

CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION OF PENANG

SEMINAR ON 'EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT  
18 - 22 NOVEMBER, 1983  
PENANG, MALAYSIA

CHILD CARE CENTRES AND PRESCHOOL  
EDUCATION

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by

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Abstract

Child care centres in Malaysia that were surveyed in 1982 offer in varying degrees of comprehensiveness, conventional programmes of activities for children below 4. Such activities define essentially the local conception of 'preschooling' for children in this age group. It is argued in this paper that such definitions of preschool education are based on scanty knowledge of child development as applicable to the local conditions and Malaysian infants. To some extent, established kindergarten curricula and parental expectations have shaped the activities planned for the very young who are sent to child care centres. Hence, variety rather than consistency characterise the type of programmes provided by child care centres. There are three identifiable forms of child care agencies viz. institute, home and estate based. Institute-based centres are generally professionally organised bases sponsored by private or state and voluntary supports and are often large to middle sized projects. Home-based operators are largely small-scale and services are provided in the minders' residences. Estates have for a long time organised their nurseries and kindergartens for children of the labourers and large numbers are involved at these child care centres.

Gross disparities characterise the various types of centres even in considering a few aspects such as, the available activities and facilities to support these. The problem engendered in the inequalities assume social overtones especially with the concentration of Indians in the estates which generally pay very little note to activities and child care programmes. Other ethnic groups predominated at the institutes which generally subscribed most strongly to schedules of activities and the home-based centres.



It is further stressed that rigid and specially designed curricula for the preschooling of such young children is not at issue and should not form the chief matter of concern. There should rather be more collated effort at extending local understanding of child behaviour and its development. Even with more knowledge about local child psychology and child-adult relationships no fixed and inflexible stages-type syllabi for the education of these very young children should be advocated since more often than not, dogmatism characterises our local child rearing practices. Child care centres have made a start by taking on such roles of parenting but there is still a long way to go before one can say that they have contributed substantively to the local understanding of the growth and development of our children aged four years and below.



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### Institute-based Centres

This type comprises child care centres organised by private individuals, voluntary organisations such as church groups and government agencies. Such a variant is generally located in detached bungalows or houses and premises owned by church or state organisations, and is operated on a large scale involving more than 5 to 30 children. Indeed, 64 percent of the centres that were included in the survey had child population sizes in this range. At least 7 percent or 13 of the 114 surveyed had 51 and more children.

Geographically, such centres are concentrated in metropolitan and urban large areas - 56 percent. Indeed, those sponsored by private entrepreneurs are largely sited in the metropolises of Kuala Lumpur, Georgetown, Ipoh and Klang. As these centres generally provide the best facilities, services and programmes among the centres, it follows that child care and preschool services are an additional item reinforcing the urban advantage over the peripheral areas.

### Home-based Centres

Such centres are operated most by private individuals, usually from their own homes. Hence, the premises vary more than in the case of institutes encompassing all housing types in the country, including flats and shophouses. Almost 97 percent of the centres have less than four children. Actually 86 percent have only one or two.

The home-based centres are more evenly dispersed among urban and rural areas. More than institutes, these bases seem to be better indication of the proliferation of professional child care services with the increasing incorporation of women into labour.



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### Introduction

In assessing child care centres in Malaysia with the type of preschool education services offered, a series of questions must be posed. What functions do child care centres fulfil in Malaysian society? What, if any, contribution have they made to preschool education? What, indeed, comprises preschool education? To begin answering such inquiries, it is necessary to establish how child care and preschool education have been defined locally. A study of child care centres was conducted in mid 1982 to survey care provided for children aged 4 years and below, in various areas of Malaysia. This paper cites material culled from this study to clarify the assertions set down viz, that apart from conventional kindergarten-style curricula, little exists way of preschool programmes; most child care centres for children aged below 4 provide minding rather than preschooling services and substantial disparities in care and programmes are seen among the different types of centres. In short the following discussion focusses not only on educational and service issues involved in the examination of child care centres but also the social questions that arise because of inequalities characterising the delivery of child care and preschool services for of this age group.

