

Working mothers' involvement in children's preschool education in Malaysia

 Gurdip Kaur Saminder Singh^{1*},  Yunera Carlyna K. Ghani²

¹Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR University College Kuala Lumpur (UUCKL), Malaysia.

^{1,2}Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Malaysia.

drguripsaini@gmail.com (G.K.S.S.) carlynakghani@gmail.com (Y.C.K.G.).

Abstract: As more women join the workforce to meet survival demands, understanding their challenges in raising young children, especially in education, is vital. This qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was designed to explore the experiences of 31 working mothers through in-depth interviews to uncover the dynamics of maternal involvement in preschool education. Thematic analysis with three-cycle coding revealed five key themes, highlighting the complexities mothers face in balancing professional responsibilities with active support for their children's early learning. Findings indicated that there is consensus that maternal involvement at the preschool education level serves as a crucial foundation for children to excel academically prior to primary education. However, there seems to be a disconnect between mothers' understanding of support and the expectations of educational institutions regarding parental involvement in education. Findings also highlighted that although working mothers apply various adaptive approaches to balance professional responsibilities with academic support for their children, they seriously struggle to balance career aspirations with familial responsibilities. These findings offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and employers seeking to establish environments that support the holistic development of children while acknowledging and alleviating the challenges faced by working mothers, creating a broader community impact on gender equity.

Keywords: Children, Involvement, Preschool education, Working mothers.

1. Introduction

Parents play a pivotal role in a child's development. Parents are not merely caregivers but are life-long mentors that shape children's ideals, helping them become responsible individuals of the future. Parents influence their children's development from an early age [1]. Developmental scholars have noted that certain people specifically have the influence to shape a child's morality, ability, resilience, and ethics at a crucial age [2-6]. One important influence on every child is their mother [7-11]. Parents' involvement, specifically the mother, is primarily witnessed via academic association through involvement in school activities or even scaffolding children's learning at home [12, 13].

Traditionally, a mother's role in a household is to raise a family. Children need the sophisticated and thorough care that mothers provide to develop into healthy adults. A mother's distinctive connection with her family enables her to offer physical, emotional, educational and moral support in a way that no one else can supplement [7, 14]. In the past most women could provide thorough care to their young children since most were 'stay-home mothers'. However, over time, due to financial challenges as well as the pursuit of financial autonomy, most women choose to engage in employment while also taking up the responsibility of raising and educating children.

In Malaysia, the phenomenon of balancing employment and child-rearing is more prevalent now than ever before since the demands of modern living have compelled both parents to engage in paid

labour [8]. As of June 2024, 56.3% of women entered the workforce, up from 55.5% in 2020 and 55.9% in 2023 [15, 16]. Although the number of women forces entering work in Malaysia is still alarming and is far behind the expectation [15] almost one in every ten women are quitting work due to challenges of childcare and development, similar to reports from the United States Catalyst [17] and United Kingdom [18]. This phenomenon which has been continuing over decades has led to many research endeavors including that by Asia [19] which summarized that the key reason why women quit their jobs encompasses lack of flexibility (75%), concerns about child-care (60%) and unsupported bosses and work environment (55%).

Although the notion 'parental involvement' in early childhood education has been the focus of various research at the international level [20-25] research on Malaysian parental involvement in early childhood remains new [26]. Those that was conducted in Malaysia has mostly focused on children in primary school and secondary schools [26-29]. With very limited done on parental involvement in early childhood education [1, 13, 26, 30-33]. To a further extend, hardly few exist on understanding working mothers' involvement in children's preschool education in Malaysia [9].

Given the above, the present study is relevant, as there are no substantial studies to date that have explored the perceptions, experiences, impact as well as challenges faced by working mothers in supporting the education of their preschool children. The findings of this study are timely as educators, policy makers, and education institutions need to understand and address the inimitable challenges faced by working mothers. Insights from this research can inform the development of targeted support programs, influence policy adjustments to better accommodate working mothers, and help teachers design more inclusive and supportive educational environments that recognize the diverse needs of preschool children from working households.

1.1. Research Aim

The overall aim of this study was to explore working mothers' involvement in their children's preschool education in Malaysia. Specifically, this study was based on the following research objectives:

1. To assess working mothers' understanding of the term 'support' in the context of preschool children's education.
2. To explore working mothers' perceptions on the importance of preschool education.
3. To discover how working mothers supported their preschool children's education at home.
4. To understand the impact of working mothers on children's preschool education.
5. To discover the specific challenges faced by working mothers' in supporting their preschool children's education.

With the above research aim and objectives constructed, this study has considerable significance in shedding light on the much-overlooked experiences of working mothers in Malaysia and their involvement in the education of their preschool children. By exploring the meaning they attach to "support," their views about preschool education, and the ways they promote their children's learning at home, the study provides important findings that bring to light the multifaceted roles these mothers play in early childhood development. Furthermore, it underlines the challenges faced by working mothers in balancing their occupational demands with the needs of supporting their children's educational process, thus helping toward a more holistic understanding of the social and educational factors that shape children's foundational learning process. The findings can inform policies and practices aimed at better supporting working mothers, in turn enhancing their ability to become involved in their children's education and, ultimately, bringing about better educational outcomes among preschoolers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Importance of Children's Early Years Development

The foundations for successful human development are established during early childhood, a critical phase that typically occurs between the ages of three and five [34]. Early Childhood Development

(ECD) refers to the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional growth of a child from conception up until the age of six [35]. This period is crucial for laying the groundwork for a child's future across various domains, with significant implications for their overall well-being and life outcomes [1]. Parenting interventions during the first few years are known to improve early childhood development outcomes [36].

