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The Development of a Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M) for Early Childhood Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Parental relationship is an important criterion for child growth. The substantial purpose of this study was to analyse the current parental relationship and involvement practices at Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres in Malaysia and consequently propose an ideal model for parental partnerships. Findings from the qualitative study steered three major themes for discussion- current trends on parent-child relationship, the intensity of parental relationship within ECE centres and ECE centres' initiatives for parental involvement. Based on these findings, a model for parental involvement grounded by Epstein's six types of parental involvement known as Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M) was developed.

Keywords: Parental Relationship, Parental Involvement, Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Introduction

Parental relationship is an important criterion for child growth. A good family relationship creates significant impact on every aspect of a child's life, including mental and physical health, as well as emotional and social well-being (Ghanizadeh & Shams, 2007). Family involvement in a child's life depends very much on how the parents' relationship is with the child, whether it is close-knitted or estranged (Upali, 2017). Parental involvement in most cases is usually observed through academic association, either through their level of communication with teachers, guiding children's learning at home or through involvement in school activities (Nokali et al., 2010).

Numerous terms and definitions have been used to refer to the relationship between parents and schools, (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016), including terms such as 'parental partnerships', 'school-family relations', and 'parental involvement' to name a few (Driessen et al., 2005; Driessen, 2020). However, today the term 'partnership' is widely applied which denotes meaningful mutual relations between parents, schools, and the society (Smith et al., 1999).

In the words of Epstein (1995), such partnership is then interpreted as the process where individuals involved mutually support each other through their contributions to enhance learning, motivation, and development of children.

With recent developments on early childhood education post Covid-19, much emphasis has been given on the role of parents and the importance of parents' involvement in children's early years education. This qualitative case study was therefore conducted with two aims in mind. Firstly, it intended to understand the current parental relationship and involvement practices from the perspective of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Malaysia. Consequently, based on the findings, a model for parental involvement grounded within Epstein's framework on parental involvement was developed as a prototype for schools to use in building impactful early childhood parent-school partnerships.

Literature Review

This section begins with describing the definition of the keyword for this research- '*involvement*' and what is meant by *parental relationship and involvement*. It then goes into understanding one of the most recognised frameworks known for its six stages of parental involvement, *The Epstein's Framework*. This section then finally focuses on reviews of literature regarding the importance of building relationship with parents and the strategies for strengthening parental involvement in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) context.

Definition of Involvement

The dictionary definition of the word 'involvement' as stated in Merriam-Webster (1828) is *the act of engaging, participating, or committing with someone or something*.

Parental Relationship and Involvement

Family relationship impacts children's growth and development in all aspects of physical, emotional, and mental health (Ghanizadeh & Shams, 2007). Parental involvement denotes to a situation where parents are directly involved in the education of their children through schools where they engage, create partnerships, and commit themselves in the learning process and development of their children (Ntekane, 2018). Parental involvement according to Clinton and Hattie (2013) does not just refer to parents questioning about their child's performance in school, but it also takes on a proactive role of creating communication circles with their children, hoping to achieve a healthy relationship with them, so that the process of encouraging, mentoring, leading and inspiring becomes genuine (Clinton & Hattie, 2013; Ntekane, 2018).

Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement Framework

Many reasons exist, according to Epstein (2001, 2009), for forming and establishing a collaboration between school, family, and community. This paradigm, as illustrated by Epstein in Figure 1, is accumulated from the numerous findings on the most successful components in children's education (Epstein, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2009).

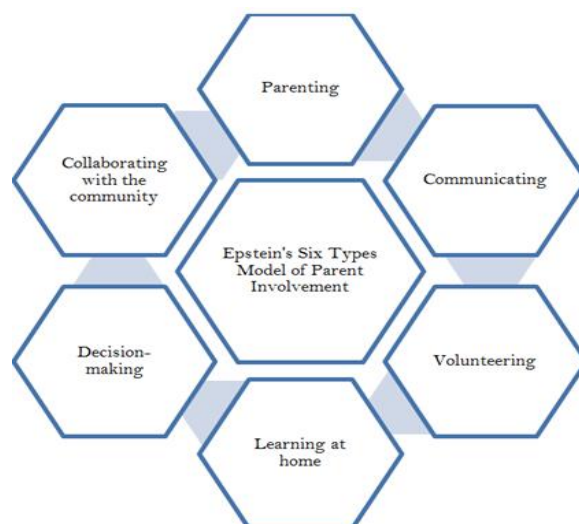


Figure 1: Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement Model

Epstein's Six Types of Parental involvement framework is one of the most prominent models in the field of education, and conveys the engagement and partnerships between school, family, and community.

