
The Study of Preschool Market from the Perspective of Parental Choices : An Example of Yunlin County

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the key determinants that influencing the parents when they select the kindergarten for their children. According to the problems of continuing decline of birth rate in Taiwan and market situation of increasing in the number of kindergartens, it is resulted as the high competition in preschool education. This research conducted the questionnaire survey by using sample of 338 parents in Yunlin, Taiwan who made decision in kindergarten selection for their children to explore the key selection criteria of parents. The results showed ranking of 27 critical factors that be categorized into five clusters after adopting factor analysis which include background and service of kindergarten, environment and facilities, price and conveniences, professional teacher and curriculum management. Kindness, professional knowledge and experiences of teachers are the top three ranking that most influence the parental choice. The outcomes of research can be important information for the policymaker or preschool administrators in planning the competitive strategies in recruiting and retaining students in the highly competitive market environment.

Keywords: Preschool education, Kindergarten, Parental choices

1. Introduction

Now most developed countries, including Taiwan, are confronting the problem of continuing decline in birth rate as the result of rising age of marriage, increasing availability and use of effective birth control methods. According to the figures of Ministry of Interior, Taiwan's birth rate has dropped from 13.76% in 2000 to 11.65% in 2001 and dramatically dropping to 8.96% in 2006, which means it has decreased by nearly half of the rate in 1996. Therefore, the numbers of children who want to receive the preschool education have been decreased compare to the increasing in the number of kindergartens.

In 1983, the Ministry of Education of Taiwan designed a plan to develop preschool education and one of the procedures was to stimulate the growth of private kindergartens by corresponding with promoting kindergartens affiliated with enterprises, promoting kindergartens affiliated with primary schools in 1999 (Ho, 2006). Then there are increases in the number of registered kindergartens both public and private approach 3,330 kindergartens in 2006, which represent by 15.8% increasing from 1998. The number of kindergartens has

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increased that contrary to the decreasing in birth rate that resulted as the highly competitive environment in kindergarten business. To maintain the number of students enrolled, the policymaker or administrator need to understand the key determinants that most affect the parental choices. This study discusses preschool management section from the perspective of parents to find the key determinants that most influence them when selecting kindergartens for their children. The result of this study provides important information for kindergarten administrators in developing the effective strategies to sustain the education business in highly competitive market environment.

2. Literature review

2.1 Preschool education in Taiwan

In most of countries, kindergarten is part of preschool system. The word Kindergarten means 'children's garden'. It was started by Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel in Germany in 1837, a philosopher and educator, Froebel opened the first kindergarten on 28 June 1840 at Blankenburg, where the children between 3 to 7 years old were educated about body, mind and soul through playing, outdoor experiences, music, movement, spontaneity, creativity and independence. The main purpose of teaching is to make children ready for their school life and this philosophy had spread to England, France, Holland, Italy and America two decades later (Bryant & Clifford, 1992).

Preschool education is the most rapidly growing section of education system in Taiwan (McMullen, Elicker, Wang, Erdiller, Lee, Lin & Sun, 2005). According to the economic growth of Taiwan through its export industrialization during 1970s, there were increasing in proportion of urban residents, nuclear families, and working mothers that caused the increasing in demand of preschool education (Ho, 2006). From 1960 to 1980 the number of kindergarten has grew up year by year especially in private sector that represented more than 143 percent increase.

In 1981, The Preschool Education Act was promulgated in order to regulate basic standards for preschool system in Taiwan. The law covers the kindergarten system, the number of children per class, teacher qualifications, facilities' standard, and financial penalties for violations.

2.2 Parental choice

Most parents have a number of critical evaluation factors when selecting kindergarten for their children. Bussell (2000) has conducted personal interview with parents who got children in preschool age. Parents were asked to mention the criterions that they were considering when select the primary school. The most influential criterions that have been mentioned by parents are location, standards or quality, organizational/ structural issues and the security or

happiness of their children. Location has been most frequently mentioned by the parents as it correlated to child's happiness and sense of security.

Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien & Roy, (2001) argued that parents' choices of childcare sometimes are governed by financial or employment situation. The practical considerations: cost, hours of availability and location can influence the parental choices. The research has found that in high income families and parents who worked fewer hours were more likely to choose a service based on quality when compare with the parents who have more stress, lower income and work more hours that will evaluate their choices based on practical or convenience considerations.