High-quality early childhood education is essential for harnessing the potential of these formative years. Studies have demonstrated that children who participate in such programs are more likely to achieve long-term success, including higher rates of high school completion, reduced teenage pregnancies, increased years of education, higher incomes, and a lower likelihood of engaging in criminal activities [37, 38]. These outcomes highlight the profound importance of investing in early years' development.

Preschool education plays a significant role in promoting early development by enhancing school readiness skills, which are fundamental for later academic achievement [34]. The benefits of early education are especially pronounced for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where early interventions can have lasting, positive effects [34]. Participation in early care and education (ECE) equips children with essential skills that benefit them throughout their lives [2, 39].

2.2. Parental Involvement in Children's Early Years Development

Parental involvement from an early stage of a child impacts their growth and development be it in the aspects of physical, emotional, or mental health [40]. Parental involvement is correlated to a condition where parents are unwaveringly involved in the education of their children by committing themselves in the learning process and development of their children [41]. Parental involvement is not merely parents questioning about their child's performance in school, but it also takes on a proactive role of creating a healthy relationship that impacts overall development [41, 42]. In a family unit, both mother and father relate to their children differently [43]. Traditionally, in the past, women have shown more participation in supporting their children's well-being as compared to men, since the men were off winning bread [44]. This remain the same till date although many mothers today are working mothers.

2.2.1. Mother's Involvement in Early Years Development

Mother's involvement is crucial in shaping a child's cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Research indicates that mothers are perceived as more accepting, responsive, supportive, and behaviorally controlling than fathers [44]. According to [40], mothers play three primary roles including fulfilling children's needs, serving as role models, and stimulating their development. During early childhood, maternal engagement helps establish secure attachments, which are foundational for emotional regulation and social interactions. This involvement often includes activities such as reading, responsive communication, and providing a nurturing environment, all of which significantly enhance early learning experiences.

Maternal involvement in education encompasses active participation in both developmental and academic processes, fostering a strong connection between home and school. Roy and Giraldo-García [45] elaborates this involvement as assisting with homework, motivating and encouraging children, participating in school functions, and maintaining communication with teachers. Such engagement supports not only academic performance but also social and emotional development. Apriyanti [46] further includes activities such as accompanying children during study sessions, purchasing storybooks and stationery, and managing playtime as important milestones of a mother's involvement. In the Philippines, mothers emphasize their crucial role in early childhood education, particularly when children are still developing basic literacy skills [47]. They take a proactive approach to reinforce and support school learning, ensuring children understand and consolidate classroom concepts [48].

2.3. Holewa [49] Concept of the "Second Shift" And Mother's Involvement

The term "second shift" typically refers to a work schedule extending from late afternoon to midnight, common in industries requiring continuous operations, such as hospitals, retail stores, manufacturing plants, and call centers [49]. However, "second shift" also carries a deeper, more pervasive meaning in this study, which is the dual burden faced by working mothers.

Holewa [49] concept of the "second shift" highlights the significant challenge that working women encounter when, after completing their paid employment, they shoulder the majority of household and caregiving responsibilities. Despite advancements in gender equality, recent studies reveal that woman—particularly those with children—continue to bear a disproportionate share of domestic duties [50, 51]. This imbalance often results in increased stress, diminished well-being, and hindered career advancement for women [52].

The persistence of the "second shift" not only reinforces traditional gender roles and contributes to the gender wage gap, but also impacts family dynamics, including maternal involvement in children's education. Working mothers, already burdened by the second shift, often face additional pressures to be actively engaged in their children's schooling. This dual role strains their time and energy, affecting their ability to participate fully in educational activities and contribute to their children's academic success.

2.4. Studies on Working Mothers' and Work-Family Balance

Various theories have identified that parental involvement in education requires continuous collaboration with schools to gain a comprehensive development of young children [3, 4, 53, 54]. For early childhood, learning takes place in different spaces and occurs in 'overlapping spheres' [53]. Parents and schools are important catalysts contributing to students' success in the future Volman and Gilde [55]. Vygotsky and Cole [56] as cited in McLeod [6] Socio-cultural Theory emphasizes that learning takes place when a more knowledgeable other (MKO) scaffolds and supports children in their endeavours. In this sense, the closest MKO is the child's mother. Research has proven that, when a mother spends time with children, their learning and psychological well-being are enhanced [57, 58].

Research over the last five years has observed that roughly 52% of Malaysian women are employed in the workforce, reflecting a 10% increase since 2008 [10, 59, 60] women's roles within the household have experienced very less changes [11, 61]. Although the job market has witnessed more women assuming leadership roles and their services and contributions being recognized, a report by McKinsey & Company [62] testified that more than one in four women are contemplating either resigning from their workplace or downsizing their careers due to their children's development and care.

This validates that working mothers encounter multiple challenges regarding juggling their roles at home and at workplace. Several research has shown that working mothers suffer more significant work-family conflict than do working fathers [63]. The pressure that working mothers encounter in their role to achieve work-life balance has led to exhaustion which directly impacted their contribution in supporting their children's education at home [64, 65]. Studies from research on working mothers also reported that full-time working-mothers having more than one child are 40% more stressed than others, of which 67% stated high-levels of tension from excessive work burden, inflexible work-environments, and inequality in career advancement [66, 67] which further contributed towards the lack of support at home towards their children's educational attainments [8].

