Parents' Information Needs and Decision Making Processes in Selecting Early Childhood Programs in Thailand

ความต้องการสารสนเทศของผู้ปกครองและกระบวนการตัดสินใจเลือกหลักสูตรสำหรับเด็กปฐมวัยในประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการนำเสนอผลการศึกษา เรื่องความต้องการสารสนเทศของผู้ปกครองกับกระบวนการการตัดสินใจเลือกหลักสูตรสำหรับเด็กปฐมวัยในประเทศไทย มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจสารสนเทศที่ใช้ประกอบเพื่อการตัดสินใจในการคัดเลือกศูนย์เด็กเล็กและโรงเรียนอนุบาล ด้วยการใช้แบบสำรวจออนไลน์ชื่อ การประเมินคุณภาพและความพึงพอใจของผู้ปกครองต่อหลักสูตรปฐมวัย *(The Parent' Ratings of Importance of Quality and Satisfaction with Preschool Program) (Jang,2008)* เป็นเครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลของผู้ปกครองจากการเลือกกลุ่มตัวอย่างตามสะดวก ซึ่งเป็นผู้ที่มีบุตรหลานอยู่ในโรงเรียนอนุบาล ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ 2 แห่งและภาคใต้ 2 แห่ง โดยมีจำนวนรวมกัน 505 คน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าผู้ปกครองส่วนใหญ่ตัดสินใจเลือกศูนย์เด็กเล็กและโรงเรียนอนุบาล โดยพิจารณาจากความสะดวกเป็นอันดับแรก ขณะที่หลักสูตร การเรียนการสอน และราคาค่าเล่าเรียนเป็นลำดับรองลงมาตามลำดับ

คำสำคัญ : ความต้องการสารสนเทศของผู้ปกครอง, กระบวนการตัดสินใจ, หลักสูตรสำหรับเด็กปฐมวัย, ศูนย์เด็กเล็ก, โรงเรียนอนุบาล

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Abstract

This article is being reported from the perspective of a convenience sample of Thai parents' informational needs and decision making processes in selecting early childhood programs. This current study puts emphasis on early childhood education in Thailand, and explored how Thai parents select a particular child care and educational program for their preschool or kindergarten aged child. What are their needs for information in order to make informed decisions? A part of the *Parent' Ratings of Importance of Quality and Satisfaction with Preschool Program Online Survey* (Jang, 2008) was used to collect data from 505 parents of preschool and kindergarten children who were enrolled in four preschool or kindergarten programs located in northeastern and southern Thailand. Findings revealed that Thai parents reported that convenience as well as curriculum and teaching as the most important consideration when selecting their children's preschool program. Cost was another factor parents considered.

Keywords : parents' information needs, decision making processes, early childhood programs, childcare, kindergarten, Thailand

Introduction and Literature Review

The Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009) identified long-term and short-term goals with an emphasis on developmental and educational outcomes for students. According to a report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (UNESCO, 2011), the Thailand 2006-2015 Plan and Policy for Early Childhood Development was formulated to promote educational reforms that emphasize "…education for all and all for education" (p. 28). The Plan and Policy focuses on children from birth to age five. The priorities include these three goals: to support early childhood development, to support parents and

other stakeholders; and to promote an environment that facilitates early childhood development (p. 29). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is one of the major development partners with the Royal Thai Government Ministry of Education that oversees educational programs. UNICEF funding supports efforts to get children into school by improving both access and the quality of education. The emphasis is on making schools "child-friendly" and promoting early childhood care (UNESCO, 2011). Although preschool education is not compulsory in Thailand, government efforts to increase access resulted in implementation of a new 15-year free education policy in 2009 that provides pre-primary education free of charge. Pre-primary levels include children ages three; four, and five years old and services are offered as full-day kindergarten classes. Consequently, more than 97% of young children are attending early childhood education programs (de Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004; UNESCO, 2011).