Many parents are faced with the challenge of finding the good quality and affordable childcare for their children (Fuqua & Schieck, 1989). Parent's education has showed significantly correlated to choice, more well-educated parents are more concerned about the education and development of child care compared to less educated parents who less concerned about the educational components of care program (Johansen, Leibowitz & Waite, 1996).

The marketing management of education section increasingly relies on strategies, methods and tools that the business world has long adopted (Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). For the preschool management segment, parents' needs and wants should be considered by school administrators in order to generate the competitive strategies that more practical in attracting and satisfying parents' expectations.

Armstrong and Kotler, 2005 have defined five stages of consumer decision processes that consumer proceeds in every time of buying, for preschool education the parent who act as the consumer (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997) since the demand comes from them. The process starts with need recognition that is influenced by internal stimuli/non-marketer dominated and external stimuli/marketer dominated. Then the process of searching for relevant information will be next stage in order to generate the set of alternatives, following with evaluation process. At this stage, the important determinants of each alternative are screened, weighed and ranked respectively. It is important for kindergarten administrators to know about alternative evaluation processed by understanding how the parent process information about the school (Kindergarten strategic e.g. price and location, environment and facilities, curriculum, professional teacher, background and service of school). Once the most preferred alternative is chosen, it accounts for decision-making process. The last stage is post purchase evaluation that lies in relationship between consumer's expectations and the product or service's perceived performance that has been interpreted in form of satisfaction or dissatisfaction by marketers. (Bussell, 2000; Donaldson & McNicholas, 2004)

3. Research methodology

This study examines documents and theories regarding the important factors that can be

influenced the parental choice in choosing the kindergarten and conducts questionnaires to parents asking to rate the aspects of kindergarten they had considered when making their choice and which of these influenced their final decision.

3.1 Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was developed into three parts. The first part was the 37 items regarding the factors that influencing the parent in kindergarten selection by applying a Likert-type scale to questionnaire design, running from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 5 (extremely important). The second part was regarding the degree of satisfaction toward 37 factors after enrollment the children in kindergarten by asking the parent to rate for degree of satisfaction which running from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), and the third part was geographic information. During the initial development stage, the questionnaire was reviewed by two preschool education experts to ensure the phrases of questionnaire.

A pre-test was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of questionnaires. Data from eighty parents were provided with the original questionnaire and 72 copies were retrieved. The Cronbach's α coefficient was used to determine the questionnaire reliability. A α exceeding 0.9 indicates high reliability, α between 0.9 and 0.7 indicates acceptable reliability, and α below 0.35 indicates low reliability. The pretest questionnaire with the value of 0.909 Cronbach's α was achieved, and the corrected scale contained 27 structural survey questions representing 27 critical factors (CFs).

3.2 Questionnaire distribution

Seven hundred sixty questionnaires were distributed to 19 kindergartens represented 40 copies of questionnaire provided to each kindergarten. Totally 372 questionnaires were retrieved which represented 48.9% return rate, 40 questionnaires were found to be invalidated, Resulting 338 valid questionnaires were used in analyzing which represented 90% of valid sample rate.

Table 1 shows that three hundred thirty eight parents participated, among which 11.54% (n = 39) were below high school level, 45.86% (n = 155) were high school level, 28.99% (n = 98) were vocational school level, 10.95% (n = 37) were university level and 2.66% (n = 9) were more than university level.

There are five ranges of parent income level. As a group, 22.49% (n = 76) of parents which monthly incomes lower than 30,000 New Taiwan dollars, 50% (n = 169) earned between 30,000 and 60,000 NT dollars per month, 23.67% (n = 80) earned between 60,001 and 90,000 NT dollars per month, 3.25% (n = 11) earned between 90,001 – 120,000 NT dollars per month and only 0.59% (n = 2) earned more than 120,000 NT dollars per month. SPSS 15 was used to perform further statistical analysis.

Table 1 Demographics profile and descriptive statistics of surveyed parents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Age</i>		
Below 25	5	1.48
26 - 35	181	53.55
36 - 45	142	42.01
Over 45	10	2.96
<i>Education</i>		
Below high school	39	11.54
High school	155	45.86
Vocational school	98	28.99
University	37	10.95
More than university	9	2.66
<i>Income / month (New Taiwan Dollar)</i>		
Below 30,000	76	22.49
30,000 - 60,000	169	50.00
60,001 - 90,000	80	23.67
90,001 - 120,000	11	3.25
More than 120,000	2	0.59

4. Analysis, findings, and discussion

4.1 Analysis of critical factor and degree of satisfaction

The critical factors were ranked according to their means. If two or more factors happened to share the same mean value, that with the lowest standard deviation was assigned the highest importance ranking. Twenty-seven CFs were identified as factor that significantly influencing the parents when they did kindergarten selection.

