# The Implementation of Marketing in Private Early Childhood Education Centres in Hong Kong: An Investigation of the Effect on Marketing Ethics

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## Abstract

A neo-liberal premise underlies the early years education provision in Hong Kong where the market determines the form, promotion and quality of early years provision with little or no Government oversight. Such reliance and acceptance of the market mechanism especially where participants' knowledge may be limited and the consequences of market distortions can serious hurt vulnerable participants, i.e. children and parents, require a level of marketing ethics higher than in other consumer markets. This is acute when parents believe that they are equipping their children from a very young age with the skills and knowledge needed for their future development but have no way of determining independently the quality of the schools other than through their own marketing. This is not to assume that the marketing is poor, only that where private early childhood education centres compete in the market for students that such risks exist. This study investigates the effect of marketing management might use of many features of schooling including teaching quality, which is difficult to easily verify, to increase the attractiveness of specific schools. Positively this work to increase the importance of quality teaching practice to substantiate such claims, negatively it can lead to misrepresentation. Such considerations and a number of other issues are core to ethical marketing practices in the marketplace and are investigated in this study.

Private early childhood education centres use marketing to promote themselves in the market, while parents use this information when making choices. Given that marketing is a seductive voice of neo-liberalism, a sustainable marketing measure needs to be backed by a wide range of practices which improve the products and protect the vulnerability of parents and children. At the same time, parents can collect information and other people's comments for further consideration and analysis. This will allow them to be better informed when choosing a private early childhood education centre for their children, thereby making sure that the interests and well-being of their children are protected. Educational marketing, marketing ethics, and teaching quality in early childhood education centres forms the framework of this study, which will also use a mixed method approach. Phase 1 consists of a quantitative method in the form of a survey. Phase 2 consists of a qualitative method in the form of focus groups, followed by analysis and discussion of the results.

The results indicate that young parents, females, parents with lower education qualifications, and parents with lower income show a higher trust and are more reliant on private early childhood education centres on promotions. The research also determined that online marketing is extremely important. It was also found that communication between parents and private early childhood education centres is

crucial. Furthermore, participants felt that no additional regulations should be added to the industry, although the government does have a number of ordinances regarding education at regular schools.

Positionality

Being a researcher and owner of a private early childhood education centre, I contribute to knowledge by offering an understanding of the market and marketing ethics in the early childhood education sector in Hong Kong. From such a position I recognise that the sustainability of my business is based on the reputation of the quality that achieves and retains. Misrepresentation in marketing are not only unethical but also poor business practice whereas good quality education which is evidenced in the practice and resource that I devote to teaching and enhance my business proposition, supports sustainability but above this secure a flourishing learning environment for the children.

As an insider researcher, and having the dual role of both operator and researcher adds a multidimensional aspect to project. However, it is vital that I remain objective and neutral in order to solve and mitigate personal and professional conflicts. In the interests of confidentiality, the sensitive information of the companies and organizations has not been disclosed. The data has also been rigorously evaluated to ensure credibility. The discussion of insider researcher implications can be referred to page 5 in this thesis.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background of study

There is growing awareness about the importance of early childhood education (Bruce, 2011). In Hong Kong in particular, the public is becoming increasingly concerned over the quality and development of preschool education (Yuen, 2015). There is strong academic emphasis from a very early age with children in Hong Kong, with parents heavily focusing on academic achievement (Chen, 2015). They believe that effort is far more important than natural ability and, to this end, expect their children to be extremely diligent and hard working at academic activities (Ebbeck, 1995). Apart from mainstream kindergartens, private early childhood education centres have really blossomed in the last decade in Hong Kong (Chan, 2018).

### 1.1.1 Aims of study

The aims of this research are:

- to analyse the adoption of marketing in the marketplace of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.
- to investigate the impact of marketing on the teaching quality in private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.
- to examine the impact of marketing on the ways to ethically deliver courses and programmes in private early childhood education centres.

### 1.1.2 Parents' perspective of their children's learning

Education is a means of upward mobility in Hong Kong and competition for places in primary schools is fierce. In a review of early childhood education policies, Wong and Rao (2015) describe Hong Kong as one of the most competitive education systems in the world. Parents, who subscribe to this view, go to great lengths to confer a learning advantage on their children; to the extent that the child is significantly ahead of their peers before they enter a school classroom (Pearson & Rao, 2006). This hyper-competitive style of educating children results in competitive parenting.

Research shows that early literacy activities (ELA) are an effective means of establishing the foundations for early literacy in children (Klein & Kogan, 2013; Lane & Wright, 2007; Peifer & Perez, 2011; Reese & Cox, 1999; Tomopoulos et al., 2007). The

findings from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) suggest that parents are not directly engaging in ELA with their children and are instead relying on private businesses to establish their child's early literacy skills. Hong Kong parents want their children to have good literacy skills, and they are willing to send their children to education centres to enhance these skills if they feel that their children will receive a more comprehensive education. At the same time, the quality of a child's learning is closely tied to the education services their parents provide independently or pay for directly. Parents are the ones who choose the education services for their children, while early childhood education businesses are able decide on curriculums and set their own hiring standards, resulting in a variety of learning outcomes and price points (Yuen, 2015). This means that parents select the education service most suitable for their children.

