

Research Article

Parental Views And Determinants Shaping Early Childhood Care And Education In Kandy, Sri Lanka: An Analysis Of Factors Influencing Parental Decision Making.

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Abstract

Introduction: The concept of early childhood care and education (ECCE), increasingly acknowledges the importance of fostering strong relationships between families and ECCE services as a potent means to enhance children's educational, health, and overall well-being outcomes. This study aimed to explore the parental perspectives on childcare and ECCE in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Methods: As a part of a larger study, a cross-sectional descriptive study with an analytical component was conducted in 20 preschools and 20 preschools with daycare facilities within Kandy Municipal Council using stratified random sampling. A sample of 484 parents was selected using simple random sampling in proportion to the number of registered children within the centres. Centre quality was evaluated using the Revised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R). The parents' perspectives were explored using a structured questionnaire. Childcare quality, rated on a 1.00 to 7.00 scale, was categorised as inadequate, minimal, or good. Parental satisfaction was simplified into two categories for analysis. Relationships between satisfaction and socio-demographic factors were examined using chi-square test.

Results: The kindness of the staff, the attention the child receives, and the training/ education of the staff were recognised as important by more than 97% of parents. Parent satisfaction was significantly low for parents with children less than three years old, with employed mothers, with low family income, and with Tamil and Muslim ethnicity.

Conclusion: State or employer-funded good quality childcare facilities at an affordable fee is defensible in the future taking into consideration the advantage of good quality childcare on the development of the children disease management.

***Keywords:** Childcare, quality, ECCE, parent expectations, satisfaction, ECERS-R

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Funding: None

Competing interests: None

Received: 04 February 2025

Accepted: 19 March 2025

Published: 31 March 2025

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Cite this article as: Navaratna S et al. Parental Views And Determinants Shaping Early Childhood Care And Education In Kandy, Sri Lanka: An Analysis Of Factors Influencing Parental Decision Making. Journal of Tropical Health 2025;1 (1): 09-22. DOI: <http://doi.org/xxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

Introduction

In recent years, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in Sri Lanka has garnered increased recognition and attention. ECCD programmes integrate various components, including aspects from early childhood education (ECE), age-appropriate stimulation, health, nutrition, community development, parent education, sociology, anthropology, child development, and economics, along with fostering nurturing and emotional care [1].

UNICEF's approach to early childhood development (ECD) prioritises the holistic needs of the child, covering their physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being. This includes preventive and curative healthcare, proper nutrition, access to safe water and sanitation, psychosocial support, protection from abuse, and ensuring birth registration [2].

The concept of early childhood care and education (ECCE), aka early childhood education and care (ECEC), increasingly acknowledges the importance of fostering strong relationships between families and ECCE services as a potent means to enhance children's educational, health, and overall well-being outcomes [3]. The formative years of early childhood serve as a pivotal juncture wherein essential neuronal connections are established [4]. The quality of experiences during this period profoundly influences the course of brain development for a person's future cognitive abilities, language proficiency, social aptitude, and emotional regulation, creating the framework upon which subsequent developmental milestones rely [5-7]. The World Bank recognises the "equity dimension" wherein an early start in an ECCE centre help to equalise learning and earning opportunities through the impact on brain development [8].

In the past, preschoolers in Sri Lanka primarily spent their early years at home with caregivers, often stay-at-home mothers or grandparents. However, modern trends show increased reliance on childcare services due to rising maternal employment, shifts from extended to nuclear family structures, and the demands of a fast-paced lifestyle [9-11].

In Sri Lanka, ECCD activities under ECCE fall under the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment, established by Gazette Extraordinary No: 2289/43 on 22nd July 2022. ECCE services are distinctly divided between independent preschools and those offering extended daycare. Currently, 474,406 children are enrolled in preschools nationwide,

including 26,486 in the Kandy district. Most preschools charge enrollment fees, with limited public or employer-sponsored options. Significant progress has been made with national policies and quality standards established for ECCD and ECCE [9,12,13]. However, available evidence accentuates the lack of an accreditation process, unavailability of quality ECCE programmes, and significant expenses linked with available 'good quality' ECCE services in Sri Lanka [11,14,15].

