

Parents' Experiences with Communication and Perception of Childcare Quality in Malaysia: A Mixed-method Study

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication between parents and childcare providers is crucial for delivering high-quality childcare. This study explores the impact of communication satisfaction on parents' perceptions of childcare quality in Malaysia. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected 45 survey responses and conducted interviews with four parents whose children attend childcare. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. In-person interactions and WhatsApp emerged as the most common communication channels, with parents mainly discussing health updates, daily activities, and developmental progress. Most parents were satisfied with the communication; however, some requested more frequent and detailed updates, while others expressed dissatisfaction due to limited developmental information and occasional insensitive language from providers. The findings also reveal that communication methods, frequency, and provider responsiveness significantly influence parents' satisfaction and overall perception of childcare quality. Additionally, the study highlights the role of cultural factors in shaping communication and childcare practices within Malaysia's diverse society. The results suggest that improving providers' communication skills, enhancing digital engagement, and fostering cultural sensitivity can strengthen relationships between parents and childcare providers, thereby enriching the overall childcare experience. Future research should consider providers' perspectives and employ larger samples and longitudinal designs to monitor changes in communication practices over time.

Keywords: parental satisfaction, childcare quality, parent-caregiver communication

INTRODUCTION

The quality of childcare is a multidimensional concept that includes both structural and process-related elements, affecting children's overall development (Salehuddin and Winskel, 2016) and parental satisfaction (Hidayat et al., 2022). Structural quality refers to measurable features such as staff-child ratios, qualifications of childcare providers, physical environment, and health and safety regulations (Harrist et al., 2007), while process quality highlights the nature of interactions between children, childcare providers, and parents (Harrist et al., 2007; Coelho et al., 2019). High-quality childcare supports cognitive, social-emotional, and language development, establishing a foundation for long-term educational and personal achievement (Hidayat et al., 2022).

While the importance of parent-childcare provider communication in early childhood education is widely recognised, there is limited research examining this issue within the

Malaysian childcare context. This results in a gap in understanding the communication practices, challenges, and expectations faced by parents and childcare providers locally. Building on this understanding, an important aspect of childcare quality is parent-childcare provider communication (Almendingen et al., 2022), which ensures that parents are informed about their child's progress, daily experiences, and any concerns that may arise. Research has shown that effective communication is linked to parents' trust in childcare services, their sense of partnership with providers, and overall satisfaction with childcare quality (Mena et al., 2020). Conversely, communication gaps can lead to dissatisfaction, misunderstandings, and decreased parental engagement in early childhood programmes (Hanafi and Taslikhan, 2016). Additionally, barriers such as time constraints, lack of training among childcare providers, and cultural sensitivities can impede this communication (Mena et al., 2020).

Furthermore, effective communication between parents and childcare providers is widely recognised as the foundation of quality childcare. This relationship influences not only parental satisfaction but also the development and well-being of children. Studies in various contexts highlight the vital role of such partnerships in early childhood education, where mutual trust and open communication foster a sense of security for children and allow for tailored caregiving approaches (Coelho et al., 2019; Almendingen et al., 2022).

To clarify this further, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) offers a framework for understanding how various environmental systems interact with childcare practices, with communication acting as a key mechanism connecting these systems and supporting children's development. The microsystem refers to the direct interactions children have with their environment, such as relationships with parents and childcare providers. These interactions are crucial for a child's development, as the quality of these relationships, being nurturing or responsive, shapes overall growth. The exosystem includes settings in which the child is not directly involved but that still influence their development by affecting those closest to them, such as local government policies, extended families, media, and workplace conditions. These factors determine how much time, energy, and attention parents and childcare providers can devote to engaging with and nurturing children. For example, parents' working hours influence the amount of time they can spend on childcare, while national childcare policies establish the standards for childcare quality.

The macrosystem encompasses broader influences, including cultural values, social norms, and political ideologies. In Malaysia, for example, cultural beliefs may impact how parents perceive discipline, learning styles, or the role of religious education in childcare. The chronosystem captures changes over time, such as evolving parenting expectations, childcare policies, and technological advancements in communication tools. The rise of digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, has transformed how parents and childcare providers share information, thereby affecting communication dynamics. Most pertinent to this study is the mesosystem, which refers to the interactions between different environments, such as those between parents and childcare providers or parents and their child's peers. Effective communication within this system ensures consistency across various settings, enhancing the child's development. In this context, parents and childcare providers play vital roles in shaping children's experiences and developmental outcomes. Strong communication between them strengthens these connections.

Globally, structured communication models have been shown to enhance childcare quality. The Head Start programme, established in the United States of America, is a federally funded initiative designed to promote school readiness among children from low-income families by providing comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition and parental involvement services. A key feature of Head Start is its emphasis on strong communication

between parents and childcare providers (Cook et al., 2023), which has been shown to enhance parental engagement and improve children's early learning experiences (Mena et al., 2020). Research on Head Start communication models reveals that structured, consistent and culturally responsive communication leads to higher parental involvement (Bryant-Mathurin, 2023), better developmental outcomes for children (McCoy et al., 2016), and improved childcare satisfaction (Coelho et al., 2019).