In recent years, parents have begun to emphasize the motivation to learn and the learning outcomes. Learning at an early age is viewed as a critical period, in which parents establish the foundational knowledge their children will need for a strong start in life (Lee & Tseng, 2013). Prior studies have described Hong Kong parents' views on their children's education as didactic. In other words, mainly concerned with storing as much knowledge and skills into children's minds as early as possible (Ng, 2012; Rao & Li, 2009; To & Chan, 2013). When coupled with the reported lack of Hong Kong parent–child engagement in early literacy tasks, it suggests that parents are relying on competitive private businesses to establish their children's early literacy during the most critical periods of brain and learning development (Neumann, 2014).

Apart from kindergartens, parents also arrange supplementary classes in private early childhood education centres for their children to enhance their academic learning and social skills. In addition, an increasing number of parents are enrolling their children in playgroup programmes at private early childhood education centres for pre-schoolers, in the hopes of enhancing the mental development of the infants, as well as nurturing their physical and social skills (HKSAR Information Service Department, 2013). These private early childhood education centres aim at providing playgroup programmes, academic and literacy learning classes (e.g., languages), and extra-curricular courses (e.g., music and art) for children aged 1–6 years old. One of the major reasons parents send their children to education centres is that competition is fierce in both academic

and extra-curricular activities. In light of this, parents look to boost the pace of learning and enhance the socialization skills of their children.

### 1.1.3 Private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong

Hong Kong early childhood education encompasses playgroups, nurseries, kindergartens, and private tutoring centres (Siriboe & Harfitt, 2017), with playgroup programmes becoming increasingly popular these days amongst parents in Hong Kong. Playgroups are defined as regular, organized gatherings of parents and young children, which provide preschool-aged children with opportunities to socialize and learn about their environment through play with other children and adults in a safe, supportive, and fun environment (ARTD Consultants, 2008; Dadich & Spooner, 2008). In Hong Kong, it is common for private early childhood education centres to operate playgroup programmes, and parents regard their children attending playgroup as an opportunity for them to gain a competitive advantage over their peers. Children who attend playgroups develop better social and emotional skills, consequently making playgroup attendance an enjoyable experience for both the parent and child. By providing children with an opportunity to play, playgroups can therefore be considered a critical development opportunity for young children (Hanlock et al., 2012).

Private early childhood education centres mainly cater to children younger than six years old and provide courses that supplement kindergartens. Attended after school, these education centres aim to strengthen children's learning abilities and enhance their social skills by providing various courses, such as art, language, and music, etc. As with any other business, private early childhood education centres require a business registration certificate from the Inland Revenue Department and must comply with the Business Registration Ordinance. However, private early childhood education centres do not have to comply with any strict regulations; they can hire staff and choose a location suitable for their operations as they see fit.

Furthermore, private early childhood education centres target different segments of the market and establish a position in the minds of parents relative to the competition. Adopting a variety of promotion strategies, private early childhood education centres look to differentiate themselves from the competition by advertising in specific magazines that target parents, offering discounts via their Facebook page, using

person-to-person communication informing parents about the benefits of the courses and helping them with the enrolment process, or creating goodwill and a favourable image through press releases and editorial comments. The purpose to adopt marketing strategies is to differentiate themselves and compete with other kindergartens and education centres.

### 1.2 Rationale of study

Applying marketing theory to this study, I conceptualize that parents are seen as the customers and the private early childhood education centres are the service providers. With the early childhood education sector in Hong Kong being privately run, market forces have shaped what the centres provide, and various marketing strategies are used to attract parents to enrol their children and boost the student recruitment.

While existing research focuses on the marketing of higher education in other countries, the phenomenon of marketing private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong is becoming more notable. It is a recent development that provides an interesting point of departure for investigation of the research questions. As such, this research focuses on private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong that provide supplementary education to children under six years old.

### 1.3 Research questions

1. How does the adoption of marketing activities affect the parents' choice of private early childhood education centre in Hong Kong?
2. Does the marketing of education imply the deteriorating teaching quality in private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong?
3. Will the delivery of courses and programmes from private early childhood education centres (service providers) to the students and parents (customers) lead to ethical issues when they implement the marketing strategies?

### 1.4 Significance of study

This study allows the owners and the managerial staff of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong to understand the views of parents and teachers in terms of marketing, as well as its relationship with teaching quality. The degree of acceptability of parents and teachers can be analysed in order to ethically implement

marketing activities in Hong Kong for these private early childhood education centres. In addition, the parent's selection criteria for private early childhood education centres can also be more clearly understood.

This study allows parents (customers) to better understand the balance between marketing and teaching quality. For owners and managerial staff (service providers), this study presents the teachers' perspective, explores their willingness to participate in the various marketing activities, and assesses the impacts on teaching quality.

As children are the vulnerable ones, the benefits for them at a young age should also be considered when ethically adopting and implementing marketing. Thus, private early childhood education centres can use the results of this study to strike a balance between marketing and teaching quality, as well as implement marketing ethically.

Finally, the study will also investigate areas in educational marketing in the emerging early childhood education sector in Hong Kong that have not yet been fully explored.