Understanding parental perspectives in childcare is vital, as parents play a central role in a child's development and well-being. Their views offer insights into what they believe is best for their children, enabling childcare providers to tailor services to meet individual needs. This child-centred approach fosters collaboration between parents and providers, supporting holistic child development [16, 17]. Most of the policies related to ECE mostly focus only on the children's school readiness skills [18]. Parents consider various family, personal, financial, and child-related factors when making childcare decisions. Understanding these perspectives can guide policymakers in creating policies that encourage enrollment in high-quality ECCE centres, improving overall childcare quality. Exploring parental perceptions, including their expectations, satisfaction, and influencing factors, is therefore essential. Childcare plays a crucial role in a child's development, presenting a global challenge for parents seeking "quality" childcare programmes. Sri Lankan parents face the same dilemma, with three studies conducted in urban areas revealing significant variations in the quality of ECCE centres. [14,15,19]. Literature on parental perspectives on centre-based childcare in Sri Lanka is limited. A study in Kandy found that quality childcare incurs significant costs within the municipality, yet parental satisfaction with childcare services was notably high. [14]. According to Cryer et al. (2002), parents often lack the education and understanding of childcare standards needed to evaluate and advocate for quality childcare programs effectively [20]. Evidence indicates that access to ECCE centres positively impacts maternal employment. For example, in Indonesia, adding one public preschool per 1,000 children increased women's workforce participation by 9.1% [21].

Overall, researching parental perceptions and the factors affecting their childcare choices is essential for promoting the well-being of both children and families, as well as for shaping effective policies and practices in the fields of ECCD and ECE [22]. Research on the

factors influencing parental choices and parental perspectives regarding ECCE is limited, in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the parental perspectives on childcare and ECE in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Methods

Design, Setting, and Sample

This cross-sectional descriptive study with an analytical component was conducted as a part of a broader research [14] and utilised a stratified random sampling approach to select 40 ECCE Centres. There are 1271 ECCE centres in the Kandy district. Using data from both the business register administered by the Chief Secretariat Office and information provided by the Kandy Municipal Council (KMC), the total number of preschools was estimated as 107 within the area. Among these, approximately 24 preschools were estimated to offer daycare facilities. A sample comprising 20 preschools and 20 preschools equipped with daycare facilities was selected using simple random sampling. A convenient sample of parents ($n = 484$) with children under 5 years of age, currently enrolled in these ECCE centres, was deemed eligible for the study. Parents were included from each ECCE centre in proportion to the number of registered children at the respective centres. Individuals other than the child's parents who accompanied them to the ECCE centre were excluded from participation.

Study instruments and data collection

The evaluation of the structural quality and operational processes across the 40 childcare centres was conducted utilising the Revised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) [23], a validated instrument renowned for its effectiveness in appraising input quality within early childcare environments through observation. Comprising 43 items, this instrument scrutinises seven facets of centre-based care specifically tailored for children aged 2.5 to 5 years.

Parents and the children participated in structured interviews with the principal investigator and trained sociology graduates who were recruited as data collectors using a comprehensive questionnaire to gather data on socioeconomic factors and views on centre-based childcare. The questionnaire designed in English was content validated, then, translated into Sinhala and Tamil and back-translated to English to assure consistency. The questionnaire encompassed diverse dimensions, including parents' expectations for centre-based childcare which encompassed various quality domains, including physical facilities, health

and safety, group size, child-to-staff ratio, compliance with government standards, interactive learning, staff kindness, discipline, individual attention for the child, suitable toys and equipment, communication between providers and parents, scheduled activities, staff training and education, and the centre's location, cost, and fees. The questionnaire covered aspects like satisfaction with location convenience, affordability, physical facilities, staff attitude, care, safety, health, learning activities, and child behaviour. Responses to inquiries related to parental expectations were quantified using a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from 'not important' to 'important', while responses to satisfaction items were collected on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all satisfied' to 'very satisfied'. Data collectors, possessing sociology qualifications, underwent rigorous training, and questionnaires were subjected to pre-testing at a model childcare centre to ensure the reliability of the gathered data. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo (EC/08/072), and informed written consent was obtained from all the participants.