The administration of education programs in Thailand come under the Office of the Basic Education Commission, including the following levels : pre-primary (3 years), primary (six years), lower secondary (3 years), and upper secondary (3 years). There are also systems of education for students with special needs. The national budget provides financing for education, with supplements from local governments and grants or donations from corporations and foundations. Fees paid by parents cover meals, uniforms, and special activities or projects. Lower income families may pay reduced fees or be exempted. Local administration is managed through 185 Educational Service Areas in 76 provinces (UNESCO, 2011). The Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment is responsible for assessing public and private education programs at all levels from pre-school to graduate education. Assessments are designed to inform policies and improve practices. The results are publicized through E-Journal providing information to the general public (UNESCO, 2011). Teacher preparation is offered in universities and teacher training colleges. Child-centered learning methods are generally promoted, and

many universities operate demonstration schools to allow trainees to acquire practical experience. Currently, teachers must complete a four-year Bachelor of Education degree to receive licensing and certification (UNESCO, 2011).

According to International Bureau of Education (IBE) (2011), there are three types of pre-primary education in Thailand depending on the local conditions including preschool classes, kindergartens, and childcare centers. The characteristics of kindergartens and childcare centers are described in this study and summarized in Table 1. Public Kindergarten programs operate from 8:00 am until 3:30 or 4:00 pm, five days a week, for 10 months of the year. School health programs include health care education; routine health check-ups; developmental, vision, and hearing screenings; immunizations; dental check-ups; and first aid or basic medications. Sanitation and hygiene are emphasized in the school facilities. A school lunch program is included, along with free milk in the mornings in all primary schools throughout Thailand. Average group sizes are 25-30 children to one teacher (de Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004). In Bangkok and other large cities, middle and upper income families may choose to enroll children in private kindergartens that charge tuition and fees. These programs are supervised by the Office of the Private Education Commission. Average group sizes are 30 three year olds and 31 four and five year olds. Approximately one-fourth of Thai children in pre-primary classes are enrolled in private programs (de Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004).

In addition to kindergartens, early childhood care and education is provided by community-based nurseries and child care centers. Most centers are open from 7:00 am until 4:30 or 5:00 pm on weekdays for 12 months of the year. Some private programs offer more flexible hours to accommodate the work schedules of parents. The average group size is 25 to 30 children. Standards prescribe the following services: food and nutrition; health (growth monitoring, first aid and immediate treatment for sick children in cases of emergency; monitoring and advice for parents regarding e.g. immunizations);

physical care and attention to personal hygiene (hand-washing, bathing, dressing-up, ensuring adequate rest e.g. afternoon naps); and support for holistic child development (love and care; space, toys and opportunities to observe investigate, problem solve, invent, explore different media, express themselves, interact fully with peers and adults and learn social skills and acquire self-discipline) (de Los Angles-Bantista, 2004, p. 9). Children enrolled in child care centers are referred to community health facilities for routine check-ups and specific medical treatments. Special services for children with disabilities or other special needs are not provided by child care centers. These children and families are referred to specialized institutions that are equipped to provide quality care (de Los Angles-Bantista, 2004). Child care centers are supervised by the Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Community Development. Centers must obtain permits to operate and meet compliance standards. Child care workers tend to be less qualified than kindergarten teachers because certification is not required. Occupational Certificate Courses are now offered for caregivers to improve their skills. However, there continues to be a gap in educational attainment when compared with kindergarten teachers.

Table 1 *Kindergarten and Childcare Centers Characteristics in Thailand*

Kindergartens	Child Care Centers
Public Kindergarten programs operate from 8:00 am until 3:30 or 4:00 pm, five days a week, for 10 months of the year.	Most centers are open from 7:00 am until 4:30 or 5:00 pm on weekdays for 12 months of the year. Some private programs offer more flexible hours to accommodate the work schedules of parents.
School health programs include health care education; routine health check-ups; developmental, vision, and hearing screenings; immunizations; dental check-ups; and first aid or basic medications. Sanitation and hygiene are emphasized in the school facilities.	School health programs include growth monitoring, first aid, care of sick children, physical care and personal hygiene.
A school lunch program is included, along with free milk in the mornings.	Programs include food and nutrition.
Children with special needs are generally referred to other institutions.	Children with special needs are generally referred to other institutions.
Average group sizes are 25-30 children with one teacher.	Average group sizes are 25-30 children.
Public programs are free; private kindergartens charge tuition and fees.	Parents pay tuition.
Teachers obtain 4-year degrees for licensing and certification.	Teachers are not required to be certified.