### 1.5 Insider researcher implications

An insider researcher is able to learn from the context of their workplace, bring specific insider knowledge to an investigation, and apply a robust academic methodology to the research. In addition, they are able to recognize the needs of a project before getting started and create a framework to aid in the analysis of the complexities of the industry. Anticipating major issues and effective strategies before commencing ensures a successful project. The project will not only be beneficial to a particular community of practice, i.e., the operators and parents in the early childhood education sector in Hong Kong, it also has specific social implications (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs, 2010).

Using the practical experience and insider knowledge, the insider researcher is able to better select their area of research (Armsby & Costley, 2000). They also have an advantage when accessing information about the organization or industry (Bell, 1999). Being an insider researcher helps in the solving of practical problems and enables the

inquiry process to change and enhance both the organization and researcher (Smyth & Holian, 1999). Furthermore, the role of an insider researcher includes that of a participant observer, the nature of enquiry put the researcher in a subjective role that cannot change and become objective as the role of the worker switches from worker to researcher. It also challenges the positivist stance that research must be undertaken objectively (Workman, 2007).

I recognize the potential conflict between being an operator of a private early childhood education centre and a researcher. However, from the perspective of a researcher, I have a deeper understanding of the current situation regarding the research issue, and am therefore able to design a better study to investigate the early childhood education sector in Hong Kong. Able to break new ground and contribute significantly to the literature, the findings of this study will benefit the operators, parents, and children in the early childhood education sector.

That said, it is important for any potential conflict or bias to be mitigated or avoided. Although, I could possibly have been influenced by my background and past experiences, I made sure to remain objective throughout the research. Specifically, Brannick and Coughlan (2007) raised the issue of "role duality" with regards to insider researchers. As an insider, my work intertwines with their research through various personal and professional relationships with teaching staff and industry. Although it is conceivable that the dual roles as researcher and operator could have resulted in personal and professional conflict, I remained neutral and resisted any temptation to share their own experiences during the focus group discussions in order not to affect the participants expressing themselves. The questionnaires were also distributed by the staff of other private early childhood education centres, and I had no direct contact with the survey respondents. Furthermore, the privacy and confidentiality of the organizations' information was treated with the utmost seriousness. All participants in the survey and focus groups remained anonymous and used pseudonyms. Any sensitive information regarding the companies involved was not disclosed. Finally, as an insider researcher, it was important for me to make sure that the data was rigorously analysed to ensure credibility.

I recognized the importance of managing the risks, challenges and tensions during the research process in order to ensure that ethical and trustworthy insider research was conducted.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

In this literature review, I propose that the provision of all forms of education is influenced by the neo-liberal socio-political context of the early 21st century. In this context, I then consider the mechanism of marketization and marketing, and will begin by considering how best to conceptualize educational marketing as a service, product, and hybrid of some form of relational approach. I suggest that given the ongoing relationships between schools, parents, and students, relationship marketing is the most significant paradigm to be adopted. Moreover, it is important to maintain this relationship in order to influence parents in their choice of early childhood education centre. In this model, teachers are considered to be the service providers, and the parents and children as the co-producers of the service provided. This is a relational engagement for teachers and, as such, the service quality of the teaching should also be taken account.

Having established the importance of relationship marketing within the service context, I then consider the application of educational marketing in terms of early childhood. However, in the sector of early childhood education, a complexity emerges as the parents are the customers and the young children are the consumer, and the above all are the vulnerable. This leads into the central theme of the review which is a consideration of marketing ethics. By applying a relationship marketing approach, I consider the attributes of ethical marketing, such as trust, commitment, integrity, benevolence, competence, and shared values, from the perspective of parents (customers) towards the schools (service providers). This review concludes that this sector of the market has not been well explored and the invasiveness of marketing needs to be fully considered from an ethical perspective.

### 2.2 Neoliberalism

During the last two decades of the 20th century, markets progressively came to be seen as the most desirable mechanism for regulating economies and reforming the public sector. In the US, right-wing ascendancy began in the late 1970s with the Reagan neoliberal programme of small government, tax cuts, deregulation, and free trade. The neoliberal agenda in the UK started to dominate after Margaret Thatcher came to

power. This trend continued to spread after both left- and right-wing national governments implemented a wave of reforms—privatization, dismantling of social welfare apparatus, retreat of the state from economic regulation, tax cuts, deregulation, opening of national boundaries—that profoundly transformed the relationship between their citizens, the state, and the economy (Campbell & Peterson, 2001).

Neoliberalism is a political not an economic project because it aims to generate certain forms of subjectivity. It argues positive cooperative bonds are fostered through markets and that these generate new enhanced subjects. It further suggests these bonds must be nurtured through constant vigilance and the maintenance of competition because interest groups seek to avoid markets. Such vigilance is organized through interventions designed to ensure 'spontaneity' in the market/society, ever-expanding competition, and the presence of elite leadership (Biebricher, 2015; Dardot & Laval, 2014; Hayek, 1948; Megay, 1970; Müller, 2015).

