

EXPLORING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF INSTITUTION-BASED PRIVATE CHILDCARE CENTRES IN KLANG VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

With the increased number of women participation in the labour force and the encouragement from the Malaysia government to the private sector in setting up preschool and early childcare centre, there is a high demand on the number of institution-based private childcare centre. However, the literature has shown that the number of childcare centres closing is on the rise and at a worrying state. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the possible factors affecting the closing down of childcare centre and to learn the best practices from the sustaining childcare centres. This study utilized multiple case studies methods in researching the success factors of those sustainable childcare centre as well as identifying the factors that lead to the closing down of some childcare centres. Two institution-based private childcare centres who have operated for more than ten years and two centres that have recently closed after operating between two to four years in the Klang Valley area were selected in this study. This study used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from the operator, teacher and parent of each centre. Findings indicate that operators need not only to have early childhood education background in curriculum planning, training and lessons planning, at the same time, they have to be knowledgeable, skilful and experienced in business management to enhance their competencies for management of centres in today's competitive industry. Operators are expected to have good financial management, strong leadership abilities, good in marketing and recruitment and to have policy literacy to comply with the constant changing of the laws and regulations of Malaysia. The ineffective governance in terms of registration and monitoring of childcare centre, enforcement of the laws and loopholes between different licenses became the leading factors of the closing down of the childcare centres in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

Keywords: sustainability, childcare centre, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

With the increased number of women participation in the labour force and the encouragement from the Malaysia government to the private sector in setting up preschool and early child care centre all over Malaysia, there is currently a high demand on the number of institution-based private childcare centre. Operators of private childcare centres are expected to be more knowledgeable, skilful and have experiences in business management to enhance their competencies for management of centres in today's competitive industry (Nupponen, 2006).

It is proven that the principals or operators with higher education qualifications have a significant impact on the quality of childcare services of the centre (Mims et al., 2008). Not only are they expected to have theoretical but also professional knowledge of the early childhood field, they also need to portray a good understanding on business management which includes the funding options, operational costs and responsiveness to the needs of the local community. Besides, they are expected to portray qualities such as responsibility, knowledgeable, confidence, rigidity in decision making, having team spirit as well as being passionate towards their job and children (Loiy et al., 2018). The principals or operators feel more and more squeezed by higher standards which most of the time, require more money to be spent, and on the other hand, to be able to compete in this competitive industry which will be difficult if they increase the school fees (Stoney & Poppick, 2016). This directly and indirectly added pressure to principals or operators who are running school and to sustain their business. The literature has shown that the number of childcare centres closing is on the rise and at a worrying state (National Child Data Centre, 2018). Hence the purpose of this study is to explore the possible factors affecting the closing down of institution-based private childcare centre and at the same time, to learn the best practices from the sustaining childcare centres.

Policies, Regulations, and Legislations

In our country, early child care and education comes under two ministries, namely the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (Chiam, 2008; Ong, 2005; Lily & Muhamed, 2013). Childcare for children aged of 4 and below is under the latter ministry. In order to ensure the health and well-being of children and staff, the per say ministry was given the authority to make regulations pertaining the registration, qualification, issuing certificates of childminders and health and nutrition care of the children in childcare centre under the Child Care Centre Act (Act 308). As more and more parents are with higher educational background and cognizant of the importance of early childhood education, it is understandable to have higher expectations on the services provided by the childcare centres to meet their needs and demands (Chiam, 2008; Ong, 2005). However, the amendments of the Child Care Centre Act 1984 Amendment – Act1285/2007 was focusing more on the administrative purposes rather than improving the overall quality of childcare services to the public (Chiam, 2008). It was also reported when there is lacking of horizontal integration between different ministries and departments who tend to act in isolation from one another would eventually create more confusion to the operators and the public on the requirements on quality childcare centre in Malaysia and probably leads to many unregistered centres operating in this country as to avoid the hazards of dealing with the governmental offices (Nyland & Ng, 2015; Rojanah & Najibah, 2011; Rao & Pearson, 2009; Liew, 2007). Lack of monitoring leads to the big gap between the public and private centres in their goals and how they run their program (Lily & Mohamed, 2013; Tan, 2017). Operators find it challenging especially in getting the initial approval and renewal of the childcare registration due to the inconsistency of the ruling imposed by the local authorities (Zoharah et al., 2007) Furthermore, with the ‘kiasuism’ culture among parents which is similar with our neighbouring country, Singapore; it further influenced the childcare centres and preschool, especially from the private sector to be focusing on children’s performance in academic and discipline. The parents want their children to be drilled with the reading, writing and mathematical skills and they prefer to see worksheets and test scores instead of allowing children at young age to play and to be involved in more socio-emotional activities (Nyland & Ng, 2015; Lily & Mohamed, 2013; Gullo & Hughes,

2011). It then impacted both teachers and children to be under great pressure as they are expected to meet the inappropriate expectations (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Centres that did not meet the expectations of parents would soon be eliminated and faced the crisis of closing down if the number of enrollment is not as what it is expected.