The first ten criterions that parents were considering when they select the kindergarten for their children; kindness of teacher, teacher professional knowledge, teacher experiences, safety building and facilities, clean and hygiene environment, qualified investigation by government, parent involvement, board classroom with adequate facilities, good image and reputation, and teaching materials and toys for children developments. Table 2 ranks this CFs based on mean value and standard deviation.

First three ranking are kindness, professional knowledge and experiences of teacher. Most of Taiwanese parents will concentrate in selecting the high quality education for children. Howes (1997) suggested that teachers with the higher degree of education were producing more effective and more positive to the child outcome.

Table 2 Ranking of Critical factors in kindergarten selection and Degree of satisfaction

Ranking	Critical factors in kindergarten selection	Mean	Degree of satisfaction toward kindergarten	Mean
1	Kindness of Teacher	4.726	Qualified Investigation by Government	4.299
2	Teacher Professional Knowledge	4.680	Kindness of Teacher	4.291
3	Teacher Experiences	4.677	Parent Involvement	4.259
4	Safety Building And Facilities	4.660	Teacher Professional Knowledge	4.234
5	Clean and Hygiene Environment	4.638	Good Image and reputation	4.228
6	Qualified Investigation by Government	4.604	Teacher Experiences	4.213
7	Parent Involvement	4.521	Principal's Experiences	4.175
8	Board Classroom with Adequate Facilities	4.503	Good and Efficient Administration	4.167
9	Good Image and reputation	4.494	Extend Staying time after school	4.116
10	Teaching materials and Toys for Children developments	4.485	Advance Teaching Program (phonetic, math)	4.077
11	Principal's Experiences	4.478	Medical Check up for Kids	4.065
12	Good and Efficient Administration	4.456	Innovate and Diversification Teaching Activities	4.021
13	Medical Check up for Kids	4.421	Clean and Hygiene Environment	3.973
14	Modern Teaching Facilities	4.353	Safety Building And Facilities	3.967
15	Innovate and Diversification Teaching Activities	4.321	Talent and Skill Teaching Program	3.934
16	Advance Teaching Program (phonetic, math)	4.299	Provide English Language Class	3.923
17	Limit Children per class (15 kids per class)	4.272	School Bus Service	3.897
18	Landscape and Board Area	4.201	Teaching materials and Toys for Children developments	3.893
19	Extend Staying time after school	4.142	Board Classroom with Adequate Facilities	3.852
20	Talent and Skill Teaching Program	4.018	Modern Teaching Facilities	3.846
21	Provide English Language Class	4.015	Far from home	3.833
22	Far from home	3.955	Limit Children per class (15 kids per class)	3.823
23	Academic Fee	3.940	Landscape and Board Area	3.808
24	Special Facilities	3.908	Computer Room	3.756
25	Computer Room	3.869	Provide Website and Real Time Video	3.682
26	Provide Website and Real Time Video	3.801	Academic Fee	3.620
27	School Bus Service	3.785	Special Facilities	3.587

This result suggests that parents believe qualified teacher is the most important criterion when they do kindergarten selection. The kindergarten with high-qualified teacher is what parents want for enrolling their children. "Safety building and facilities", "clean and hygiene environment" be considered as the top fourth and fifth ranking. Parents and care provider have given on most importance elements: child safety, communication between parent and

care provider, warm relationship between care providers and child (Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1995, Cryer & Burchinal, 1997, Gorard, 1999). Parents visit the kindergarten to observe for the safety elements before enrolling their children in that school.

For the ranking of degree of satisfaction of 27 items above are also showed in the table 2. Most of parent satisfied in qualified investigation by government, kindness of teacher, parent involvement, teacher professional knowledge, good image. We can see that the “safety building and facilities”, “clean and hygiene environment”, “board classroom with adequate facilities”, and “teaching materials and toys for children development” are in the average degree as their mean still not reach 4. These four items should be considered by kindergarten administrator to improve as it placed in top 10 ranking for the factor most influencing parental choice.