In Malaysia, where childcare services are expanding to meet the needs of working parents, the dynamics of communication between parents and childcare providers remain underexplored (Aziz et al., 2021). Malaysia is a highly diverse and multicultural society, home to ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, and Indian, as well as various indigenous communities. This diversity influences childcare expectations, parenting styles, and communication norms between parents and childcare providers (Salehuddin and Winskel, 2016). Cultural beliefs and traditions significantly influence how parents perceive childcare quality and the role of communication in their child's development (Nizam et al., 2024). Studies suggest that parental expectations of childhood development differ among various ethnic groups in Malaysia, especially regarding discipline, independence, and social behaviours (Salehuddin and Winskel, 2016). These cultural differences can impact how parents interact with childcare providers, their communication preferences, and their satisfaction with provider interactions.

Although emphasis has been placed on integrated childcare approaches, including active parental involvement (Hanafi and Taslikhan, 2016), challenges remain, such as cultural differences in communication expectations (Rahmatullah et al., 2021), the availability of high-quality services (Sulaiman and Hussain, 2023), and the diverse needs of working parents (Aziz et al., 2021). Existing research highlights the significance of communication patterns in influencing parents' perceptions of childcare quality. For example, effective dialogue about daily routines (Abashah and Taib, 2024) and developmental milestones (Salehuddin and Winskel, 2016) enhances trust and satisfaction between parents and childcare providers. In a study involving various early childhood settings, communication occurs through different channels, including face-to-face interactions, phone calls, mobile applications, written reports, books, and social media platforms (Hanafi and Taslikhan, 2016). However, it remains unclear which mediums parents prefer, how often communication takes place, and whether these interactions meet parental expectations, especially within the context of childcare in Malaysia.

Considering the increasing reliance of families in Malaysia on childcare services (Aziz et al., 2021), understanding how communication shapes parents' experiences of childcare quality is crucial for policy development and service enhancement. This study examines parents' experiences with various communication methods, communication patterns, and cultural influences with childcare providers, analysing how these interactions impact their overall satisfaction with childcare services in Malaysia. Employing a mixed-method approach, the research explores the mediums and patterns of communication within childcare settings, as well as the role of cultural factors in shaping communication and childcare practices. The findings aim to inform strategies for strengthening parent-provider partnerships, ultimately improving the quality of childcare across Malaysia.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the methods and patterns of communication in childcare environments.
2. To explore parents' satisfaction with communication between childcare providers and parents in Malaysia.

3. To investigate how parents' satisfaction with communication influences their perceptions of childcare quality.
4. To examine the influence of cultural factors on communication and other childcare practices

Research Questions

1. What are the medium and pattern of communication in childcare settings?
2. Are parents content with the communication they have with childcare providers in Malaysia?
3. How does parents' satisfaction with communication affect their perceptions of childcare quality?
4. What is the influence of cultural factors on communication and other childcare practices?

METHOD

This study uses a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives. The quantitative component involves structured surveys that collect measurable data on parents' satisfaction with communication and their experiences of childcare quality. The qualitative component, however, utilises semi-structured interviews to explore communication practices in greater depth and examine the influence of cultural factors. These interviews aim to uncover nuanced perspectives on communication practices, satisfaction levels, and the effects of cultural factors on these interactions.

The study employs purposive sampling to ensure that participants meet specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives. Eligible participants are parents with at least one child enrolled in childcare for a minimum of six months, with the child under the age of five attending programmes that provide more than five hours of daily living assistance. Furthermore, childcare should not be registered as kindergartens, regardless of whether it operates as home-based care or childcare centres. This distinction was made because the study focuses on childcare as a whole, rather than solely on childhood education.

Data collection for the study is conducted in two methods. The selection criteria are identical for both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data is gathered through surveys with closed-ended questions, adapted from previous research on childcare communication and quality (Mena et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2019). The survey in this study comprises three main sections: (1) screening questions, (2) background information, and (3) key questions addressing the research aims. The screening section confirms respondents meet all selection criteria. Background information includes details about parents and children, such as age, education level, and type of childcare (home-based or centre-based). The third section contains 21 items evaluating parents' satisfaction with communication, communication patterns and channels, and their perceptions of overall childcare quality. Examples of items include: "How does your childcare provider communicate with you about your child?", "What does your childcare provider communicate about your child?", "How satisfied are you with the current communication methods in meeting your needs as a parent?", "How often do you communicate with your childcare provider about your child?" and "Are you satisfied with how childcare providers address your concerns or questions?" Different scale formats were utilised, depending on the item, such as multiple-choice questions (parents' preferred communication method), frequency scales (indicating how often the childcare provider communicates with

