



## Examining the Factors Influencing Parents' Preschool Selection in Malaysia Post-COVID-19

Tee Mey Chen<sup>1</sup>, Loo Fung Lan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Faculty of Education, Open University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

Published Online: August 09, 2024

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant disruptions and transformations in the operations of preschools across Malaysia. Consequently, parents' decision-making process when choosing a preschool for their children has become less straightforward. This study aims to elucidate the factors that influence parents' selection of preschools. A questionnaire survey was conducted involving 70 parents of preschool children enrolled in four kindergartens in Malaysia. Descriptive and ANOVA analyses were employed to assess the levels of various factors and their interrelationships. Our findings uncovered nine key post-COVID-19 elements that impact parents' decisions when selecting a preschool: culture, religion, teachers, curriculum, safety, practical considerations, management, reputation, and facilities. These factors exert varying levels of influence on parents' preschool choices. Among these factors, safety, the curriculum and educational philosophy, and the practical aspects of a preschool emerged as the top three considerations for parents. The results revealed a significant disparity in parents' preschool selection based on income levels. Lower-income parents displayed less enthusiasm for preschools that required substantial parental support for blended online learning than their higher-income counterparts. These findings offer valuable insights into the criteria parents use to choose a preschool for their children, shedding light on their specific needs and expectations.

### KEYWORDS:

early childhood, parents, preschool choices, kindergarten, Covid-19

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The preschool landscape in the country has experienced extensive disruptions and significant changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic [18]. However, as children return to preschools in the post-COVID-19 era, uncertainties abound, potentially causing anxiety for parents seeking to choose or re-choose the right preschool for their children. Despite the efforts made by preschool operators to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19 through virtual, blended, or flexible learning approaches to ensure the safety of children and staff and to maintain enrolment rates, this new educational landscape is a novel experience for all stakeholders – preschool operators, principals, teachers, parents, and children.

Parents play a pivotal role in deciding the best preschool for their children. Without a clear understanding of

*Corresponding Author: Loo Fung Lan*

*\*Cite this Article: Tee Mey Chen, Loo Fung Lan (2024). Examining the Factors Influencing Parents' Preschool Selection in Malaysia Post-COVID-19. International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies, 4(8), 848-854*

parents' considerations in the post-pandemic era, it becomes challenging to develop effective preschool policies that cater to parental needs [16]. It is important to acknowledge that parents now prioritize enhanced hygiene and a safe environment to protect their children from COVID-19. They also expect teachers to be equipped to address the emotional challenges faced by children who have been away from school for an extended period or who may have fallen behind in their studies. To meet these evolving demands, preschool operators are required to swiftly adapt, aligning with government mandates for employee vaccination, daily sanitation, and disease prevention measures as they prepare for preschool reopening in the post-COVID-19 phase.

In order to foster parental satisfaction and ensure the consistent enrolment rates in the post-COVID-19 era, it is imperative for preschool operators to establish an environment that promotes the holistic development of children. With these imperatives in mind, this study seeks to examine the factors influencing parental choices of preschools in Malaysia during the post-COVID-19 period. The research questions guiding this investigation are as follows:

1. What factors do parents take-into-consideration when selecting a preschool for their children?
2. What are the top three most significant reasons for parents to enrol their children in a particular preschool?
3. Is there a significant difference in parents' preschool selections based on their income levels?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous studies have illuminated the complex procedure by which parents make choices regarding preschools for their children. This procedure commonly encompasses the evaluation of their children's requirements, the collection of pertinent information, the consideration of multiple available alternatives, and the identification of essential criteria to ultimately determine the most appropriate preschool." [11] [19]. Numerous studies have explored the factors that influence parents' decisions when selecting preschools [3] [6] [10] [13]. However, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding the post-Covid-19 era, particularly within the context of preschool selection in Malaysia.