Parents' Information Needs for Selections of Early Childhood Education Programs

Several studies in different geographic areas have been conducted to explore what are parents' informational needs in order to make informed decisions? Rubin (2004) defined information needs as "…the condition, whether recognized by the individual or not in which information is required to resolve a problem" (p. 38). Savolaine (1995) described the components of information needs as identifying both cognitive and affective knowledge that an individual or a group requires in order to achieve a task or to solve a problem. In a case study of parents with children under the age of five residing in the London Borough of Haringey in the United Kingdom, Nicolas (1997) interviewed 53 parents and five representatives of parents' organizations. Most parents needed information about child development, schools, children's behavior, finances, careers, training and education. The most common need was for information on health and child care. A study of rural women's information needs in Nigeria conducted by Okwilagwe and Opeke (1998), found that the rural women's needs for information focused on education and schooling related issues such as financial aid, adult education services, cost of education, the educational system, and parent-teacher relationships. Findings also identified needs for information concerning child care, and relevant problems such as costs of child care and its effects on family relationships. Devolin, et al. (2013) conducted a study of information and support needs among parents of young children in a region of Canada by utilizing a survey with a cross-sectional sample of 1,064 parents of children aged six years and under. Of the 359 respondents, the majority were Caucasian, female, married, and well educated. The findings revealed that breastfeeding, car seat safety, caring for a new baby, supporting their child's development, and sleep issues were considered the most important information needs. The respondents required parenting information about drop-in program for

parents and children, books, organized play groups, classes and information sessions. Guillaume and Bath (2004) conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen parents in a northern city in the UK. Parents were asked about their information needs, preferred information sources, areas in which they felt they needed more information, and their attitudes towards different information sources in relation to parenting. Findings highlighted that there were two factors that made the parents trust the information that they received: 1) the accuracy of the information, and 2) the reliability of the information source.

Several studies examined how parents selected a particular child care and education program for their preschool or kindergarten aged child. Research evidence suggests that this is a complicated, multi-characteristic decision (Leslie, Ettenson, & Cumille, 2000). Entrusting a child's potential pathway to academic success as well as personal care with another individual may be a difficult task for most parents. Many working parents do not have the ability to work from home or stay at home with their children. Taguma, Litjens, Kim and Makowiecki (2012) stated that enrolling children in early child care and education offers positive results for parents and children. For instance, children are exposed to academic content as well as opportunities to develop social skills with their peers (Taguma, et al., 2012). While most parents prefer to leave children with family members, changes in the economy, family and professional roles, and urbanization have made this more challenging. Contextual factors include program characteristics, parents' beliefs and expectations, and children's ages (da Silva & Wise, 2002; Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Hand, 2005; Rose & Elicker, 2008; Seo, 2003).

In addition, previous studies highlighted decision making factors that have been considered by parents before selecting a child care center. Many parents are under the assumption that child care providers are qualified and certified to manage a child care center. Taguma, et al. (2012) emphasized that parents' requirements and assumptions of quality child care programs are ever changing.