parents), and 4-point Likert scales for measuring satisfaction and agreement levels. Respondents were also asked to select up to three aspects they considered most important when assessing childcare quality, including safety and cleanliness, learning and developmental activities, provider qualifications and training, child-provider ratio, parent-provider communication, sports and outdoor activities, parent participation (like parent-provider meetings or take-home activities), religious activities, and physical facilities (such as sensory rooms, play equipment, or outdoor play areas). The research team reviewed the items for content relevance, clarity, and suitability within the Malaysian childcare context.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four participants. Interview questions were informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) and previous studies on parental communication and cultural dynamics in childcare. Questions aimed to explore communication channels, satisfaction levels, perceptions of childcare quality, and cultural influences. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated if necessary. Four interviewers participated in this study. To ensure consistency among the interviewers, a semi-structured interview guide (a standardised list of questions and prompts) was prepared in English and Malay before data collection. Examples of interview questions include, "Can you describe how your childcare provider usually communicates with you?", "What types of information do you normally receive from the provider?", "Are there times when you felt the communication was lacking or unclear?", "In what ways, if any, does your cultural background influence how you communicate with the childcare provider?". Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to communication practices, satisfaction, and cultural influences. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted independently by four researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. Software was not utilised; instead, manual coding was employed due to the small sample size.

The study was conducted with ethical considerations to ensure participants' rights and confidentiality were safeguarded throughout. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews and was provided along with the survey. Personal information was removed from the interview transcripts and replaced with codes (P1, P2, P3, P4). Both English and Malay were used in the survey and interviews to reflect Malaysia's multilingual context. The surveys were distributed in both languages, and participants could choose the language they were most comfortable with during the interviews.

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data were integrated using the convergent mixed methods approach, specifically the simultaneous bidirectional framework, where both datasets equally guided the final interpretation without any method taking precedence over the other (Moseholm and Feters, 2017). By comparing the trends from the survey with the in-depth insights from interviews, the study employed this method based on Andrew and her colleagues (2010), allowing it to explore the limitations of quantitative methodology, such as its inability to fully capture parents' satisfaction.

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. After screening, 45 respondents were included in this study. The respondents were mainly mothers (80%), and participants' ages ranged from 27 to 43 (mean = 33.6 years). In terms of educational attainment, both fathers and mothers predominantly held undergraduate degrees, as shown in Table 1. Apart from 7 parents, all other parents had educational levels beyond secondary school.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Ethnicity	Malay	35	77.8
	Chinese	4	8.8
	Indian	3	6.7
	Others	3	6.7
Highest education level of father	Secondary school	7	15.6
	Diploma or equivalent	9	20.0
	Undergraduate degree or equivalent	20	44.4
	Postgraduate	7	15.6
	Professional certificate/s	2	4.4
Highest education level of mother	Secondary school	0	-
	Diploma or equivalent	9	20.0
	Undergraduate degree or equivalent	25	55.6
	Postgraduate	11	24.4
	Professional certificate/s	0	-

Regarding childcare options, most children were enrolled in centre-based care (44.4% non-franchise, 31.2% franchise), with 24.4% receiving home-based care, as shown in Table 2. A small percentage (6.7%) of families reported having a child with special needs.

Table 2: Childcare Details

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Types of childcare	Home-based	11	24.4
	At the centre (non-franchise)	20	44.4
	At the centre (franchise)	14	31.2
Is your child/ any of your children a special needs child?	Yes	42	93.3
	No	3	6.7

Meanwhile, four parents were interviewed for this study, all of whom were female and held a bachelor's degree. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 36 years old, and they represented the three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian, with diverse professions. The participants had one or two children, whose ages ranged from 1 year and 2 months to 4 years. Childcare arrangements varied, with three participants using centre-based care and one opting for home-based care.

FINDINGS

This section is divided into two parts, beginning with the survey findings and then the interview results. The results are organised to correspond with the study's research objectives.

Survey

It is presented in the following order, beginning with the parents' perceptions and experiences of provider communication, their satisfaction with the communication, and their overall satisfaction with childcare quality. From the survey question, the medium of communication and the frequency of its use are shown in Table 3. Communication methods varied widely, with in-person interactions being the most frequent (68.8% daily). Online communication was also common, used daily by 40% of respondents. Other methods such as phone calls, memos, and custom-built apps saw less frequent use, with notable percentages of respondents indicating they were not used at all.

Table 3: Types and Frequency of Communication

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Phone call frequency	Daily	9	20.0
	Weekly	6	13.3
	Monthly	1	2.3
	Once in several months	10	22.2
	Not used	19	42.2
In-person communication frequency	Daily	31	68.8
	Weekly	3	6.7
	Monthly	0	-
	Once in several months	8	17.8
	Not used	3	6.7
Book usage frequency	Daily	9	20.0
	Weekly	2	4.4
	Monthly	2	4.4
	Once in several months	2	4.4
	Not used	30	66.8
	Daily	4	8.9

Memos frequency	Weekly	6	13.3
	Monthly	3	6.7
	Once in several months	9	20.0
	Not used	23	51.1
Online communication frequency	Daily	18	40.0
	Weekly	13	28.9
	Monthly	2	4.4
	Once in several months	7	15.6
	Not used	5	11.1
Email frequency	Daily	0	-
	Weekly	1	2.2
	Monthly	2	4.4
	Once in several months	3	6.7
	Not used	39	86.7
Custom-built apps by centre frequency	Daily	11	24.4
	Weekly	4	8.9
	Monthly	1	2.2
	Once in several months	0	-
	Not used	29	64.5

Source: Author's survey data

Meanwhile, Table 4 below details the content and clarity of communication with the provider. The most discussed topics included health symptoms (95.6%), daily activities (75.6%), and videos and/or pictures (75.6%). While most parents found the communication clear and easy to understand (71.1%), nearly a third occasionally required clarification.

