seen from the following examples:

“Haa... fun learning. She feels happy. Like she has achieved something from not knowing anything previously”. (LC2)

“As long as she goes to school, she enjoys it, has friends and she comes home happy and doesn’t cry for me that’s good enough.” (SM2)

“In terms of emotional development, we want her to be more confident and able to control her emotions.” (SM1)

“I don’t expect that my child only learns (academically) at school. Hmm, she should also learn how to make friends. I mean, after sending her to kindergarten I notice that she knows how to make friends.” (LC3)

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, parents in this study perceive that Islamic private preschool plays an important role to inculcate Islamic teaching and values for their children at the early stage of life. Therefore, they prefer to send their children to Islamic-based private preschools. Whenever parents chose the branded Islamic private preschools for their children’s education, they really look for quality and meaningful learning experience for their children to fulfill their expectations. In finding the best place for their children, parents’s perception can be influenced by the brand image of the preschool. The parents also expect the branded Islamic preschools to support their children’s development spiritually, physically, intellectually and emotionally and prepare them to be a better generation in the future. For future research, mixed design studies could be conducted to obtain more detailed responses from the parents on the issue of Islamic private preschools.

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