Parenting, or also referred to as Type 1 involvement, relates to parental actions that contributes to children being wholesome hence impacting their learning at school. Parents have life-long impact on a child as compared to teachers. Forming relationships between parents and school open opportunities for parents to gain overall information about their child's growth and development in all aspects of cognitive, health, safety, and emotions which they can further use to scaffold their child at home. Involvement happens when both family and home environment view children as learners and vice versa when schools begin understanding each student's family.

When forming partnerships, communication, which is Type 2 involvement, is crucial. When information is exchanged through various methods between families and school, and frequent engagements is encouraged, necessary information about a child's progress and development is shared.

Volunteering which refers to coordinating parental assistance and support for school programmes and student activities, is also an impactful element of involvement. This type 3 involvement as stated by Epstein, can be done through various ways including providing support as tutors or assistants in the school or classroom or assist at school-level activities such as fund raising and social work as well as simply participating as audience members by attending school meetings and programmes.

Type 4 involvement, which refers to learning at home is related with furnishing parents with knowledge and methods on how to best support their children with schoolwork and related school activities. This form of involvement can include parents helping their children with homework or even taking them for real-life learning outside their classroom such as going marketing, visiting a zoo and so on.

Decision-making which refers to parents' involvement in school decisions and the creation of parent leaders and representatives, is the fifth type of parental involvement. When parents join school-based organisations such as the Parent and Teachers Association (PTA), they not only contribute to school decision-making, but are able to provide various support and networking that can further contribute towards school improvements.

Collaborating with the community, the type six involvement is associated with building relationships through incorporating various society services and external resources that can strengthen schools, students, and their families. It may include crucial information related to community services such as health, social support, and other programs/services that are linked to development of knowledge, skills and talents.

The framework (which is summarised in Figure 1 above) provides a support to teachers in designing a more comprehensive partnership programmes between school and family, apart from assisting scholars in their research endeavours (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Connors, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000). The main goal of these six involvements is to promote academic achievement alongside assisting parents and teachers to accomplish a range of outcomes (Epstein, 2003, 2009).

Importance of building a relationship with parents in Early Childhood Education

Various researchers have shown that strong, positive ties between homes and schools are critical for children's growth and education (Burnage, 2019; Smith et al, 1999; Upali, 2017). Early years classrooms come with children excited to learn, eager to try new things and develop. Although many of these children come from diverse backgrounds, the one thing they all have in common is the need for a safe learning environment. Building relationships between school and families hence is unquestionably an integral part of early learning classrooms (Boyarshinov, 2015).

Several reasons contribute to the need of building professional relationship with parents:

i. children feel safe and secured to engage and learn

When parents often communicate with teachers in the presence of the child, even just saying 'hello' or even asking the teacher about their child in a friendly manner, the child feels that the parents and the teachers have close-knitted relationships and therefore they too can establish such a relationship. The child then feels safe and secured to communicate, engage, and learn within that school environment.

ii. the child's development is more effective

Study has revealed that alliance with parents is one of the ways in which early childhood educators can be more efficient, as it enhances their knowledge of the child (Patrikakou, 2009). When the parents and teacher have frequent communication about the child, both on their behaviour at home and school, teachers learn more about the child, and in effect, can assist the child in many ways to cope and be successful at school.

iii. the quality of student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions improves

When parent and preschool create a partnership, they have developed an echo-effect on the child. When a child observes that his/her parents have respectful and positive discussions, children also begin to communicate better and use kind words with each other. Children also form habits to work collaboratively together to achieve common goals in the preschool (Boyarshinov, 2015) hence automatically creating a decline in students' negative attitudes and behaviours. This helps create an overall improvement in classroom achievements, creating positive climate, and school readiness.

iv. the child's academic success is effectively achieved

Patrikakou (2008) suggests that healthy partnerships with school means better outcomes for children in the areas of higher cognitive and language skills and preparedness for school. When school build professional relationship with parents, they are improving to develop a child's intellectual and emotional skills. Working with parents drives consistency between the preschool setting and home life for the child to be academically successful (LINC Consortium, 2020).

Strategies for strengthening parental involvement in Early Childhood Education

ECE centres and preschools can apply a few strategies to create partnerships. Generally, schools can have three modes of communications to create effective and impactful partnerships with parents

i. One-way communication

When we say one way communication, what comes in mind is written communication. "Written communication is probably the most efficient and effective way we can provide valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home" (Williams & Cartledge, 1997, p. 30). Written communication is a permanent form of communication that requires organized, concise, and precise information for parents to read and understand the progress of their child and the environment their child is in (Berger, 1991). Some forms of written communication that can be strategically used by schools are newsletters on a monthly or periodically basis, brochures on school programmes and structures, posters to announce new updates, events or programmes, school-to-home communication books where teachers provide weekly feedback on the child's development, reports cards to inform parents on the overall development and learning of children.