Noble (2007) found that parents valued the feedback they received from other working parents. Parents were more likely to consider a child care center if it was recommended by a family member, neighbor, or other trusted colleagues. Communication within a community is only one common element of child care choice evidenced in the literature. Modica, Ajmera, and Dunning (2010) reported that parents from various ethnicities and backgrounds emphasized the need for a culturally sensitive center when making their selections. In an Australian study consisting of questionnaires answered by parents from various ethnicities and interviews conducted involving 29 single mothers and 32 mothers with significant others, da Silva and Wise (2002) found that Somali and Vietnamese parents' choices for child care were based on how the child care center promoted social and emotional development. In addition, Somali parents also searched for centers that aligned with the cultural values of their parenting techniques. Parents of Vietnamese children rated parenting support as very important. Overall, most of the parents who responded chose an early childhood program that was beneficial for the family as a whole. Several concerns may arise when selecting a preschool or kindergarten program. What matters most when parents choose a program? Many working parents base their decisions on both their personal goals and what seems appropriate for their child to transition into this type of setting. These goals may include their daily work commute, cost, and scheduling which is conducive to their work schedules (Noble, 2007). Making a decision of this nature is not universal; instead it is based on the individual circumstances for each family. Within the past few years there has been a growing body of research about the factors that influence parents' choices about ECE programs. In a pilot study with 47 mothers in the mid-western United States, Seo (2003) found parents' child care choices were based on financial obligation, operating times, and opinions of others. The decision weighed heavily on what was favorable for the parents. Sometimes the chances of parents receiving quality and flexibility in child care were restricted due to the demands of their work schedules.

In contrast, Rose and Elicker (2008) asserted that the level of nurturance provided by caregivers, the professional education of the staff, and how the program incorporated play into learning were major factors for 355 mothers surveyed in southern Texas. Parents around the globe most likely experience some of the same reservations when selecting early care and education programs. It may be considered biased to assume that all countries and cultures share the same viewpoint about selecting programs. A study of selections of child care in Taiwan by 810 parents was conducted by Jang in 2008. Parents identified teachers' qualifications and training, as well as a clean and safe indoor and outdoor environment, as important factors in their selection process. Parents with higher incomes stressed program standards, teacher qualifications, and parent-teacher interactions as critical components, while lower income parents were more concerned with cost and curriculum. Higher income parents chose private programs while lower income parents chose public programs for their children. Parents were generally satisfied with their children's programs but some expressed concerns about large group sizes. Jang (2008) concluded that the surveyed parents in Taiwan chose child care outside of the home based on goals for the child as well as situations that were conducive for the parents. Richter (1997) indicated that working mothers in Thailand were constantly faced with the dilemma of staying at home with their children or enrolling them in child care. Child care choices in Bangkok, Thailand were investigated in a study of 1,515 working mothers. A majority of the mothers supported enrollment in nursery school for children aged three to five. Selections of child care arrangements were significantly predicted by the socioeconomic status of families (Richter, 1997). An Australian study evaluated parents' perceptions about child care choices (Noble, 2007). Noble noted that research on parents' reasons for selecting early childhood education programs is limited. Most of the research on parents' perceptions of child care emphasizes the importance of cost, flexibility of hours, and cultural diversity (Noble, 2007; Rose, K. K., & Elicker, J., 2008, Seo; 2003.)

Overall research evidence noted above demonstrate that parents in different countries have common needs for information concerning child development, health, schools, and finances when making the right child care decisions. As Noble (2007) emphasized the importance of understanding parents' values from a global perspective. Therefore, the need for conducting research on parents' decisions about children's programs from various regions is necessary. Understanding the viewpoints of parents may help early care and education providers align some of their services with the needs of parents in their communities. To date, there has been little research focusing on parents' information needs and decision making processes in selecting early childhood programs in Thailand.

Current Study

Parent's informational needs and decision making processes when selecting early childhood programs are related. This descriptive research study surveyed parents with young children enrolled in a selected sample of four preschool and kindergarten programs located in the northeastern and southern regions of Thailand. The study examined the processes through which parents obtained information and selected early childhood programs, with an emphasis on the factors they took into account when deciding on their children's preschool or kindergarten. This study also aims to explore what are the decision-making and selection considerations of parents with children enrolled in the participating preschool and kindergarten programs.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

This study was conducted by utilizing online survey to collect data from 505 parents of preschool and kindergarten children. Eligibility was determined by enrollment of a child between the ages of three and six in one

of the participating preschool or kindergarten programs. This represented a convenience sample from the four selected early childhood programs.

