

Work-care Balance among Parents-workers in Malaysian Urban Organizations: Role and Quality of Children's Daycare Centers

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Abstract

Many modern parents-workers today contribute to the survival and maintenance of their households. However, work-life-balance is always their perennial issue. Indisputable, the domestic and financial demands have an effect on their lives. Preceding literature in Malaysia discussed the effects of parenting styles on the development of children. However, the attitudes of parents-workers on parenting and childcaring demonstrate a clear gap towards children's development and parents-workers' well-being. It is therefore pertinent here to explore the attitudes of the parents-workers in handling the children's daycare centers issues. The research is a survey project using questionnaires onto 558 parents-workers who works in three different constituencies in Malaysia. It is concluded that parents-workers are inclined to have a convenient attitude in sending their children to children's daycare centers as long as they are cared while they are out at work. The result is distressing. The research consequently recommends establish integrated children's daycare centers within the community.

Keywords: Children's daycare centers, Work-care balance, Organizations, Parents-workers, Malaysia

Introduction

Developments in the field of parenting and family studies have led to the ever-lasting interest in the relationship between children's school achievements and parenting style. Since the family is the earliest socialization agent of a child, parenting style greatly affect children's understanding, attitude and school achievements. Socialization means the acquisition of education, experience, attitudes and behavior that are required for a successful adaptation to the society and the family (Ladd and Pettit, 2002). Accordingly, there are several researches were done on parent-child relationships and children's school achievements (Prindle and Resinski, 1989).

On the other hand, parenting in this modern epoch requires helps and cooperation from other bodies too. As Malaysia progresses towards the knowledge economy and high-technology status, certainly the nation requires sufficient labor force. Statistics show the labor force participation rate (LFPR) in Malaysia in the year 2010 is 64.7 percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). The same report indicates that 78.7 percent are males and women contribute about 46.1 percent. Indeed, increasingly skilled and well-qualified women are expected to join the workforce. This expectation is in line with the fact that 55.5 per cent of the undergraduate population is women. Evidently the Government has lost the availability of potential labor force created by the non-participation of this major component of human resources. In fact, Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development has currently urged more women to be in the labor force to reach the expected 55.0 percent in few years time. This urge definitely shows the Government's interest to have more workers to further develop the nation.

The reason behind this scenario is mainly due to the unavailability of children's daycare centers that are reliable, inexpensive and safe for children. Parents are concern about interest and safety of their children. At the same time, many of them also feel pressured to show commitment to their professional work. It is a no-win situation for them. Often they have to handle these conflicting issues themselves, either to send their children to children's daycare centers or to have in-house domestic helpers. At the moment, there is a lack of assistance available for them. The questions arise: What are parents-workers' attitudes in sending their children to these children's daycare centers? Do they feel indifferent in their decision and action as long as there are people or bodies that are able to mind their children while they are out at work? Or do they find in-house domestic helpers sufficiently adequate to do so?

It is the aim of this research to explore the situation further so that it may reduce parents-workers' difficulty in balancing their domestic and professional spheres. This preliminary research is hoped to provide beneficial measures and effective strategies by setting integrated children's daycare centers within the community to assist parents-workers particularly mothers in coping with the demands of the two life spheres.

Conceptual Framework

Parents work to fulfill the economic demands of the family. Nevertheless, when parents work, many of them seek for non-parental care for their children. High LFPR statistics among parents indicate the fact that many Malaysian children are in non-parental care such as in daycare, care by extended family, in-charge by in-house helpers or self-care. The subsequent topics will briefly discuss concepts on parents-workers; parenting styles; parental involvement; and children's daycare centers. Since parenting and child caring concerns with human development, the discussions encompass disciplines of economics, psychology and sociology.

Parents-workers

The article attempts to propose the term parents-workers to give emphasis that these are a group of people who may suffer work-care balance crisis.