Leadership and Management

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) program standards are set to help parents of young children in identifying the quality childcare centre, preschool or kindergarten for their little ones. Out of the ten program standards, Standard Ten focuses on the Leadership and Management of a centre (NAEYC, n.d.). In which centres are required to execute related policies effectively and the management can support their staff, children, and families in providing them high-quality experiences. Therefore, it is essential that the management team is effective and having knowledgeable leaders in each centre, having sensible policies and procedures to provide and maintain quality services over time. With such standard set, it was specified that the program administrator to have a certain educational qualification; the registration of the centre with related governmental departments; sharing of centre's philosophies, policies and procedures such as safety and protection with families; last but not least the ideal adult-child ratio for different age group of children (NAEYC, n.d.). The principals or operators feel more and more squeezed by higher standards which most of the time, require more money to be spent, and on the other hand, to be able to compete in this competitive industry which will be difficult if they increase the school fees (Stoney & Poppick, 2016; Fullan, 2007). Principals or operators need to be more knowledgeable, skilful and experienced in business management to enhance their competencies for management of centres in today's competitive industry (Nupponen, 2006). It is proven that the principals or operators with higher education qualifications have a significant impact on the quality of childcare services of the centre (Mims et al., 2008). Operators are expected to have theoretical and professional knowledge of the early childhood field. Besides, they need to portray a good understanding of business management which includes the funding options, operational costs and responsiveness to the needs of the local community. In addition, they are expected to portray qualities such as responsible, knowledgeable, confidence, rigidity in decision making, having team spirit as well as being passionate towards their job and children (Loiy et al., 2018).

Qualifications and Trainings

In Singapore, The Nurturing Early Learners curriculum framework was recommended to preschools with the training of teachers and leadership training for principals mandated (Tan, 2017). With the aim to raise the professional standards and improve the overall quality of preschool education in Singapore, the mandated nationwide training was provided for all preschool teachers and principals (Ng, 2011). All preschool principals are required to obtain a Diploma in Pre-school Education (Leadership) under the teacher's training framework. By 2008, one in four teachers were required to obtain the Diploma in Pre-school Education (Teaching), and all other teachers were to have a Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (Ng, 2011). These requirements applied to staff employed in a Ministry of Education (MOE) kindergarten or a childcare centre regulated by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). As compared with Malaysia, graduates with a Certificate, Diploma or bachelor's degree in ECE may teach in preschools or childcare centres. All preschools under the

Ministry of Education Malaysia require their teachers to have a bachelor's degree in ECE as their minimum qualification to ensure quality and professionalism in early childhood education. Currently in Malaysia, childcare providers are not required to have high academic and professional qualifications, therefore their status remains low and parents see them as childminders or even as maids rather than the early childhood educators (Chiam, 2008). Minimum qualification to Diploma by 2020-adding challenges to operators as there are still many centres with teachers who are unqualified and reluctant to fulfil the requirements for various reasons (financial, ages, distance etc). All preschool education implementing agencies must start hiring kindergarten teachers with at least diploma qualification from year 2020. The former Education Minister, Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid said the requirement for such an academic qualification would be fully enforced by 2020 (Bernama, 2016). However, there is no mandated training from the government on the childcare principals or operators and hence, leads to inexperienced principals or operators without leadership training in managing the centre and ending up, centres closing one after another. Besides, it was also reported the biggest challenge faced by the operators is to attract and retain qualified staff in the centre (Neuman et al., 2014). Research shows that staff turnover is high in childcare services because of poor working conditions and low wages (Mims et al., 2008; Zoharah et al., 2007).