Participants Recruitment

Flyers described the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, potential risks, instructions for accessing the online survey, dates for data collection, and contact information for the researchers. Flyers were distributed to the parents when they arrived with their children in the morning or when they came to pick their children up in the afternoon. Participants were parents who volunteered to complete the surveys. The Institutional Review Board approval for protection of human participants was obtained before data collection began.

Instrument

The online questionnaire was adapted from The Parents' Ratings of Importance of Quality and Satisfaction with Preschool Programs (Jang, 2008). The Thai version of the questionnaire was entered as a survey on the Psychdata.com website. Parents were instructed to log onto the Psychdata.com homepage and enter the survey number in order to read the statement of informed consent and access the survey. Reliability was calculated for the Decision-Making and Selection Process Subscales and Overall Selection Scale.

The survey was made available from July 1, 2013-August 4, 2014. Once the participants agreed to the conditions of consent, the parents completed the online survey. The identities of the parents, children, and school programs were not revealed through the survey. Personalized certificates of appreciation were prepared and delivered to the teachers and administrators of the early childhood programs in recognition of their assistance with the recruitment of participants. Two culturally appropriate children's books were provided to each participating program as gifts for their school libraries.

Parents' selections of the children's programs were explored through 27 items in six categories: convenience, cost, program standards, curriculum and teaching, teacher qualifications and training, and parent-teacher interactions.

The 5-points Likert Scale ranged from (5) "very important" to (1) "unimportant." Subscale means scores for the six categories and the overall mean score were produced by adding the ratings and dividing by the numbers of items. The reliability for the Overall Decision-Making and Selection Process scale was reported by Jang (2008) as a Cronbach alpha value of 0.86.

Data Analyses

The survey data were coded, entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 19.0 for Windows. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze parents' decision-making and selection for a particular childcare early childhood programs. Means and standard deviation were calculated for ratings of importance of categories. The mean scores for the categories of the Decision-Making and Selection Process were first tested for correlations. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was implemented to compare category mean by demographic descriptors and assess whether an overall difference existed between the groups.

Findings

Decision-Making and Selection Process

The selection of the particular preschool or kindergarten program attended by the child was made jointly by both mothers and fathers in 78.2% of the families. When asked how the parents obtained information about their children's programs, the most frequent sources were relatives, the school, colleagues, and friends.

Parents were asked to select reasons if their children had transferred from another preschool. Since not all children had transferred, the total number of responses was not equal to the sample size and parents could select multiple reasons. The most frequently selected reasons were convenience (*f*= 355),

curriculum and teaching (*f* = 243), program standards (*f* = 189), and cost (*f* = 119). Additional reasons for transfers were teacher qualifications (*f* = 109) and parent-teacher interactions (*f* = 109). Less frequent responses were teacher characteristics (*f*= 87) and children's adjustment (*f*= 86).

The parents were asked to level the importance considerations for selecting a particular child care and education program for their preschool or kindergarten aged child. Parents ranked their Decision-Making and Selection Process by level of importance on a 5-points scale. The statements were grouped according to the subscales: convenience, cost, program standards, curriculum and teaching, teacher qualifications, and parent-teacher interactions.

Most parents indicated that the location of the school in proximity to their homes was of great importance (*f*= 420). In addition, many parents preferred schools that were along the route they traveled for work (*f* = 395). Cost was another factor parents considered. Choosing schools with affordable tuitions within their budgets was ranked as highly important (*f*=424). Parents also preferred tuitions that were inexpensive (*f*=403).

Three items were ranked highly in regards to program standards. The majority of parents reported that choosing a school with government licensure was of great importance (*f*=418). Many parents indicated that having their child exposed to the same teacher was also important (*f*=408). Parents valued a school environment that practiced proper sanitation and safety (*f*= 412).