Parents who work may have to send their children to childcare and pre-education centers. They face a tight spot between working and parenting. For some parents-workers, work means the family can have economic security. For others, it means a temporary break from continual responsibility for childrearing. For many, it is about quality parenting. The message is clear: Parents-workers must decide what is best for their children. It is believed that quality parenting can be performed even when both parents work, as long as they provide loving relationship, nurturing, positive interactions and open communication to their children. However in reality, achieving this while maintaining employment is not an easy task for many parents.

Parenting Styles

Parents can be defined as a person's father or mother who has their biological or adopted children under their care. Parents are mothers and/or fathers who are responsible in nurturing their children and striving for the family's survival. Naturally, any parent would want to give the best for their children, particularly when it concerns their children's development. However, due to some obstacles such as work commitment, family size and socioeconomic status, others may not be able to help them to attain what they wish for. For example, sending their children to daycare centers. Parenting style solely may not be able to provide explanations for parental involvement in children's development. What are the attitudes of the working mothers and other parents in sending their children to children's daycare centers?

Parenting styles play an important role in a child's development. Researchers have uncovered convincing links between parenting styles and the effects these styles have on children. Psychologist Diana Baumrind (1967) had conducted a naturalistic observation study and parental interviews on more than 100 preschool-age children in the early 1960s. She identified four important dimensions of parenting styles, namely authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and uninvolved parenting (Baumrind, 1991).

Later researchers have conducted numerous other studies that have led to a variety of conclusions about the findings of Baumrind's parenting styles on children (Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Maccoby, 1992). Firstly, authoritative authoritarian parenting styles generally lead to children who are proficient and obedient but they have low happiness level, social competence and self-esteem. Secondly, permissive parenting styles often produce children who have low happiness level and little self-regulation. These children are frequently have trouble to follow rules and perform poorly in school. Thirdly, uninvolved parenting styles demonstrate low in all life domains. These children tend to have low self-esteem, lack self-control, and are less capable than their friends.

Parenting style has been studied comprehensively in human development (Baldwin, McIntyre and Hardaway, 2007). It is considered as a significant determinant of several aspects of children's outcome (Gadeyne, Ghesquiere and Onghena, 2004).

Parental Involvement

In addition, parental involvement appeared to be one of the most significant topics in education and parenting (Jeynes, 2000). Parents today must be effective parents. They need to engage in family involvements especially as providers, nurturers and role-models to their children.

The term parent-family involvement is used to describe patterns of parents' participation in early childhood education that describe all manners of parent-program interaction such as the policy making, parent education, fund-raising, volunteering time, and the exchange of information among parents-children-teachers and others (Pettygrove and Greenman, 1984).

However, not all parents get involved in their children's activities and development. It may be derived from the issues that they have in their professional life. These non-participation parents use children's daycare centers and pre-school services purely as a consumer, whether through choice or direction, and do not involve themselves. They can be parents who are working, a parent who wants time off from the children and parents who want to 'buy' professional time.

Children's daycare centers

Childcare and pre-education are two different establishments that take care the needs and well-beings of young children of different ages.

Childcare is a centre that provides care and child minding for infants and toddlers at the age of 0 to 4 years old. It is also known as a children's nursery. In this evolving culture of work, parents spend more time working and children spend less time with them. Parents disengage from their child during early years for workplace commitments.

Pre-education centre is an established educational institution that offers program learning for children at the age of 4 to 6 years old. Its activities and syllabus are more on academics as well as on social development. National pre-education curriculum (Malaysia, 2003) defined pre-education as a grounding educational site before entering the next level of education which is primary schools. It concerns with the knowledge and experiences that will equip the children with adequate skills, self-esteem and positive attitudes for the next level of learning.

Ammul Sahara et al. (2010) reported that pre-education centre has become an important institution for society today. This is the result of the changes in the lifestyle and family structures. Previously, males-fathers are the breadwinners of the family whereas females-mothers are the dominant homemakers. However, due to the demand of the high living status, females are no longer homemakers only. A mother who works contributes to the family income but has less time to care for home and children (Humprey, et al. 2010). This situation has made children's daycare centers as an alternative for working parents in helping them to care and educate their children.