Neoliberalism is a term used to identify a particular discourse of governance, political philosophy, and policy prescription that centres on the objectives of the 'self-limiting' state, unregulated investment capital, and the 'free-trading' open global economy (Fitzsimons, 2000). Neoliberalism places great stress on the importance of individualism and promotes the self-seeking, profit-maximizing behaviour of the marketplace. For neoliberals, a competitive market system not only maximizes economic efficiency, it is the main guarantor of individual freedom and social solidarity (Giddens, 1994). Thus, neoliberalism shares some central presuppositions with classical liberalism. Hayek (1976) maintains that the proper functioning of markets is incompatible with state planning of any sort, either full-scale socialism or the more limited concept of the welfare state. In Hayek's view, central planning is inefficiency and also a threat to the freedom of the individual. The main object of government is to regulate and keep in working order the production of goods and services, instead of producing any particular services or products to be consumed by its citizens (Hayek, 1973). For this reason, markets are seen to have distinct advantages over state regulation or planning. Thus, the best way to allocate resources and opportunities is thought to be through the market. The market is seen as a more efficient and morally superior mechanism. McChesney (1997, p.7) defines neoliberalism in the following way:

> Neo-liberal initiatives are characterized as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine the dead hand of the incompetent, bureaucratic, and parasitic government, that can never do good even if well intended, which it rarely is.

However, neoliberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws, and institutions necessary for its operation. In neoliberalism, the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. Under neoliberalism, markets have become a new technology by which control can be affected and performance enhanced in the public sector (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

**2.3 Neoliberalism and marketization**

Harvey (2005) characterizes neoliberalism as the ascendance of a market ethic in which contractual relations in the marketplace are deemed the most efficient and most ethical means to organize society. This installation of markets as the organizing force in society entails a necessary role. Tickell and Peck (2003) describe marketization as both 'primitive' and 'amoral', reflecting the deregulatory focus of the roll-back phase of neoliberalization. When it comes to the roll-out phase (i.e., post mid-1990s), they align marketization more closely with new forms of public service delivery, such as public-private partnerships. The movement of public services into direct competition with their private enterprise counterparts is a common feature of public sector policy throughout the developed world. The publicly funded provision of education is not exempt from this trend (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberal policies of marketization in education are rooted in postmodernism. The rapid rise of the market form in education is best understood as a post-modern phenomenon (Kenway, 1992), and the logic of the postmodern argument points towards an individualistic educational consumerism in many respects similar to that advocated by the free-marketers of the New Right (Green, 1997).

The term neoliberalism is also called economic rationalism, and has dominated the way public policy is made and managed in many developed countries. Economic rationalism

assumes that the market will deliver the best outcomes because consumers can be counted on to act rationally when making their choices and purchases (Baldwin & James, 2000). Neoliberals claim that the invisible hand of the market will inexorably lead to better outcomes in education. Underlying neoliberal policies in education and their social policies, in general, is a faith in the essential fairness and justice of markets (Apple, 1999). For neoliberals, consumer choice is crucial, and students can make a choice among a vast array of education products. Based on neoliberal economics, it is argued that education should not be paid for through taxation, and that educational institutions should be deregulated in order to compete fairly in the market for the dollar of students/clients. Therefore, the reform agenda in education is oriented towards the market rather than public ownership or governmental planning and regulation. In order to improve their competitiveness and effectiveness, schools are seen to need to restructure themselves and adopt marketization as their governance strategy.

### 2.4 Marketization and marketing

Marketization refers to the process of creating new markets for products that were previously shielded from market exchange and price mechanisms. It involves the introduction of markets and market forces into the state, primarily into its functioning, authority, and legitimation (Tickell & Peck, 2003). Similarly, Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010) argue that marketization is about the reconfiguring of the relationship between the state and market so that they become more thoroughly intermeshed (Aalbers, 2013). Castree (2008) defines marketization as the assignment of prices to phenomena that were previously shielded from market exchange or for various reasons were unpriced. Hence, marketization necessarily entails previously non-market phenomena, whether protected or simply unpriced, which are then transformed by the insertion or creation of markets.

Education, like other sectors of many advanced economies, has faced increased marketization in recent decades in response to neoliberal agendas. These agendas have been advanced by those believing that the free flow of goods and services in relation to market price mechanisms is in the interests of economic efficiency (Castree, 2010). Marketization, as defined above, is distinctive from marketing because it implies a strategy of creating markets for products considered previously as public goods (Finalay,

McCollum & Packwood, 2017). Moreover, marketization is a process that enables the conceptualization, production, and exchange of goods (Araujo & Pels, 2015).

The notion behind the marketization of education is that increased competition can provide ways of improving educational systems, and that educators should be aware of their 'business climate'. The principle of marketization "denotes a process whereby education becomes a commodity provided by competitive suppliers, educational services are priced, and access to them depends on consumer calculations and ability to pay" (Yin & White, 1994, p.217).

While marketing presupposes some minimal level of capacity or competence to make choices, as well as the related responsibility for the choices made. In short, it presupposes its participants are capable of a basic form of self-determination or autonomy. The fact that marketing presupposes that its audience is capable of making choices and decisions implies that they have the relevant information. This requires that the parties must be able to communicate with each other (Stanton et al., 1994; Takala & Uusitla, 1996). However, in the context of early childhood education, it is the parents that decide whether to enrol their children in the centres and the children who are the users.