Data analysis

Socio-demographic characteristics of ECCE centres, and parents were analysed through frequency calculations. ECERS-R scores indicating centre quality were analysed using frequencies, and cross-tabulations were conducted with relevant ECCE centre and caregiver characteristics. Scores on a continuous scale (1.00 to 7.00) for each subscale were assigned when measuring childcare quality. The overall mean score was categorised as inadequate (1.00-2.99), minimal (3.00-4.99), or good (5.00-6.99) quality.

Parental expectations and satisfaction were analysed by frequency distribution while satisfaction responses were collapsed into a dichotomous variable indicating 'very satisfied' and 'not very satisfied' before further analysis.

Cross-tabulations were conducted to analyse the relationship between dimensions of satisfaction and different sociodemographic characteristics of parents and children. The chi-square test or Fisher's exact test was then utilised to identify any statistically significant associations between these variables.

Results

The study included 484 parents of children under the age of 5 years who were currently enrolled in the selected ECCE centres. None of the parents declined the will to participate and hence the response rate was

100%. As explicitly mentioned under the methods, parents were recruited from each ECCE centre in proportion to the number of registered children in the

respective centres. Individuals other than the child's parents who accompanied them to the ECCE centre were excluded from participation.

Table 1: Socio-demographic and economic characteristics of parents

Characteristic	Number	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Family ethnicity[#]			
Sinhalese	421	87.0	87.0
Tamil	26	5.4	92.4
Muslim	37	7.6	100.0
Family income per month			
< LKR. 30,000	109	22.5	22.5
LKR. 30,000 – LKR. 60,000	131	27.1	49.6
LKR. 61,000 – LKR. 99,000	142	29.3	78.9
≥ LKR. 100,000	102	21.1	100.0
Mother's education level			
≤ G.C.E. Ordinary level	198	40.9	40.9
G.C.E. Advanced level	226	46.7	87.6
Degree/ Diploma	60	12.4	100.0
Mother's employment status			
Employed	142	29.3	29.3
Unemployed	342	70.7	100.0
The gender of the child enrolled			
Male	250	51.7	51.7
Female	234	48.3	100.0

[#] Where mother and father belonged to different races father's ethnicity was taken as family ethnicity

As denoted in Table 1, a notable proportion of mothers, specifically 40.9%, possessed educational qualifications at the level of or below the G.C.E. Ordinary Level, with a minority, constituting only 29.3%, being employed. In the case of fathers, 41.1% and 46.1% had attained educational levels up to G.C.E. Ordinary Level and G.C.E. Advanced Level, respectively, while 12.8% had pursued higher studies (not presented in the table). Additionally, an overwhelming 99.4% of fathers were employed.

The majority of parents had children aged more than 3 years enrolled in the childcare centres, contrasting with only 22.3% having children aged ≤ 3 years enrolled.

Furthermore, parental distribution was fairly balanced, with 51.7% being parents of boys and 48.3% being parents of girls.

Parental expectations

In the parent questionnaire, 15 questions were included to assess parental expectations regarding centre-based childcare.

As shown in Table 2, almost all parents (97%) have identified the kindness of the staff, the attention the child receives, and the training/ education of the staff as important. Close location, low cost/ low fees, scheduled day-to-day activities, discipline, and child: staff ratio are some of the factors identified as relatively unimportant by some of the parents (at least 10%).