Quality Childcare

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the key to achieve the expected benefits, as mentioned in all the international literature. Ong (2005) stated that the positive interactions and experiences a child gets in childcare helps in their emotional, social and intellectual development. Ong further found out that children are happier and securely attached to caregivers in care settings that had lower adult-child ratios, and children were rated as cognitively competent during free play in child care settings that offered more opportunities for art, blocks, and dramatic play, and in settings in which caregivers had college degrees and specific early childhood training. Similarly, Chiam (2008) reported on previous research and noted that children in quality childcare presented with improved social competence. Similar effects are also evident for social outcomes such as self-regulation, the ability to cope with emotions, manage thinking and behaviour and focus attention. It was found that the same benefits were not gained from attending low quality preschools (Xin et al., 2011; Chiam, 2008; Ong, 2005). Quality has become the watchword for early childhood especially in the last few decades. Findings by neuroscientists disclose that experiences in the first five years are critical to brain development. Inappropriate and stressful experiences can affect the brain architecture, affecting not only cognitive and socio-emotional development but also the physical and mental health of the child (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2014). Quality of childcare and continuity in personnel are concerns for parents as well as for childcare professionals. This has been supported more recently with research suggesting that high quality childcare involves stability that, in turn, requires an emotionally healthy and continuous relationship with a caregiver within a stable environment (Tan, 2017; Nupponen, 2006; Ong, 2005). Childcare providers suffer less emotional exhaustion and enjoy greater personal accomplishment in childcare programs with higher levels of organizational commitment and better supervision and staff relationships (Chiam, 2008; Mims et al., 2008; Ong, 2005).

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to identify the factors and challenges faced by the operators in contributing to the sustainability of the institution-based private childcare centre, namely TASKA. With the hope from the findings, it could help the others in the same industry to sustain their business and at the same time, to offer the quality early childhood care and services to the young generations. The specific objectives include:

- i) To explore the centre operation of the institution-based private childcare center.
- ii) To identify the factors contributing to the sustainability/non-sustainability of the institution-based private childcare center.
- iii) To explore the opportunities and challenges in operating an institution-based private childcare center.
- iv) To identify if the current governmental policies/legislations/regulations have been effective in sustaining the institution-based private childcare centre.
- v) To give recommendation pertaining the sustainability of institution-based private childcare center based on operators, parents and teachers perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized multiple case studies methods in researching the success factors of those sustainable childcare centres as well as identifying the factors that lead to the closing down of some childcare centres. Qualitative research was carried out to collect meaningful data from the participants' responses and gathering word and image data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The interview protocol was developed and validated by the research team which consists of experts from the related field is essential in getting the instrument validated and to maintain the trustworthiness of the research (Hays & Singh, 2012).

There were two institution-based private childcare centres who have operated for more than ten years and two centres that have recently closed after operating between two to four years in the Klang Valley area selected in this study. The two sustaining centres in this study are known as Centre 1 and Centre 2 whereas the close down centres in this study are known as Centre 3 and Centre 4.

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from the operator, teacher, and parent of each centre. Altogether, there were twelve participants in this study. In addition, field observations and document analysis were conducted at the centres who are sustaining. Through the interview session, the researcher asked some probing questions to help to expand the participants' responses. This was made with the intention that participants would provide richer interviews because the voice of participants is important. Probing could be in the form of verbal questions or body gestures such as nodding head (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The rationale of choosing individual interview sessions in collecting data in this research is because it allowed participants to describe what is meaningful and important using his or her own words. It also allowed the researcher in probing further to ensure that participants are interpreting questions the way they are intended. Most importantly, it helped the researcher to gain participant's story in generally a simpler format (Hays & Singh, 2012).

All the interviews were later being transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively. Once transcribed, it will be sent back to each participant for member checking to review the transcript before moving on to coding the interview. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), thematic analysis is for a rich description of the case to understand the complex contexts. This methodology ensures that the themes were strongly linked to the data and not driven from a theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke's (2013) five stages of inductive thematic analysis method involved; (i) Becoming familiar with the data; (ii) Generating initial codes; (iii) Searching for themes; (iv) Refining; and (v) Defining and naming themes. The researcher examined the data analytically and provided detailed descriptions of themes from each interview. The themes generated are the important findings of this study.

RESULTS

In answering the research questions, it is wise to first look into the operators' background to know more about them and try to rationalize their management and leadership style and all these would have an impact in shaping who they are today. During the interview sessions with them, it's interesting to discover each of them having various educational and working experiences and eventually ending up in the Early Childhood Education industry in Malaysia.

Operators' Background

From the interviews with the four operators, it is interesting to note that four of them were having Degrees in some other fields and eventually came into Early Childhood Education and continued with this passion working with the children. Centre 1 operator has a legal background and after one of her family members approached her in partnering in setting up a childcare centre, she found her passion and love for young children and thereafter pursued a certificate in play and PERMATA course, she is also currently pursuing her master's degree in Early Childhood Education with a local university. Centre 2 operator was a PhD holder and has been in this industry for the past three decades. Centre 3 operator has been in this industry for the past two decades and has obtained her qualifications in Early Childhood Education from a local private college. Whereas Centre 4 operator obtained a master's degree in Early Childhood Education.