Table 4: Communication Content and Clarity

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
	Health symptoms	43	95.6

Communication content	Physical injuries	32	71.1
	Anecdotes	4	8.9
	Behaviour	31	68.9
	Daily activities	34	75.6
	Videos and/or pictures	34	75.6
	Parenting information	17	37.8
	Announcement	33	73.3
	Others	0	-
Message clarity	Always clear and easy to understand	32	71.1
	Most of the time, it's clear, but sometimes I need to ask for clarification	13	28.9
	I often feel confused about the messages I receive	0	-

Note. Participants could choose more than one answer

Source: Author's survey data

Table 5 below summarises the communication preferences of parents and how often they initiate contact with childcare providers. The most popular method of communication was verbal (51.1%), followed by digital communication (46.7%). The majority of parents addressed their concerns in person or online, with both methods being equally common (82.2%). Regarding how often they communicate, more than half of the parents (55.6%) initiated contact daily.

Table 5: Parents' Communication Preference and Frequency of Initiation

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Preferred communication type	Verbal communication	23	51.1
	Digital communication	21	46.7
	Written reports	1	2.2
How concerns are communicated	In-person	37	82.2
	Online	37	82.2
	Email	1	2.2
	Custom-built apps by centre	4	8.9
	Others	0	-

Frequency of initiating communication	Daily	25	55.6
	Weekly	11	24.4
	Monthly	2	4.4
	Once in several months	7	15.6

Source: Author's survey data

Key aspects of childcare quality valued by parents included safety and cleanliness (97.8%), learning and developmental activities (68.9%), and provider qualifications (48.9%), as shown in Table 6. However, no parent considered parent participation an important aspect of childcare quality.

Table 6: Childcare Quality

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Three most important childcare quality aspects	Safety and cleanliness	44	97.8
	Learning and developmental activities	31	68.9
	Provider qualifications and training	22	48.9
	Child-provider ratio	18	40.0
	Communication with parents	9	20.0
	Sports and outdoor activities	2	4.4
	Parent participation	0	-
	Religious activities and learning	4	8.9
	Physical facilities	5	11.1

Source: Author's survey data

Table 7 shows findings on parental satisfaction with childcare quality and communication. Most parents were pleased with the current approach (93.3%) and the frequency of communication (91.1%), as well as overall childcare quality (93.3%). Similarly, most parents (93.3%) were satisfied with how their childcare provider addresses concerns. Notably, aside from one parent, all agreed that effective communication from their childcare provider enhances the quality of care.

Table 7: Childcare Quality and Communication Satisfaction

Items	Response Options	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
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Satisfaction with the current communication methods	Very satisfied	13	28.9
	Satisfied	29	64.4
	Dissatisfied	3	6.7
	Very dissatisfied	0	-
Satisfaction with frequency of communication	Very satisfied	12	26.7
	Satisfied	29	64.4
	Dissatisfied	4	8.9
	Very dissatisfied	0	-
Satisfaction with how childcare provider addresses concerns or questions	Very satisfied	14	31.1
	Satisfied	28	62.2
	Dissatisfied	3	6.7
	Very dissatisfied	0	-
Satisfaction with overall quality of childcare	Very satisfied	17	37.7
	Satisfied	25	55.6
	Dissatisfied	3	6.7
	Very dissatisfied	0	-
Do you agree that effective communication from your childcare provider improves the quality of care?	Strongly agree	28	62.2
	Agree	16	35.6
	Disagree	1	2.2
	Strongly disagree	0	-

Source: Author's survey data

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis between communication satisfaction and overall quality of childcare are shown in Table 8. The results indicated that there was a significant, strong, positive correlation between satisfaction with the current communication methods and satisfaction with overall quality of childcare, $r(45) = .61, p < .001$. Similarly, satisfaction with how the childcare provider addresses concerns or questions also had a significant, strong, positive correlation with overall quality of childcare, $r(45) = .71, p < .001$. Meanwhile, satisfaction with the frequency of communication had a significant, moderate, positive correlation with overall quality of childcare, $r(45) = .50, p < .001$.

Table 8: Correlations with overall quality of childcare

Items	r
Satisfaction with the current communication methods	.605* *
Satisfaction with frequency of communication	.497* *
Satisfaction with how childcare provider addresses concerns or questions	.701* *

Note. N =45. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), $p < .001$.

Summary of Survey Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate how vital communication is in shaping parents' satisfaction with the quality of childcare. The most common communication methods were face-to-face and online, with parents mainly discussing daily activities, health issues, and sharing photos or videos. Some parents occasionally required clarification, but most reported that communication was clear. Parents preferred verbal and digital communication, using in-person and online platforms as their primary means of raising concerns. The majority of parents initiated communication daily, valuing safety, cleanliness, learning and developmental opportunities, as well as provider qualifications and training as key aspects of childcare quality. Most were satisfied with the current methods and frequency of communication, along with overall childcare quality. The strong correlations identified suggest that communication methods, frequency, and provider responsiveness significantly influence parents' overall perception of childcare quality.