For instance, it was found that a significant 84% of Latino mothers regarded safety as the most important factor in their preschool selection process, and 76% of mothers emphasized the importance of a welcoming preschool environment [8]. Additionally, teacher professionalism emerged as the foremost criterion for preschool selection. Parents indicated that professionalism could be assessed through direct interaction with educators and believed that competent practitioners contributed significantly to the overall quality of a preschool [10]. The overall atmosphere of the preschool was another influential factor, encompassing aspects such as the happiness of children, positive staff relationships, and a welcoming ambiance. This atmosphere was often reflected in the relationships between professionals and parents and the information parents received from educators. The pedagogical approach employed by the educators, which included warm interactions with children, active engagement in play, effective rule establishment, discipline enforcement, and handling of challenging situations, also played a pivotal role.

In the Malaysian context, similar study on the factors influencing parents' choice of preschools was conducted [19]. The research revealed that Malay parents exhibited a preference for Islamic-based (95%), branded (84%), English-medium (72%), and privately-run (52%) preschools. Higher-income Malay parents tended to opt for private, English-language, Islamic preschools, while the lower-income group favoured government Islamic preschools. Additional survey-based studies showed that factors such as curriculum quality, educational standards, hygiene, and religious values also played a significant role in parents' preschool choices [3] [19]. Furthermore, teacher qualifications and training, program standards, and parent-teacher interaction were identified as primary considerations

in the selection process [6]. Among these influencing factors, parents consistently expressed concern about the school's curriculum, safety, hygiene, and the proximity of the preschool to their homes [15]. Parents tended to favour preschools that were conveniently located, as it reduced transportation costs and made drop-off and pickup more accessible. In contrast, practical factors and administrative aspects were considered the least important factors in kindergarten selection [3].

In general, some key factors were identified from the past research that exert a profound influence on parents' decisions when it comes to enrolling their children in a high-quality preschool. First and foremost, The Covid-19 lockdown measures had caused the physical discharge of children at preschool and the removal of chances for children to participate in extracurricular activities [14]. Preschool operators have made enormous efforts to adapt and innovate in response to the recent changes in circumstances, such as schools shifting in very different ways to online, hybrid, blended, flexible or personalised learning facilities for varying periods in place of traditional face-to-face learning. However, parents who are not typically involved in their children's school work might face difficulties and may look for preschools that can provide information and response about what parents can do to support their children's learning at home, such as material and pedagogical facilities support to whose parents who do not have the resources to access distance education, or children who usually receive special support for their learning [14]. Thus, it is clear and widely recognised that this crisis has stimulated innovation in the education sector.

Moreover, the cultural and linguistic background of parents plays a pivotal role in shaping their preferences for preschool programs. A study delved into the distinctions among three distinct groups of Chinese parents was conducted [17]. The Chinese-literate group places a strong emphasis on their ethnic cultural heritage, language, and expressions. Mandarin, in particular, is deemed of paramount importance to the preservation of their Chinese identity. In contrast, non-Chinese literate parents, educated in English-medium missionary schools, prioritize English as a pathway to enhanced career opportunities. Meanwhile, an in-between category has emerged, characterized by social and economic mobility. These parents, by enrolling their children in Chinese schools, encourage trilingual, thereby advancing their children's prospects for career growth and life opportunities. Religion represents the third significant factor shaping parents' preschool choices. The religious beliefs and practices of parents are intricately linked to the three prominent faiths within Chinese communities: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Each of these faiths espouses distinct tenets and values related to education, morality, and personal development [19].

Additionally, the quality of teachers takes centre stage in parents' decision-making process [10].

Characteristics such as qualifications and training are of paramount importance, with a plethora of research highlighting their significance. Effective preschool teachers have the capacity to accommodate diverse learning preferences, needs, abilities, interests, and backgrounds among students. Additionally, the establishment of trusting relationships between teachers, children, and parents carries particular weight, especially among low-income mothers.