Passionate Operators

One of the outstanding values that stand out for the sustaining centres' operators was being ethical and with principles in managing the centre. All four centres were registered with the related ministry. Centre 1 operator originally started with one childcare centre, expanded to two due to high demand and finally decided to close down the second centre due to the fact that they wanted to focus on one centre and maintain its high quality in serving the children and the community. Instead of making more money, they insisted to hold on to the quality due to lack of manpower in managing both centres at the same time. On the other hand, another sustaining centre's operator expressed her principle in only getting in the 2-year-old and above children in her centre, even if they were just a few months younger than 2, the operator insisted on the age range when enrolling the children into her centre. She emphasizes on the developmentally appropriate environment for the children as well as

making sure the adult child ratio is appropriate instead of focusing on money making and taking in children whenever there is a demand from the parents. Besides, she maintains her centre fees to an affordable range as she believes every child deserves quality education.

'you can't just run the business like that, you have to find some ways that it has to be licensed.' (Centre 1 Operator)

'I cannot take them when they are under 2, because the materials are not right, and we don't have enough staff... so I decline those who are under 2...' (Centre 2 Operator)

'But at that time, it was already full, and my son was only 18 months but they (the centre) only accepted from 2 years old and above. So, despite me begging the principal, she still said no. So, like consider we were on the waiting list.' (Centre 2 Parent)

From the findings, unanimously all four operators agreed and are making themselves available and accessible to all their employees. They all agree to the importance of being in the centre physically as much as possible and even if they are unable to be present physically, the teachers in the centre would know their way to access their respective operators too. Their roles in empowering and giving the sense of safety and security to their employees does make an impact on them and their centre daily operation.

'You have to be present, to be there, to motivate them, to empower them... I think this is very important because it gives them the sense of security and it also helps in terms of giving them the confidence.' (Centre 1 Operator)

'... to sustain and to be successful, I think, the person who runs it has to have a genuine interest in children and they have to be there.' (Centre 2 Operator)

'But I feel it's very important, even my administrator, she has been with me since the first year, she always tells me, teacher, do you know, you are considered very good. How many owners will be in the centre themselves? How many owners will do everything on their own?' (Centre 3 Operator)

'Everyone likes to have a sense of belongingness; this is human needs... So, these are the values teachers have at their working place, they will feel they themselves are valuable.' (Centre 4 Operator)

During the interview sessions with the teachers and parents from the four childcare centres, both teachers and parents are very satisfied with the presence of the operators being in the centre as they could approach them as and when it is needed. They will be able to monitor the teachers, to provide immediate advice and assistance. Teachers find it easy to communicate and connect with their operators, who is also the principal of their respective centres. Operators who are physically present in the childcare centres empowers their staff. Their availability and accessibility enable their staff to communicate with them effectively. At the same time, being physically present in the childcare centres enables operators to have a better-quality control by guiding and monitoring their staff.

'If I can handle it, I will straightaway tell the parents. If not, I will tell Aunty L (centre principal).' (Centre 1 Teacher)

'the principals are always in the centre. Like anytime you want to talk to them, either you talk to them like now (during picking up time) or you can make an appointment with them. They are always in the centre.' (Centre 1 Parent)

'So, whatever we want to carry out, or talk to her, it's very easy... We can bring up our feelings, our problems, even though we face some challenges with the children... then we would share with her, then maybe she would give us some solutions. So, it's quite easy, we can communicate with each other.' (Centre 2 Teacher)

'We can approach them easily or they will come and approach us.' (Centre 4 Teacher)

Another essential value found from the operators was being passionate with what they are doing and found this job to be a rewarding profession. They could recognize all the children in their centre and the parent was very satisfied with the passion found in the operators and teachers in the centre.

'Their teachers' turnover rate is low... Then the principals are very caring and they know every single child in the centre... they actually can call the correct name of the children. So, I feel it's different.' (Centre 1 Parent)

From the findings, it was evident that all four operators are ethical and with principles in managing their centres, regardless of the sustainability of their centres. On the other hand, it is noticeable that the two operators from the closed centres are multitasking in managing and handling their childcare centre. The two operators are the manager of the centre, which they need to handle the centre registration procedures and deal with the government offices. At the same time, they are putting on hats as the curriculum developer, class teacher, chef, driver, accountant, marketing staff, concert choreographer and even their employees' spiritual leaders. This could be testified from the excerpts below.