4.2 Factor analysis

Factor analysis was used to explore the relationship among the 27 CFs. It is method for identifying clusters of related variables and then an ideal technique for reducing numerous items into more easily understood framework (Norusis, 2006). This statistical technique identifies a relatively small number of factors that can be used to represent relationships among sets of multiple interrelated variables.

In this study, 27 CFs were subjected to factor analysis using principal components analysis and varimax rotation. Each factor can thus be viewed as a “super-variable” comprising a specific combination of the actual variables examined in the survey.

The first stage of the factor analysis involves determining the strength of the relationship among the variables, the 27 identified CFs measured by the correlation coefficients of each pair of variable. The Bartlett test of sphericity is 4345.839, and the associated significance level is 0.000, indicate that the population correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. The value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling accuracy is 0.890, which significantly exceeds 0.5 and thus is considered acceptable and appropriate for conducting factor analysis.

The extracted factors of CFs were renamed as a “cluster” in the interpretation of result analysis. Five clusters with eigen values greater than 1 were extracted. The final statistics of the principal component analysis, and the clusters extracted comprise 61.715% of variance.

Based on an examination of the inherent relationships among 27 CFs, five clusters extracted were labeled background and service of kindergarten, curriculum management, qualified teacher, environment and facilities, price and conveniences. The explanations of these clusters are as follows.

Table 3 Cluster of matrix after varimax rotation

Factor	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5
Parent Involvement	0.7890				
Good and Efficient Administration	0.7861				
Good Image	0.7687				
Qualified Investigation by Government	0.7572				
Medical Check up for Kids	0.6435				
Limit Children per class (15 kids per class)	0.5943				
Computer Room		0.823			
Talent and Skill Teaching Program		0.807			
Provide English Language Class		0.719			
Innovate and Diversification Teaching Activities		0.642			
Provide Website and Real Time Video		0.612			
Advance Teaching Program (phonetic, math)		0.523			
Teacher Experiences			0.859		
Teacher Professional Knowledge			0.850		
Kindness of Teacher			0.813		
Principal Experiences			0.664		
Clean and Hygiene Environment				0.537	
Landscape and Board Area				0.710	
Board Classroom with Adequate Facilities				0.698	
Safety Building And Facilities				0.646	
Teaching aids and Toys for Children developments				0.620	
Modern Teaching Facilities				0.614	
Special Facilities				0.571	
Nearness to home					0.798
Academic Fee					0.715
School Bus Service					0.583
Extend Staying time after school					0.423

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. ◇ Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

Background and services of kindergarten. For the first cluster which represents 14.822% of variance are parent involvement, good and efficient administration, good image, qualified investigation by government, medical check up for kids, and limit children per class (15 kids per class). Policymakers and educators agree that family involvement in children's education is closely related to children's success outcome (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1996, National

Household Education Survey also suggests that fathers can be a positive force in their children's education, the involvement of fathers in their children's schools is relate to children's achievement and behavior. Hughes & MacNaughton (2001) suggested that there are formal and informal communications of parent involvement. The formal communication channels were parent conferences, parent meetings, and message books. The informal channels were the conversation before or after the class.

Curriculum management. The second cluster (14.179% of variance) consists of computer room, talent and skill teaching program, provide English language class, innovate and diversification teaching activities, provide website and real time video (for parent), advance teaching program (phonetic, math). Liu, Yeung, & Farmer (2001) suggested that parent had a high educational expectation as well as all aspects that consider to child development in order to prepare children for future schooling. Gray (1991) proposes there are three key functions of management area in education section; personal management, resource management and one of them is curriculum management. Taiwanese parents are very concentrate in the academic part of their children's education. They prefer teacher to teach background of phonetic or math to their children.

Qualified and professional teacher. The four CFs in this cluster (13.291% of variance) includes teacher experiences, teacher professional knowledge, kindness of teacher, and principal experiences. Training and qualification of staff is the good predictor of children's outcome (McGurk, 1997). Liu, Yeung & Farmer (2001) also support that for the best educational and developmental outcomes, the professionalism of staff should not be overlooked. Nowadays parents pay much attention in teachers' quality, not only who can take care children but also the one who can provide the high quality in teaching their children (Zhu 2006). She also has found that the teachers with more teaching experiences possess higher leadership skill.