Hamner and Turner (1996) observed increasing numbers of parents seeking part-time and full-time alternatives for assistance which supplements parenting and children's daycare centers. Parents enroll their children to children's daycare centers for many reasons that may include their need for temporary relief from continual responsibility for childrearing or somebody who are able to take care of their children while they are away working.

Work-care Balance

Work-life balance often becomes the topic of discussion, especially in the developed nations due to the demographical facts of ageing and the falling of fertility rates (Gregory and Milner, 2009). In many literatures, the terms concern on the relationship between work and non-work spheres (Felstead et al, 2002). These spheres however are more directed towards the increase flexibility and autonomy of the workers at the workplaces (Gregory and Milner, 2009). This article however is more interested in Barbara Haas' (2005) *work-care balance* rather than *work-life balance*. It is because the two terms i.e. work and care directly focus on the issues of being parents who are employed in organizations and who at the same time also have children and/or dependents to care of. As Malaysia is a young country that promotes for population growth, it is not a backlash against non-parents at workplaces.

Work-care balance as sided by this article has to do with the condition of working full-time. This criterion may become problematic to parents-workers if it means that they come to work early and stay on late; and that personal sphere should not encroach the work sphere. This situation may not be possible if the organizations are structurally gendered for female and male parents (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). To achieve equal satisfaction for work role and family role, both types of parents must know their responsibilities at both spheres, or else working environment becomes very prejudicial against female parents.

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by four major theoretical paradigms, which are inter-linked with each other. They are ecological systems theory; family systems theory; rational choice theory; and social network theory.

Ecological Systems Theory

This research is guided by the structural-functional perspective, specifically by the work of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (2005: 1979). This theory explores the factors that influence parents' convenient attitudes in sending their children to children's daycare centers. The theory defines complex "layers" of environment, each having an effect on a person's development. It divided the person's environment into four different systems: microsystem; mesosystem; exosystem; and macrosystem.

The *microsystem* is the layer closest to the individual such as family, school, peers, workplace, religious affiliations, workplace and neighborhood. It contains the structures with which the individual has direct contacts. It encompasses her/his relationships and interactions with her/his immediate surroundings. The *mesosystem* is the layer that provides the connection to the structures of the person's microsystem. It connects between an individual with her/his neighborhood, between her/his family and workplace and other social structures. The *exosystem* is the layer that defines the larger social systems such as economic system, political system, education system, government system and religion system in which the individual does not function directly. The structures in this layer impact one's development by interacting with some structure in her/his microsystem. The *macrosystem* is the layer that may be regarded the most distant layer in the individual environment that comprises of cultural values, customs, and laws. The effects of macrosystem have a direct influence to the interactions of all other layers. For example, when the culture dictates that parents should be responsible exclusively for caring their children, that culture probably unconcern to provide assistance for parents. Consequently, it affects the function of parents.

Family Systems Theory

An ecological framework views families within manifold, interactive layers ranging from individual factors, to community issues and broader social contexts. Thus, family system theory addresses family characteristics, interactions, functions, and life cycle stages (Turnbull, 2000: Turnbull et al., 2005).

According to Turnbull (2000), family interactions are the course of actions that comprise marital subsystem (i.e. interaction between spouses), parental subsystem (i.e. interaction between parents and children), sibling subsystem (i.e. interaction among siblings), and extended family subsystem (i.e. interaction between the nuclear and extended family). Family functions, on the other hand are the output in the family systems that refers to affection, self-esteem, socialization, education, recreation, daily care, spirituality, and economic stability (Turnbull et al., 2005).

Rational Choice Theory

This theory is initially derived from the socio-economic perspective. Its basic assumption is that people act rationally when making decision particularly of social and economic in nature. Their decision normally is about optimizing all benefits while reducing all unfavorable costs to a lowest amount (Bazza, 2009).