'So in the end, my boss, like, eh, I (operator) cook, so the aunty helped her in preparing food...multitasking, I can assure you on this... If she wants this group to use these props or to put on these costumes (for year end concert), she plans everything on her own...' (Centre 3 Teacher)

'Yeah, like my centre's account, I was handling it myself too... So, when we started that time, we did some advertisements, like banners to attract parents... we did most of the things ourselves, no admin, no marketing, we basically don't have anyone else... at the same time, training teachers, I'm like a spiritual leader to my teachers.' (Centre 4 Operator)

When we compared the two sustaining centres, they were having a team of management personnel to handle different matters. A better segregation of responsibilities was evident in both sustaining centres. For example, Centre 1 has a team of three key persons in the centre where one is looking after the licensing and registrations related matters, another

one is looking after the curriculum and daily operations of the centre, the third one is looking after the finance of the centre. As for Centre 2, the operator did most of the tasks herself, but she has trained up senior teachers and supervisors in her centre to help manage and look after the curriculum and daily operations of the centre, not forgetting having an administrator to take care of the paper documentations related matters of the centre.

Complexity in Managing Employees

The main element under Human Resource Management is on Recruitment and Staffing. Different centres have different expectations and requirements in recruiting the staff in their centre. The researcher has noticed that both sustaining centres would hire teachers above ratio, which is to have floaters in their centre. As generally in Malaysia, many parents and the community look down at childcare centre teachers' jobs, and it resulted in low self-esteem among teachers. Ergo, the turnover rate among childcare centre teachers is high. Therefore, for both centres, they have always hired more teachers, hiring above the ratio required by the Malaysia's government regulation, indirectly gives the teachers more sense of security that when one is unable to be present to work, they do not need to take over the other's job as there is always a floater or two to take care of the children and to ensure the job transition and handover would be smoother. As the teachers from both centres were having a very good relationship with operators cum principals, early notice is always given and this enabled her to have ample to hire a new staff to be trained side-by-side with the old staff before she left the centre.

„We hired above the ratio so that the teachers can take leave. When they can take a break, another teacher can step in and it doesn't feel stressful for everyone.” (Centre 1 Operator)

„Sometimes I take even before a vacancy arises, so that I have one floater... when I get a new staff, I get them to work together.” (Centre 2 Operator)

By being in the centre physically daily enables the operators themselves to monitor the teachers. They would either pop into the classroom to observe without prior notice, or they could be peeping by the window, monitoring through CCTV or the formal checking on their lesson plans. With this, the quality of the centre's services will be ensured and guaranteed. Another strategy implemented by all the centres is to put a few teachers in a class. Having teachers and assistants in a class so that the teachers would be keeping an eye on each other too. By doing so, it helps the operators to better monitor the teachers. In this era of technology, it is interesting to find out only one centre is implementing the technology application in managing leave applications for the staff. A mobile application is downloaded in each teachers' mobile phone. Teachers are to apply leave before 7.30am via this application so that the management would be able to arrange manpower to replace and to take over the class. This helps the principal in handling the absenteeism of teachers and to troubleshoot before the day begins in the centre. From this study, only one centre reported they have come across a teacher who was doing nasty things such as gossiping, arguing with staff, jealousy and resigning within twenty-four hours. The centre operator is then being more careful in hiring teachers and to a certain point where she would be taking over a class while searching for the suitable candidate for her centre.

'Because I know they are very experienced, but at the same time, also, I need to keep one eye on them... I don't like fighting, because fights will not solve the problem. But when you deal with it nicely, then you can solve the problem...' (Centre 3 Operator)

„At least there are three, at least they can keep eyes on each other. If one takes the child to the toilet, there are another two to keep an eye on the children. So, there are many advantages to having a big room.“ (Centre 2 Operator)

One of the interesting findings from this study was the sharing from Centre 1 Operator on how she has put her teachers on a shift basis. Her centre's basic line was everyone works for eight hours in a day, therefore, the assistant teachers would clock in first to the centre, to handle and manage the children's morning routine which the class teachers would clock in later to start teaching and to stay later to meet up with parents during pick-up time. With this, the principal hopes everyone gets to have a more work-life balance lifestyle and to make sure nobody is burned out easily. She has adopted this model after visiting a school in Singapore. For teachers who worked more than eight hours in a day, the centre has paid them overtime claims too, which is fair to the staff. This can be testified from the excerpt from the teacher's interview.