It goes without saying that for there to be marketing and marketization there needs to be a market. In economic theory, a 'market' is defined as "a means of social coordination whereby the supply and demand for goods or services are balanced through the price mechanism" (Brown, 2011, p. 11). As such, economic market theory implies that no one, other than the buyer and the seller, decides on the nature of the product or service by negotiating the price. Buyers, who have specific budgets, decide what and when they want to buy; and suppliers do their best to meet buyers' needs and, in the process, obtain profit. Sellers deciding what and how they want to sell, rely only on their skills, resources, and customer demand.

**2.5 Educational marketing**

Few definitions have been suggested for the concept of educational marketing that are similar to the definitions and conceptualizations of marketing in the context of business and service sector companies. A comprehensive definition of educational marketing is

suggested by Kotler and Fox (1995), who define marketing as the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organizational objectives. In the context of education, Davies and Ellison (1997) define marketing as the means by which the school actively communicates and promotes its purpose, values, and products to the pupils, parents, staff, and wider community. A slightly different definition is proposed by Pardey (1991) who argues that marketing is the process which enables the clients' needs to be identified, anticipated, and satisfied in order that the school's objectives can be achieved. A similar definition is alluded by Evan (1995) who regards marketing as the management process of identifying and satisfying the requirements of consumers and society in a sustainable way.

Foskett (2002) defines educational marketing as "an umbrella term of the management of a wide and dynamic range of external relationships for schools and colleges" (p. 243), including promotion, sales, and public relations. In terms of the goals of marketing, the 'triad model' proposed by Foskett (2002) includes objectives related to student recruitment, communication, and responsiveness with the community, as well as the management of the quality of educational provision. In the new market, the school is encouraged to carefully examine the needs of its clients and customers in order to meet those needs more precisely (Hanson, 1996). The marketing orientation seems to meet these expectations because of its emphasis on satisfying the clients' requirements by providing desired goods, services, or experiences from which they can choose. School marketing should express to students, parents, staff members, and the community that the school is dedicated to serving the educational needs of the community to the highest degree possible (Lockhart, 2011).

### 2.5.1 Development of educational marketing

The development of educational markets, and the consequent need for educational leaders to engage with marketing, is typically associated with the period after 1980. It is aligned with the emergence of market-focused political ideologies, rooted in the ideas of von Hayek (1976) and put into political practice by conservative administrations in a number of countries, most notably in the United Kingdom and United States. However, education markets are by no means an entirely new creation. In essence, a market exists where there are alternatives between which an individual

can choose. Therefore, in the school sector, the opportunity in many countries for parents to choose private over state education has created a small but important market in the compulsory phase of education that has a long history (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2003).

Kotler and Fox (1985) offer solid marketing foundations for the basic activities of the school unit in the book "Strategic Marketing for educational Institutions". In "Educational Marketing" (1993), John H. Holcomb refers to the public school system in the United States. His work suggests methods for more efficient educational services by improving the activities of the students, members of the administrative council, and school directors, etc. In "Educational Management", Andrew Hockley tackles organizational culture, human resources, consumer behaviour, financial management, and project management in school units.

### 2.5.2 Educational marketing and schools

Educational marketing is an indispensable managerial function without which the school could not survive in its current competitive environment; on the grounds that it is not enough for a school to be effective, it also needs to convey an effective image to parents and stakeholders (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2003). Marketing is considered to be a holistic management process aimed at improving effectiveness through the satisfaction of parents' needs and desires, rather than just mere selling of products and services or persuasion of clients to buy a specific educational programme (Foskett, 2002). In other words, marketing is another managerial philosophy based on the ideal relationship between the school and its community. School marketing strategies should be interpreted not as an isolated response, but as part of schools' complex behaviours in competitive environments. In this sense, education reforms that introduce choice and competition between schools imply the need for important changes in the management strategies adopted by these institutions. Market theory in education (Lubienski, 2006) expects that, as a result of the incentive imposed by the market, schools will become more responsive organizations, particularly in order to satisfy the demands and preferences of families (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

School marketing and its contribution for school success is a controversial issue in education. While some educational scholars found that schools would benefit from

marketing activities and need marketing to survive in the competitive environment (Drysdale, 2001; Foskett, 2002), others think that there is no need for schools to carry out marketing activities and that it even undermines the value of the educational process. In a competitive environment, school choice, school autonomy, and league tables place external pressure on schools. Managerial staff see marketing as a useful mechanism for enlisting prospective students, while in more stable environments where student flow is determined by means such as enrolment zones, principles see no need for marketing (Oplaska & Hemsley-Brown, 2004).

School staff are engaged in many actions that can be defined as marketing practices, such as building a distinctive identity, developing a strategic plan, establishing cooperation with stakeholders and allies, circulating brochures and leaflets, and establishing open days, parents' meetings, and fundraising events (Oplaska & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Principles then explain these actions as part of running a school: vision and distinctive identity is required to give meaning and direction to the school community, cooperation with stakeholders is needed to enhance school legitimacy in the community, and open days and parents' meetings are necessary for information diffusion and clarification of expectations (Tubin, 2011).

The relationship between the schools and parents, as well as the students, is built on the services and products that the schools offer. The relational approach to maintain a positive relationship is adopted through relationship marketing.

