

**A STUDY ON PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY AND PERCEIVED
MONTESSORI CHARACTERISTICS TOWARDS PARENTS' SATISFACTION
FOR MONTESSORI KINDERGARTEN IN PENANG**

HIZRIAN NAZEEFAH BT. AHMAD MOGHNI

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2006

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By

HIZRIAN NAZEEFAH BT. AHMAD MOGHNI

Research report in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Business Administration

JUNE 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The success of this research depends on the contributions of many people, especially those who take the time to share their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions to improve the text.

Very special thanks to Dr Suhaiza Hanim Mohd Zailani for her patience, supervision and endless guidance throughout this research. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to all lecturers that have been given their full commitment throughout my study.

Once again, thank to my dearest friends, Syed Zhafer, Zakuan, Yudi Fernando, Hasniza, Suhartini, Farah Merican, Farah Sahul and Jelian for their friendship, caring and encouragement. It has been a joy to work with all of you.

In addition, I wish to thanks all that help me work diligently to provide the careful crafted content of this research.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to extend my gratitude to family for years spent in loving and caring, which has endured my partial neglect of them throughout this research.

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan mengkaji tahap kepuasan ibu bapa / penjaga terhadap pendidikan prasekolah anak-anak di tadika-tadika Montessori Pulau Pinang. Kajian ini juga menyelidiki hubungan di antara pandangan mereka mengenai tahap kualiti perkhidmatan tadika Montessori dengan tahap kepuasan ibu bapa. Di samping itu, kajian ini juga menyelidiki hubungan di antara pandangan ibu bapa mengenai ciri-ciri Montessori dengan tahap kepuasan ibu bapa. Tahap keterlibatan ibu bapa juga dikaji sebagai faktor yang mempengaruhi hubungan-hubungan tersebut. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini merupakan salah satu usaha penambahbaikan di tadika-tadika Montessori dalam memberikan pendidikan prasekolah yang cemerlang kepada anak-anak. Kajian ini telah dilaksanakan dengan mengagihkan soalselidik kepada 225 orang responden yang terdiri daripada ibu bapa/penjaga anak-anak prasekolah tadika Montessori dengan menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Data yang telah dikumpulkan dianalisis menggunakan hirarki regresi berganda. Dapatan kajian mendapati pandangan ibu bapa mengenai tahap kualiti perkhidmatan dan pandangan ibu bapa mengenai ciri-ciri Montessori adalah tidak disokong sepenuhnya oleh ibu bapa dengan tahap kepuasan mereka. Kajian ini mendapati pandangan kualiti perkhidmatan dari segi keberkesanan dan kebolehpercayaan adalah mempunyai hubungan secara positif dengan tahap kepuasan ibu bapa. Selain itu, kajian ini juga mendapati pandangan ciri-ciri Montessori dari segi imej korporat, kerjasama guru dan teras kecekapan adalah mempunyai hubungan secara positif dengan tahap kepuasan ibu bapa. Begitu juga dengan tahap keterlibatan ibu bapa dalam hubungan mengenai pandangan ibu bapa terhadap kualiti perkhidmatan dan pandangan mereka mengenai ciri-ciri Montessori juga tidak disokong sepenuhnya oleh ibu bapa dengan tahap kepuasan

mereka. Oleh itu, gaya pengurusan dalam perkhidmatan pendidikan di sektor perkhidmatan swasta di Malaysia, terutamanya di tadika Montessori perlu dikaji semula dengan gaya yang bersesuaian dengan keperluan masa kini.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate parents' satisfaction for Montessori kindergarten in Penang. This study is also to examine the relationship between perceived service quality and parents' satisfaction. Moreover, this study examines the relationship between perceived Montessori characteristics and parents' satisfaction. This study also includes the level of partnership as an additional dimension that may moderates the relationship of parents' satisfaction. As overall, this study is an effort to improve Montessori kindergarten service quality in giving excellent education service to children, in a prospect of importance for parents to achieve their level of satisfaction. This study was conducted by distributing questionnaires purposively to 225 parents in Montessori kindergarten. Data collected were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. The findings revealed that perceived service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics were partially supported in relationship with parents' satisfaction. In perceived service quality, this study found that effectiveness and reliability are positively related to parents' satisfaction while in perceived Montessori characteristics, this study found that corporate image, teachers' cooperation and core competencies are also positively related to parents' satisfaction. Level of partnership also was found partially supported in relationship with perceived service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics. For instance, management approaches in business education particularly private sector in Malaysia, especially Montessori kindergarten needs to be revised to be more appropriate in modern standard of living.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter includes a brief explanation of the research background. It discusses the problems statement, research questions and research objectives. Finally, it describes the significance and outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background of the Study