'Because I realized in the morning, my children don't come in all at the same time. So, I put my assistants to come in earlier, so they come in at 8am and go back at 5pm. Then my teachers come in later, the reason being so my assistant can prepare, and I get my teachers to come in and then they go back later because they have to meet the parents. So, they can always see the parents... So, every teacher works for eight hours.' (Centre 1 Operator)

As for another sustaining centre, most of the teachers only work half a day and will be paid for overtime if they are to stay for the day care duty. With this, the hardworking teachers can earn extra income if they offer private tuition in the afternoon. As compared with the two closed centres, both centres required teachers to work full day, with one to two hours break in between, during children's nap time.

Cautious in Managing Finance

Quality comes with a cost. To sustain the childcare centre business, one must make profit to ensure sustainability. Operators must work on the financial budgeting and planning, to decide the fees range as well as the salary for the teachers. Simultaneously, operators need to ensure that they adhere to the government's rules and regulations such as minimum wage and adult-child ratio in operating a childcare centre in Malaysia. Therefore, careful, and proper financial planning was evident in all childcare centres in this study. To sustain the childcare business, it is vital to keep the expenses within the budget. One closed centre's operator shared even when they have reached full enrolment, they are not getting much profit as they comply strictly to the adult-child ratio set by the government. She has also commented as compared with other centres around, they are taking in more children than they are supposed to which she chose not to do so but to choose to comply with the government's regulations.

„Yup, both centres have reached maximum..... Because, you won't be able to earn much. So many centres out there, they actually take in a lot.” (Centre 3 Operator)

As the main income of the childcare centre is on the fees collection, therefore if there are any parents who are bad payers, it would directly impact the centre's finances. Both sustaining centres 'operators shared their strategy in being selective in their enrolment.

‘Yeah, people will come to us. We are at this point now where we can even pick and choose our parents... Back in those days we would take anything, everything...’ (Centre 1 Operator)

On the other hand, as Centre 2 Operator is not the owner of the building, she expressed her unhappiness in dealing with the not responsive and irresponsible building management which delayed or ignored her request in maintaining the building aggravated her financial burden as she needed to pay for the maintenance of the building. Besides, Centre 3 Operator has closed her childcare centre business (the third centre) after operating it for four years. When probed further, the operator shared about the unexpected expenses in operating a childcare centre business. She was confused and agitated as it was the rented purpose-built unit from the local council, but she was asked to pay a lot for the building stamping purposes as well as the monthly lawn mowing cost, which she found out later, it was supposed to be provided for free. One of the main factors that lead to the closing down of the childcare centre is on the high operational costs. Both parent and teacher understand that there is no way to increase the school fees due to the social-economic status of the community around as well as the low adult-child ratio which the centre's principal has chosen to comply with, but at the same time, the operator's expenses have to increase yearly due to inflation as well as to give increment to the staff.

‘The weeds were so tall and there were monitor lizards, snakes and lots of creatures... we paid, everytime RM100, everytime RM100, silly right? because they refused to do for us... K is my neighbour, so I told her... So, she called (local council) on behalf of us to file a complaint. Then only they did for us, for free. But that 3 years have passed. Has passed.’ (Centre 3 Operator)

Despite the financial pressure faced by the operators, unanimously four operators have shared their principle on women empowerment. As the majority of the teachers in childcare centres are women and many of them are housewives; education, and assistance on the importance of getting their individual bank account and the benefit of EPF were provided. Financial aid in supporting the staff's professional development was provided, as this would provide more confidence and assurance to the teachers to sustain and stay in their respective centres. The following excerpts could explain further to the point.

„one of the reasons why we find our staff actually stay with us is actually we work to provide them and to assist them in whatever they need... so we provide the opportunity for them, we help them open a bank account, we get them work on it so they can earn their money. And even teach them why you need EPF and things like that.” (Centre 1 Operator)

Effective Marketing Strategies

In ensuring the centre's sustainability, operators need to make sure the marketing strategies are effective and able to reach out to the community as much as possible. Various marketing strategies were implemented, and the shift from marketing using the hard copy methods such as printing brochures and banners to the contemporary methods which are making good use of social media platforms such as Facebook or Website. As parents nowadays are techno-savvy, they could be referring to the internet to find out more about the centre before approaching them physically. Therefore, the social media platform serves as an information feeder platform to provide parents with the information about the centre such as their activities and events and if they are interested with the centre, they could have taken more initiative to know more about the centre by talking to people who have contact with the centre. However, there is always the best marketing strategy in the childcare business, which is through the words of mouth. Especially for the two sustaining centres, the need in doing marketing is no longer high as they have been quite established in the respective community areas and they have a good reputation where people would go to them. From the interview sessions, parents from both sustaining centres were recommending their centres with the others, voluntarily. Some parents were attracted when they observed the children who attended their centre could communicate fluently in English and are confident and sociable. When comparing the two sustaining centres, Centre 1 was located at a strategic location where it is located besides the main road which led to the highway. It made it convenient for the parents to pick up and drop off the children before and after their work. However, Centre 2 is not easily identified and located. The researcher had trouble in locating the childcare centre as Google Map or Waze did not lead the researcher to the exact location of the childcare centre.