### Types of Child Care Centres

Three types of child care centres were identified in the 1982 country-wide survey. Basically, the institute, home and estate-based child care organisations have been differentiated because of the premises used for children, the scale and in part the type of management of the places. Some arbitrariness probably characterises the categories used to describe the varieties of child care centres but distinctly different conditions typify each group.



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### Estate-based Child Care Centres

This group of centres are organised by estate companies and has since the British colonial period, provided care for the children of plantation labourers while the parents were at work. Located in annexes and existing buildings, such centres normally provide care for groups of children numbering more than ten. About one half of the places care for between 20 to 50 children. Some 7 percent had between 51 to 100 children.

Practically all the estate centres are in rural areas. Due to the predominance of Indians among estate labour, it is seen that 80 percent of the children are of this ethnic group. Such an ethnic distribution leads to the social inequality which makes child care and preschool education larger issues than the mere delivery of services. Facilities found at estate centres are largely inferior to those in the other two variants. Indeed, certain basic amenities such as, toilets and adequate water supply, can be totally lacking. It is, therefore, a matter for concern that the further development of preschooling will only enhance disparities already existing in the Malaysian community. A lack of access to preschool education will ultimately widen further the gaps between the impoverished and other working classes in our society. The type of preschool education received will therefore distinguish formally the class divisions inherent in the social structure. As it stands, considerable differences exist between estate and the other centres in terms of environment and programmes, as seen in the following discussion.

### Child Care Environments

Although there may be as many child care environments as there are centres, conditions vary generally with each of the three types of child care operations identified. Hence, institute-based centres pay the greatest priority to provision of toys and playgrounds and this is obvious in Table 1. In using these measures to examine the allocation



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Table 1. Facilities Provided At Child Care Centres, 1982.

Type of Centre Facilities	Institute-Based Centres		Estate-Based Centres		Home-Based Centres	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Toys available	85	74.6	6	4.4	198	69.5
Playgrounds available	89	78.1	74	53.6	176	61.8
Flat/Shophouse Used	5	4.4	-	-	20	7.0
Mixing children of Different ages with special arrangements	84	73.7	44	31.9	250	87.8
Total number of centres surveyed	141		138		285	



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of effort towards creating or adapting environments adequate for the care of children, only base limits were used, namely, whether toys and playgrounds were supplied or made available. The quality of both the amenities was not an issue. Thus, the 50 percent of estate centres without playgrounds have not met some of the most basic standards. Home-based operations tend to intermediate standards between the limits set by institute and estate bases, both in ensuring that toys are available and open play space accessible for the children.

While not deemed crucial, the siting of centres in flats and shophouses only became a problem when combined with a lack of provision of both toys and playgrounds for children. It was considered that such a mixture of deprivations necessarily means that the centres must resemble nothing more than penitentiaries where the children are sentenced to serve time. At estate-based centres and homes this may be until the children are allowed to attend kindergartens.

As the survey was concerned with all children aged below 4 who were found at child care centres, note was paid to whether these were provided for differently from children who were older, 4-6 years. In Table 2 it is clear that first estate and then institute-based centres did not discriminate among the different ages but rather combined them with older children. Due to the small numbers concerned, home based were far more specific, tending not to keep children of mixed ages. It is debatable whether children between 3 and 4 should be exposed to the same educational programmes as their 5 and 6 year old counterparts but certainly it must be recognised that younger children command less developed abilities and have been exposed to fewer opportunities to learn, all other conditions being similar. It follows that the demands for attention must vary among children of different ages.

Of importance here is not the conditions found at each type of centre but rather, their reflection of the definition of child needs and priorities in child care for the very young. Hence, institute-based centres by far pay the most service to designing environments aimed at



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Table 2. Child Care Centres With a Mix of Children Below and Above Four Years.

Type	No.	% of Centres Surveyed
Institute-based centres	79	69.3
Estate-based centres	105	76.1
Home-based centres	38	13.3



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helping the children progress towards maturity of thought and action. Yet the mere provision of toys and playgrounds or keeping the needs of children of different ages in mind do not signify major achievements in applied child psychology or preschool education. They are vital ingredients but not the crux of the matter which is the understanding of child growth and maturation. This is so especially as the children found at the centres were all of varied ages including the very young who were less than 2 years old.