Table 2: Parents' expectations regarding centre-based care

Quality domain	Not important		Somewhat important		Important		Total	
	No:	%	No:	%	No:	%	No:	%
Physical facilities	4	0.8	40	8.3	440	90.9	484	100
Health and Safety	3	0.6	16	3.3	465	96.1	484	100
Group size and adequate space	7	1.4	45	9.3	432	89.3	484	100
Child: staff ratio	10	2.1	45	9.3	429	88.6	484	100
Compliance with government standards	8	1.7	39	8.1	437	90.3	484	100
Interactive learning	1	0.2	33	6.8	448	92.9	482	100
Kindness of the staff	1	0.2	9	1.9	474	97.9	484	100
Discipline	11	2.3	46	9.5	427	88.2	484	100
Attention the child receives	1	0.2	12	2.5	471	97.3	484	100
Appropriate toys and equipment	2	0.4	39	8.1	443	91.5	484	100
Written/ verbal communication between provider and parents	5	1.0	30	6.2	449	92.8	484	100
scheduled day-to-day activities	14	2.9	35	7.2	435	89.9	484	100
Training/ education of the staff	3	0.6	8	1.7	473	97.7	484	100
Close location	33	6.8	87	18.0	364	75.2	484	100
Low cost/ low fees	53	11.0	87	18.0	344	71.1	484	100

Factors associated with parental satisfaction

To determine the factors associated with parental satisfaction, the level of satisfaction for each dimension of satisfaction was analysed with the quality of the centres as measured by the total average ECERS-R score, family income, maternal employment status, ethnicity, and child's age.

There were statistically significant associations between certain dimensions of satisfaction and the quality of the ECCE centres as measured by the ECERS-R score. Percentages of parents satisfied with healthy and sanitary conditions increased with the increase in centre quality and the association was statistically significant ($\chi^2=13.853$, $p=0.001$). Similarly, as shown in Table 3, significant associations were found between the quality of the ECCE centres and satisfaction dimensions—

healthy and sanitary conditions ($\chi^2=13.853$, $p=0.001$), plenty of toys, books, pictures, and music available ($\chi^2=17.957$, $p=0.000$), planned activities/ schedule ($\chi^2=7.348$, $p=0.025$), child enjoys preschool ($\chi^2=9.303$, $p=0.010$), well-disciplined children ($\chi^2=7.348$, $p=0.025$), affectionate towards the child ($\chi^2=10.343$, $p=0.006$), caregivers not harsh when handling discipline matters ($\chi^2=22.95$, $p=0.000$), parent permitted to drop in at any time ($\chi^2=19.298$, $p=0.000$), important festivals from child's culture celebrated ($\chi^2=10.422$, $p=0.005$), and daycare/preschool recommended to others ($\chi^2=12.01$, $p=0.002$). Moreover, the parent satisfaction with the quality of the ECCE centre was significantly associated with the quality of the childcare centre as detected by the total average ECERS ($\chi^2=10.631$, $p=0.005$).

Table 3: Parent Satisfaction by the centre quality as measured by the total average ECERS-R

Dimension of satisfaction	Total average ECERS-R Score			Level of significance
	Inadequate	Minimal	Good	
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No.(%)	
Healthy and sanitary conditions				
Very satisfied	28(33.7)	203(55.9)	22(57.9)	$\chi^2 = 13.853$, p = 0.001
not very satisfied	55(66.3)	160(44.1)	16(42.1)	
Plenty of toys, books, pictures, and music available				
Very satisfied	27 (32.5)	192 (52.9)	27 (71.0)	$\chi^2 = 17.957$, p = 0.000
not very satisfied	56 (67.5)	171(47.1)	11 (29.0)	
The child enjoys preschool				
Very satisfied	61 (73.5)	203 (55.9)	25 (65.8)	$\chi^2 = 9.303$, p = 0.010
not very satisfied	22(26.5)	160 (44.1)	13 (34.2)	
Planned activities/ schedule				
Very satisfied	48 (57.8)	217 (59.8)	31 (81.6)	$\chi^2 = 7.348$, p = 0.025
not very satisfied	35 (42.2)	146 (40.2)	7 (18.4)	
Well-disciplined children				
Very satisfied	41 (49.4)	239 (65.4)	24 (63.2)	$\chi^2 = 7.348$, p = 0.025
not very satisfied	42 (50.6)	124 (34.6)	14 (36.8)	
Affectionate towards child				
Very satisfied	55 (66.3)	282 (77.7)	35 (92.1)	$\chi^2 = 10.343$, p = 0.006
not very satisfied	28 (33.7)	81 (22.3)	3 (7.9)	
Caregivers not harsh when handling discipline matters				
Very satisfied	40 (48.2)	41 (66.4)	35 (92.1)	$\chi^2 = 22.95$, p = 0.000
not very satisfied	43 (51.8)	122 (33.6)	3 (7.9)	
The parent was permitted to drop in at any time				
Very satisfied	25 (30.1)	123 (33.9)	26 (68.4)	$\chi^2 = 19.298$, p = 0.000
not very satisfied	58 (69.9)	240 (66.1)	12 (31.6)	
Important festivals from the child's culture celebrated				
Very satisfied	43 (51.8)	255 (70.2)	26 (68.4)	$\chi^2 = 10.422$, p = 0.005
not very satisfied	40 (48.2)	108 (29.8)	12 (31.6)	
Daycare/preschool recommended to others				
Very satisfied	33 (39.7)	181(49.9)	28 (73.7)	$\chi^2 = 12.01$, p = 0.002
not very satisfied	50 (60.3)	182 (50.1)	10 (26.3)	
Quality of the preschool/ daycare as rated by the parent				
Very satisfied	28 (33.7)	180 (49.6)	24 (63.2)	$\chi^2 = 10.631$, p = 0.005
not very satisfied	55 (66.3)	183 (50.4)	14 (36.8)	
Total	83 (100)	363 (100)	38 (100)	