According to Bosetti (2000), parents are able to decide effective action that they think is useful to them and their family. This means parents may use their rational thinking and preferences in selecting children's daycare centers for their children. This preference however may not necessarily be the best interest for their children but more of their convenient attitude. Moreover, Karen (2010) found that parents' choice is influenced by their assessment of the families and their children's needs. Some of them expressed their rational choice is influenced by convenience of distance to home and workplace.

Social Networks Theory

A social network framework considers how individual decisions are shaped by social interactions and the resources they have (Chaudry, 2010). This theory shows the importance of social network as an important source of information (Lin, 2001). Since information is a critical component in decision-making, parents may turn to their social networks for information in selecting the children's daycare centers for their children. The broader environmental context and status characteristics of their network members, the wider decision options parents may have.

This enables the social networks framework to facilitate and/or constrain network resources (Lin, 2001).

Methods and Methodology

For quantitative method, a set of questionnaire for survey are used for data collection. This method is very useful in order to get a large amount of data from many people in a very limited time. Furthermore, survey method is widely used in descriptive as well as exploratory research (Neuman, 2006).

Sample

The sample size consists of 558 parents who were identified by the purposive sampling method. The sample criteria include being a parent or guardian to a child of the age between 0-18 years old, and who is also working for a living. The selection of sample is done by listing down numbers of children's daycare centers and tuition centers around Cheras, Gombak and Shah Alam constituencies. The list was obtained from site and internet searching.

Measurement

The questionnaire was developed based on research objectives. This 2-page questionnaire is divided into two sections. Section A is the demographic part which gives the researcher a general view of parent's background. Section B is a set of *Likert* Scale items in order to specify parents' level of agreement towards particular statements.

This scaling method measures either positive or negative response to a statement based on a four-point scale where the middle option of "Neither agree nor disagree" or "Neutral" is not made available.

Procedures

Parents are required to fill the set of questionnaire and the scale of parental expectation for their children's early education as well as their personal opinion towards sending their children to children's daycare centers. The scale was translated into two languages using English and Bahasa Malaysia. It contained 22 items, for which parents must give answers ranging from 4 (*Strongly agree*) to 1 (*Strongly disagree*). Instructions are as follow: "*Please state your level of agreement for statements*".

Respondents are given ample time to answer and the questionnaires are collected once they have finished. They are also encouraged to provide further explanation about the topic.

Ethical consideration

There is system of ethical protections that the scientific community has created to protect the rights of their research participants. Neuman (2006) for example cited the principle of voluntary participation that participants should not be forced to participate in the research.

In addition, voluntary participation also required informed consent. It means that potential research participants must be fully informed about the research procedures and risks and must give their consent to participate (Neuman, 2006).

Research Findings and Discussions

Demographic Data

This section only reports the significant findings based on the research objectives. The report displays frequencies and percentages of the data (whenever necessary). Since the data is a non-probable data, advanced statistical analysis is unnecessary.

The research designed some important demographic variables in achieving its objectives. Among them are gender/sex, age, marital status, type of parents, ethnicity, religion, number of children, monthly income and working sectors. All these variables are relevant to explore the agreement level of the respondents in exploring working parents' attitudes on children's daycare centers and in-house domestic helpers. The dichotomous level of agreement – agree or disagree – is able to determine the attitudes of parents-workers on the issue. To answer the first research question on factors behind parents' decision and action in sending their children to children's daycare centers, demographic data were crosstabulated with questionnaire items on the distance of the children's daycare centers from home and its cost/fee. The finding clearly indicates that majority of the respondents of various demographic backgrounds agreed that distance and cost/fee are among the criteria that they look upon for children's daycare centers.

However, it raises the next questions: If these are the determinant factors for them to send their children to the children's daycare centers, what are their attitudes in sending their children there? Are they conveniently sending their children to just any children's daycare centers as long as it is not far from their homes and its cost/fee is low?

In general, all demographic variables used in the questionnaire demonstrate a sharp agreement on short-distance and low-cost/fee. The current findings provide an indication that when the childcaring issues concerns with internal and controllable factors like distance and cost/fee, parents shows a convenient attitude.