In a study, Grande (2004) narrated about literacy bags, in which the ECE centre included materials developed to assist parents understand class-level expectations and to provide them with resources and specific activities to support whole development of their child. These bags are given as take-home so that both children and parents can collaboratively learn.

ii. Two-way communication

Two-way communication occurs when teachers and parents discourse with each other. Effective discussion "develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, and an appreciation of contrasting perspectives" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

There may be various reasons for schools to communicate with parents, be it to celebrate a child's successful school experience, or most often is to share a concern. The most popular two-way communication strategy is a phone call home. Gustafson (1998) in research claimed that she communicated with parents usually on monthly-basis to discuss, both concerns and celebrate success. Gustafson established that students' academic success was partially influenced from the positive communication with parents by phone. Love (1996) also similarly promotes the use of "good news calls" to acknowledge the child for good work done as a way of promoting constructive relations with parents.

Another traditional strategy to improve partnerships is the parent-teacher conferences or meetings (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Effective parent-teacher meetings are an occasion to create a successful partnership where Metcalf (2001) points out that “it is about the child, or on findings solutions together for development and learning where teachers can construct an opportunity to discuss what is working with the child” (p. 18).

Inviting parents to organize, conduct and participate in preschool events is another effective two-way communication to establish parental relationships. Events such as sports day, children’s day, and so on can provide schools an opportunity for teachers to develop a “personal touch” in their communication which enhances school relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

In addition to this, the findings from the studies of Mendez, (2010) proves that parent engagement has positive impact on children. In their study of Head Start programs, they analysed how parents help children get ready for school and engage parents or other key family members to form positive relationships, with a focus on family wellbeing. This research adds in support of the critical role that parental participation plays in establishing a positive educational trajectory for young children.

Powell (2003) in another study about relations between families and early childhood programs also found that parents were often asked to assist teachers in the classroom at least once per week during the child’s early years where teachers and parents engage in interactive discourse through two-way communication and found it to be very impactful for child’s positive development and academic achievement.

iii. Technology enabled communication

Integrating technology into school-parent communication can help schools communicate quickly to a broad parent community (Ramirez, 2001). Some forms of communication include WhatsApp video or even audio-recordings. In the studies by Cameron and Lee (1997) on discovering satisfaction regarding the use of audio technology demonstrated that both parents and teachers expressed a better communication pattern, both in quality and quantity.

Visual technology has also proven successful as a communication tool for parents of early years students as they build more confidence as parents are able to see and view teachers’ expressions during the talk (Alberto, Mechling, Taber, & Tompson, 1995)

Videos, through specific phone apps are a good source for homework activity, specifically related to assimilation activities, and to assist with transition planning for early years learners. In a study, parents reported that videos enhanced communication with teachers and understanding of their child’s school program (Alberto et al., 1995)

Apart from audio and video through specific software apps, social media platforms such as Facebook, Insta, Google Meet, Zoom and many more also holds promise to allow teachers communication opportunities “not limited by school hours or location” (Brewer & Kallick, 1996, p. 181). In the end, technology enables children’s’ learning to be accessed online, where development and progress is shared with parents. The capability to connect homes and schools with new

technologies provides many unique opportunities to enhance communication with parents beyond the traditional formats, thereafter, enhance partnerships.

Methodology

This section describes the research method used to collect data for the exploration of this case study. On a broader basis, the substantial purpose of this study was to understand the current parental relationship and involvement practices at Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Malaysia and consequently propose a model for parental involvement grounded on Epstein's framework.

3.1 Research design

This case study approach employed a qualitative research design using diverse methods to gain a total and in-depth knowledge of parental involvement which then led to the development of Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M). Case study approach according to Heale and Twycross (2018) is an appropriate research design to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject. It allows the researcher to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case (Single, 2017).