Malaysia, a country with diverse cultures and rapid development, is set to work on education for all in our nation's vision 2020. In the past, kindergarten education was not part of the formal education system and is provided by several government agencies for children aged 4-6 years. Kindergarten education was mostly conducted by the private sector in the urban areas and various government agencies. Therefore, the care of kindergarten-aged children comes under a responsibility of a large number of government departments and social agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Natural Unity and Social development (now known as Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development), Ministry of Rural Development; and the several state departments.

Montessori kindergarten is private kindergarten education that required parent to pay expensive fees to facilitate the best kindergarten education for children cognitive development. Hence, delivering quality service in Montessori kindergarten education becomes important in portraying excellent icon and bringing satisfaction towards the parents.

Service quality is generally viewed as the output of the service delivery system, especially in the case of pure service system. Moreover, service quality is linked to customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is the key measure of the quality or for the service component of a product company. Therefore, it is strategic objective for most companies to success are by enhancing customer satisfaction. According to Zeithaml et.al (1992) knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly most critical step in delivering quality (as cited in Joseph et al., 2005). Firm that provides services that customers perceived as excellent requires that a firm knows what customers expect.

In kindergarten service, quality is a term early childhood professionals often use in describing their programs. Parents, too, are concerned about the quality of their children's education. This is true for families across the board, regardless of background or income level. In a recent national poll, 97 percent of the parents surveyed cited quality as their top priority in determining which early childhood programs they wanted their child to attend (Smith et. al., 1997). There is however, a difference in the quality of education received.

Unfortunately, many parents are now setting high expectations and demands on their children, which can be potentially damaging for young children (The Star, April 25, 2006). Montessori kindergarten, the service provider, agrees that their customer's expectation have accelerated over these recent years.

In providing service, most companies will receive customer request, suggestions and even complaints. Employees in the organization play an important role in giving information to customer. When information is not as they expected, this will leads to dissatisfaction. Moreover, complaints on Montessori kindergarten kept on increasing

yearly, on an average of 20 complaints sent by parents through letter, and 10 complaints through telephone (Source: Public Relation Section, Penang Education Department). There are also other complaints received by department through telephone fax and email.

In order to reduce the number of complaint, it is necessary for Montessori kindergarten to improve their quality of their services. They need to ensure they provide the windows decision making based on how students learn, how teachers teach and how education communities (from school to home and beyond) actually functions as dynamic and complex subcultures within the broader cultures (Martin, 2001).

Most of the complaints are regarding to health and safety as well as children long-term development and learning (The Star, January 31, 2006; Sunday Star, January 15, 2006, Kostelnik et. al., 1999) and staffing in terms of teachers' qualification and staff attitudes towards the children (Star Education, January 15, 2006, Buttercup Montessori Kindergarten Report, 2004). There are also complaints on stimulating environment in school where Montessori kindergartens provide inadequate of material (Kolstelnik et. al., 1999) to support children's explorations and development of advanced knowledge and skills. Furthermore, most of the complaints are related to inappropriate curriculum designed to support and enrich children aesthetic, affective, cognitive, language, physical and social development and leaning (Kolstelnik et. al., 1999, The Star, January 28, 2006, Buttercup Montessori Kindergarten Report, 2004).

For instance, poor-quality experiences lead to increased behavior problems and poorer academic progress in children. Such children are also more likely to have poor social skills (Howes, 1988, Vandell & Corasanti, 1990). The negative effects appear to be long lasting, with evidence of poor quality still apparent up to five years later. Other

consequences include an insecure personality with a challenged self-esteem and issues with their level of confidence. What is more important, as a parent, is to make your child comfortable in every aspect, showering him with affection and appreciating his uniqueness (The Star, April 25, 2006).

The SERVPERF model was used in this study to measure service quality. This study attempts to examine which dimensions are most relevant in Montessori kindergarten service by set into considerations all the five dimensions proposed by Cronin and Taylor. On top of this, perceived Montessori characteristics are also developed in this study and treated as an independent variable. It also used to measure service quality.