Curriculum forms the key determinant particularly in the context of Malaysia, where adherence to the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) is mandatory [12]. Within this framework, preschools have the flexibility to adopt various approaches that align with their educational philosophy, cater to the well-being of the children, and address the specific developmental needs of the students. Parents consider several critical aspects when selecting a preschool. These include the curriculum, which encompasses factors such as the overall learning environment, teaching materials, facilities that cater to children's interests and developmental needs, and the focus of teachers on children's daily living skills. Parents place particular importance on the overall atmosphere of the preschool [4]. They seek an environment that is welcoming, comfortable, and characterized by a child-centred educational philosophy. This welcoming and child-centric approach is identified as a highly significant factor influencing parents when choosing a preschool for their children.

Health and safety, sanitation, equipment, and a homelike environment were the parents' priorities when it came to their preschoolers because parents want to make sure that their child has a positive, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate experience [9]. Parents rated health and safety as being of the utmost importance criteria [2]. Lastly, parents frequently list convenience elements as priorities when choosing preschool including programme timing, place, transport, and price [1] [7]. Housewives have more flexible schedules than other working mothers thus they place less weight on convenience concerns [8]. Low or moderate incomes families were more possible than high-income families to select a preschool based on those practical considerations, in contrast, high-income families were significantly more likely to select a preschool that prioritised quality [15] instead of practical criteria.

**III. METHODS**

To determine the answers to the research questions, this study used quantitative analysis via a survey questionnaire. The quantitative results give adequate explanations for the research questions.

**Participants**

The samples were 70 parents from four registered preschools in Malaysia. The sample collected had some common defining characteristics, Chinese parents with aged 3 to 6 children which are homogeneous and common in culture, language and religion.

**Instruments**

The instrument was a self-administered questionnaire and the researcher employed online questionnaire. There were three parts to the questionnaire. Part 1 collected the socio-demographic data of respondents and these were essential to determine whether parents' demographic characteristics have any relation with their preschool selection factors. It consisted of closed-ended questions where the respondents determine one of the options given as their response. Part 2 consisted of 28 questions adopted from [7] with Likert scales from 5 (will definitely affect) to 1 (will not affect) used to measure factors that might affect parents' choice of preschool. Part 3 consisted of 9 items adopted from [6] to discover which factors has greatest influence parents' preschool selection by choosing the top 3 qualities factors out of 9 items listed.

**Data Analysis**

All quantitative data were coded, entered and analysed using IBM SPSS statistic software 28 version. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse ordinal and nominal data. Means and standard deviations were calculated for items and categories of preschool selection. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated for hypothesis testing. The items of the questionnaire were validated by an early childhood expert and the reliability of the instrument was checked. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the items was reported as 0.88, which indicates that the scale is significantly reliable. All the items in the scales were internally consistent and measure the same variable.

**IV. RESULTS**

**Demographic**

The demographic information for the participants is illustrated in **Table 1**.

**Table 1. Demographic information**

Participants (N=70)	Frequency	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Female	40	57.1
Male	30	42.9
<u>Education Level</u>		
Secondary lower & below	4	5.7
Secondary upper	9	12.9
Diploma	10	14.3
Bachelor	38	54.3
Master & above	9	12.9
<u>Family Income</u>		
RM0- 4,000	4	5.7
RM4,001- 8,000	15	21.4
RM8,001- 12,000	28	40.0
RM12,001- 16,000	11	15.7
RM16,001- 20,000 above	12	17.1

**RQ1: What are parents' preschool selection factors**

Table 2 shows the frequency of factors influencing parents' decisions when selecting a preschool. The data reveals that the "Safety" factor holds the highest priority, scoring an impressive 4.39 (SD = 0.65), indicating its significant impact on parental decision-making. Following closely are the "Curriculum & Philosophy" factor, with a rating of 4.37 (SD = 0.59), and the "Teacher" factor, scoring 4.30 (SD = 0.61). These top three factors stand out as the most crucial determinants in parents' preschool selection.