This research is with the opinion that parents' convenient attitude is derived from their dilemma to manage the childcaring issues. This is a continuous dilemma due to the extinct of the extended family system and the need for dual-earning income families. Modern families may have to decide whether to send their children there or to have in-house domestic helpers.

At this point, the research arrives at the hypotheses: Working parents are inclined to have a convenient attitude in sending their children to children's daycare centers as long as they are cared while they are out at work. But at the same time, they feel happy to accept integrated children's daycare centers rather than to have an in-house helper to manage their children while working. In such cases, the research starts to explore the matter by asking their opinions between sending their children to children's daycare centers and having in-house domestic helpers. Evidently a majority of the respondents gives trust towards children's daycare centers compared to in-house helpers in taking care of their children while they are at work.

Additionally, many of them believe that parents' dependence on in-house helpers is mostly due to child caring rather than to do domestic chores. Correspondingly, more than 70.0 percent of the respondents feel most in-house helpers bring in more trouble to employers' home rather than take those troubles away.

The research then asked the respondents to provide their views on having an integrated children's daycare centers that provide 24-7 services, including weekends and public holidays (whenever necessary) so that they do not have to rely on in-house helpers, relatives and others to take care and educate their children while working. As expected, this noble idea is well accepted by the respondents.

The finding reveals that the majority of the respondents of diverse demographic backgrounds feel happy to have an integrated establishment that serves for their welfare as well as for the benefits of their children. They are also pleased to have such integrated centers that are able to take care and educate their children while they are working outside homes.

Finally, the research poses a series of questionnaire items on having integrated children's daycare centers which cooperates with their employers. It is found that most respondents wish to have a collaborative effort between employers and parents. The establishment of the integrated children's daycare centers seems to be the most appropriate effort. Apparently, more than 90.0 percent of them agreed that the care of children is not only the responsibility of parents but of the employers as well. Furthermore, they accepted the idea of employers' subsidization scheme, so that parents have to bear a minimal fee/cost for childcare. The subsidies may include financial assistance for the refurbishment of the office areas into children's daycare centers; low rentals of the premises; and funding for the purchase of furnishings and equipment.

Apart from a low cost/fee for the centre, the respondents also show a high acceptance on time-scheduling, so that these children's daycare centers can be used to the maximum by parents-workers of different nature of work particularly those who work in shifts or any other odd hours such as factory workers and nurses.

Recommendation for Integrated Children's Daycare Centers

The Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) welcomed the idea of establishing children's daycare centers at the workplace. They argued that the in-situ centers will help working mothers to take care of their children. Ministries of Women, Family and Human Development and Human Resources urge the employers of various companies to set up nearby children's daycare centers for the use of their working employees with young and dependent children. Several incentives declared by the Government including 10 percent tax exemption; 10 percent tax rebate over 10-year period on the building cost of a children's daycare centers at the workplace; and RM50k special grant were still unwelcomed by the company/organization.

The question that arises is why even with such an attractive package, they have yet to set up children's daycare centers at the workplaces. Indeed, this situation enhances the culture of dependency on foreign domestic helpers, particularly Indonesians, Filipinos and more recently Cambodians. Moreover, the on-off socio-political differences between the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia indicate a clear sign that something needs to be done.

Private sector employers are often taken to task for their unwillingness to set up children's daycare centers at the workplace. The National Unity and Social Development Ministry has reported that by March 2001, only 74 children's daycare centers had been established at the workplace, of which 55 were from the public sector while 19 were from the private sector. Why is this seem-to-be attractive incentive not seen as attractive by the employers? According to the Business Times (2001), among the issues are:

1. The 10 per cent exemption of tax on the building of children's daycare centers is inadequate. Additional incentives are necessary to persuade more employers to establish children's daycare centers.
2. The Government must provide financial support to employers for the development and expansion of children's daycare centers.
3. High cost of setting up and operating children's daycare centers.
4. The cumbersome bureaucratic procedures involved in obtaining the necessary approval for setting a children's daycare center.
5. The transportation limitations especially to those employees using public transport to their workplace to bring along their toddlers or their infants to the place of work.
6. In the absence of a safe and healthy environment, workplace children's daycare centers is not a suitable environment for a child to grow up thus their development may be jeopardized.