#### The Children At Child Care Centres

In Figure 1, the detailed age break-down of the children at child care centres is provided. It is seen that institute-based centres have the smallest proportion of the children aged below 4 while the homes and estates provide for almost 90 and 70 percent respectively of such children. A majority of the children, therefore, who spend time at home and estate-based child care centres are very young. Child psychologists have chronicled in some detail the progressive development of children above the age of 4 with perfunctory note to ages below that so that knowledge which is pertinent to the care and development of these very young children remains limited in scope and yet to prove applicable to local situations. Such knowledge on the growth and development process in children puts a time frame on the evolution of thought and conceptions which is essentially descriptive rather than explanatory in approach. While understanding of child psychology is advanced in a manner of speaking, it is still not clear whether environments play any part in the shaping of children's abilities and skills. Conclusions formed on the basis of research on child development tend to be clinical, isolated from real-world associations impinging on the issue.

Rather arbitrarily, the ages of 4 to 6 have generally been linked with preschooling but the limits set are as much a social decision as technical. There is also just as much debate about whether the period below 4 represents the formative phase of child development so that education that is received after reinforces rather than form the personality of the child.



At this juncture, it is necessary to examine what child care centres understand as preschooling for the children below 4 years' old.

### Child Care Centre Programmes

The curricula drawn on by more enterprising professional child care givers have been derived from the West. Given the variety of child care centres, it would have been unjustifiable whether the bases provided such curriculum and the sophistication of the programmes. Rather, it was decided to survey the types of programmes available at the centres. In Table 3, the situation at institutes definitely is far superior to the activities scheduled by home and estate based centres. Ranked in terms of the number of centres subscribing to the activity, it was seen that the conventional programmes prevailed over the more innovative, the sedentary over the rigorous viz. teaching of civics and clean habits over playing, television viewing, cassette-listening over story-telling, singing, drawing, counting, dancing, craft, visits and parents' participation.

Institutes promote more activities which require greater verbal communication and interaction between centre staff and their charges. As observed earlier, these centres also provide more amenities in toys and playgrounds. Home-based child care centres rely on staples characterising family-style entertainment viz. television-viewing and allowing the children to play on their own. The most depressing conditions are found at estate child care centres. An inordinate number has practically no activities for the children even when 'playing' is considered. Only three percent professed that time was allocated for this event for the children at the centres. The reasons for this may include the type of staff manning these centres and the staff-child ratios found.



Further, aggravating the dismal situation at estate child care centres is the length of time that the children spend at these places. Most estate bases take the children for the whole day (70 percent). Fewer homes (about half) and institutes (some one-fifth), provide day care. Most institute-based centres take in children for the mornings and essentially preschooling. The other two variants emerged more to supply child-minding services for working-class parents. This is manifested in the token service paid to activities scheduled for children.

In sum, children at a majority of the child care centres under review may be cared for but may not be exposed to any formal programme of preschooling. Assuming that this latter is crucial, it is concluded that preschool education remains relatively simplistic, when they exist for children in this age group. Indeed, the attitude towards educational activities for these children at the child care centres remain highly conventional and even casual. Yet the concern is not with the educational programmes that are available but rather the understanding of child behaviour and the encouragement of learning potential using innovative approaches and methods of communication. The assessment of the state of preschool education for the very young children suffers from the way in which it has been tackled but the analysis required concrete measures of a wide range of centres and large numbers of child care givers. Hence, the approaches used to communicate facts to children were not examined. For children aged four and below, preschool education essentially is a misnomer, if the aim is to arrive at forms of communicating facts that are relevant to children in this age group. Hence the activities characterising programme schedules in child care centres that are home-spun and conventional must be preferable to highly formal and stylised curricula.