Data Collection Procedure and Instruments

To analyse the current parental relationship and involvement practices at Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres and subsequently propose a model for parental involvement in the Malaysian early childhood education context, this study was conducted in **three phases**

i. Phase 1: Selecting target population and sample

Phase one involved selecting a target population. The target population for this study was privately owned Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Malaysia. Since it was not practical to recruit the entire population of ECE centres throughout Malaysia for this study, it is essential therefore to specify on the accessible population. The accessible population is a division of the target population that considers certain characteristics (Lunsford & Lunsford, 1995). According to Davis (2019), the accessible population is the population in research to which the researchers can apply their conclusions. It is from the accessible population that researchers draw their samples. For the purpose of this case study, convenience sampling was used to draw a sample since data collection needed to be facilitated by researchers themselves (Saunders et al, 2012). Upon the specification on the characteristics of the accessible population, the geographic and time constraints with which both the researcher and potential subjects will have to contend with was studied carefully. Due to researchers' geographical convenience, at the initial stage, fifteen privately owned early childhood centres were conveniently selected from Perak, Selangor and Penang. Each centre was then given a brief explanation on the purpose and design of the research. A consent form was also given to centre owners/operators on their willingness to participate in forum discussions and to share documents as well as social media sources for document analysis. Permission to observe school communications with parents was also requested. Unfortunately, of the fifteen selected centres only six centres agreed to provide the research team with documents and social media sources for analysis as well as permission to observe the daily communication between school and parents at the premise for the duration of two weeks. The other

nine centres were only willing to participate in forum discussions and were extremely private about sharing documents, visuals, school records, social media sources and were specifically against the idea researchers being in the school for observations.

ii. **Phase 2: Research method framework**

In the second phase, the researchers personally met with the six ECE centre owners/operators, respectively between 12 September 2022 to 16 September 2022 to explain the process and ensure smooth collection of data. The researchers together with school directors then devised the methodological framework for data collection as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

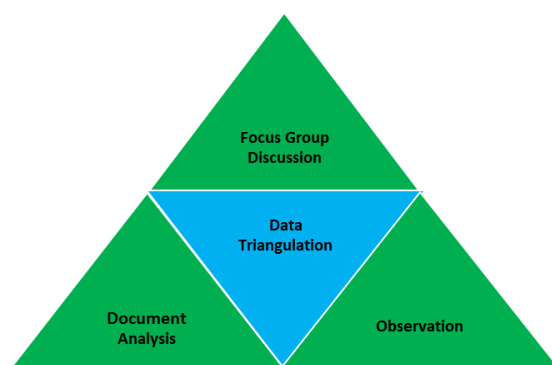


Figure 2: Data Triangulation

To strengthen this study, data triangulation method was applied. According to Creswell (2009) qualitative research very much relies on data obtained by the researcher from first-hand observation, document analysis, focus groups, interviews, recordings made in natural settings, and artifacts.

Researchers specifically agreed on multiple methods of data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 1990). The rationale for using this approach is that one can be more confident, and triangulation can increase the credibility and validity of the findings when different methods generate the same findings (Creswell, 2009).

The qualitative data obtained in this study were based on document analysis of relevant communications including students' records, emails, letters, circulars, and social media platforms specifically Facebook, Instagram, and Business WhatsApp. Apart from this, researchers also conducted several observations during active parent-teacher communication, especially during the arrival and departure of students from the centres as well as parent-teacher association meetings. Finally, focus group discussions provided information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals (Krueger & Casey, 2000). It also provided validation to the data obtained from document analysis and observations.

iii. Phase 3: Designing a model for parental involvement in an ECE setting

The parental involvement model, which is known as *Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M)* was developed during this stage. Data that guided the development of the model were drawn from the themes that emerged from the findings during phase 2 as well as facts drawn from the literature review conducted in 2.0 above. Relevant theories from literature such as Epstein's parental involvement framework, as well as design principles and existing frameworks at the ECE centres where the research was conducted were explored in depth to develop the parental involvement model.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Several approaches are available to analyse qualitative data. For this study to be effective, the researchers applied content analysis. Content analysis according to Krippendorf (1980) "is a research technique for making replicable and valid inference from data to their context" (p. 21) and is an important building block in the conceptual analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). The content analysis for this study was done strategically as follow

1. All content was collected in stages and accordingly (focus group transcripts, social media content and visuals as well as documents from the centre related to parental involvement)
2. Next, interpretation of data from social media platform and documents was done by researchers where coding was applied.
3. The codes were than analysed against the focus group transcripts to further validate findings.
4. Once coding was complete, the collected data was examined to find patterns and draw conclusions (themes).

The outcome of the analysed data on *current parental relationship and involvement practices* are presented in section 4.0 below with more detailed discussions including the proposed model for parental involvement.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings from the data analysis and subsequently proposes a model of parental involvement for ECE centres.

a. Reliability of qualitative instrument

Since the assessment was designed by the researchers based on the research questions and literature review, an inter-rater reliability test was important to be conducted to check its reliability. The well-established inter-rater reliability test method known as Cohen's Kappa was used. According to Viera and Garrett (2005), Cohen Kappa's rule of the thumb is that values of Kappa ranging from 0.40 to 0.59 are considered moderate, 0.60 to 0.79 substantial, and 0.80 outstanding.