Subsequent to these primary considerations, the "Religious" factor received a notable rating of 4.22 (SD = 0.65), underlining its importance in parental decision-making. The "Management" factor followed with a rating of 4.15 (SD = 0.61), and the "Reputation" factor with a rating of 4.13 (SD = 0.71). While these factors are also significant, they rank slightly below safety, curriculum & philosophy, and teacher in terms of importance. Factors related to "Languages & Culture," "Practical considerations," and "Facilities post-Covid-19" were also taken-into-account, but received relatively lower scores. "Languages & Culture" obtained a rating of 3.98 (SD = 0.65), "Practical" factors received a rating of 3.93 (SD = 0.62), and "Facilities post-Covid-19" had a rating of 3.91 (SD = 1.03).

Data reveals that 85.7% parents considered safety to have a moderate to high impact (4.00-5.00) on their decision. Similarly, both curriculum and philosophy, and teacher quality were highly influential, with 84.3% of parents deeming them important factors. Other factors, such as religion (81.4%), management (78.6%), and reputation (70%), were also significant but had slightly fewer parents considering them highly influential. Language & culture (61.4%), practical considerations (50%), and Facilities post-Covid-19 (34.3%) were factors that some parents took-into-account in their decision-making, but to a lesser extent.

**Table 2. Parents' preschool selection factors (N=70)**

Factors	Mean	Std Dev	Percentage (%)
Safety	4.39	.65	85.71
Curriculum & philosophy	4.37	.59	84.29
Teacher	4.30	.61	84.29
Religion	4.22	.65	81.43
Management	4.15	.61	78.57
Reputation	4.13	.71	70.00
Language & culture	3.98	.65	61.43
Practical	3.93	.62	50.00
Facilities (post-COVID 19)	3.91	1.03	34.29

Table 3 presents an overview of all 28 items on the instrument, categorized into three levels of importance: high,

moderate, and low. Among these items, those with the highest mean ratings included "Preschool is clean and disinfected regularly" with a remarkable score of 4.57 (SD = 0.73), closely followed by "Teacher is warm and trustworthy" at 4.56 (SD = 0.74). Additionally, "Preschool helps my child learn how to learn" and "Preschool is safe (with a focus on entrance and exit security, and regular fire safety inspections)" both received substantial ratings of 4.50 (SD = 0.78) and 4.50 (SD = 0.81), respectively. In contrast, certain items garnered lower ratings, with "Preschool provides transportation" at 2.86 (SD = 1.18), "Preschool is English-medium with diverse staff and students" at 3.53 (SD = 0.90), and "Preschool placed at a preferred primary school or region" at 3.73 (SD = 1.25) ranking among the lowest.

**Table 3. Ranking Items by Means Score of Parent's Preschool Selection Factors**

Selection Items	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Level I High (Means range 4.31-5.00)</b>		
Preschool is clean and disinfected on a regular basis	4.57	.734
Teacher is warm and trustworthy	4.56	.735
Preschool helps my child learn how to learn	4.50	.776
Preschool is safe (ie. pay attention to entrance & exit security, fire safety pass inspection regularly)	4.50	.812
Preschool near to my home/ workplace	4.50	.812
Preschool feels welcoming and child-centred	4.47	.737
Preschool aids my child make friends and socialize	4.47	.696
Teacher is skilled / educated in child development	4.39	.687
Tuition cost is affordable	4.31	.713
<b>Level II Moderate (Means range 4.00- 4.30)</b>		
Preschool get ready my child for the conversion to primary school	4.29	.837
Preschool possess a perfect child-to-staff ratio	4.27	.721
Preschool possess operation timing that fit my schedule	4.26	.928
Preschool teaches early reading skills	4.24	.892
Preschool teaches Chinese language and cultural value	4.23	.837
Preschool includes Buddhism religion focusing on moral, concentration, wisdom education	4.22	.646