**2.6 Relationship marketing**

When producers and consumers directly deal with each other, there is a greater potential for emotional bonding that transcends economic exchange. They are able to better understand and appreciate each other's needs and constraints, are more inclined to cooperate, and thus, become more relationship oriented. Since retaining students is important for schools, relationship marketing should be of great interest to schools entrusted with student enrolment and retention. The relationship marketing approach means that an importance is attached to the creation of student value and the value proposition to students should match their needs. The creation of value should also be regarded as an ongoing process (Helgesen, 2008).

Relationship marketing aims to build long-term mutually satisfying relations among key parties (e.g., customers, suppliers, and distributors) in order to earn and retain their long-term preference and business (Kotler et al., 2000). Relationship marketing attempts to involve and integrate customers, suppliers, and other infrastructural stakeholders into a firm's marketing strategy and activities (McKenna, 1991; Shani & Chalasani, 1991). Such involvement results in interactive relationships with suppliers, customers, or other value chain partners of the corporation. An integrative relationship approach assumes an overlap in the plans and processes of the interacting parties, and suggests close economic, emotional, and structural bonds among them. It reflects interdependence rather than independence of choice among the parties, and it emphasizes cooperation rather than competition and consequent conflict among the marketing actors. Thus, development of relationship marketing points to a significant shift in the axioms of marketing: from competition and conflict to mutual cooperation; and from choice independence to mutual interdependence (Hollensen & Opresnik, 2015).

According to Grönroos (1994), the process of creating a relationship with a customer can be divided into two parts: first, attracting the customer, and second, building the relationship in a way that ensures the accomplishment of the economic goals of the relationship for both parties. A strong and lasting relationship with any partner can become a powerful tool of differentiation for the institution, leading to an important competitive advantage by consistently providing value to the audiences and other groups of interest (Pop, 2006; Judson et al., 2007; Negricea et al., 2011).

Relationship building is becoming a cornerstone of the marketing concept, involving an interactive process between the organization and its partners (Grönroos, 1994). Institutions are becoming increasingly interested in getting to know their public better, thereby creating the possibility to discover new needs that can be satisfied in the shortest time (Negricea et al., 2011).

From a firm's perspective, relationship marketing is based on two factors. First, it is more expensive to win a new customer than it is to retain an existing one. Second, the longer the association, the more profitable the relationship for the firm (Baron et al., 2010). It is claimed that getting a new customer is five to ten times more expensive

than retaining one. This is not only because of the direct costs that are incurred but also the costs of unsuccessful prospecting that can be saved. Furthermore, as customers become more satisfied with the service they receive, the more they buy (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). As purchases increase, operating costs fall due to increased efficiency. Reducing customer-defection rates is obviously critical for retention. As defection rates fall, the average customer-relationship lifespan increases. When customers defect, they take profits away from current transactions and future profits, as well as negative word-of-mouth comments. Therefore, relationship marketing stresses that loyalty, customer retention, and long-term relationships are key to profitability. In this sense, private early childhood education centres should adopt relationship marketing to maintain relationships with their customers and consumers (parents and students), to lower the cost of retaining them.

In relationship marketing, consumers are progressively becoming co-producers. While there is not as much need for middlemen, there is also less of a boundary between producers, consumers, and other stakeholders in the value chain. In many instances, market participants jointly participate in design, innovation, production, and consummation of goods and services. Sometimes these relationships and activities become so enmeshed that it is difficult to separate the marketing actors from one another. There is also a blurring of time and place boundaries (Kotler, 1994).

Berry (1993) suggests relationship marketing should be defined as attracting, maintaining, and enhancing consumer relationships. Recognizing that customer acquisition was, and will always remain, part of a marketer's responsibilities, this viewpoint emphasizes that a relationship view of marketing implies that maintenance and development are of equal or perhaps even greater importance to a company than customer acquisition in the long run. Due to the fact that customer retention is so much more important than attracting new customers, companies pursuing relationship marketing principles design strategies to develop close and lifelong relationships with the most beneficial customers. By differentiating between customer types, the relationship marketing concept further suggests that not all customers or potential customers should be treated in the same way. Relationship marketing sees a need to communicate in different ways depending on customers' status and value.

This view of marketing also implies that suppliers are not alone in creating or benefiting from the value created by the corporation. Rather, relationship marketing can be seen as an ongoing process of identifying and creating new value with individual consumers, and then sharing the value benefits with them over the lifetime of the association (Gordon, 1988). This is because a higher customer value will raise customer satisfaction, thereby instilling customer loyalty. In turn, this creates higher profit due to increased volume resulting from positive word-of-mouth and repeat purchases. According to Aijo (1996), it is a close, long-term relationship between the various participants involved in exchanging something of value. Thus, the overall objective of relationship marketing is to facilitate and maintain long-term customer relationships, which leads to altered focal points and modifications to the marketing management process. The objective of all of the strategies is an enduring and unique relationship with the customers that cannot be imitated by the competitors and therefore provides sustainable competitive advantages.

Most of the aforementioned concepts are present in the following refined definition, which describes the objectives of relationship marketing as to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and, when necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met; done by the mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises (Grönroos, 1994).

The view is that consumers will actively seek a relationship with their brand (product manufacturer, service supplier, brand owner, or retailer), which in turn offers psychological reassurances to the buyer and creates a sense of belonging (Uncles, 1999).