Two subject matter experts (SMEs) were provided with the Focus Group Research Guide. To examine the agreement on the discussion guide between the two subject matter experts (SMEs) or also known as evaluators, the researcher conducted the inter-rater reliability analysis with SMEs using the confusion concept matrix.

Based on the researcher's calculation using the confusion matrix which contains the counts of true positives, false positives, true negatives, and false negatives for each class, the Kappa

score achieved was .72, meaning that there is substantial agreement on the discussion guide, hence indicating that the instrument is reliable.

b. Demographic data of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres that agreed to participate in this study were located at Perak, Penang and Selangor. Table 1 below briefly describes the demographic details related to each centre in terms of year of establishment, student numbers and total number of staff. For the purpose of confidentiality, centres were given acronyms PK, TM, MA, KP, IS and HC.

Table 1

Demographic details

Centre	Location	Year Established	Total number of students	Total number of staff
Centre PK	Perak	2019	212	14
Centre TM	Perak	2017	84	4
Centre MA	Perak	2018	121	6
Centre KP	Penang	2020	102	5
Centre IS	Selangor	2017	156	8
Centre HC	Selangor	2020	143	9
Total participants				46

Based on Table 1 above, all centres that agreed to participate in this study were quite recently established, not more than 6 years in operation. On average, it can be deducted that the student-teacher ratio in each centre is 19:1. Based on the focus group discussion, many of these centres are new because the owners or principals who have established the centres were formerly teachers themselves in early education centres elsewhere and upon gaining enough knowledge and experience, they have decided to open their own early childhood establishments. All the centres selected were privately owned institutions.

Students' background

Based on financial and personal information provided through focus group discussion and researcher's own examination of students' background records, all students attending the ECE centres range between average to high socio-economic backgrounds. Of the total 818 students, 90% of their parents possess a higher education qualification whereas only 10% are high school graduates. A total of 95 % (777 students) are English speakers while a small percentage of about 41 students (5%) speak mostly mandarin with their parents or guardians. From the total sample, about 92.9% (760 students) are at their age-specific levels and 58 students (7.1%) are categorized as differently abled mainly dealing with autism or speech delay challenges.

Overall, it can be observed that the ECE centres volunteered for this study are all well to do socio-economically and in terms of cognitive development, face no issues of education disparity.

Analysis of current parental relationship and involvement practices at Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres

Based on the data collected throughout the data triangulation method, information was examined to find patterns and draw conclusions. From the coding obtained, three major themes were drawn out, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of major conclusions from data analysis

Major conclusion	*f	**%	Themes developed
a. parents and their children are quite close-knitted	46	100	<i>Current trends on parent-child relationship</i>
b. when incidences occur to children, parents or grandparents immediately call or WhatsApp	40	87	
c. parents communicate through WhatsApp on every minute matter	42	91	
d. children's studies or academic is not the only concern	37	80	
e. major concern seems to be more on children's physical and socio-emotional matters	42	91	
a. on festive occasions parents send out their appreciation to the school by gifting food and presents	43	93	<i>The intensity of parental relationship within ECE centres</i>
b. parents provide encouragement and positive feedback showing their constant support to the preschool during events or incidences (covid-19)	41	89	
c. weekly written feedback or reports from parents to teacher on their child	39	85	
d. parents are very keen to keep a good relationship with school- constant informal verbal communication	42	91	
e. appreciating the teachers and school's effort	45	98	
f. volunteering in projects	38	83	
a. parent-child bonding programmes for parents on a weekly basis	23	50	<i>ECE centers' initiative for parental involvement</i>
b. preschool initiatives to create partnership with parents specifically during online learning	27	59	
c. ECE centre create various projects that both parents and children can do	38	83	
d. child-parent-teacher event such as report card day, sports day, parents-teacher meeting	42	91	
e. weekly reports from teachers to parents	43	93	

***f = frequency of responses**

****% = percentage is based on number of responses/total participants**

The major findings formulated from the data analysis on *current parental relationship and involvement practices* which are divided into three major themes as summarized above are discussed in more detail below.

Theme 1

Current trends on parent-child relationship

Focus group discussion with the head-teachers and teachers revealed that all children have a very close-knitted relationship with their parents or guardians.

The relationship between parents and their children is quite close-knitted because almost everyday we get messages querying their child's well-being.

[Teacher 1, 10/10/2022]

Even when children forget something or show certain emotions at home, parents or grandparents immediately call or WhatsApp to find out further.