Table 3. Programmes Offered by Child Care Centres

Institute based Centres			Home-based Centres			Estate-based Centres		
Activity ranked by recurrence	% of centres involved		Activity ranked by recurrence	% of centres involved		Activity ranked by recurrence	% of centres involved	
Civics/Cleanliness	86.8		Playing	58.6		Civics/Cleanliness	31.2	
Playing	76.3		Civics/Cleanliness	47.0		Story-telling	21.7	
Story-telling	75.4		TV/Radio/Cassette	41.1		Drawing/Counting	18.8	
Singing	71.1		Singing	19.6		Singing	16.7	
Drawing/Counting	68.4		Story-telling	19.3		Playing	2.9	
TV/Radio/Cassette	58.8		Drawing/Counting	17.2		Dancing	1.4	
Dancing	44.7		Dancing	4.2		Craft	1.4	
Craft	37.7		Visits	2.8				
Visits	29.8		Craft	2.1				



Table 4. Staff Child Ratios at Child Care Centres

Type of Centre  Staff Child Ratio	Home		Institute		Estate	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1 : 1-4 children	278	97.5	32	28.1	4	2.9
1 : 5-9 children	7	2.5	39	34.2	17	12.3
1 : 10-14 children			24	21.1	34	24.6
1 : 15-19 children			6	5.3	20	14.5
1 : 20-24 children			4	3.5	23	16.7
1 : 25-29 children			2	1.8	17	12.3
1 : 30 & above			1	6.1	23	16.7
1. Total	285	100.0	114	100.1	138	100.0



Centre staff must generally cope with more than preschooling (this being formally interpreted) for their charges aged below four. Their responsibilities run to feeding, bathing, scheduling of naps and such for children staying all day and in some instances, for the morning. These child care centres, in essence, are parenting on a surrogate basis. In this way centres encounter problems that bar their functioning as places to promote greater knowledge of child psychology and education.

### Problems Faced by Child Care Centres

Staffing is a problem faced in the centres, especially those dealing with large children populations. The staff-child ratios deteriorate with the increase in the scale of the centres as evident in Table 4. Although there is no ideal ratio, it is logical to anticipate that with the very young, little can be accomplished in large groups when staff cannot provide the necessary personal attention.

### Adequacy of Staffing

The most ideal ratios prevail in home-based centres where the majority has one staff to four children although as earlier shown, the ratio of one to one to two children predominate. At institute-based centres, however, the largest number of centres provide one staff for from five to nine children. For estates the staffing is spartan since the two largest groups are centres where there is one staff to 10 to 14 children and one staff to 20 to 24 children. This would be likely to stretch the staff's capacity to cope with the multivariate demands of the children.

It can be posited that estates with their current staff situation cannot initiate any progressive preschool programmes. Indeed, as seen before, most centres do not plan any activities for children. Home bases, on the other hand, possess the desirable staff-child allocations but show just as limited a range of programmes. Here,



the reasons may be different in that the constraint lies not in the staffing but rather the qualifications of the child care givers and it follows, their views of what care for their children entails. As most of the institute-types of centres cater to preschooling of these children, the only constraint in the ratios of staff preschooling of these children, the only constraint in the ratios of staff to children would be viability of the enterprises. This problem must be most applicable to privately organised centres where owners depend on the provision of professional child care services for their livelihoods. A summary of the qualifications of centre staff is presented in Table 5.

#### Staff Qualifications from Schooling

From the table it is again clear that institute-based child care centres provide staff with the highest 'paper' qualifications. More than two-fifths have had at least secondary schooling, compared to the one-fifth in estate child care centres and the one-tenth in home bases. The personnel with tertiary education (hence more than 14 years of schooling), were found in institute-based child care centres. Indeed, two fifths of estate staff had no schooling. Similar proportions apply in the case of home-based centres although a larger group (43 percent compared to 27 percent in estate bases), was found to have at least six years of schooling.

#### Other Qualifications

The implications of the low levels of schooling are not necessarily serious since most estate staff and those in home bases are married or have been professional child minders for more than two years, as is seen in Table 6. It is the ~~institute~~-based minders who are largely single (more than 50 percent) and also with less than two years in their job or child care. This latter coupled with the low salaries characterising the profession lead to the impression that the turnover of staff at child care centres is high. At any rate, dealing with staff turnover, providing adequate staffing and staff with desirable qualifications together with sustaining commercial viability are problems that ~~face~~ ~~most~~ child care centres. This study highlighted



Table 5. Schooling Qualifications of Staff at Child Care Centres

Type of Centre Schooling Level	Home		Estate		Institute	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Never been to school	117	39.8	96	43.0	15	4.9
1-6 years	125	42.5	60	26.9	51	16.6
7-9 years	36	12.2	23	10.3	68	22.1
10-11 years	16	5.4	40	17.9	131	42.7
12-13 years			4	1.8	20	6.5
14 years & above					4	1.3
Not available						
Total	294	99.9	223	99.9	307	100.0



how, as a whole, these centres are coping with the problems and also the preschool education programmes initiated. While it was not possible to examine the methods used for the programmes, some measures were obtained to assess staff-children relationships.