Preschool is accredited	4.21	.883
Preschool has good leadership	4.21	.849
Preschool emphasises 3 languages in Chinese, English and Malay	4.17	.932
Preschool teaches early math skills	4.16	.828
Preschool has nutrition and good taste of food	4.10	.903
Preschool has a good reputation	4.04	.999
<b>Level II Low (Means range 2.00-3.99)</b>		
Teacher's turnover is low	3.97	.851
Preschool has flexible post-Covid-19 sick absence policies and provide support for children to learn at home	3.96	1.148
Preschool provides hybrid/ blended/ flexible learning post Covid-19	3.86	1.107
Preschool use various ways to communicate with parents to enhance parental involvement.	3.84	1.044
Preschool placed at primary school or region I like	3.73	1.250
Preschool is an English medium with diverse staff and students	3.53	.896
Preschool provides transportation	2.86	1.183

**RQ2: What are the three most important reasons for parents to enrol their children?**

The results showed that the majority of parents prioritize safety factors, Curriculum & Philosophy factors, and Teacher factors as the most critical when making decisions about enrolling their children in a preschool. This is evident from responses such as "The kindergarten attaches great importance to the safety and cleanliness of the environment and facilities" (75%), "The kindergarten setting, classrooms, and curriculum are designed based on the children's interests and various aspects of their development (72%)", and "Interaction among educators and children is positive, fostering open dialogue and utilizing diverse forms of body language" (52%). These findings align with the objectives of research question 1, confirming that parents indeed prioritize Safety, Curriculum & Philosophy, and Teacher factors as the top three important considerations when selecting a preschool for their children.

**Research Question 3: Is there any significant difference in parents' selection factors based on income level?**

Table 5 demonstrates a statistically significant difference in the mean value of the facility post-Covid-19 factor among at least two groups ( $F(2,67) = [7.22]$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). This comparison was carried out using a one-way ANOVA to assess the impact of income groups on parents' perceptions. The income groups considered were low income, medium income, and high income. The results of Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons, which showed that the mean value

of the facility post-Covid-19 factor differed significantly between the low and high-income groups ( $p = 0.02$ ). However, there was no statistically significant difference observed in the mean value of the facility post-Covid-19 factor between the low and medium-income groups ( $p = 0.06$ ) or between the medium and high-income groups ( $p = 0.873$ ). These findings suggest that parents with low income (earning between RM0 and RM8,000) rated the facility post-Covid-19 factor significantly less favourably than parents with medium income (earning between RM8,001 and RM12,000) and high income (earning RM12,001 and above).

**Table 5. ANOVA summary results (N = 70)**

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Facility post-Covid-19	12.875	2	6.438	7.216	.001
<b>Tukey-HSD</b>					
Income Group	Income Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	
Low Income	Medium Income	-.897	.281	.006	
Low Income	High Income	-1.029	.293	<b>.002</b>	
High Income	Medium Income	.132	.266	.873	

**V. DISCUSSION**

The study revealed that all nine factors had an influence on parents' selection of a preschool, but the level and order of importance varied among them. The factors parents prioritized when selecting a preschool for their children were as follows: Safety factor was identified as the top priority, followed by Curriculum & Philosophy, and Teacher factor, which ranked as the 2nd and 3rd top priorities, respectively. These findings indicate that parents' primary concerns revolve around their children's well-being and the quality of their daily experiences, learning, and development. Other factors such as Religion, Management, Reputation, Language, and Culture, while important, are influenced by individual beliefs, personal histories, and experiences and may not hold the same level of importance as the top three factors.

Notably, parents expressed a strong emphasis on environment-related aspects, particularly health and safety, cleanliness, facilities, and creating a homely atmosphere. This concern for safety aligns with previous research, as studies have shown that parents prioritize ensuring a safe, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate environment for

their children [9]. Research [19] found that 84% of Latina mothers considered safety the most critical factor when choosing a preschool. Additionally, the results also aligned with [2], revealed that 99.3% of parents ranked "health and safety" as their top priority.