„The first one is actually words of mouth. Definitely word of mouth and then of course, Facebook is actually a very good platform.“ (Centre 1 Operator)

„it was highly recommended by my friend actually... I also recommended this centre to my family members and friends...“ (Centre 1 Parent)

„I think other parents must be posting something nice, so then they come... the only problem is, we are so hidden, they don't know. And the google map or waze or something doesn't lead them here.“ (Centre 2 Operator)

From the interview sessions, the researcher also found out that one of the closed centres is making good use of the Year End Concert as their main marketing strategy. In Malaysia, it is common to see most of the childcare centre and preschools are investing a lot of their time, money, and effort in their year-end concert, to impress and to showcase the children's stage performance talents. At the same time, it served as a marketing strategy as it would impress the public about their centre's performance too. The same applies to this centre as the operator cum principal would plan and choreograph the concert by herself. She makes sure all children from her centres get a chance to present and perform on the stage. She has never held any Open Day or to invest on other types of advertising methods besides investing all her effort on the Year End Concert, as she thinks having an Open Day is tiring for the teachers, added workload for the teachers. This could be testified from the following excerpt.

„I know it's actually very tiring on an open day, and then I don't want my teachers to be so stressful, Monday to Friday... You know?“ (Centre 3 Operator)

Ineffective Early Childhood Education related Policies and Implementation

Unanimously, all four operators have high expectations on the governmental departments and hope for a more consistent and effective governance. The regulations on childcare centres were there, but the law enforcement was not up to the expectations and led to the mushrooming of illegal or unregistered centres. It made it harder for the legal centres to sustain their business as the industry becomes more competitive and parents are not educated and aware of the differences between registered and unregistered centres in the community. In addition, the regulations on the childcare centres emphasised a lot on the physical setting of the centre but not on the other areas. The professionalism and the requirement of professional development are not stated clearly in the regulations. Only a minimum requirement of academic qualification, which is the completion of Kursus Asuhan PERMATA (KAP) is required currently. One operator expressed her opinion on the segregation management of the government departments.

„One of it that I noticed is, the law is there, the enforcement is not there, the enforcement of the law is not there.“ (Centre 1 Operator)

„If they are setting the age range as such, almost all the operators are breaking the rules. What is the purpose to have that law and act? Taking in children from 0-6 in a centre. Most of the centres are operating as such because they are catering to the needs of parents, so that they don't need to travel here and there.“ (Centre 4 Operator)

They reported issues such as frequent changes of the regulations and sudden increase of business license fees aggravate the situation for the registered centres. They met with some irresponsible government officers where they were arrogant, rude, and misplaced their centre's documents. Lack of monitoring is another main concern voiced by the operators where the related department officers only came for the inspection in the initial stage during application and thereafter, left alone to operate. One operator expressed her disappointment with the government when probed further if she thinks the government has been helpful over the years in operating her childcare centre. Another operator expressed her dissatisfaction on SOCSO and HRDF when it comes to claiming from these two departments.

„Google helped me a lot. Not the government.“ (Centre 1 Operator)

„Ok, we paid SOCSO for the staff, but when my staff said want to claim, you said “you still can walk... Cannot claim” ...HRDF, that one is really (troublesome)... I have been paying this for 6 years and they also give me a lot of problems.“ (Centre 3 Operator)

Fortunately, operators did share some positive experiences dealing with government officers who were friendly and supportive in their license renewal. Sincerity is the key to sustain business, shared one operator, while she was describing her positive relationship with the government officer who was understanding and helpful along the way.