A curriculum with enrichment activities such as computer, art, and music was rated as highly important (*f*= 428). Parents were more likely to choose programs that provided academic instruction in English (*f*= 430). In addition, parents chose more academic programs which prepared children for school (*f*= 409). Qualified and trained teachers were also important to parents. Therefore, parents made decisions about programs based on the teachers' levels of responsibility for their jobs (*f*= 419).

In addition, parents rated the amount of teaching experience in early childhood education and care as selection criteria. Lastly, parents chose preschool or kindergarten programs based on the level of care and warmth the teacher provided to their children (f= 416) (see Table 2).

Table 2 *Frequencies and Percentages of Decision-Making and Selection Items Ranked from Highest to Lowest within Categories*

Selection Items		"Very Important" to "Important"		"Neutral"		"Of Little Importance" to "Unimportant"	
	n	*f*	%	*F*	%	*f*	%
Convenience							
The school is located near my home	504	420	83.3	78	15.5	6	0.6
The school is on my commuting route.	504	395	78.4	91	18.1	18	3.6
The drop-off and pick-up times are flexible.	504	376	74.6	102	20.2	26	5.2
School bus is available daily.	503	357	71.0	110	21.9	36	7.2
The school provides extend hours.	504	343	68.1	133	26.4	28	5.6
Cost							
The tuition is affordable.	505	424	83.9	73	14.5	8	1.6
The tuition is inexpensive.	505	403	79.8	90	17.8	12	2.4
I will get the voucher from school.	498	327	65.6	108	21.7	63	12.6
Program Standards							
The school is licensing by the government.	504	418	82.9	73	14.5	13	2.6
The same teacher(s) take care of my child.	504	408	81.0	84	16.7	12	2.4
The indoor is safe and clean	504	412	81.7	83	16.5	9	1.8
The teacher-child ratio met the regulation, 2-4-year old (1:10); 4-6-year-old (1:15)	504	393	77.9	96	19.0	15	3.0

The playground is safe and maintained in good condition.	504	392	77.7	95	18.8	17	3.4
The school has a good reputation.	504	387	76.8	105	20.8	12	2.4
Curriculum & Teaching							
The program provides extra curricula, such as computer, art, music, etc.	504	428	84.9	65	12.9	11	2.2
English is the language used in instruction.	504	430	85.3	61	12.1	13	2.6
The curricula are prepared for kindergarten or elementary school.	504	409	81.1	87	17.3	8	1.6
There are enough toys and learning materials for the children.	504	403	79.9	91	18.1	10	2.0
The school includes infant and toddler programs.	504	393	77.9	98	19.4	13	2.6
Teacher Qualifications & Training							
Teachers take responsibility for their jobs.	504	419	83.1	72	14.3	13	2.6
Teachers have teaching experiences in Early Childhood Education and Care.	504	404	80.1	94	18.7	6	1.2
The teacher is sensitive and warm to my child.	504	416	82.5	78	15.5	10	2.0
The school provides appropriate training courses for directors, teachers and staff every year, such as conferences and workshops.	504	399	79.1	92	18.3	13	2.6
Teachers have a related bachelor degree in ECE & Care.	504	393	77.9	93	18.5	18	3.6
Parent-Teacher Interaction							
Sharing of child-related information between parents and staff.	505	393	77.8	102	20.2	10	2.0
Parents can visit at any time.	505	396	78.4	94	18.6	15	3.0
Parents can be a volunteer in the classroom.	505	375	74.2	106	21.0	24	4.8

The means and standard deviations for the Decision Making and Selection categories are shown in Table 3. The ratings were based on a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being the most important. Overall, parents rated Curriculum and Teaching as the most important when selecting preschools or kindergartens (*M* = 4.15). Parents also valued both Teacher Qualifications (*M* = 4.13) and Program Standards (*M* = 4.11). In addition, Parent-Teacher Interactions (*M* = 4.03) were considered important in the decision making and selection process. Although cost and convenience were reasons many parents transferred their children to another preschool or kindergarten, ratings for selection were different. Both Cost (*M*=4.00) and Convenience (*M*=3.99) were rated as fairly important for parents' decision making about preschools and kindergartens.