Generally, this study is to examine the impact of perceived service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics in Montessori kindergarten on parents' satisfaction, which can help principals, teachers and administrative staffs to improve their service quality.

1.2 Quality of Life

Quality of life is the sum of factors that contribute to the social, environmental and economic well-being of citizens (City of Vancouver Administrative Report, 2004). In Malaysia, the role of public service and administration has significantly changed over the years, in line with the country's economic growth and development. Its mission, objectives and functions have undergone various degrees of reform, especially under the explicit and implicit influences of changes in public policies, development strategies and initiatives. The success of Malaysia's development programs to a significant extend can

be attributed not only to the efficient and effective functioning of the economic system, but also to the stabilizing and to integrative functioning of the country's public administration system. Critical policy areas, which may be increasing or decreasing in importance, are:

1. **Education**
2. Social security
3. Health
4. Environment
5. Immigration
6. Criminal justice
7. Agriculture
8. Industrial
9. Public works
10. Urban decay/infrastructure
11. Micro economic reform
12. Macro economic management
13. Others

Thailand is also sharply changing its vision of choosing to address quality-of-life concerns rather than raw economic development. According to Sumet Tantivejkul, secretary-general to the National Economic and Social Development Board, although Thailand's economy has been growing at the fast pace over the past decade, that growth has been matched by a tangled society and unsustainable development (Nopporn, 1996). The new development plan will focus on education and training, improvement in the quality of life, economic and political decentralization and income distribution. Among the twelve main targets of the eight developments plan are:

1. To provide 9 years of basic **education** to every child
2. To upgrade the skills and knowledge of factory workers between the ages of 25 and 45
3. To reduce the poverty ratio to less than 10% from 14%
4. To reduce the current account deficit's percentage of the gross domestic product to 3.4% from over 8% now
5. To increase the household-saving rate to at least 10% of GDP from 5.5%.

Among developing countries, Korea recognized as relatively well-balanced country in terms of both economic growth and social development. Korea's ranking in terms of human development is a little bit higher than its income ranking, respectively among a total of 174 countries in 2000 (Song Lee, 2003). Korea has economically grown much faster than the developed countries have within a very short period. Yet it would appear that it has had neither sufficient time nor the means to translate its rapid income growth into an equally rapid improvement in its quality of life. As a society become more complex, or has people lead more complicated and affluent lives, life domains become more diversified. There are six domains of life measured in Korea, which are:

1. Income
2. Health
- 3. Education**
4. Work
5. Culture and information
6. Equity

Canada is known as the best place in the world to live. Canadian believes that there is an impression bolstered by their generally high standard of living and the amenities still available in their communities (City of Vancouver Administrative Report, 2004). In Vancouver specifically, shows some improvements and the same trends towards a declining quality of life for an increasing number of residents. In Vancouver, this indication of improvements are generally not as high as elsewhere in the country, while the trends towards a declining quality of life are greater and / or apply to proportionately higher numbers of residents, with compared to the rest of Canada. These acknowledge the factors such as:

1. Affordable, appropriate housing
2. Civic engagement

3. Community and social infrastructure
- 4. Education**
5. Employment
6. The local economy
7. The natural environment
8. Personal community and health
9. Personal financial security
10. Personal safety

In most situation however, they only provide general guidelines not specific criteria for determining quality. Meanwhile, Martinez (2000) also mentioned quality of life factors are:

1. Individual tax rates
2. Security
3. Housing
- 4. Schools (education)**
5. Healthcare
6. Whether
7. Culture
8. Geographic factor such as political and economic stability, real estate, telecommunications, travel accessibility and time zone.

The Economist Intelligent Unit (2005) has developed a new “quality of life index based on a unique methodology that links the result of subjective life-satisfaction surveys to the objective determinant of quality of life across country. The nine quality of life factors and the indicators use to represent these factors are:

1. Material wellbeing
2. Health
3. Political stability and security
4. Family life
5. Community life
6. Climate and geography
7. Job security
8. Political freedom
9. Gender equality

A number of other variables were also investigated but in line with finding in the literature, had no impact in the multivariate framework. These were **education levels**, the rate of real GDP growth and income inequality.

In general, education is one of the indicators mentioned in each of the quality of life factors. Therefore, it is undeniable that education is important in improving the quality of life. Thus, it is critical to study the importance of education and its impact towards the economic growth of the countries.