3. Methodology

On a broader basis, the substantial purpose of this study was to explore working mothers' involvement in their children's preschool education in Malaysia.

3.1. Research Design

A phenomenological qualitative research design using open-ended interviews was applied to gain a detailed understanding of the working mothers' experiences and perceptions of supporting their

preschool children's education. Creswell and Creswell [68] suggest that phenomenological studies have "strong philosophical underpinnings" as the aim is to depict the experiences and perceptions of the participants stemming from their experiences. To explore the underlying nature of mothers' involvement, the barriers they have encountered, and how important they attach themselves to supporting their children in learning, the use of phenomenological approach was most appropriate. This approach allowed an in-depth study of the individuals and the exploration of the subjective experiences of the participants so that rich information concerning how working mothers negotiate the complex interaction between professional responsibilities and family commitments in the context of early childhood education could be obtained. In this view, the study highlighted the importance of understanding the lived experience of the participants since phenomenology considers an individual's perspective as central to the interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation [68].

3.2. Participants

The population consisted of working mothers from Malaysia's most cosmopolitan city- Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur was chosen since it has been a hot spot for economic activity, and a highly likely area to house a significant number of dual-earner families, presenting a compelling setting to explore the dynamics of parental engagement. Purposive sampling strategy used received a total of 31 working mothers with at least one child enrolled in a preschool for an average duration of one year by end of 2023 across Kuala Lumpur. This intentional sampling approach ensured diversity across ethnicity and educational backgrounds, providing a rich tapestry of experiences to draw upon in the subsequent phases of the study. Purposive sampling was utilized in this study to intentionally select a specific group of participants, in this case, the working mothers with at least one child enrolled in preschool for a year, that could provide relevant and in-depth insights into the research. By utilizing purposive sampling, the researchers were able to target individuals who met specific criteria crucial to the study, ensuring that the sample was both appropriate and informative [68] for exploring the experiences and perceptions of working mothers regarding their involvement in preschool education. The purposive sampling approach also allowed researchers to select diversity across ethnicity and educational backgrounds, ensuring that the study captured a wide range of perspectives and experiences, which is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, strategies, and impacts related to supporting children's early education. This intentional selection of participants helped enrich the data, making it more relevant and applicable to the research objectives.

3.3. Research Instrument

For this study, the researchers thoroughly studied the insights from the literature to first formulate specific research questions that address the gaps which then guided the content of the interview guide. Since literature showed a gap in data pertaining the perceptions, experiences, impact as well as challenges faced by working mothers in supporting the education of their preschool children, a self-constructed interview guide was designed to include five carefully structured questions focusing on exploring participants' understanding of the term 'support', challenges faced, and current strategies used in supporting their preschool children's education at home. To ensure the trustworthiness of data obtained from the interviews, the self-developed interview guide was reviewed by two subject-matter experts (SMEs) and an inter-rater reliability test carried out which resulted in Kappa agreement of 0.73 indicating the instrument achieved substantial agreement, McHugh [69] indicates that any Kappa score between 0.60 and 0.74 reflects good agreement between raters which ensured instrument reliability.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of data was done based on the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke [70]. In addition to transcribing verbatim data, creating codes and developing themes, three-cycle analytical coding was utilized for the data analysis [71]. This ensured the systematic analysis and categorization of data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. The three-cycle analytical coding systematically

categorized and interpreted large volumes of qualitative data by reducing them into manageable units and identifying the key themes or patterns. The first cycle involved open or descriptive coding, where the researchers went through the data-interview transcripts and labeled segments of text. In the second cycle, the researchers refined these initial codes by collating the similar codes together and concentrating on the most significant and recurring themes. In the final cycle, the data were synthesized into higher-level themes or concepts whereby the researchers integrated previous cycles to interpret the data in a way that responds to the research questions. A careful transcription of the interview, member checking of the verbatim transcript and the coding process to check consistency further deposited the reliability and validity of the data [72].

3.5. Ethical Consideration

Potential research participants were fully informed about the research area, process, implication and publication of findings that ensured ethical procedures were handled with great quality. Ethical considerations include obtaining authorization from preschools to gain parental data, ensuring participants privacy, and obtaining signed consents. Based on Neuman [73, 74] the system of ethical protection introduced by the scientific community has created procedures to protect the rights of research participants [73, 74]. further explained that in the context of voluntary participation, each participation is required to receive informed consent with complete information of the research and implications, if any, prior to their participation in research.

4. Findings and Discussion

The research findings presented below through five developed themes provide valuable insights into the perceptions, experiences, impact and challenges of working mothers on supporting their children's preschool education.

Theme 1: Working mothers' perceptions on the importance of preschool education

The findings reveal a consensus among all working mothers (100%) that preschool education serves as a crucial foundation for children to excel academically prior their enrolment into primary school.

"I emphasize preschool education because it is where they learn academically, socially, and emotionally"

[Mother 1]

The majority (93.5%) emphasized the significance of preschool in instilling basic skills like reading, writing, and counting. There was a dual perspective on the purpose of preschool. About 50% viewed it as a means of academic readiness towards primary school, while others emphasized its role in fostering social-emotional development. The elements of socialization, play-based learning, and cognitive development emerged as essential components of preschool education.