Interview

To supplement the survey results, qualitative data was collected through interviews to gain a deeper understanding of parents' viewpoints and experiences regarding communication with childcare providers. Thematic analysis was performed to identify key themes and recurring patterns. The interview findings are presented based on each research question, addressing the mediums and patterns of communication, parents' satisfaction with communication in childcare settings, the impact of communication satisfaction on perceptions of childcare quality, and the influence of cultural factors in communication practices. An additional aspect not covered in the survey, which may be significant in the multicultural Malaysian context, was included—namely, exploring cultural influences on communication practices.

1. Mediums and Patterns of Communication

The findings revealed various mediums and patterns of communication between parents and childcare providers. Three themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: WhatsApp Communication.

The most commonly used medium for communication was Whatsapp. It was mainly used for general updates such as daily activities, meals, the child's progress, and announcements. Both P1 and P3 shared that they received updates on their child's activities through WhatsApp either daily or weekly. One parent also noted that "*They also post*

announcements in the group. WhatsApp is the most frequent method, and I find it very convenient.” (P1).

Theme 2: Face-to-Face Communication

All parents reported face-to-face communication, especially during drop-off and pick-up times. The shared information included developmental and behavioural updates, as well as health, safety, and parental concerns. For example, one parent stated, *“In the evening, when we pick up our son, usually if there are any issues regarding safety, for example, fall or injury, the childcare provider will inform us including informing the necessities that needed.”* (P3). Another example is when P2 reported that drop-off and pick-up times were used to discuss developmental milestones achieved or any immediate health concerns.

Theme 3: Written Records and Digital Applications

These methods of communication were less utilised by childcare providers. Only one parent reported that their childcare provider kept a record book, but it was kept by the provider and only shared with parents when necessary (P3). Similarly, only one parent mentioned the use of digital applications for announcements and submitting health verification forms, saying, *“We do have to download an app... for us to send the verification forms and also for the school to make any major announcements”* (P4).

2. Parents’ Satisfaction with Communication in Childcare Settings

The findings revealed that parents had mixed levels of satisfaction with communication in childcare settings. Two themes that emerged from the analysis are satisfied with communication and unsatisfied with communication, each with several subthemes focusing on specific areas of satisfaction or concern.

Theme 1: Satisfactory Elements regarding Communication

Parent Involvement. Parents appreciate being involved in their child’s care, especially when providers seek their input on managing specific situations with their children. For example, one parent shared, *“My son was having some trouble sharing toys with his friends. The teacher asked me how we handle this at home and tried to apply the same approach in class. I appreciated that they involved me.”* (P1)

Timely Updates. Many parents appreciated receiving timely updates either through face-to-face communication or digital platforms such as WhatsApp. One parent mentioned that the childcare provider responds promptly to messages and informs her of any new skills her child acquires each day (P2).

Approachability of Staff. Parents also valued the approachability of the childcare staff in raising any questions or concerns, promoting trustworthiness. One parent stated, *“I like that they’re approachable. Even if I have a small concern, I feel comfortable bringing it up.”* (P1)

Constructive Feedback. The parents also valued constructive feedback from childcare providers, which included practical advice or suggestions that promote their child's well-being. For example, one parent mentioned,

“They also give positive feedback about AR, which means a lot to me. ... One time, AR wasn’t eating well during lunchtime. The teacher called me to discuss it and even

shared some suggestions to make him more interested in food. I followed their advice, and it worked!" (P1).

Conflict Resolution. Another aspect of parental satisfaction was effective conflict resolution by childcare providers. As one parent expressed, *"I am very grateful that the principal was a mediator between these two parents when there was a conflict."* (P4).

Theme 2: Unsatisfactory Elements regarding Communication

Lack of Updates. Parents also complained about unreliable updates. One parent recounted an incident where they were not informed about a class activity, causing their child to feel left out due to lack of preparation (P1). Additionally, several parents expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency of updates about their children. They wanted to receive more regular updates, such as multimedia content like videos when their child does something (P2). One parent said,

"I still have not been able to talk to his class teacher. Up till now, there is a time a date when they have a parent-teacher meeting, which is in January. So, every half a year they will do it. Only then I get to talk to the teacher. As of now, I've not been even introduced to the teacher just yet, everyone, everything that I liaise with, is with the principal. So, I'm quite a bit in the dark about what exactly my son is doing in class, unless the teacher informs the principal, and then the principal, so happens forwards it to me, or tells me. Updates me about it. If I ask any questions, the principal has to go back to ask the teacher and then come back to me. So, there is a slight delay on that" (P4).

Furthermore, the parent also sought more insights into their child's emotional development to better support their growth at home (P1).

Negative labelling. Parents also expressed concerns about childcare providers using insensitive language, such as labelling the child as a "fat kid" (P3).

3. Influence of Communication Satisfaction on Perceptions of Childcare Quality

The results show that parents' views of childcare quality are shaped by their satisfaction with communication. Three themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: Positive Outlook on Health Vigilance

Parents' appreciation of health-related communication influences their view of childcare quality. One parent noted that the childcare was vigilant in checking the children's health and encouraged parents to fill out daily health verification forms, serving as a reminder for parents (P4).