1.1 Education

Malaysia has one of the most remarkable growth records in modern history. In a quarter of a century (1973-1995), real average per capita income increased 2.5 times and the poverty rate shrank from slightly over half the population to 7.8 percent. If the poverty reduction continues at the same rate, there would be no one left below the international poverty line of \$2 dollars a day by next year.

Education is accorded high priority in national development, with about 15 percent of total public development expenditure allocated for this purpose under Malaysia's five-year development plan. In non-salary educational expenditures, Malaysia spent US\$252 per student in 1998, while Malaysia spent US\$10.78 per student in 1998 on teaching materials and other non-salary educational good. In Asia, public education expenditure grew by 151 percent in year 1994. Therefore, when economies grow, more is spent on educational goods and services per student. This raises the size of the education markets with strong rates of economic growth. By the year 2009, the education market in Malaysia will grow to US\$160 million (Honeyman, 2000).

There are 11 public universities, six private universities, about 600 government and private colleges, and several polytechnics and industrial training institutes that offer courses leading to certificate, diploma, degree and post-graduate qualifications. The total enrolment in public institutions of higher learning is projected to reach more than 250,000 this year, with more than half in the science and technical disciplines. The private sector has also set up educational institutions to supplement the government's effort to generate a larger pool of professional and semi-professionals. Among these are institutions of higher learning set up by large corporations such as Telecom Malaysia Berhad, Tenaga Nasional Berhad and Petronas. Various private colleges in Malaysia also offer degree programs on a twinning basis with overseas institutions of higher learning, while foreign universities from the UK and Australia have set up branch campuses in the country.

Patrinos (2006) has cited in Denison (1967) that improvement in the quality of the labor force, including increased education, were, important, together with other factors such as technological process and economies of scale. It is now generally recognized that education contributes to economic growth. It enhances the adoption and efficient use of new input into educated labor where skill labor is more complementary with capital than is unskilled labor which is enhanced by education. The importance of education for promoting economic growth is to affirm technological change. Technological change increases when there are more highly educated workers. Therefore, education is needed to support the development of a knowledge-based economy and enhance productivity and competitiveness. In this regard, efforts will be undertaken to develop an efficient and responsive education and training system to meet the demand for the knowledgeable

highly skilled labor force that is equipped with positive values and attitudes. Special emphasis will be given to produce a larger number of higher levels in Research and Development and Science and Technology work force.

1.3 National Education System in Malaysia

One of the most commonly cited indicators of the quality of national life as discussed in previous section is the attained education. Education is the responsibility of the Federal Government. The national education system encompasses education beginning from kindergarten to higher education. Primary and secondary education is free but not compulsory. The admission age to the first year of primary education is six. Most schools in the country are government or government-aided schools and a growing number of private schools. The school starts in January and ends in November. Students sit for common public examinations at the end of primary, lower, secondary, upper secondary and sixth form level.

Education as a whole is under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Education, which is responsible for managing a comprehensive school system ranging from primary to university level, regulate syllabus, control national examination and its supervises the development of education in the country.

Primary education in Malaysia covers a total period of six years. It is aimed to provide a good foundation for pupils to be proficient in reading, writing and arithmetic. At the end of the six years, primary school pupil will be assessed for the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah/The Primary School Assessment Test (UPSR/PSAT). Irrespective of

their performance in the PSAT, all primary school pupils are promoted to form one, the foundation year of secondary education.

Secondary education is the continuation of primary level education. The syllabus, *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah/Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSM/SSIC)* is developed to suit the needs and aspiration of the country. Secondary education is divided into three main levels: lower secondary level, upper secondary level and pre-university level.

1.3.1 Kindergarten Education

Kindergarten education is a part of the National Education System under the Education Act, 1996. The aim of kindergarten education is to provide a firm foundation for formal education. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) as well as private institutions run kindergartens. The major government agencies that are responsible for the kindergarten education are the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of National Unity and Community Development. Children enroll between the ages of four to six. All kindergartens have to abide the curriculum guidelines set by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum enables kindergarten children to acquire sufficient basic communication, social and other positive skills in preparation for primary schooling. The learning components include language and communication, physical development, moral and spiritual growth, socio-emotional development, aesthetic and creativity.

1.3.2 Types of Kindergarten in Malaysia

There are various types of kindergarten, which fulfill the different needs of parents. In Malaysia, parents can choose to send their children to KEMAS, Islamic, International, Montessori or other types of kindergarten.