Table 3 *Means and Standard Deviations of Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories*

Category	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Convenience	502	3.99	0.60
Cost	498	4.00	0.68
Program Standards	504	4.11	0.57
Curriculum and Teaching	504	4.15	0.57
Teacher Qualifications	504	4.13	0.60
Parent-Teacher Interactions	505	4.03	0.69

Note. 5 = very important, 1 = unimportant

The mean scores for the categories of the Decision-Making and Selection Process were first tested for correlations. The resulting significant positive correlations displayed in Table 4 led to a decision to use multivariate analyses to compute the group comparisons.

Table 4 *Correlations of Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories (n = 504)*

	Conv	Cost	Prog Stand	Curriculum	Tch Qual	P-T Inter
Convenience	1.00					
Cost	0.46***	1.00				
Program Standards	0.47***	0.44***	1.00			
Curriculum	0.40***	0.38***	0.67***	1.00		
Teacher Qualifications	0.45***	0.41***	0.67***	0.75***	1.00	
Parent-Teacher Interactions	0.40***	0.37***	0.55***	0.57***	0.61***	1.00

Note: ***Correlations are significant at the 0.001 level.

Ages of children To determine whether parents' considerations were different by children's ages, the mean scores for the Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories were grouped by three year olds (*n* = 169), four year olds (*n* = 196), and five year olds (*n* = 123). A MANOVA test revealed no significant differences among age groups, although importance ratings tended to be highest for the youngest children and lowest for the oldest children.

Levels of parents' education Education levels reported by parents were combined to create two groups: high school or less (*n* = 203) and college educated with Associate's, Bachelor's, or Graduate Degrees (*n* = 284). The MANOVA for the combined Decision-Making and Selection Process categories resulted in a Wilks' Lambda value of 0.96, $F = 3.22$, $p = 0.01$, $d = 0.04$. Further analyses compared education groups for each category

using ANOVA tests. Parents with college educations rated the following categories as significantly more important in their selection process: Curriculum, Program Standards, Parent-Teacher Interactions, and Teacher Qualifications. There were not significant differences by education levels for Convenience or Cost (see Table 5).

Table 5 *MANOVA of Parents' Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories by Parents' Education*

	High School or Less		College Education			
Category	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Convenience	3.96	0.59	4.01	0.60	0.93	0.34
Cost	4.00	0.63	4.02	0.69	0.08	0.78
Program Standards	4.03	0.54	4.18	0.58	8.68	0.00**
Curriculum	4.03	0.53	4.23	0.57	15.38	0.000***
Teacher Qualifications	4.06	0.55	4.19	0.61	5.92	0.02*
Parent-Teacher Interactions	3.94	0.67	4.11	0.70	6.93	0.01**

Note. $*p \leq 0.05$ $**p \leq 0.01$ $***p \leq 0.001$

School type Children were enrolled in public (n = 268) or private (n = 215) preschool and kindergarten programs. A comparison by school type was computed with a multivariate analysis of variance test to determine overall differences for the combined Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories. A Wilks' Lambda value of 0.95 was produced, with an associated F = 4.54 and

p = 0.000, d = 0.05. Further analyses revealed significant differences between parents' ratings of importance for Curriculum, Teacher Qualifications, and Program Standards. Parents in private programs rated these categories as more important in their selection process. There were not significant differences by type of school regarding Convenience, Cost, or Parent-Teacher Interactions (see Table 6).