### Staff-Child Relationships

When queried about the methods used to quiet distress in children, there were staff at the various centres who advocated measures as extreme as spanking. The majority favoured liberal and perhaps even indulgent means of dealing with distressed charges from comforting to feeding. It is noteworthy that there was no vehement protest against the idea of spanking a child in distress and indeed to find that five percent of the principal staff members of institute, 18 percent home and 25 percent in estates advocated and did spank children at such times. Balanced against this, however, are the larger proportions (80 to 90 percent) who would combine such a measure with the liberal means of feeding and comforting.

True to the conventional form of most child care centres, spanking was still regarded as necessary to child discipline. While the range of stands or views taken on this aspect of child care is limited, none of the principals of the centres ventured to elaborate on other premises on which child discipline could be established.

### Conclusions

Preschool curricula, even for the very young children, that have been incorporated into programmes at child care centres, have been developed in Western contexts. These schedules fill a vacuum prevailing in the local delivery of child care services as there are few comprehensive programmes designed specifically for Malaysian situations. Yet most child psychologists and educationists have been reserved about dictating what, when, how and why things should be taught to children who are very young.



Table 6. Non-School Qualifications of Staff at  
Child Care Centres

Non School Attributes	Type of Centre	Institute		Estate		Home	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Staff who have ever married		147	47.9	168	75.3	256	87.1
Principal with 2 years or more experience in professional child care		51	44.7	109	79.0	135	47.4



The study of child care centres has amply demonstrated the variety characterising places, people, children and child care practices to be found locally. Hence, it must be emphasised that no dogmas should prevail in the way of care of children below four. Essentially, professional child minders fill in for parents for part of the children's day and perform the functions of parents during the time. Thus, it is the improvement of such surrogate parenting rather than preschool educational curricula which should come first as a matter for concern.

While child care centre staff may have developed commitments to preschooling for children below four, little advances have been made in the understanding of child behaviour and development at least locally. Although literature abounds with research done in Western societies, the experiences are often too far removed to be pertinent to local conditions. There is an urgent need to collate knowledge on the evolution of thought, conception and action among children focussing on explanation rather than the description typical of most work in child psychology. Often the development of abilities in children are studied and treated in isolation from the real world forces impinging on the phenomenon. More comprehensive knowledge about child behavioural pattern has to be established before work can begin on designing educational programmes and curricula. Formal preschooling ala kindergartens operating in Malaysia should be given less priority for children below four. The gap between the child and adult consciousness is too large currently for formal, classroom type of preschool education. Given the problems faced by centres in the way of staffing, it is hardly realistic to advocate the production of specially designed preschool programmes for this age group, at this juncture.

One questions the value of programming and preparing very young children for school especially based on nebulous aims, such as maximising their life chances. There should, instead, be more commitment towards



a maximum and fuller comprehension of child perception, logic and behaviour together with further collation of efforts made to define their needs or demands. In the introduction and conception of preschool programmes there is generally a tendency to impose the adult consciousness at the expense of encouraging the children to develop theirs.

What passes for preschooling at child care centres that take in children below four is an electric mix of activities conventionally conducted in kindergartens and the minders' views of suitable programmes for the young. Parents have shown themselves to either consign the responsibility to the child care centres or deem preschooling unnecessary for their children of this age group. In essence, there is considerable dogmatism in our current interpretation of the care required by children that can only be corrected with more knowledge of how to establish beneficial adult-child relations and effective communication on these bases. Collectively, child care centres have defined for us their notions of child care and preschooling. This is a start but there is still much ground to be covered in the area of guiding our very young children towards the awareness of their rightful places in this adult dominated world.



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SEMINAR ON EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

18 - 22 NOVEMBER 1983

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CONTINUING AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RURAL AREAS

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by

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SECRETARY

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