Environment and facilities. The fourth cluster (11.748% of variance) consists of clean and hygiene environment, landscape and board area, board classroom with adequate facilities, safety building and facilities, teaching aids and toys for children developments, modern teaching facilities, and special facilities. Parents are not only to focus on the qualified teacher, but also the arrangement with the safety facilities. Bogat & Gensheimer (1986) have found that the health and safety involvements were rated as the most important by the parents in choosing child-care service and caregiver's relationship with the children was rated as the second important aspect. Cryer & Burchinal (1997) supported that parent gave high important in rating all the aspect of care that related to health and safety items. Parent rated the quality of care that their children received higher than observers did.

Price and convenience. The fifth cluster (7.675% of variance) are all related to nearness to home, academic fee, school bus service, and extend staying time after school. Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky (1995) propose that 41% of parent mentioned cost or convenience as important in their choice. Single parents also rank cost and locations are important factors when selecting the day care service, while married parents rank the quality more important in selecting care services (Turner & Smith, 1983). Bussell (2000) has found that the most frequently mentioned criterion by parent was school’s location. This can be linked to the child’s happiness as it ensures that child will have friends when they go to school near home.

4.3 Analysis of parental choice

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) was performed to see if there were any difference in perception among the group of parents who had difference income levels toward these five clusters. The *p*-value indicates the statistical significance of the five clusters. All *p*-values exceed 0.05.

Table 4 Analysis of variance in difference level of education

		Sum of				
		Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
C1	Between Groups	2.597	4	.649	.651	.627
	Within Groups	299.181	334	.997		
	Total	301.777	338			
C2	Between Groups	16.248	4	4.062	4.169	.003
	Within Groups	292.305	334	.974		
	Total	308.553	338			
C3	Between Groups	1.395	4	.349	.342	.849
	Within Groups	305.571	334	1.019		
	Total	306.966	338			
C4	Between Groups	5.753	4	1.438	1.488	.206
	Within Groups	289.976	334	.967		
	Total	295.729	338			
C5	Between Groups	1.891	4	.473	.477	.753
	Within Groups	297.607	334	.992		
	Total	299.498	338			

Note: Background and services (C1), Curriculum management (C2), Qualified and professional teacher (C3), Environment and facilities (C4), Price and conveniences (C5)

Consequently, we conclude that no strong link exists among the five clusters, implying no differences in perspective among group of parents in difference income levels regarding

the five clusters of critical factors in kindergarten selection.

Table 4 summarizes the analysis of variance based on the parent's education levels toward five clusters. The result showed that one *p*-value (C2-curriculum management) is below 0.05, so we conclude that there were significant differences among groups of parent in their perceptions regarding the curriculum management. Accordingly, the clusters of C2 influenced parents who have high educational level more than parents in low educational level are. Johansen, Leibowitz & Waite (1996) have found that mothers with college degrees or higher place greater concentration on educational component of child care. For example, parents who are high school degree or lower will less emphasize in curriculum part when compare to the parents with university degrees.

There are no significant differences among group of parents in relation to educational levels toward the perceptions of C1, C3, C4 and C5.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated the views of parents toward the factors that influencing the parental choice. Twenty-seven of critical factors were ranking. Taiwanese parent rated the quality is the most important factor in choosing kindergarten for their children. The items of "kindness of teacher", "teacher professional knowledge", "teacher experiences", "safety building and facilities", and "clean and hygiene environment" were the most important factors that be ranked as the top five critical factors. This result suggests that the policymaker or kindergarten administrator should promote the effective programs that provide by professional teacher in this highly competitive environment.

Using the factor analysis technique, the 27 critical factors were divided into five clusters; background and service (C1), curriculum management (C2), qualified and professional teacher (C3), environment and facilities (C4), and the last cluster are price and convenience (C5). There are three key functions in management areas that closely related to educational marketing; personnel management, curriculum management and resource management (Gray 1991). The cluster of C1, C2 and C3 showed the most three important clusters as it accounting for 14.822%, 14.179% and 13.291% of variance respectively (42.292% cumulative variance).

For the perception among groups of parent that related to difference income levels toward five clusters. One way ANOVA was used and the result indicated that there are no differences in the perception of groups of parents, while there are significant differences in perception among groups of parent that related to educational level. The parents with advance educational level pay more attention in the curriculum management when compare to the parents who had lower educational level.

This study only considers the parental choice in Taiwan. Future studies could examine the parental choice in the other countries to explore the cultural difference perception in different countries.

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