„if you are sincere towards others, others will treat you sincerely too. So, they were kind to me.” (Centre 3 Operator)

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Loopholes in regulations and licenses

There is an urge to the policy makers and related governmental departments to investigate the regulations imposed on childcare centres as well as other related early childhood care and education centres in Malaysia. One interesting finding from this study was both operators who have closed their childcare centres later obtained a care centre license as they claimed the regulations on a care centre license was not as strict as childcare centre license. They have the freedom to hire teachers, with any qualification or background which they deemed to be appropriate for their centres; to implement the curriculum as they wished and there is a wider age range of children which they can take in their centres as compared with what is permissible in a childcare centre, and at the same time, operate its centre as a childcare centre or preschool. Parents may prefer this better as they do not need to travel to different centres if they have more than one child. Moreover, the participants shared their suggestions to the early childhood care and education associations or organizations to be more aggressive in educating and supporting practitioners in the industry to overall improve the quality of early childhood care and education in Malaysia.

‘I’m now the care centre, no longer taska, because there are too many restrictions. To be frank, I really don’t appreciate the local national curriculum.’ (Centre 4 Operator)

Empathetic Leadership

It is interesting to note that despite the typical democratic leadership style being implemented in all four childcare centres of respective operators, findings indicate that empathetic leadership is also evident in all four childcare centres. When operators are demonstrating respect and understanding in handling the staff and working arrangement, staff are found to be loyal and willing to perform at their best. The great sense of trust and responsibility is evident in the interactions between operators and staff. From the case studies, operators were found to be doing extra miles for their staff such as offering micro loans to support them in their studies and to empower them by giving them opportunity to improve themselves in terms of qualifications and skills by sending them for training. The researcher could see that from the interview sessions with different stakeholders from the four centres, the operators cum principals are demonstrating characteristics of an empathetic leader, from the planning and managing the centre, they strive to think for the staff’s benefits and their wellbeing. One interesting finding from the research is the low turnover rate among the staff for both sustaining childcare centre and one of the closed childcare centres. This once again has proven the positive working environment created by the operators in their respective childcare centres.

‘I don’t get my teachers to come back on weekends. As much as I tried, I try to give them their weekends.’ (Centre 1 Operator)

'No, we are not open on Saturday". We also need a break.' (Centre 2 Operator)

Being an empathetic leader may sometimes mean doing the extra miles. The empathetic leader would be considerate and wanting to provide the best for the staff and the children, even when it means earning lesser than it is expected. For instance, from the excerpt below, the operator cum principal mentioned that sometimes when a teacher is on long-term medical leave (more than one month), she would need to get a replacement. For the benefit of the staff and the children, she would need to pay two persons for a position during this time.

'Because I have to get a replacement, you know, so you are paying two people for a job that is half only. But what to do, I have to keep that, I have to less my profit. My profit, I less. But I love this job, so it doesn't matter.' (Centre 2 Operator)

Parent Education

The participants in this study felt that the awareness and exposure on early childhood care and education in general is relatively low in Malaysia. When choosing a centre for their children, parents emphasized more on the physical facilities of a centre instead of the quality of curriculum and qualifications of the teachers. Ergo, it is vital for the government to educate the parents, believing that if parents are having higher awareness and understanding on early childhood care and education, they will be more careful in selecting the centre for their children. Indirectly, would eliminate the centres who are not complying with the laws and regulations of the country. In addition, participants expressed the need for the government to educate the community about family planning as it would directly affect the affordability of families in supporting children in their education.

„But in general, not to say their level is lower, their education level is there, but maybe their exposure on this is very limited. They didn't look into Early Childhood Education. (Centre 4 Operator)

„There is such a thing as family planning, you know? It all comes in, it's not just one off. They got to be educated in this, they got to be responsible parents. If you cannot afford, have one or two, don't have ten. (Centre 2 Operator)

Perseverance

To sustain a childcare centre business, one must have the character of perseverance. As it is not the money-making industry but an industry in which you offer the quality education services to the future leaders, it is essential to do it with good and genuine intentions. Resourcefulness helps in bringing in creative and innovative ideas in managing the daily operation of the centre such as teaching materials and collaboration with the community resources. Operators need to have a support group by building a strong network with the community and the people from the industry.

„You need a sense of perseverance. This is not an easy industry to go in and you need to do it with the good intention of providing quality childcare.“
(Centre 1 Operator)

CONCLUSION

Operator is the key person of a childcare centre. It is important to have one who has early childhood care and education background, related working experiences and coupled with good financial management, strong and empathetic leadership abilities, good in marketing and recruitment and to have policy literacy to comply with the constant changing of the laws and regulations of the country. Perseverance, ethics and passion are important characteristics for operators to operate and sustain their business in the long run. The ineffective governance in terms of registration and monitoring of childcare centre, enforcement of the laws and loopholes between different licenses became the leading factors of the closing down of the childcare centres.

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