However, a small percentage (6.5%) reported differently stating that although preschool education is important but not all preschools ensure academic success.

"Normally, yes...preschool is seen as important, but as I observed my child, I think I help her better than the teachers in school."

[Mother 12]

Preschool education, as found in this study, parallels that of previous research indicating parents' understanding of its importance [75, 76]. This orientation accentuates a coherent recognition of the foundational role that early childhood education plays in cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. Additionally, the findings highlight an expanding appreciation among parents regarding the benefits of early learning experiences. This trend suggests that as parents' awareness expands, there is a corresponding rise in both parental involvement and investment in quality early education opportunities.

Theme 2: Understanding the term 'support' for preschool children's education

Although all mothers valued the importance of parental involvement in early years, almost 48% were not able to link the term 'support' towards academic specifically Table 1.

Table 1.
Understanding of the term ‘support’

Participants	Key phrases	Coding	Percentage (%)
M1, M2, M6, M7 M8, M9, M10, M13, M14, M16, M17, M20, M22, M26, M28, M29	Academic Homework Learning Worksheet/Activity	Academic Support	52%
M3, M5, M11, M15, M21 M19, M23, M25, M27, M30	Care Hug Love	Emotional Support	32%
M4, M12, M18, M24, M31	Playing Games Watching Movies Shopping	Social Support	16%

Note: n=31; M=Mothers.

10 (32%) mothers linked ‘support’ to giving appropriate nurture and care to their children which they stated will enhance children’s ability to want to learn.

“In my understanding, the support at the preschool level should be more towards becoming a caring parent. I asked how school was and if they enjoyed it. I think that also can contribute to good learning habit, right?”

[Mother 15]

On the other hand, there were also a small percentage (16%) who related ‘support’ to the social well-being of their children.

“I don’t want to touch much on their education because I am tired myself. What is important is I have enough engagement with them...like play games and be with my child.”

[Mother 18]

Although all mothers in the study valued the importance of parental involvement in early childhood education, nearly 48% writhed to link the term ‘support’ specifically to academic outcomes [77]. This gap in understanding highlights a critical area for improvement, as many mothers recognize the general value of involvement but may lack clarity on how their support translates into academic success [78]. Correspondingly, research in Malaysia has revealed that while parental engagement is unanimously acknowledged, there is often inadequate stress on its direct impact on academic performance [79]. Addressing this disconnect through appropriately designed educational programs for parents could augment mothers' ability to effectively support their children's academic growth [80].

Theme 3: Strategies used to support preschool children's education

For the majority (52%) that were able to relate the term ‘support’ to children’s education provided practices or strategies they have used. The findings illuminated the diverse ways working mothers engage with their children's academic, both on weekdays and weekends. Table 2 below summarizes mothers' experiences in supporting their preschool children’s education.

Table 2.
Practice to support children’s education.

Key findings	Frequency	(%)	Frequency	(%)	Frequency	(%)
Helping with homework	Weekday Evening	31%	Weekday Night	69%	-	-
Reading story books	Weekday Bedtime	25%	Weekend Bedtime	45%	Once A Week	30%
Revising lessons studied	Weekday Night	15%	Weekend	25%	Twice A Week	60%
Additional worksheets	Weekday Night	15%	Weekend	10%	Rarely	75%
Colouring/drawing	Weekday Night	20%	Weekend	25%	Once A Week	55%

Note: n=16 (52%)

Almost 70% of mothers also related that due to the lack of possibilities to engage with children’s education on weekdays, working mothers usually send their children to after-school programs or day care centres that can accommodate homework completion.

“On weekdays, nothing is possible for me to do with my child. So in order to ensure she is learning well and has completed all task of the day, I have registered her into a day care centre.”

[Mother 31]

The findings in this study proves previous studies on the varied ways working mothers engage with their children's academic activities, both on weekdays and weekends [81]. In a separate study, Lee, et al. [77] have elaborated that on weekdays, working mothers often employ strategies such as structuring routines and utilizing after-school programs or day care centres to support their children's learning [77]. In contrast, weekends grant a more adaptable time frame for engagement, with mothers using this time for activities like extra studies and educational outings [78]. This variation underscores the adaptive approaches that working mothers take to balance professional responsibilities with academic support for their children [79].

Theme 4: Working mother's impact on preschool education

All working mothers (100%) stated that parental involvement is crucial from the very beginning the child is born. Participants also reported stating that, comparatively, mothers' involvement is more crucial in ensuring success in preschool compared to fathers when the children are much younger.

“From birth till they finish primary school, children are more attached to mothers than their fathers. They do really well academically when there is support from their mummies.”

[Mother 21]

“In today's world, parents must be involved in every manner if they want to ensure their children develop well in future. In my time, parents weren't so worried about what we do or what we study, maybe...not much exposure? But now, we must interfere...involve...support the education and overall development.”

[Mother 29]

This observation aligns with existing literature advocating that early childhood experiences often underline maternal roles due to traditional family patterns [11]. Similarly, a study by Zainudin, et al. [80] on parental involvement and academic achievement in Malaysia also related that children do academically well with parental influence and involvement, especially from mothers.

“When I support my children in their education, I can see they do better in school. But on days when I can't, I sometimes get feedback from teachers my child doesn't do well.”

[Mother 10]

“Of course, as a mother I support my child in his homework, study along with him...but not always. So, when I am supporting him, he is motivated to study and do well. Otherwise, no.”