Theme 2: Positive Outlook on Parental Involvement

The involvement of parents in decision-making about their children's health and safety also fostered a positive perception of the quality of childcare, particularly their respect for parental autonomy. One parent noted,

"Like, if I say there is a change from the government saying there's no need for face mask, they do a poll with the parents like to, do you want your children, your child to

continue wearing face masks? Do you want to take weekly COVID testing?... So it gives us a lot of freedom as parents as well. Like to a certain extent, like it's a control decision, but they allow the parents also to partake in moving forward. What do we (the parents) want from here? You know? So I feel like, okay, to a certain extent, they do allow parents autonomy to choose for their children's well-being" (P4).

Theme 3: Positive Outlook on Child's Independence

Parents valued the childcare providers' efforts in offering insights into their child's developmental progress, especially regarding independence. It reassures parents that the childcare aims to optimise the child's development. One parent said,

"...they foster a lot of independence...I get a lot of reports...like, does your child know how to wear his own shoes? And I'm like, not yet...they also give a little bit of advice to increase the independence of the child...So that means, I know this childcare is also like, fostering a lot of independence" (P4).

4. Role of Cultural Factors in Communication and Other Childcare Practices

The analysis identified several ways in which cultural factors influenced communication practices. Two themes emerged from this. Only one parent did not place much emphasis on cultural factors in childcare.

Theme 1: Respect and Sensitivity towards Cultural and Religious Differences

The childcare providers were observed to be respectful and considerate towards families from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. One parent mentioned,

"Yes, it's very diverse. There are Malay, Chinese and Indian families... I think we're part of the minority since most of the families are Malay or Chinese. But it hasn't been an issue. The teachers are sensitive and respectful towards all cultures" (P1).

Similarly, another parent appreciated the efforts made by the childcare staff to ensure that the meals served are halal, such as making announcements for potluck, demonstrating their respect for religious dietary restrictions (P4). Parents also showed respect towards elders in accordance with cultural norms, which influenced their communication. For example, one parent said, *"So, I don't really like it but I am reluctant to say it because she is elderly. So, for me it's okay like that. I feel like...just give in to her" (P2).*

Theme 2: Diversity and Inclusivity

Childcare providers often promote cultural diversity and inclusion through activities that showcase different cultures. For example, a parent who was a minority at the centre shared,

"For Deepavali, they invited me to share about the festival, and they even taught the kids simple kolam design. They also celebrate other cultural events like Chinese New Year and Hari Raya, which makes all families feel welcome and involved" (P1).

Additionally, other parents have also observed that the children participate in performances representing various cultures (P4). This was also reflected in their communication practices, whereby one parent mentioned, *"Some Chinese parents are not*

Mandarin-speaking, but they got an emcee that made sure that they spoke in English and Chinese. So we were very appreciative of the English part.” (P4).

Summary of Interview Findings

Parental satisfaction with communication in childcare settings was varied. Major themes included satisfaction with timely updates, parental involvement, approachable staff, and dissatisfaction with inconsistent updates and insensitive language. Face-to-face interaction and WhatsApp were the main methods of communication. Communication about health vigilance, parental involvement, and child independence all positively affected parents' perceptions of childcare quality. Finally, providers respecting diverse backgrounds and engaging in activities that promote inclusivity demonstrate their cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness. A thematic summary table linking qualitative themes to research questions is shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Summary of Themes and Subthemes with Research Questions

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quote
RQ1: What is the medium and pattern of communication in childcare settings?	WhatsApp Communication	Daily updates, announcements	“WhatsApp is the most frequent method, and I find it very convenient.” (P1)
	Face-to-Face Communication	Drop-off/pick-up, real-time concerns	“In the evening... the childcare provider will inform us including informing the necessities.” (P3)
	Written Records and Digital Apps	Health forms, minimal use	“We do have to download an app... for us to send the verification forms.” (P4)
RQ2: Are parents satisfied with the communication with childcare providers in Malaysia?	Satisfactory Communication	Timely updates, involvement, approachability, constructive feedback, conflict resolution	“They give positive feedback... it worked!” (P1)
	Unsatisfactory Communication	Infrequent updates, unclear reporting, insensitive language	“So I’m quite a bit in the dark about what exactly my son is doing in class.” (P4)
RQ3: How does parents’	Health Vigilance	Consistent health checks	“They check the children’s health... it

satisfaction with communication influence their experiences of childcare quality?			reminds parents too.” (P4)
	Parental Involvement	Autonomy in decision-making	“They do allow parents autonomy to choose for their children's well-being.” (P4)
	Child Independence	Reports and advice on self-help skills	“They foster a lot of independence... give advice to increase independence.” (P4)
RQ4: What is the role of cultural factors in communication and other childcare practices?	Respect and Sensitivity	Religious accommodation, respect for elders	“They’re sensitive and respectful towards all cultures.” (P1); “She is elderly... I just give in to her.” (P2)
	Diversity and Inclusivity	Cultural events, bilingual communication	“They invited me to share about Deepavali... also celebrate other festivals.” (P1); “They got an emcee that spoke English and Chinese.” (P4)

Note. “P1” to “P4” refer to parent interview participants.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this mixed-method study offer an understanding of parents' experiences with childcare providers' communication and their impact on the quality of childcare in Malaysia. By combining both quantitative and qualitative results, it explores key aspects of communication practices and their cultural connections.