Table 4: Parent satisfaction by family income

Dimension of satisfaction	Family income (LKR)				Level of significance
	<30000	31000-60000	61000-99000	> 100000	
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	
Quality as rated by the parents					
Very satisfied	46(42.2)	52(39.7)	67 (47.2)	67(65.7)	$\chi^2 = 17.91$, p = 0.000
Not very Satisfied	63(57.8)	79(60.3)	75(52.8)	35(34.3)	
Child enjoys preschool/ daycare					
Very satisfied	75(68.8)	95(72.5)	75 (52.8)	44(43.1)	$\chi^2 = 27.13$, p = 0.000
Not very Satisfied	34(31.2)	36(27.5)	67 (47.2)	58(56.9)	
Total	109(100)	131(100)	142(100)	102(100)	

As shown in Table 4, when parental satisfaction was analysed with the family income, there were statistically significant associations with the 'Quality as rated by the parent' ($\chi^2 = 17.91$, $p = 0.000$) and with 'the child enjoys preschool/ daycare' ($\chi^2 = 27.13$, $p = 0.000$).

The more affluent parents seemed more satisfied with the quality of care provided by the ECCE centres, but on the other hand, they seemed to be less satisfied with

the satisfaction domain 'child enjoys preschool/ daycare'.

Significant associations were also found between maternal employment status and parental satisfaction with dimensions of satisfaction such as taking care of the child properly, caring staff, child enjoying the preschool, approachable staff, and staff affectionate towards the child (Table 5).

Table 5: Parent satisfaction by mothers' employment

Dimension of Satisfaction	Mother's employment status		Level of significance
	Employed No. (%)	Not employed No. (%)	
Take care of the child properly			
Very satisfied	79(55.6)	237 (69.3)	$\chi^2 = 8.26$, $p = 0.001$
not very satisfied	63 (44.4)	105 (30.7)	
Caring staff			
Very satisfied	77(54.2)	223 (65.2)	$\chi^2 = 5.133$, $p = 0.023$
not very satisfied	65 (45.8)	119 (34.8)	
Child enjoys the preschool/ daycare			
Very satisfied	70 (49.3)	219 (64.0)	$\chi^2 = 9.061$, $p = 0.003$
not very satisfied	72 (50.7)	123 (36.0)	
Approachable staff			
Very satisfied	99 (69.7)	273 (79.8)	$\chi^2 = 5.76$, $p = 0.016$
not very satisfied	43 (30.3)	69 (20.2)	
Staff is affectionate towards the child			
Very satisfied	99 (69.7)	273 (79.8)	$\chi^2 = 5.76$, $p = 0.016$
not very satisfied	43 (30.3)	69 (20.2)	
Total	142 (100)	342 (100)	

There were several significant associations between ethnicity and dimensions of satisfaction. For example, for the satisfaction dimension 'take care of the child properly', 86.5% of Muslim parents were very satisfied, while the very satisfied percentages for Sinhalese and Tamils were 63.4% and 65.4%, respectively. The overall difference was statistically significant. Similarly, there were statistically significant associations between ethnicity and caring staff, the child enjoys the preschool, the staff is affectionate towards the child, and important festivals from the child's culture are celebrated (Table 6).