Table 6 *MANOVA of Parents' Decision-Making and Selection Process Categories by School Type*

	Private (n = 215)		Public (n = 268)			
Category	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Convenience	4.00	0.04	3.95	0.04	0.97	0.32
Cost	3.99	0.05	4.01	0.04	0.19	0.67
Program Standards	4.18	0.40	4.05	0.04	5.91	0.02*
Curriculum	4.27	0.04	4.04	0.03	19.53	0.000***
Teacher Qualifications	4.20	0.40	4.06	0.40	7.26	0.01**
Parent-Teacher Interactions	4.06	0.05	4.01	0.04	0.54	0.46

Note. *$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Summary of Findings

Information was obtained about their children's programs most often from relatives, the school, colleagues, and friends. This was similar to the findings of Nobel (2007) who indicated that recommendations from family members, neighbors, and colleagues influenced parents' choices. Because the school was one of the primary sources, it can be assumed that parents trusted the information they received, as in the study by Guillaume and Bath (2004) that emphasized two factors: the accuracy of information and the reliability of the source. Parents' Decision-making and the Selection Process were explored through a series of statements grouped in the following subscales: Convenience, Cost, Program Standards, Curriculum and Teaching, Teacher Qualifications, and Parent-Teacher Interactions. All of the categories were "important" or "very important" to parents, with Curriculum and Teaching highest, and Convenience lowest. A study of preschool parents in Taiwan by Jang (2008) found that parents rated Teacher Qualifications highest and Convenience lowest.

In the current study, comparisons were calculated using multivariate analyses of variance to determine whether there were differences by the ages of children, levels of family income, levels of parents' education, or school type (public or private). Parents with college educations rated the importance of Curriculum, Program Standards, Parent-Teacher Interactions, and Teacher Qualifications higher than did parents with high school educations or less. Parents in private schools rated Curriculum, Teacher Qualifications, and Program Standards as more important than did parents in public school programs. Other comparisons were not significantly different among groups.

In contrast, the study in Taiwan (Jang, 2008) reported significant differences when parents were grouped by children's ages, parents' education, maternal employment, household incomes, and types of schools. The findings were similar for parents' education, with the exception of Cost, which was considered

more important to parents with high school educations or less. Cost and Convenience have been major factors in the decision-making and selection process in studies in Australia (Noble, 2007) and the United States (Seo, 2003).

Implications and recommendations

How parents obtain information about early childhood programs in Thailand and the considerations used to make decisions and select appropriate settings for their preschool and kindergarten children are important issues for school and administrators, librarian, and future research.

School and administrators

As results of this study, there are some recommendations for schools and administrators. The recommendations of other parents were the major sources of information, along with the school. Therefore, the school's reputation is critically important in order to attract new parents to the program. If parents transferred from another preschool, the most frequent reasons were Convenience, Curriculum and Teaching, and Program Standards. When choosing a center for their children, parents looked for programs with extra curricula such as computer, art, and music. They were concerned about Teacher Qualifications and Training, with an emphasis on teachers with experience in Early Childhood Education and Care.

In addition, Program Standards were important, including licensing and consistency of care by the same teachers. These concerns should be addressed by the school administrators and teachers in order to attract potential parents. Information about the school should include details about the curriculum and qualifications of the teachers. When parents visit, they are most likely to notice the physical environment and note if it is clean, well maintained, and not crowded. Children's safety and health are important to parents, so all personnel should receive adequate training and supervision to teach and model health practices, prevent dangerous problems, and provide nutritious meals and snacks. While

group size and teacher-child ratios did not appear to be matters of great concern to parents when rating importance or satisfaction, there were comments at the conclusion of the survey indicating that some classrooms were crowded and perhaps teachers could better care for children in smaller groups. With average group sizes of 25-30 children with one teacher in Thai kindergartens and child care centers (de Los Angeles-Bantista, 2004), these concerns are well founded. However, policy changes would inevitably impact costs, so programs must carefully consider reductions.

Librarians

As noted earlier, parents trust the information they receive, as in the study by Guillaume and Bath (2004) that emphasized two factors: the accuracy of information and the reliability of the source. Feinburg, Kuncher, and Feldman (1998) pointed out that librarians must focus on what they can do to support parents in their multifaceted roles as primary caregivers. In order to enhance parents' ability when selecting high quality early childhood programs, the public library should have information searching workshops that provide parents with precise information and skills in selecting better quality child care programs.

Future research

Future research should expand the selection of early childhood education programs to representation from rural and urban centers, university demonstration schools, and additional geographical regions within Thailand.

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