Therefore, it is persistently essential for parents-workers to have integrated children's daycare centers within their community area. It is suggested that these centers should be established in appropriate local community that are convenient to parents-workers as well as beneficial for the development of the children. The centers should be established adjacent to schools which are normally in residential areas within a community. The children's daycare centers will ensure that children would be brought up in a familiar and safe environment. It would also be cost-effective because such centers would be able to cater the needs of the whole community instead of each employer having its own children's daycare centers centre at the workplace. The members of the community such as the pensioners, single mothers, and other productive individuals could involve in providing services to the centers. Care for each other among the local community members would benefit everybody – the children, parents, community and country.

Suggestively, the centre provides 24-7 service. It means that this centre offers "around the clock-daily-inclusive of weekends" service. It is the view that children's daycare centers should be able to cater parents' and children's need not only during normal day-care hours but also ideally during odd hours including weekends and public holidays. This expectation is very much needed for parents-workers who work in shifts such as factory workers, doctors, nurses, among others. If such assistance is made available to parents-workers, their dependence on in-house helpers is lessened.

The research therefore recommends reducing some parents' dependence of in-house helpers by setting up an integrated children's daycare centers. Apparently, the majority of the respondents are happy to have such measure, which is clearly shown from the research findings.

Conclusion

Work-care balance is a recurrent issue to most working women. The shortage of children's daycare centers in Malaysia is a major problem and may result in women dropping out of the job market due to their domestic responsibilities. Due to the decline of extended family in today's situation and the modernized parenting style adopted by parents, children's daycare centers seem to be a requirement. This article explores parents-workers' attitudes in sending their children to children's daycare centers. They often have to sacrifice to maintain a job and high-quality loving relationship with their children concurrently. Still, they worry about their children, especially when they are unable to watch them. Derived from the research findings, the controlling variables affecting the decision of children's daycare centers arrangements include parents' gender, age, marital status, type of parents, ethnicity, religion, family size, monthly income, working sector and also the types of children's daycare centers services.

The finding shows that the selection of the children's daycare centers is based on the location and the cost/fee. It seems that both indicators are internal variables that respondents are able to control themselves. When they provide a high agreement level towards both indicators, it indicates that these parents have a convenient attitude in sending their children to children's daycare centers. As far as the research has found, their attitudes are mostly based on their personal interest rather than their children's welfare. Even though they do not like the idea of having in-house helpers, they do not seem to have much choice as their children need to be taken care of while they are away working.

The parenting styles of modern parents no longer can be easily categorized to authoritative authoritarian, permissive nor uninvolved parenting styles. They are the effective and affectionate parents-workers who are in dire need for the transformation of social structure and function. They yearn for full family involvement and concurrently desire to get involved in employment for as long as they can. Clearly, they require assistance from different spectrum of life for work-care balance. These points are worth further investigations. Insofar, parents-workers utilize *external* social support for their *internal* domestic affairs.

As a conclusion, this research finds strong relevancy to synthesize all theories. The Rational Choice Theory highlights the socio-economic factors that shape parental influence in their decision in sending their children to children's daycare centers. In addition, the basic tenets of the Social Networks Theory provide useful insights on how environments particularly social network influences parents' attitude.

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, everything in a person and his/her environment affects the way he/she grows and develops. A basic premise of a human ecological theory is that of the interdependence of all individuals of the world with the available resources. Thus, this theory is particularly useful to this area of study. It focuses on the ways in which the individual interacts with his/her environment that affect their decision-making. Moreover, the Family Systems Theory puts the emphasis on family characteristics that includes family members' personal attributes as well as their coping styles in dealing with their needs as a family. These features of family characteristics determine parents' choice and decisions.

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