Table 7 shows the significant associations found between the child's age and dimensions of parental satisfaction namely, staff takes care of the child properly, child enjoys the preschool/ daycare, planned activities/ schedule, approachable staff, and daycare/preschool recommended to others. The 'Very satisfied' percentage is less for parents who have a child less than 3 years enrolled in the ECCE centres for the above-mentioned dimensions of satisfaction.

Discussion

In this current study, almost all parents valued staff kindness, child-focused attention, and staff training, while cost and proximity were less critical. Although overall satisfaction was high, it was lower for parents of children under 3 years and working mothers, reflecting concerns about childcare adequacy and staff attentiveness. The analysis of predictors of parental satisfaction showed significant links between satisfaction levels and the quality of ECCE centres.

Key factors included sanitary conditions, availability of toys and educational materials, structured activities, child discipline, caregiver affection, gentle disciplinary approaches, open-door policies for parents, cultural inclusivity, and recommendations to others. These factors were strongly associated with centre quality, as determined by the ECERS-R total average score.

Table 6: Parent satisfaction by ethnicity

Dimension of satisfaction	Ethnicity			Level of significance
	Sinhalese No. (%)	Tamil No. (%)	Muslim No. (%)	
Take care of the child properly				
Very satisfied	267(63.4)	17(65.4)	32(86.5)	$\chi^2 = 7.985$, $p = 0.018$
not very satisfied	154(36.6)	9(34.6)	5(13.5)	
Caring staff				
Very satisfied	252(59.9)	18(69.2)	30(81.1)	$\chi^2 = 7.114$, $p = 0.029$
not very satisfied	169(40.1)	8(30.8)	7(18.9)	
child enjoy the preschool/ daycare				
Very satisfied	255(60.6)	9(34.6)	25(67.6)	$\chi^2 = 7.88$, $p = 0.010$
not very satisfied	166(39.4)	17(65.4)	12 (32.4)	
Affectionate towards child				
Very satisfied	322(76.5)	16(61.5)	34 (91.9)	$\chi^2 = 8.166$ $p = 0.017$
not very satisfied	99 (23.5)	10(38.5)	3(8.1)	
Important festivals from the child's culture are celebrated				
Very satisfied	291(69.1)	13(50.0)	20 (54.0)	$\chi^2 = 7.053$, $p = 0.029$
not very satisfied	130(30.9)	13(50.0)	17(46.0)	
Total	421 (100)	26 (100)	37(100)	

Table 7: Parent satisfaction by child's age

Dimension of satisfaction	Child's age		Level of significance
	≤ 3 years No. (%)	> 3 years No. (%)	
Take care of the child properly			
Very satisfied	31 (46.3)	285 (68.3)	$\chi^2 = 12.414$, $p = 0.000$
not very satisfied	36 (53.7)	132 (31.7)	
child enjoy the preschool/ daycare			
Very satisfied	27(40.3)	262 (62.8)	$\chi^2 = 12.181$, $p = 0.000$
not very satisfied	40 (59.7)	155 (37.2)	
Planned activities/ schedule			
Very satisfied	33(49.2)	263 (63.1)	$\chi^2 = 4.63$, $p = 0.031$
not very satisfied	34 (50.8)	154 (36.9)	
Approachable staff			
Very satisfied	43 (64.2)	329 (78.9)	$\chi^2 = 7.03$, $p = 0.008$
not very satisfied	42(35.8)	124(21.1)	
Daycare/preschool recommended to others			
Very satisfied	25 (37.3)	217(52.0)	$\chi^2 = 5.00$, $p = 0.025$
not very satisfied	42 (62.7)	200 (48.0)	
Total	67 (100)	417 (100)	

Contemporary perspectives on early childhood education emphasise the critical role of parental involvement and the need for high-quality early learning environments. According to experts on the subject, early childhood education should not only focus on academic skills but also foster creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional development [24]. These perspectives emphasise the importance of

collaborative efforts between parents, educators, and the community to provide holistic and enriching experiences for young children.