[Head Teacher D, 10/10/2022]

Based on observations and document analysis, on a daily basis, parents communicate with school either on the well-being of their child, lesson development or even on self-care and nutrition matters. Multiple analyses show that at most times parents preferred communication through WhatsApp rather than face to face with the school.

This was further validated during the focus group discussion.

Most often, parents communicate through WhatsApp on every minute matter. Sometimes, one parent can send more than one message per day. These are the overly concerned parents usually.

[Teacher 5, 10/10/2022]

Findings of Theme 1 is parallel to Upali (2017) that indicated children's wellbeing is largely a part of family's responsibility, and this was observed in the ECE centres researched. Parents' relationship with their children is close-knitted and active. Their keen conversations with children and then confirming information with school management shows that they are very much involved in the child's psycho-socio emotions as well as learning developments.

In addition, document analyses based on social-media applications showed that on a weekly basis, each parent and teacher had at least one form of communication regarding their child's development at school. However, data showed that a large part of the communication seems to be more about the child's well-being both physically and emotionally rather than cognitive related issues.

Parents don't just ask about children's studies nowadays. Their major concern seems to be more if their child has eaten or how much water was consumed and even about toilet matters. Sometimes some parents prefer to meet us face to face. But today, post covid, everyone just uses Whatsapp and most ask us to send them pictures or videos about their child.

[Head Teacher A, 10/10/2022]

Theme 2

The intensity of parental relationship within ECE centres

As put forward by KLA Schools (2020), a positive preschool-parent relationship demonstrates to a child that he or she can trust, respect, and appreciate his or her teacher because parents are doing it. From the focus group discussions, social media and documents analyses, the school has a proactive approach in reaching out to parents and generally has a very good school-parent relationship. Parents too are very keen to keep a good relationship and are always appreciating the teachers and school's effort through various ways. Findings indicated that during festive occasions parents send out their appreciation to the school by gifting food and beverages. For example, during Mooncake Festival or Teacher's Day, the entire school staff receive a large number of gifts every year. Apart from gifts and tokens, parents also provide encouragement and positive feedback showing their constant support to the preschools.

Even when there are no occasions, parents show great support. This can be seen in our weekly communication books where most parents thank teachers or state a few good words.

[Principal C, 10/10/2022]

Theme 3

ECE centres' initiative for parental involvement

Based on the analyses from the triangulation of data sources, Centres PK, TM, MA, KP, IS and HC have taken impressive actions and implemented strategic initiatives to get parents involvement.

Document analysis provided evidence that Centre PK and TM continuously organized parent-child bonding programmes for parents on a weekly basis to encourage parental involvement in their child's learning.

The school has taken tremendous step in creating long-term parental involvement initiatives from a long time ago and we have expanded our strategies by providing parents with four weekly worksheets to be done together with their child during the weekend.

[Teacher 3, 10/10/2022]

Evidence from social media and document analyses showed that the preschool initiatives to create bonding with parents were noticed occurring even more strongly for Centres TM, KP and HC during the lock-down where parents were encouraged to be with the child during the online learning sessions.

The school encouraged parents to assist their children's learning online during the Covid-19 phase and this has also made parents to form close bonds with kids at home. Furthermore, parents got to understand better what their child is able to and not able to do.

[Teacher 2, 10/10/2022]

Apart from academic-based programmes, the ECE centres also created various projects that both parents and children can do and be involved with. One of such was where children made postcards in school and schools requested parents' involvement in taking their children to the post-office to post these postcards to their friends.

Parents are always eager to do projects with schools, as they find it a channel to communicate something interesting with their child, hence building better bonds.

[Head Teacher B, 10/10/2022]

Centre IS has even created schedules with parents during every term's break to create closer relationship between the child-parent-teacher by organizing hi-tea sessions for families.

The school together with parents has always practised a get-together for every occasion because we believe every child will enjoy moments with their parents and when teachers are present with them, they feel excited as the teacher usually talks about that child, they feel a sense of belonging and get greater confidence. There is a three-way communication.

[Teacher 5, 10/10/2022]

Apart from the above, parents were also found to be actively involved in the centres' academic and yearly events such as *Parent-Teacher Meeting (PTM), Graduation Day, Sports Day, Hari Raya, Chine New Year* and *Termly School Holiday Programme*.

The school encourages parents to let their children try multi-cultural attire and practices celebrating every occasion, giving both parent-and child the excitement of the festival, whether it is face-to-face or online.

[Teacher 6, 10/10/2022]

I think we as principals who are here all agree that parents are always eagerly waiting for school occasions. That is why, every chance we get we call parents for every celebration. It is good vibe for us as principals too.