Mediums and Patterns of Communication

Effective communication between parents and childcare providers is essential for building trust, fostering collaboration, and aligning childcare practices. The study’s findings revealed that in-person communication is the most commonly used method in childcare settings. It offers opportunities for direct and immediate discussions, particularly during pick-up and drop-off times, addressing real-time concerns such as health updates, daily activities, and behaviour. Additionally, the study identified health updates, daily activities, and child behaviour as some of the most frequently discussed topics in these settings. This is supported by a previous study reporting that parents often raise concerns about their child’s behaviour, toilet training, social skills, and health (Almendingen et al., 2022). Pick-up and drop-off times not only efficiently address these issues but also help establish rapport between parents and

providers. Mena and her colleagues' (2020) study noted that in-person communication is parents' preferred method as it is more convenient and facilitates personal interaction. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, exchanging concerns and information about the child can foster a sense of transparency and collaboration, which is vital for building trust between parents and providers (Almendingen et al., 2022). The strong bond between the two parties exemplifies the theory's second layer of mesosystem, where one influences the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The study revealed that most parents preferred in-person communication over digital communication and written reports, mainly because it is easier to convey messages and concerns face-to-face. Still, digital communication, when fully utilised, can boost efficiency. The research found that WhatsApp is among the most used methods of communication after in-person interactions, making it an essential tool for many parents and providers. Its convenience, speed, and accessibility make it a preferred means of sharing updates on daily activities. The study reports that videos and pictures are among the most common contents shared via WhatsApp, offering richer feedback on children's activities in childcare, which parents can replicate at home. This style of communication presents a positive view of childcare in Malaysia, as it facilitates the transfer of knowledge between childcare centres and homes. The research also suggests possible improvements, such as integrating more structured digital tools like custom-built applications. Findings show that these applications are rarely used; even when they are available, childcare providers tend to utilise them less. These tools could enhance communication by offering features like multimedia updates, progress tracking, and centralised platforms for announcements and feedback. Although WhatsApp and in-person communication address immediacy effectively, structured applications have the potential to provide a more comprehensive communication strategy. Combining multiple methods, such as face-to-face updates and built-in applications, would deliver both speed and efficiency while maintaining a personal connection between carers and parents. Despite the benefits of in-person meetings, they lack a record of the child's updates, which digital platforms can easily document.

Furthermore, the study revealed that parenting knowledge is less communicated in childcare settings. This topic should be given more attention, as sharing parenting information fosters alignment and consistency in child-rearing practices both at home and in childcare. Providing parents with resources and practical tips on addressing developmental milestones or behavioural challenges can bridge gaps and reinforce shared goals for the children's growth. According to prior research, such alignment ensures consistency in a child's experiences, which is critical for their social and emotional development (Pirchio et al., 2011; Koivula et al., 2023). Additionally, this alignment and consistency reduce the gap between home and childcare settings, ensuring continuity in caregiving practices. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory further supports these findings by highlighting the mesosystem – the interconnectedness between home and childcare – as a key factor in a child's development. Sharing knowledge between parents and care providers will promote alignment and consistency in the child's routines at home and in childcare.

Bronfenbrenner's theory indicates that the strength of the mesosystem depends on the quality and frequency of interactions between the microsystems. Based on these findings, childcare centres should actively incorporate parenting knowledge into their communication strategies to enhance collaboration between providers and parents. Existing methods such as digital platforms and face-to-face communication should be utilised to share parenting tips, research-based recommendations, and interactive resources. Organising regular parenting

workshops, distributing educational materials, and including brief discussions during pick-up and drop-off times can effectively support parents in their caregiving roles. By fostering better alignment between childcare providers and parents, these initiatives can create stable and supportive environments that benefit children's overall well-being.

Parents' Satisfaction with Communication in Childcare Settings

Generally, parents are satisfied with communication in childcare settings, although there is room for improvement. Findings from the current study indicate that most parents value timely updates, active consultation, and constructive feedback regarding their child. This suggests that parental involvement is important. The findings are supported by a previous study that noted parents felt supported after communicating with child providers, especially during informal interactions and when provided with resources (Raza, 2019). Further support for the study's findings can also be viewed through the lens of ecological system theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977), which emphasises the importance of child providers' influence on parental involvement. The sensitive responses from child providers foster ongoing communication and information exchange about the child between parents and providers, which in turn offers support to the parents. This support then enhances parent-care provider communication, which is crucial for the child's development. The findings also underscore the importance of approachability and professionalism in communication between parents and childcare providers. A study by Aleksić and colleagues (2024) revealed that communication is affected by parental satisfaction, parental involvement, provider's attitude, and several other factors. The interaction between parental satisfaction, involvement, and the provider's attitude indicates that the provider's demeanour significantly influences communication effectiveness. Additionally, this supports the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), particularly the mesosystem in parent-provider interactions for effective communication.