Kemas Kindergarten

Kemas kindergarten is under a responsibility of a large number of government departments and social agencies such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Natural Unity and Social development (now known as Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development), Ministry of Rural Development; and the several state departments. Kemas kindergartens are developed with the implementation of National Kindergarten Curriculum, which there are more well-equipped and facilitated pre-school programmes in rural primary school. In urban settings, it is common for children to have more than two years of pre-school programmes before they enter Primary One. Children living in rural areas are being assisted by various government social agencies such as Kemas, Perpaduan and local primary school's pre-school annexes.

Islamic Kindergarten

What makes a kindergarten 'Islamic'? According to Lihanna (2004), the spiritual domain outlined in the National Kindergarten Curriculum is specifically divided into: Islamic Teaching Islam in Malaysia education and moral education, as Islam is the official faith of Malaysia. However, having Islamic education as the part of the curriculum does not automatically qualify a kindergarten as Islamic. The secular

education system mandates that in all levels of education Islam be taught to Muslim students only during the Islamic studies period. By default, Muslim students will be taught the Islamic education part of the curriculum while the non-Muslims will be taught the moral education part. Therefore, any kindergarten can have the Islamic education component. However, to the Malaysian public, this does not necessary make these schools 'Islamic', as this secular approach does not embrace the philosophy that Islam is a way of life and not confined to a specific class period. In addition to the national curriculum, the Islamic kindergarten also offers subjects that are overtly Islamic in nature, such as learning to cite the Koran. A kindergarten that is Islamic generally clearly states so, in either its brochure or its name. An Islamic kindergarten usually adds the terms 'Islam' itself as a modifier or uses an Arabic element in its name.

International Kindergarten

International kindergarten is established to meet the needs of expatriates' and Malaysian students. The school provides the young people from the age of four with an education of the highest standard using English as the medium of instruction. The school exists to provide high quality of international education for children, enabling them to transfer to their own national or other education system.

Montessori Kindergarten

Montessori is a philosophy that respects the unique individuality of each child. It is founded on the belief that children should be free to succeed and learn without restriction or criticism. It is a process that helps children learns in their own way at their

own pace. The main concept of Montessori is to promote the joy of learning. Another important skill that is provided by Montessori is self-reliance and independence. Montessori work in methodical way in which each steps is the process of learning. In other words, it encourages children to develop their observation skills by doing various types of activities. These activities includes the use of five senses, kinetic movement, spatial refinement, small and large motor skill coordination, and concrete knowledge that lead to later abstraction (Aisha, 2001).

A Montessori child is more independent because he or she is able to do basic daily routines such as pouring his or her own drinks. Furthermore, through observation and interview with one of the principals, it is noted that Montessori children are more discipline because the curriculum design is more teacher-centered with minimum participation from students.

1.3.3 How Parents Choose School for Their Children?

School choice is suppose to be a movement to let more parents choose what schools their children will attend (Martin, 2001). In a true market, to design an effective syllabus for a school, one must put into consideration to meet those three demands assumes by Henig (1996) which are:

- (1) Quality education is the chief consideration of family's school decisions.
- (2) Families can obtain accurate information regarding school programs and performance.
- (3) Families will exit neighborhood schools if they find "better" education at equal or lesser costs elsewhere.

According to Martin (2001), parents will indicate their consideration for evaluating school performance based on quality of education that is important to the families. They were the teaching of basic skills (top priority), teacher attentiveness, followed by critical thinking, a safe and orderly environment, attention to the child, special curriculum program and general student behavior. Non-academic factor such as cost effective, location, social composition of schools, desire to keep siblings or friends together, and moral value of staff as influencing their decisions. These are some entire factors that related to service quality and Montessori characteristics perceived by parents in Montessori kindergarten that will influence the level of parents' satisfaction.

1.4 Problems Statement

As the education industry grows, competition among school providers becomes more intense. With the population of children in Malaysia has increased, it indicates that too many alternative kindergartens grew up in a competitive education market. Therefore, parents have to be more concern in choosing the perfect school for their children.

The introduction of the Montessori education has much to do with the competitive nature of accommodated to the kindergarten demand. However, the increasing popularity of Montessori education is set to be closely link to prestige of the education provided. Conversely, some of the Montessori faced or decrease in their students' enrollment due to the bad reputation as a results of previous customers (parents) dissatisfaction. Morrison (2000) found that 75% of parents changed their children kindergarten because of their dissatisfaction towards the kindergarten. The bad reputation of Montessori kindergarten might be spread by the word of mouth from the parents to their relative and friends.