[Principal F, 10/10/2022]

Parallel to literature statement, events such as sports day, children's day, and so on can provide schools an opportunity for teachers to develop a "personal touch" in their communication style and directly achieve enhanced school relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

Although all centres do conduct weekly progress reports be it digital or written to their respective parents about their child's teaching and learning progress,

The school has also created broadcast groups through WhatsApp where parents are not only informed on latest updates but also on how parents can help children at home through their school-based progress.

[Teacher 4, 10/10/2022]

Centre MA was found to have additional parents' involvement of their child's academic progress through *Weekly Academic Planner* that's sent through WhatsApp Broadcasts before even the lessons begin.

Frequent communication through channels like WhatsApp business, Broadcast Groups, Instagram and Facebook by the school has gotten parents to be involved entirely with the school. Children's progress in the modes of pictures, activity types, measures of development are frequently conveyed to each parent daily basis. But we also provide parents a weekly academic planner just so that they know what we intend to teach that week.

[Principal E, 10/10/2022]

Based on the overall findings in Theme 3 above, it can be deduced that there have been various types of initiatives by the centres to include parents, in every way possible to ensure their children develop positively and gain the necessary success at school. These findings are parallel to the findings from literature review that partnership between parent and school when congruent and when individuals involved mutually support each other through their contributions, positively enhances learning, increases motivation, and influence the development of children (Berger, 1991; Burnage, 2019; Epstein, 2001, 2009; Metcalf, 2001; Upali, 2017).

Proposed model for parental involvement for Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings

As discussed in the literature 2.4 above, Joyce Epstein of John Hopkins University developed the framework for defining six different types of parent involvement that institutions can apply to develop school and family partnership programs. Based on the Epstein model and observing the findings obtained from our research work, this study would therefore propose a model for parental involvement for the Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings in Malaysia. Findings from this study indicates that a vast majority of parents frequently have two-way communication with the ECE centre. Parallel to the statement by American Federation of Teachers (2007) this study also found that effective communication is essential for building school- family partnerships as it constitutes the foundation for all other forms of family involvement in education.

The Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M) presented here emphasizes that parent-school communication is extremely essential in early years education and for this reason, this study proposed that the model centres on communication. The model, as illustrated in Figure 3 below, emphasises that communication is the major link to parenting and learning at home (01), decision making (02), volunteering (03) and collaborating with the community (04). The entire model emphasises that communication should be an iterative process, suggesting that although communication at every level, 01 to 04, is important and should be done by stages, each level can be revisited as children grow and the communication process doesn't stop after one level. Each level of communication can be revisited as many times as possible until certain desired result is obtained.

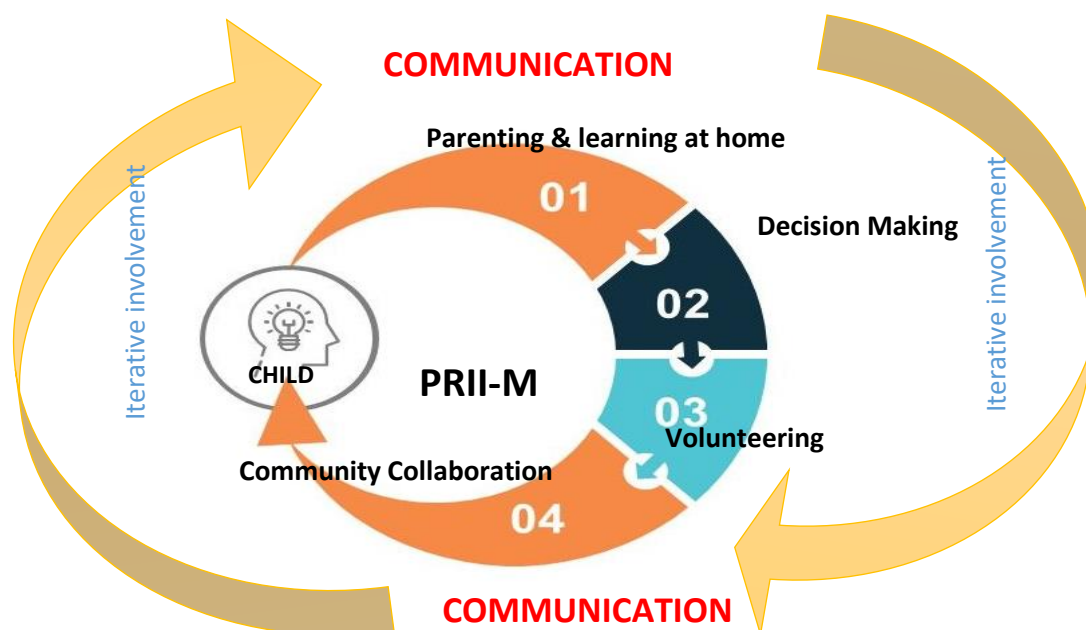


Figure 3

The Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M)

This framework suggested that iterative involvement of parents with ECE centres is essential, meaning that communication is a necessity link until a desired result is achieved, which is the child's overall well-being and holistic development. In this study, the desired result is the child's success in learning and successful development in early years.