Exploring parental perceptions and the factors influencing their childcare choices in Sri Lanka holds immense significance for several reasons. Firstly, understanding parental preferences provides invaluable

insights for policymakers and childcare service providers to tailor programmes and policies that align with the needs of families. Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, and this customisation ensures that childcare services are not only accessible but also meet the expectations of diverse communities across the country. Moreover, delving into the factors driving parental decision-making sheds light on issues of affordability, quality, and accessibility that seem to exist [11], and seem to have multiplied by several folds during the existing financial crisis within the country. Undoubtedly, this would allow targeted interventions to address gaps and enhance the overall childcare landscape. Additionally, such research aids in fostering equity by ensuring that all families, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location, have access to high-quality childcare options that support the holistic development of children. Parent perspectives on childcare quality are thought to differ from researcher perspectives because parents focus on the specific needs of their child and family, as well as personal beliefs about childcare and parenting.

By comprehensively examining parental perceptions and the determinants of childcare choices, Sri Lanka can foster a more responsive and inclusive ECCE system, ultimately benefiting the well-being and prospects of its youngest citizens.

Research by Gorard in 1997 [25] indicates that in a competitive market, educational institutions strive to enhance their standards and services to align with consumer criteria. Hence, ECCE providers must prioritise parental preferences and demands to meet the expectations for quality preschools, thereby remaining competitive in the ECCE industry. The 100% response rate observed in this study reflects the high level of interest parents have in their childcare arrangements and the importance they attribute to these decisions.

Parental expectations

Analysis of the parental expectations regarding centre-based childcare disclosed that most of the responses have been identified as 'important' by the parents indicating that parents strongly agreed with statements reflecting characteristics of a good-quality programme. Almost all the parents (97%) have identified the kindness of the staff, the attention the child receives and the training/ education of the staff as important. Close location, low cost/ low fees, the discipline of children, and the number of children under each caregiver as well as scheduled daily activities were some of the factors identified as relatively less important by some of the

parents. Consistently, studies done in other countries indicate that parents give high importance to several critical dimensions of care, especially interactions, health, and safety, nurturing, and caregiver training/education [16, 26, 27]. In a study by Rouse and Hadley, it was noted that parents identified good care, love, happiness, and friendships as important for their children in ECCE settings in contrast to educators who were much more focused on child development and education [28]. However, in contrast to the current study, the parents in the study by Rouse and Hadley didn't feel that the training and education of the staff were important. They advocate for using the term ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) instead of ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) as placing 'care' before 'education' in ECCE emphasises the significance of love, care, and nurturing in early childhood, prioritising these aspects over purely educational outcomes [28].

Interestingly, a study by Foot et al [29] in the year 2000 in the United Kingdom identified preparation for primary school, including learning social interactions, routines, and discipline, is seen as crucial by parents in facilitating their child's transition into primary school [29]. However, almost two decades later, in the current study, the parents of Sri Lanka identified scheduled activities and discipline as relatively less important than love, care, health, and safety indicating that parents now-a-days give more consideration to the emotional and physical wellness of the child. Though the National Survey on Preschools, Sri Lanka in 2003 has investigated some aspects of parental expectations it is not possible to compare the findings as it has taken only the educational aspects such as good education, education for citizenship, and preparation for formal education. Etc., into consideration. The study by Tang et al. [30] in Malaysia explored parent perspectives on ECCE quality. Parents appreciated preschool hygiene and facilities but suggested improvements in curriculum, including multilingual instruction and play-based learning. Overall, parents found ECCE programmes effective, leading to enjoyable experiences for children and improved learning outcomes [30].