The quality of teachers was another crucial factor for parents, with a particular emphasis on teacher features [2]. Teacher quality, encompassing aspects such as the teacher's attitude, teacher-to-child ratio, density of teachers, teacher experience, and relationships with the children, ranked as the most important factor in preschool quality. Besides, the qualifications and training of teachers were considered vital [6].

The curriculum factor also played a significant role in parents' decisions, echoing the findings of Duo (2007), who identified the curriculum as the most important factor. This included the emphasis on children's interests, appropriate development, and teachers focusing on daily living skills. Similar to [4], the study showed that parents valued a welcoming and child-centred philosophy.

On the other hand, factors like Practical considerations and Facility post-Covid-19 were viewed with less priority, with 50% of parents moderately agreeing with the Practical factor and 65.7% with the Facility post-Covid-19 factor. The variation in importance may stem from individual parents having different preferences regarding practical factors like location, transportation, cost, and flexible schedules, based on their specific needs. For instance, working mothers and non-working mothers may prioritize different aspects of practicality. The location of the preschool, such as its proximity to home or workplace, was considered highly important by 92.9% of parents, aligning with previous studies that emphasized the importance of easy access to preschool to reduce children's fatigue and stress.

Parents also showed less enthusiasm for the Facility post-Covid-19 factor, which includes blended learning, online learning, and support for learning at home. This may be attributed to concerns about the lack of social interaction in preschool, which is crucial for children's learning and development. Parents with lower income levels, specifically those earning RM8,000 or below, rated the Facility post-Covid-19 factor less favourably, as they may face challenges in supporting their children's learning at home, especially if they have limited resources and need to work longer hours. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges for parents and children, and while online learning was introduced, not all parents were equally equipped to support their children's education from home. The limitations in resources, employment instability, and the stress of working from home exacerbated the difficulties faced by low-income families.

Furthermore, online learning can hinder the social and emotional development of preschoolers by reducing physical interaction. The online coursework could impede the progress of low-income and underprepared students, and

this limitation was likely a concern for parents when considering online or virtual learning [5]. Technical challenges, lack of guidance, and the absence of social interaction were the factors that parents with low incomes may have struggled with in adopting online learning. In summary, parents placed less emphasis on online learning due to its challenges and the critical role that physical interaction plays in a preschoolers' development.

### ***Recommendations for practice***

This study underscores the paramount importance of safety and hygiene, curriculum and philosophy, and teacher quality factors when parents choose a preschool for their children post-Covid-19. To enhance both enrolment rates and parental satisfaction, preschool operators and administrators should prioritize improvements in these critical areas. Operators should maintain a preschool environment that is consistently safe, clean, and hygienic. They should focus on enhancing teacher qualifications and training, ensuring the recruitment of teachers with commendable attributes, and developing a child-centered and needs-based curriculum.

Furthermore, educators should collaborate closely with parents to employ effective pedagogical strategies that stimulate children's thinking and development, leading to more positive outcomes. Additionally, the Malaysian government could consider offering educational subsidies and vouchers to help parents broaden their preschool options and make preschool more affordable. Providing low-income families with free online courses, gadgets, computers, and internet packages could further support their children's education.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The study identified nine key factors, including culture, religion, teacher quality, curriculum & philosophy, safety, practical considerations, management, reputation, and the facility post-Covid-19 factor, that influence parents' decisions when choosing a preschool. Among these factors, safety, curriculum & philosophy, and teacher quality emerged as the top priorities for parents when selecting a preschool for their children. These findings reaffirm the central role of safety, effective teaching methods, and child-centric curriculum in parents' decision-making process.

Moreover, the study also revealed a significant difference in parents' preschool selection based on their income levels. While income played a role in shaping preferences, no substantial variation was observed concerning parents' education levels. To improve the overall quality of preschools and enhance enrolment rates in the post-Covid-19 context, recommendations were provided for operators, educators, and government authorities.

## **VII. DISCLOSURE**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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