Firms that implement relationship marketing–based strategies recognize the importance of developing and maintaining long-term cooperative relationships with other firms and/or consumers. Specifically, relationship marketing–based strategy emphasizes that to achieve a competitive advantage and thereby a superior financial performance, firms should identify, develop, and nurture an efficiency- and effectiveness-enhancing portfolio of relationships (Hunt, 1997). Relationship marketing research identifies a number of outcomes, goals, and indicators of successfully designed and implemented relationship marketing strategies. In general, these

strategies are designed to allow firms to more easily share, develop, and leverage resources (e.g., information, processes, and/or competences) with other firms and/or consumers. The result being that, by cooperating, firms are able to compete more efficiently and/or effectively (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Changes in the market environment represents substantial opportunities to build and enhance customer relationships through co-creation. Suppliers can seek to build closer relationships through opportunities provided by technological breakthroughs, as well as changes in industry logic, customer preferences, and lifestyles (Payne et al., 2008). With these changes, firms must shift from a unidirectional perspective of viewing customers as largely passive receivers of value, to ones where they can more actively engage in mutual value co-creation. The contemporary view, which is now becoming more widely acknowledged, is that 'value-in-use' is co-created (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Hence, co-creating value-in-use in a "joint sphere of responsibility" (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) becomes the concern of both the customer and firm, and is critical to strengthening customer–firm relationships. Value-in-use seeks the active participation of the customer in resource-sharing, and in contributing and enhancing relational outcomes. In an early childhood education context, the learning experience is co-created by the teachers, parents, and students. Thus, co-creation enhances the value of the education service and leads to positive relationships among all involved.

### 2.6.1 Stages of relationship

Some use a marriage metaphor to describe the various stages through which a relationship can develop (Dwyer et al., 1987; Grossman, 1998). However, in this instance, the marriage analogy may not be appropriate. Tynan (1997) argues that the marriage analogy may now not be useful as it does not help in understanding timescales, or the number, nature, and willingness of the parties involved, nor does it offer the possibility of considering dysfunctional relationships. Dwyer et al., however, use a divorce metaphor in their scheme. Duck (1991) states that building a relationship involves four key elements: (1) awareness of opportunities for friendship, (2) ability to encourage and entice likeable people into a relationship, (3) skills and knowledge of the ways in which relationships can develop and grow, and (4) skills that help to maintain and repair relationships.

Waldock (1989) presents a process comprising recognition of the need/use of partnerships, initiation of the partnership, establishment, and maturity. On the other hand, Scanzoni (1979) highlights three stages of involvement: exploration, expansion, and commitment.

Christopher et al. (2002) present a different five-stage model, which they term “a ladder of customer loyalty”. On the bottom rung of the ladder, customers are viewed as ‘prospects’. On the top rung of the ladder they become true ‘partners’, having climbed intermediate rungs, labelled, in turn, as ‘purchaser’, ‘client’, ‘supporter’, and ‘advocate’. Here, the role of relationship marketing is to advance relationships up the ladder. Partners work together for mutual benefit and advocates are so deeply involved in the organization that in addition to being very loyal, long-term purchasers, they also influence others through positive word-of-mouth. Moving customers up the ladder, however, is not a simple task. Organizations need to know exactly what each customer is buying and as every customer is different, they need to know how they can continue to offer additional value and satisfaction that will differentiate their offering. Essentially this is done through exceeding expectations.

Similarly, Cross (1992) talks of the “five degrees of customer bonding”, which are awareness, identity, relationship, community, and advocacy. All of these have different levels of trust and interaction in terms of the relationships with customers. The final three stages are considered to be the key ones relating to relationship marketing, since they emphasize two-way interaction.

The relationship marketing–based strategy is being adopted in the education sector now too, with students going through various stages to build up their relationships with the schools. Increased competition among schools has made retaining students equally as important as attracting and enrolling them. An improvement of the retention rate positively influences the financial preformation of a school (Ryals, 2002). Thus, student retention is becoming an increasingly important strategic theme for schools offering different level of education. In this relationship, teachers are service providers, and parents and students are co-producers. As such, their positions are worth looking at more closely.

### 2.6.2 Service providers – Teachers

Teachers provide educational services to students and advice to parents about the students' learning. Relationships can be built which, in turn, lead to trust and commitment from the parents and students. In this sense, teachers can be regarded as human resources in relationship marketing to help retain students.

The fundamental imperative of relationship marketing strategy is that, to achieve a competitive advantage and hence superior financial performance, firms should identify, develop, and nurture a relationship portfolio (Gummesson, 2002; Hunt & Derozier, 2004). To explicate how certain kinds of relationships can make firms more competitive, it is necessary to draw on resource-advantage theory. This theory states that competition can provide a grounding framework for relationship marketing strategy (Hunt, 2002; Hunt & Derozier, 2004). Resources are defined as the tangible and intangible entities available to a firm that enables it to produce efficiently and/or effectively a market offering for some market segments. Furthermore, resources can be categorized as financial (e.g., cash resources and access to financial markets), physical (e.g., plant and equipment), legal (e.g., trademarks and licenses), human (e.g., the skills and knowledge of individual employees), organizational (e.g., competences, controls, policies, and culture), informational (e.g., knowledge from consumer and competitive intelligence), and relational (e.g., relationships with suppliers and customers). Teachers are crucial human resources in early childhood education. Their skills and knowledge are able to make the school more competitive. Teachers are also able to gain knowledge from parents about their preferences and choice of school if they have good relationships with them.