The study indicates that parental involvement and provider attitude shape parents' satisfaction with communication. Therefore, training programmes should focus on enhancing childcare staff's interpersonal skills, professionalism, and approachability to promote effective communication with parents. Implementing these strategies can help childcare services improve parental satisfaction with communication.

Influence of Communication Satisfaction on Perceptions of Childcare Quality

The correlation results reveal a strong link between parents' satisfaction with communication and the quality of childcare. Most parents are happy with the providers' communication, as they offer various perspectives on childcare quality, especially regarding the child's health, independence, and parental involvement. Effective communication ensures parents are aware of their child's health status, which is a key aspect of quality childcare (Alkon et al., 2020). Additionally, most parents rated the environment—particularly clean and safe settings—as an important factor for childcare quality. A clean and safe environment reduces the risk of illness, allowing children to be in optimal health for learning. Moreover, according to the ecological system theory popularised by Bronfenbrenner (1977), this setting also fosters a conducive learning environment for children to engage in activities related to their developmental areas, as it constitutes an immediate environment with which children are continually interacting. This reflects the first layer of the theory, known as the microsystem.

Additionally, this study has found that parents value learning and developmental activities in childcare. Research has demonstrated a positive link between children's developmental outcomes and early childhood education and care. Children who attend

preschools tend to perform better in academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being (Lehrl et al., 2016).

Most parents in this study considered activities for children and childcare providers' skills to be the most important aspects of quality in childcare. Furthermore, children's learning is enhanced when childcare providers are well-trained and possess sufficient knowledge of children's development. One respondent specifically highlighted the importance of independence in childcare and even advised parents to follow this example. These three aspects were also emphasised in a previous study on parents' perceptions of childcare quality services across Malaysia (Johan et al., 2019). Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system theory supports these aspects by linking them to the microsystem—the immediate relationships that influence children's outcomes—as central to providing high-quality childcare that parents seek.

Despite these positive aspects, some parents express dissatisfaction with the medium and frequency of communication, as well as how well their concerns are addressed. Improving these areas may enhance parents' perceptions of the quality of childcare. In line with previous findings by Mena and her colleagues (2020), this study reinforces the link between effective communication and childcare quality. Parents who receive clear, timely, and engaging communication tend to view childcare services more favourably.

The Role of Cultural Factors in Communication and Childcare Practices

Qualitative findings show that childcare in Malaysia is attuned to the needs of families from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. They also promote diversity and inclusivity to meet family requirements. Malaysia is a multicultural nation with three main ethnic groups and several indigenous communities. Previous research has indicated that this diversity influences interactions between parents and childcare providers, in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory of macrosystem (1977). Parents' perceptions of childcare quality are affected by diversity, as are the expectations of childcare providers (Salehuddin and Winskel, 2016). Nizam and colleagues (2024) also emphasised the significance of cultural beliefs and traditions in shaping parents' expectations of childcare quality. Hence, parents' cultural and linguistic backgrounds must be taken into account to facilitate effective communication from parents to childcare providers (Bezcioglu-Goktolga and Yagmur, 2018).

Failure to recognise these elements leads to ineffective communication and discourages parental involvement. One way to bridge this gap is by providing support to families (Sollars, 2020). The qualitative results showed how appreciative the interviewee was of the childcare's effort in hiring a bilingual host for an event to accommodate non-Mandarin speaking parents. The inclusivity that the childcare offers allows parents to communicate and feel more involved in the activities organised by the childcare. Involved parents are shown to have a positive impact on children's development, including the promotion of their mental health and well-being (Yngvesson and Garvis, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Despite the small sample size of the participants, which makes it difficult to generalise, the study provides new and important insights into parent-caregiver communication. The findings highlight the importance of structured communication policies to maximise the effectiveness of communication. By implementing designated time slots for parent-teacher

discussions during pick-up and drop-off, childcare providers can ensure that essential information is consistently conveyed and that all parents have equal opportunities for engagement. Additionally, training providers in active listening, clear and concise information sharing, and culturally responsive communication can strengthen trust and collaboration with parents by addressing concerns related to children's health, behaviour, and daily activities more effectively.

Although in-person communication remains the preferred method, integrating digital tools as a supplementary aid can improve efficiency and offer ongoing documentation. Structured digital applications or WhatsApp updates can provide parents with continuous access to information about their child's activities and well-being, fostering a more comprehensive exchange of information. A balanced approach that combines in-person and digital communication can establish a more transparent and effective system that supports parental involvement and enhances the overall quality of early childhood care.

Beyond enabling smoother developmental progress for children, effective parent-caregiver communication also offers parents emotional and informational support, boosting their confidence in the childcare system. Given these benefits, it is crucial for childcare providers to establish structured communication policies that improve consistency and responsiveness. Future research should involve larger sample sizes and adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in communication practices over time. Additionally, including perspectives from childcare providers would provide a more balanced view of communication challenges and best practices. By addressing these gaps, future studies can help develop more effective communication strategies that support children's developmental outcomes in childcare settings.

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