However, a research done by McNichols (1992) portrays that Montessori kindergarten does not include parents' involvement in improving the children's academic performance. This current practice often results to parents' dissatisfaction, which would create negative impact to the image and reputation of the kindergarten. These parents seem to look kindergarten that includes their participation in their children education such as concurrently providing the parents with information on the children progress at kindergarten.

Even though Montessori kindergarten develops the best kindergarten education in child academic progress, there still too many cases shows that administrator and teachers have given in to parent pressure to produce children of Montessori at high competence in reading and math skills. McNichols (1992) found that Montessori kindergarten push children too far and too fast in children's academic work such as reading and math. Parents were dissatisfied with the Montessori services when they found that their child does not much cope with the lessons provided in Montessori such in basic concept to read, write and count.

Lillard (1997) found that Montessori is out of date when there are lacks of current development of computer usage towards Montessori children. This current practice too will lead to parents' dissatisfaction. Montessori kindergarten does not entertain the influence of mass media such as computer. Moreover, children will make only use of materials provided to enhance their observation on cognitive development. Nevertheless, by using materials alone will not enhance students understanding of the changes in the Practical Life curriculum area such as life science.

In the case of Montessori kindergarten, however the kindergarten has to provide sufficient teaching methods, academic, knowledge, skills and abilities to the children. These will enhance parents' satisfaction towards school capabilities in upgrading their children performance. Literature review found that there was little evidence done in perceived service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics in Montessori kindergarten. As a service provider, is expected to be sufficient in delivering service to Montessori kindergarten customer. Given these situations, parents' satisfaction on service quality, level of partnership (parent involvement) and the characteristics of Montessori itself is an interesting issue to study.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To study the reasons parents choose Montessori as their children's kindergarten.
2. To investigate on how service quality offered in Montessori kindergartens influence the parents' satisfaction.
3. To examine whether perceived Montessori characteristics influence the parents' satisfaction.
4. To determine whether level of partnership of the parents can moderates the relationships between the service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics with parents' satisfaction.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What are the reasons parents choose Montessori kindergarten as their children's kindergarten?

2. Does the service quality in terms of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy can influence parents' satisfaction in Montessori kindergarten?
3. How can perceived Montessori characteristics in terms of academic, teachers' social skills and corporate image influence parents' satisfaction in Montessori kindergarten?
4. How can level of partnership moderates the relationship?

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Parents

A parent refers as consumers to kindergarten education services. They can freely crossing and responsible being looking after their children's health and well-being, as they are also responsible with others for looking after the greater good of the community (Martin, 2001).

Parents' Satisfaction

Parent satisfaction may ask parents to rate their satisfaction with the amount of services they or their child received, the quality of the services and the quality of their relationship with professionals (Summers et al., 2005 cited in Bailey, 2003; Johnson & Duffet, 2002).

Service Quality

Parasuraman (1988) cited in Lewis and Booms (1983) which have defined service quality as a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations.

Delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis.

Kindergarten

A kindergarten refers as a place for children to learn. Kindergarten provides children the experience to draw conclusions about school and their abilities as learners in school (La Paro et al., 2003).

Montessori

The Montessori Method is a philosophy that respects the unique individuality of each child. The main concept of Montessori is to promote the joy of learning. This joy of learning develops a well-adjusted person who has a purpose and direction in his or her life. Children, who experience the joy of learning, are happy, confident, fulfilled children. In essence, Montessori helps bring forth the giftedness of each child.

Another important skill it teaches is self-reliance and independence. It helps a child to become independent by teaching him or her life skills, which is called practical life. Montessori children learn to dress themselves, help cook, put their toys and clothes away and take an active part of their household, neighborhood and school.

Montessori encourages children to develop their observation skills by doing many types of activities. These activities include use of the five senses, kinetic movement, spatial refinement, small and large motor skill coordination, and concrete knowledge that lead to later abstraction.

For a grade school child, Montessori encourages a child to proceed at his or her own pace onto abstract thinking, writing, reading, science, mathematics and most importantly, to absorb his or her culture and environment. Culture includes interaction with nature, art, music, religion, societal organizations and customs.

Perceived Service Quality

Perceived service quality refers to as customer judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Perceived Montessori Characteristics

Perceived Montessori Characteristics refers to as Montessori internal and external environment that contributes to an individuality of a Montessori kindergarten. Focus of this study is the internal attributes, which are academic, teachers' social skills and corporate image.