Parental satisfaction and factors affecting parental satisfaction

Parents' satisfaction is invariably tied to their expectations regarding their child's physical and emotional well-being, indicating a focus on general well-being and adjustment to the ECCE centre environment, including interactions with classmates and teachers.

According to several studies, parents tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their childcare arrangements [16, 31-33]. Consistent with other research parents of the current study responded overwhelmingly positively to the questionnaire items under satisfaction, and the results were published last year [14].

A review of the literature indicated that the quality of the childcare programme was the factor that has shown associations with parental satisfaction in many instances [34-36]. Consistently, analysis of predictors of parental satisfaction in the present study indicated that there were significant associations between the dimensions of satisfaction and the quality of the centres. Satisfaction with healthy and sanitary conditions, availability of toys, books, pictures, and music, planned activities/ schedule, well-disciplined children, affectionate towards the child, caregivers not harsh when handling discipline matters, parent permitted to drop in at any time, important festivals from child's culture celebrated, daycare/preschool recommended to others were all significantly associated with the quality of the centres as measured by the researchers using ECERS total average score.

According to some authors, parents' perspectives are also influenced by factors such as the age of the child, maternal education and hours of employment, family ethnicity, and income [36, 37]. Consistent with these findings this study disclosed that parental satisfaction is associated with family income, maternal employment status, family ethnicity, and age of the child. For certain dimensions, satisfaction was significantly low for parents with children less than three years enrolled in childcare centres.

Parental satisfaction for dimensions, 'Quality as rated by the parent' and 'Child enjoy preschool/ daycare' were significantly associated with the family income. Similarly, there were statistically significant associations between ethnicity and several other dimensions of satisfaction. Tamil and Muslim parents were significantly less satisfied with the celebration of culture-appropriate festivals. Thus, it is evident that these ECCE centres should adopt the celebration of festivals appropriate to all cultures.

In a qualitative study conducted at five childcare centres in Kota Bharu, Malaysia, involving five respondents, a connection was found between service quality and parent satisfaction. The aspects contributing to this satisfaction included safety, parental involvement, childcare providers' qualifications, curriculum content, physical facilities, and strategic location. The study

revealed that parents are satisfied when there is sufficient safety, active parental participation, qualified and certified childcare providers, and a well-implemented curriculum [38].

In the current study, dimensions of parental satisfaction namely, taking care of the child properly, the child enjoying the preschool/daycare, planned activities/ schedule, approachable staff, and daycare/ preschool recommended to others were significantly low for parents with children less than 3 years enrolled in the ECCE centre. Parental satisfaction notably declined in several areas, including the perceived adequacy of childcare, staff attentiveness, the child's enjoyment at the preschool, staff approachability, and staff-child affection, particularly when mothers were employed. This decline could stem from the stress experienced by parents when entrusting their child to an ECCE centre while they work. Addressing this issue could be beneficial by advocating for employer-sponsored childcare facilities at workplaces. Research suggests that such arrangements can enhance employee stability and productivity [39]. By offering on-site childcare options, employers can alleviate some of the stress associated with balancing work and childcare responsibilities, ultimately contributing to a more satisfied and productive workforce [39,40].

Limitations

One limitation of this current study is that the completeness of the sampling frame of ECCE centres could not be assured in the absence of a comprehensive registration system. Although every possible measure was adopted to include all the ECCE centres in the sampling frame there is still a possibility that a few could have been missed. In addition, the present study was carried out in the Kandy M.C. area, where the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the resident population may be different from the rest of the country. Therefore the current study findings may not be generalisable to all areas of Sri Lanka.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Parental satisfaction with childcare was lower for parents of children under 3 years. The analysis of satisfaction predictors revealed significant associations between satisfaction levels and the quality of ECCE centres, as measured by the ECERS-R. Employer-sponsored childcare facilities can be recommended

where feasible as this not only will improve parental satisfaction but also may enhance the stability of the employees as well as the working capacity. State funded good quality childcare facilities at an affordable fee also is warranted in the future taking into consideration the

advantage of good quality childcare on the development of the children. Thus it would be appropriate to recommend more research on this field. Particularly the cost-benefit as well as the cost-effectiveness of such a venture should be explored.

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