[Mother 13]

Parallel to the findings in this study, past research has also steadily demonstrated that mothers tend to be more aggressively engaged in daily care-giving and early educational activities, which can significantly influence developmental outcomes [82]. This suggests that mother's participation in education through actions such as homework assistance, reading story books, and fostering a supportive learning environment can positively influence children's educational outcomes.

However, promising studies from Malaysia are beginning to highlight the importance of father involvement in early years, promoting for more balanced parental involvement to support optimal child development [80]. Research in the Malaysian context reveals that enhancing paternal engagement can positively impact children's holistic development, challenging traditional norms that prioritize maternal roles [67]. These studies underscore the need for policies and programs that support active father involvement to ensure comprehensive developmental benefits for children [83].

Theme 5: Challenges faced by working mothers in supporting their children's preschool education

Based on data analysis, time factor emerged as a critical challenge (100%) for working mothers, with the demands from work, household chores, and childcare creating a complex juggling act.

“I am really exhausted from all the work I am doing on a daily basis. I have to prepare in the morning for family, send kids to school, get to work and go home to cook and guide children with homework.”

[Mother 20]

"I usually can't help with the homework...I am gasping for time."

[Mother 30]

In addition, working mothers also elaborated that their counterparts had it easier when it came to juggling between children, work and household chores. This finding concurs with that of Yapp [11] that states women spent three times longer time doing household chores than men. In addition, study by Ravindranath, et al. [8] further stated that working mothers sacrifice their free time and have limited to no time to focus on their well-being because whatever free time is left out of a day is used to support their children's education.

"You see, compared to men, we have more responsibilities. We must ensure food is served on the table, house is clean, clothes are washed and ready for the next day, and so on. Whereas, for men, they finish work, come home and spend time on television."

[Mother 22]

48% of mothers also felt that the fast-paced evolution of the education system also made it difficult to provide the required education support and therefore, they preferred providing social or emotional support, that indisputably contributed to children's success in school.

"First of all, I don't even know the syllabus or the curriculum. Also, I think teachers are doing enough already. They know the curriculum better."

[Mother 11]

"As I already have no time for even myself, I admit I am not familiar with how to support my child in his education. I may provide additional worksheets once a while, but I am also afraid If I am teaching out of context?"

[Mother 4]

"Preschool education today is so diverse and includes all sorts of STEM and play-based approaches which I am not familiar with. So, I will not be a good guide."

[Mother 24]

This finding concurs with [88] where 61% Malaysian parents admitted not having much awareness about their children's preschool education, specifically those that is related with multi or interdisciplinary outcomes.

Few mothers also cited lack of patience in supporting children's education and termed it as a challenge.

"By the time I pick my child from daycare and reach home, I would have very little time to read and understand the syllabus of the day... it may just be counting 1,2,3 but teaching preschool children 1,2,3 has its techniques and patience. I don't have patience....especially asking them to write!"

[Mother 23]

In addition, due to quest to stay competitive at workplace, working mothers had to carry work back home, which contributed most not being able to contribute their children's additional education requirement.

"All I can do is support their homework. Beyond that is impossible because I also have reports to complete for next day of work."

[Mother 16]

Working mothers found it tough to manage with the demands related to work responsibilities and the pressures related to family responsibilities all at once.

"It's very competitive where I work. From Monday to Friday, I don't have time to support my children. All I can do is ensure they are given the basic care and needs."

[Mother 21]

These findings concur with past studies done by Jeffrey Hill, et al. [84] depicting the issue of work-life balance where women are said to play roles that are time-consuming and stressful, hence issuing

various conflict and stress when supporting their children's education. Findings from this study also found that the struggle to balance career aspirations with familial responsibilities added layers of difficulty. The emotional toll of adapting to the demands of parenthood, coupled with workforce expectations, surfaced as stressors for working mothers.

5. Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions, experiences, impact and challenges of working mothers in navigating their roles in their children's preschool education. Overall, findings reveal a consensus among all working mothers that preschool education serves as a crucial foundation for children to excel academically prior their enrolment into primary education. It also concurs with past researches that preschool children do academically well with maternal involvement. However, a substantial percentage of mothers were not able to link the term 'support' to academic achievement, but instead associated 'support' with providing appropriate nurture, care, and ensuring the social well-being of their children. This created a disconnect between what constitutes support in the mothers' conceptualization and the expectations of the educational institutions, who view parental involvement through the prism of academic support and school readiness. This, in return, creates a gap in understanding between what mothers perceive as helpful support for children's education and what schools or educators consider effective involvement of parents, hence underlining the need for more inclusive definitions and strategies of support compatible with the varied ways mothers contribute to children's early learning. Although findings from this study clearly underscore the adaptive approaches that working mothers take to balance professional responsibilities with academic support for their children, they seriously struggled to balance career aspirations with familial responsibilities. The conflict between career advancement and the provision of needed academic support to children testifies to the growing necessity of structural and social support to help working mothers balance their professional aspirations with their care-giving responsibilities, giving opportunities in managing these two spheres effectively.