The model further suggests that to ensure child's success at school, ECE centres should start initial communications with parents on both the parenting and the learning at home (01) from an early stage itself, even before the child steps into school. This model suggests that as soon as parents make an enquiry at the administration office, the school should start providing parenting courses through sharing of videos, pictures and even articles such as how to get your child emotionally ready for school, conducting toilet training at home, and matters on healthy nutrition for early years. The model also believes that schools should encourage parents to do preschool-based activities with kids at home so that the child is aware about school and be more school-ready. The model believes that the sooner parents learn about children's growth and behaviour, the easier the transition to school will be for their children. ECE centres should therefore provide information and ideas to families about how to help children to cope with learning and self-care. This model in addition suggests that schools can provide a milestone-achievement chart of what each child should be able to do at certain age or phase so that parents can assist from an earlier stage itself and make the transition from home to school less stressful for the child.

Next the model also suggested decision making (02) as the second level of communication. Here it is important to note that any ECE centre that does not communicate with parents on certain decision making about the children's developmental needs, often see failure in extending the experiences that a child has in the classroom to real-world activities that often happens in the home, parallel to Spreeuwenberg (2019) that states that establishing clear communication pathways between school and parents whilst increasing effort to include

parents as an important partner in their child's education, brings forward positive impact on children's learning ability. Based on the findings obtained through this study, parents have a very close-knitted relationship with their children. It is therefore indeed useful for ECE centres to include parents in decision making especially related to issues such as applying developmentally appropriate pedagogy for children based on their needs, asking feedback on changes in curriculum, implementing new initiatives such as using tablets in classrooms, and even in planning and organizing school events such as sports, children's day, school holiday programme and so on. Information and feedback from families can sometimes provide a different perspective or viewpoints which in turn can be essential for school's decisions.

The model also suggested both, volunteering (03) and community collaboration (04) as important elements where parents can involve actively, however these come only at later stages. Such involvements are more likely to happen when parents have built a good rapport with the ECE centre and are confident enough with the ECE centre to participate actively.

The model suggests that for volunteering (03), parents can be invited to schools to be volunteers during events such as sports day, or even for school enrichment programme as the ones carried out by some of the ECE centres of this study such as reading story books and assisting children in little chef activities. Parents who have good influence and networks can also involve in collaboration with community (04). Schools can work with parents to identify, integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes to further develop better student learning experiences. This could be related to recreational activities, social work and support, health inspections or various other early years programmes and services.

In conclusion, based on best practices from literature and major findings from this study, the Parental Relationship and Iterative Involvement Model (PRII-M) which is grounded on Epstein's framework on the six types of parental involvement, sets a standard prototype for ECE centres to model on since it is achievable and has been seen workable between the school and parents during the course of this research, and most importantly is iterative in nature, as parents and teachers can go back and forth to provide the child with highest benefit in his or her learning and development.

Conclusion

Partnership is construed as the process in which those individuals involved mutually support each other and attune their contributions with the objective of advocating the learning, motivation, and development of children. The findings of this study have therefore proved that parental relationship is an important criterion for child growth because family relationships can have impact on the way the child behaves at school, the child's academic success as well as overall mental and physical development. The model, PRII-M, developed based on the findings in this study emphasizes that parent-school communication is extremely essential in early years education. This model which centres on communication, relates that to be an effective ECE centre and to have successful impact on a child's growth, communication between parents and school should begin from the early stages even before the child starts preschool and should be a continuous partnership throughout the child's journey at the preschool. It also suggests that parental involvement should be an iterative process, rather than being just one-off, as it contributes significantly on every aspect of a child's life in their early education.

This study has significant contributions both theoretically and contextually. In terms of theoretical significance, the study has further added on the literature on parents'

involvement, and its impact on children's growth that further proves that forming and establishing a collaboration between school and family will ensure better child development. This research has also provided new perspectives in approaching parental partnerships at the early childhood level. Contextually, this study spreads awareness to all early childhood centres in Malaysia on the importance of recognizing communication as the primary tool to creating parental partnerships and how Malaysian preschools can promote these partnerships through the PRII-M model to ensure young children attain a holistic growth and development.

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