Corporate Image

Nguyen and Leblanc (2002) cited in Barich and Kotler (1991) that corporate image is described as the overall impression made on the minds of the public about an organization.

Partnership

Partnership is also known as parents' involvement. Parents' involvement in schools depends in part, on how welcome they feel by the school. Early opportunities to visit the

school and speak with the teacher may determine how welcome parents feel (Kreider, 2002).

1.8 Scope of the Study

This study builds on existing studies on service quality in early childhood education. It analyses the five dimensions of service quality perceived by parents in Montessori kindergarten in Penang. Moreover, it analyses three dimensions of perceived Montessori characteristics. This study also includes the level of partnership as an additional dimension that may moderate the relationship of parents' satisfaction. The more dissatisfied parents towards the service quality in Montessori kindergarten may lead to the overload complaints to the school and these may convey Montessori kindergarten to provide more sufficient service quality to increase the level of parents' satisfaction.

1.9 Significance of the Study

Understanding of a new concept in an education business is very important for developing an effective marketing strategy, in order to regulate marketing practice or to cause socially desirable behaviors. It is hope that the findings from this study can be utilized to promote the urgency of studying parents' satisfaction in terms of perceived service quality and perceived Montessori characteristics in Montessori kindergarten. In order to achieve parents' satisfaction, Montessori kindergarten should be given better publicity to many aspects to make them a better kindergarten. The result of this study could also serve as a reference to Montessori kindergarten on their service quality that related to parents satisfaction.

1.10 Organization of the Study

There are five chapters in this research. Chapter one consists of research background, research problem, research objectives and research questions. The research problem is to address the important of conducting this research. Chapter two discusses on literature review of all variables. The chapter highlights previous research and findings by various researchers. This chapter is important to indicate that every variable is supported by previous study. It also to strengthen the research that will be carried out. Chapter three explains the methodology of the research. It elaborates on how the study will be conducted and illustrates on population, sample, design, instrument and statistical analysis that will be used. This research will presents chapter four that is the analysis of the study. Lastly, chapter five discusses the findings, explain the limitations and suggestion future research.

CHAPTER 2

THE MONTESSORI METHOD

2.0 What is Early Childhood Education?

Early childhood education involves any group program-serving children from birth to 8 years of age that is designed to promote children's intellectual, social, emotional, language, and physical development and learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This translates into a wide array of programs attended by children of many different ages. Early childhood education includes programs for infants and toddlers, as well as preschool, kindergarten and primary programs. These programs may be half-day or full-day, public or private, enrichment or remedial in focus, targeted at low, medium or high income families and administered by a variety of institutions in the community (Kolsteltnik et. al., 1999). Among many types of kindergarten programs have been discussed in previous chapter, this study will focus on Montessori kindergarten method in more detail as early childhood education program.

2.1 Maria Montessori

The Montessori Method expounded by Dr Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) is method of education, which combines a philosophy with a practical approach that allows the child freedom to act spontaneously within a structured and prepared environment. She studied mathematics and engineering at a technical school and went to the University of Rome, where she became the first women in Italy to receive a degree in medicine (Aisha, 2001).

Montessori launched her medical career at the State Orthophrenic School in Rome. There she worked with rejected children. Her success in helping them as well as their regular-school peers convinced her to leave her medical profession and focus on education. To learn the functions of human thought, she returned to her university to study philosophy and anthropology, and later headed the department of Pedagogic Anthropology.

Montessori continues her work with children from diverse cultures and background and not just those special needs, but also normal children from both deprived and affluent families. She concluded from her observations that children needed more than medical and physical care for all-around growth and development. In addition, they needed more than what regular schools were giving them.

She devised an educational strategy revolving around the training of children's physical senses and motor skills, using special designed materials, in what she called "prepared environments". She observed that, given the right materials and the right surroundings, children tended to engage in spontaneous activity. Through such activity, they acquired knowledge and skill, learning to tend to their own needs and overcome their own inabilities without much adult intervention.

While her first working experience was with special-needs children, Montessori later found that her observations applied similarly to all children. Her early experiments taught her that it was necessary to return to basics, and set her fundamental ideas on educating the sensory and muscular systems. Seeing her success with special needs children, Montessori began to question the teaching approach followed in schools for normal children (Aisha, 2001).