6. Implications and Recommendations for Future Studies

The findings from this study can offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and employers seeking to create environments that support the holistic development of children while acknowledging and alleviating the challenges faced by working women, creating a broader community impact on gender equity. The findings of this study call for more targeted interventions designed to increase the involvement of working mothers in their children's preschool education, flexible working arrangements, and improved communication channels between school and families aimed at fostering a more balanced and supportive ecosystem for working mothers and their families. Future study can further design research using longitudinal study to track children from preschool through early primary school to assess the enduring impact of working mothers' engagement on diverse aspects of child development, encompassing academic achievement, social adeptness, and emotional. While this study was focused on working mothers, the roles of fathers could be further explored in support of their children's preschool education, especially for families with both parents working. This would provide a wider understanding of the familial contributors to early education and how fathers compare in this regard to mothers.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank UNITAR University College Kuala Lumpur (UUCKL) for partially funding the publication fee of this research paper.

Copyright:

© 2025 by the authors. This open-access article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

References

- [1] G. K. S. Singh, R. K. P. G. Singh, H. Kaur, G. Singh, and A. H. Masnan, "The development of a parental relationship and iterative involvement model (prii-m) for early childhood education in Malaysia," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v12-i2/17259>
- [2] A. D. Schoch, C. S. Gerson, T. Halle, and M. Bredeson, "Children's learning and development benefits from high-quality early care and education: A summary of the evidence," Retrieved: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/social-emotional-development>, 2023.
- [3] U. Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979.
- [4] J. Levy, *Epstein school, family, and community partnerships: your handbook for action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2002.
- [5] L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [6] S. McLeod, "Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development simply psychology simply psychology," Retrieved: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>, 2024.
- [7] F. Gade, D. Pada, F. Tarbiyah, I. Ar-Raniry, and B. Aceh, "Mother as a madrasah in children's education," Retrieved: <https://jurnal.ar-raniry.ac.id/index.php/didaktika/article/view/462>, 2012.
- [8] H. Ravindranath, J. Singh, T. Arumugam, and J. Kularajasingam, "Exploring the challenges faced by working mothers and the perceived factors to retain them in the private education sector," *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 64-81, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v11i2.18457>
- [9] N. Sofeira, "Balancing work and early childhood education: exploring the double burden faced by working mothers during the covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia," *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 11-22, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2023.5.3.2>
- [10] Khazanah Research Institute, "Time to care: Gender inequality, unpaid care work and time use survey," Retrieved: https://www.krinstute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/Publications_Time%20to%20Care_Full%20report.pdf, 2019.
- [11] C. Yapp, "Parental roles in early childhood education: Maternal versus paternal involvement," *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 85-102, 2018.
- [12] N. E. El Nokali, H. J. Bachman, and E. Votruba-Drzal, "Parent involvement and children's academic and social development in elementary school," *Child development*, vol. 81, no. 3, pp. 988-1005, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01447.x>
- [13] G. Singh and G. Nagarajah, "Parents' involvement in young children's english language education post pandemic," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 593-606, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v13-i1/18600>
- [14] P. H. A. Shah, "The wonderful role of a mother in the family - fair observer," fair observer," Retrieved: <https://www.fairobserver.com/culture/the-wonderful-role-of-a-mother-in-the-family/#>, 2023.
- [15] Berita, "Percentage of women in Malaysia's workforce still trails significantly behind men: Noraini," Retrieved: <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2024/02/1014121/percentage-women-malaysias-workforce-still-trails-significantly-behind>, 2024.
- [16] World Bank Group, "World bank group gender strategy 2024 – 2030_ accelerate gender equality to end poverty on a livable planet," world bank group," Retrieved: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/gender-strategy-update-2024-30-accelerating-equality-and-empowerment-for-all.print>, 2024.
- [17] Catalyst, "Four in ten working mothers to change jobs because of childcare," catalyst," Retrieved: <https://www.catalyst.org/media-release/working-parents-childcare-problems-report/>, 2023.
- [18] M. Ashdown and L. Hooker, "One in 10 mothers with under-fours quit work over childcare, says charity," BBC," Retrieved: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67325993>, 2024.
- [19] H. Asia, "'75% of Malaysian mothers quit their jobs due to a lack of flexibility - hr asia," hr asia," Retrieved: <https://hr.asia/uncategorized/75-of-malaysian-mothers-quit-their-jobs-due-to-a-lack-of-flexibility/>. [Accessed 218.

- [20] R. M. Alper *et al.*, "Change the things you can: Modifiable parent characteristics predict high-quality early language interaction within socioeconomic status," *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, vol. 64, no. 6, pp. 1992–2004, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_JSLHR-20-00412
- [21] A. Al-Fadley, A. Al-Holy, and A. Al-Adwani, "Teacher perception of parents' involvement in their children's literacy and their reading instructions in kuwait efl primary school classrooms," *International Journal of Education and Practice*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 120–133, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.61.2018.63.120.133>
- [22] M. M. Barger, E. M. Kim, N. R. Kuncel, and E. M. Pomerantz, "The relation between parents' involvement in children's schooling and children's adjustment: A meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 145, no. 9, p. 855, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000201>
- [23] M. A. Barnett, K. W. Paschall, A. M. Mastergeorge, C. A. Cutshaw, and S. M. Warren, "Influences of parent engagement in early childhood education centers and the home on kindergarten school readiness," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 53, pp. 260–273, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.05.005>
- [24] L. Lara and M. Saracostti, "Effect of parental involvement on children's academic achievement in Chile," *Frontiers in psychology*, vol. 10, p. 1464, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01464>
- [25] H. S. A. Torres and H. A. Castañeda-Peña, "Exploring the roles of parents and students in efl literacy learning: A colombian case," *English language teaching*, vol. 9, no. 10, pp. 156–165, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n10p156>
- [26] S. S. L. A. Kamal, A. H. Masnan, and N. H. Hashim, "Parental involvement in young children's education in Malaysia: A systematic literature review," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 319–341, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.3.17>
- [27] N. A. Ishak, N. M. Satar, and R. H. Zakaria, "Parental involvement in education among urban families in Malaysia," *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 60–85, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.22452/jati.vol25no2.4>
- [28] S. L. Ngu, Z. Hanafi, and M. Taslikhan, "Influence of parental involvement on academic achievement," Retrieved: www.allnationaljournal.com/njar, 2016.
- [29] K. Yulianti and E. J. P. G. Denessen, "Indonesian parents' involvement in their children's education: A study in elementary schools in urban and rural Java, Indonesia," Retrieved: <http://hdl.handle.net/2066/204353>. [Accessed 2019.
- [30] F. Edek and S. R. Isha, "The importance of parental involvement in home-based learning to improve the academic achievements of kindergarten children," *CAPEU Journal of Education*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 56–63, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.17509/cje.v1i2.31845>
- [31] R. Ramasamy, Y. Hussain, Y. Fernando, and D. Kamarudin, "Parent's Involvement in Preschool and its Influences on Children's Learning Activities," *International Journal of Education & Technology*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2023.
- [32] M. Sobri, N. Soh, and N. Roziman, "The importance of parental involvement in early childhood education for children under 4-year old," *Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 13–20, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.37698/jels.v1i1.104>
- [33] L. C. Yi and M. I. B. H. M. Hamzah, "The role of parents in educational change and its implications for the education system in Malaysia," *In (Webinar) Seminar Nasional Pendidikan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 312–327, 2020.
- [34] G. Duncan, A. Kalil, M. Mogstad, and M. Rege, "Investing in early childhood development in preschool and at home," Retrieved: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w29985>, 2022.
- [35] M. Ashley-Cooper, L.-J. van Niekerk, and E. Atmore, "Early childhood development in South Africa: Inequality and opportunity," *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities*, pp. 87–108, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18811-5_5
- [36] J. Jeong, E. E. Franchett, C. V. Ramos de Oliveira, K. Rehmani, and A. K. Yousafzai, "Parenting interventions to promote early child development in the first three years of life: A global systematic review and meta-analysis," *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 18, no. 5, p. e1003602, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003602>
- [37] C. N. Jones, "Benefits of early childhood education on later adult life," Retrieved: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all, 2024.
- [38] H. Morgan, "Does high-quality preschool benefit children? What the research shows," *Education sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 19, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci9010019>
- [39] UNICEF, "Aworld ready to learn prioritizing quality early childhood education. United Nations Children's Fund," Retrieved: <https://www.unicef.org/media/57926/file/A-world-ready-to-learn-advocacy-brief-2019.pdf>. [Accessed 2019.
- [40] A. Ghanizadeh and F. Shams, "Children's perceived parent-child relationships and family functioning in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder," *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 1–11, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1300/J019v29n03_01
- [41] A. Ntekane, "Parental involvement in education," *NWU (VAAL)*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36330.21440>
- [42] J. Clinton and J. Hattie, "New Zealand students' perceptions of parental involvement in learning and schooling," *Asia Pacific journal of education*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 324–337, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.786679>
- [43] L. Thompson and A. J. Walker, "Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, pp. 845–871, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353201>

- [44] Y. Yaffe, "Systematic review of the differences between mothers and fathers in parenting styles and practices," *Current psychology*, vol. 42, no. 19, pp. 16011-16024, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-01014-6>
- [45] M. Roy and R. Giraldo-García, "The role of parental involvement and social/ emotional skills in academic achievement: Global perspectives," Retrieved: <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>. [Accessed 2018].
- [46] C. Apriyanti, "Revitalizing the role of mother as children's first school," *jurnal eduscience*, Retrieved: <https://jurnal.ulb.ac.id/index.php/eduscience/article/view/2259>, 2021.
- [47] C. Antonio, G. Lirio, O. L. Gutlay, and Z. Q. Reyes, "Filipino mothers' involvement in children's education in the new normal," *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences: Proceedings*, vol. 11, no. 1 (s), pp. pp. 105-132, 2022.
- [48] W. Carcausto-Calla, M. P. C. Leyva, M. P. V. Guerrero, N. A. Zapata, and M. S. Alza-Salvatierra, "The role of mothers in the education of their preschool children: A comparative qualitative study," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 211-221, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2024-0016>
- [49] R. Holewa, "What is second shift? (definition, example, pros, and cons)," *quidlo timesheets*, Retrieved: <https://www.quidlo.com/blog/second-shift/>, 2024.
- [50] J. Cerrato and E. Cifre, "Gender inequality in household chores and work-family conflict," *Frontiers in psychology*, vol. 9, p. 1330, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01330>
- [51] B. Churchill, S. Kornrich, and L. Ruppner, "Children of the Revolution: The continued unevenness of the gender revolution in housework, childcare and work time across birth cohorts," *Social Science Research*, vol. 111, p. 102868, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2023.102868>
- [52] R. Bianchi and R. Brisson, "Burnout and depression: Causal attributions and construct overlap," *Journal of health psychology*, vol. 24, no. 11, pp. 1574-1580, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105317740415>
- [53] J. L. Epstein, *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2018.
- [54] J. M. Walker, A. S. Wilkins, J. R. Dallaire, H. M. Sandler, and K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, "Parental involvement: Model revision through scale development," *The elementary school journal*, vol. 106, no. 2, pp. 85-104, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499193>
- [55] M. Volman and J. t. Gilde, "The effects of using students' funds of knowledge on educational outcomes in the social and personal domain," *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, vol. 28, p. 100472, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2020.100472>
- [56] L. S. Vygotsky and M. Cole, *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [57] C. Kong and F. Yasmin, "Impact of parenting style on early childhood learning: Mediating role of parental self-efficacy," *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13, p. 928629, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.928629>
- [58] D. Li and X. Guo, "The effect of the time parents spend with children on children's well-being," Retrieved: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10106685/pdf/fpsyg-14-1096128.pdf>, 2023.
- [59] Department of Statistic Malaysia, "Department of statistics Malaysia press release," pp. 1-5, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>
- [60] S. N. S. Salleh and N. Mansor, "Women and labour force participation in Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 7, pp. e001641-e001641, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i7.1641>
- [61] J.-P. Zuo and Y. P. Jiang, "Urban women's work and family in social transition," Retrieved: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Zuo%2C+Ji-Ping%2C+and+Yong-Ping+Jiang.+2009.+Urban+women%E2%80%99s+work+and+family+in+social+transition.+Beijing%3A+The+Contemporary+China+Publishing+House.&btnG, 2009.
- [62] McKinsey & Company, "Women in the workplace ", Retrieved: [https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace-archive#/,](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace-archive#/) 2020.
- [63] I. Kremer, "The relationship between school-work-family-conflict, subjective stress, and burnout," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 805-819, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-01-2015-0014>
- [64] J. Sudha and P. Karthikeyan, "Work life balance of women employee: A literature review," *International journal of management research and reviews*, vol. 4, no. 8, p. 797, 2014.
- [65] C. Schueller-Weidekamm and A. Kautzky-Willer, "Challenges of work-life balance for women physicians/mothers working in leadership positions," *Gender medicine*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 244-250, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.genm.2012.04.002>
- [66] K. Kurupparachchi and H. Surangi, "The glass ceiling and women career advancement: A study based on ready-Made garment industry in Sri Lanka," *Kelaniya Journal of Management*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 18-39, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4038/kjm.v8i2.7581>
- [67] A. Islam and A. H. Jantan, "The glass ceiling: Career barriers for female employees in the ready-made garments (RMG) industry of Bangladesh," Retrieved: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3414583>, 2017.
- [68] J. D. Creswell and J. W. Creswell, "Research design qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches," Retrieved: https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf, 2018.
- [69] M. L. McHugh, "Interrater reliability: the kappa statistic," *Biochemia medica*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 276-282, 2012.
- [70] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative research in psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77-101, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

- [71] M. B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and J. Saldaña, "Qualitative data analysis a methods sourcebook edition," Retrieved: <http://www.theculturelab.umd.edu/uploads/1/4/2/2/14225661/miles-huberman-saldana-designing-matrix-and-network-displays.pdf>, 2014.
- [72] J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997.
- [73] N. W. Lawrence, "Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches, Seventh. Pearson," Retrieved: <http://194.164.49.16:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/156/1/Social%20Research%20Methods%20%28Eng%29%205MB%282%29.pdf>, 2014.
- [74] W. L. Neuman, "Basic of social research, secong pearson education," Retrieved: https://scholar.google.com.my/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&as_vis=1&q=Neuman%2C+W.+Lawrence.+%282006%29&btnG, 2007.
- [75] H. S. Lee, S. L. Chan, and A. Rahman, "Parental involvement and its effects on children's education: Insights from Malaysian mothers," *J Educ Psychol*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 55–68, 2022.
- [76] A. Smith and B. Johnson, "The role of parental involvement in early childhood education," *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 123–135, 2020.
- [77] C. Lee, D. Martinez, and E. Roberts, "Parental awareness and early childhood development: A review," *Early Education and Development*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 567–580, 2018.
- [78] H. L. Tan and S. J. Lim, "Understanding parental support in early childhood education: A Malaysian perspective," *Early Childhood Development and Care*, vol. 191, no. 4, pp. 567–579, 2021.
- [79] A. Ali and M. Ahmad, "Fathers' roles in early childhood education: Evidence from Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 72–89, 2021.
- [80] N. Zainudin, S. Mohamed, and N. M. Nor, "Parental involvement and academic achievement in Malaysia: Bridging the gap," *Asian Journal of Education and Development*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 22–35, 2023.
- [81] A. Yusof and A. Hadi, "Working mothers and academic support: Patterns of engagement in Malaysian families " *International Journal of Child Development*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 102–115, 2023.
- [82] A. Martin and J. Brooks-Gunn, "The impact of parental involvement on child development: A review of recent research," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 415–430, 2020.
- [83] H. L. Tan and S. F. Wong, "Enhancing father involvement in early childhood education: Lessons from Malaysian practices," *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 101–115, 2021.
- [84] E. Jeffrey Hill, J. I. Jacob, L. L. Shannon, R. T. Brennan, V. L. Blanchard, and G. Martinengo, "Exploring the relationship of workplace flexibility, gender, and life stage to family-to-work conflict, and stress and burnout," *Community, Work and Family*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 165–181, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800802027564>