In terms of resource-advantage theory, relationships will contribute to the competitiveness of a firm when they constitute relational resources. Relationships become relational resources when they contribute to a firm's ability to efficiently/effectively produce market offerings that have value for some market segments. In this sense, teachers are the relational resources needed to build relationships with parents and students, and to produce value for them.

Market demands have contributed to a profound change in teachers' positions, from relatively autonomous professionals to service-oriented workers in a quasi-business environment. Regardless of their attitude to marketization and competition, most

teachers are influenced by their schools' attempts to stay competitive. Their employment is directly dependent on the success of marketing and recruitment campaigns. School staff are increasingly engaged in benchmarking, i.e., examining and relating themselves strategically to competitors (Lundahl, Arreman, Holm & Lundstrom, 2013). This change in the priority of work tasks is the most evident example of the devaluation of professional values that many teachers describe. The focus on competition and ranking is contributing to grade inflation and an emphasis on easily measurable teaching content (Wikstrom & Wikstrom, 2005).

### 2.6.3 Co-producers – Parents and students

Parents and students are the customers and consumers of the education services respectively. They are also co-producers. Consumers understand that the benefits of engaging in relational exchange with particular firms exceeds the costs incurred. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify 'relationship benefits' as a key antecedent for the kind of relationship commitment that characterizes consumers who engage in relational exchange. Benefits that customers receive include special treatment, confidence, social, and time-saving (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Berry, 1995; Gwinner et al., 1998; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Furthermore, consumers desire relationship partners that they can trust. They do so because a trusted partner reduces the risks associated with relational exchange, because trust is associated with a partner's reliability, integrity, and competence. Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that consumers are motivated to engage in relational exchanges with partners with whom they share values. That is, they seek firms that agree with them over what is important or unimportant, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, proper or improper, and significant or insignificant (Hunt & Arnett, 2006).

Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) propose that consumers engage in relational market behaviour to achieve greater efficiency in their decision making, reduce information processing, achieve more cognitive consistency in their decisions, and reduce the perceived risks associated with future choices. Sheth and Parbvatiyar focus on relational exchange as achieving 'greater efficiency'. Consistent with Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behaviour, relational exchanges reduce the costs involved in consumer searching, as in a "routinized response behaviour". Moreover,

their focus on reducing perceived risk is consistent with the view that consumers look for trustworthy partners with whom to engage in relational exchange.

Bagozzi (1995) maintains that the most common and determinative motive for entering a marketing relationship is that consumers see the relationship as a means of fulfilling a goal which they had earlier, and perhaps tentatively, committed. That is, people have goals to acquire a product or use a service, and a relationship then becomes instrumental in goal achievement. In his view, relationship marketing should more thoroughly investigate consumers' goals. In particular, Bagozzi (1995) stresses that, for many consumers, "moral obligation" and "moral virtues" play an important part in motivating relational exchange. In other words, similar to the view that "shared values" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) are important considerations, consumers' sense of morality informs choices of relational exchange.

Vargo and Lusch (2004) evaluate marketing's evolving 'dominant logic'. With this, the focus changes from tangibles (e.g., skills, information, and knowledge) towards intangibles (e.g., interactivity, connectivity, and ongoing relationships). As to why consumers engage in relational exchanges with firms, the evolving, dominant logic "implies that the goal is to customize offerings, to recognize that the consumer is always a co-producer, and to strive to maximize consumer involvement in the customization to better fit his or her needs" (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 12). Therefore, Vargo and Lusch's answer as to why consumers engage in relational exchange is that relational exchange contributes to the production of goods and services that are customized to consumers' individual needs, wants, tastes, and preferences.

The interaction between teachers, parents, and students can generate more value when parents and students are viewed as co-producers in a school. This also enables a deeper relationship that will create opportunities for acquiring more knowledge about the consumers and customers; thus making school management better able to adapt to parents and students, and provide a higher quality service (Wikstrom et al., 1994).

### 2.6.4 Service quality in education

Quality is defined in different terms: as readiness for use (Juran, 1982), as value-added (Shannon, 1997), and as ongoing improvement (Foster, 2001). In marketing terms, it

can be said that something is of quality if it satisfies consumer expectations. Thus, it can be defined as consumer satisfaction (Juran, 1988) or adaptation to the requirements (Crosby, 1984).

For all systems that create new value, including education, it can be said that "quality means different things for different people and it is usually connected with processes and results of these processes" (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, p. 13). In other words, "quality is connected to three different causally determined values: purpose, processes, and people"(King Taylor, 1992, p. 40). The widely accepted definition of education quality implies a continuous process of fulfilment of set education standards (Ivošević & Miklavič, 2009).

In early childhood education, teaching quality is a crucial part of the service. Good quality teaching is an attribute of good education. Marketing is adopted to promote the quality of the education service, and relationship marketing is used to retain the parents and students, as well as develop a long-term relationship based on the good quality of the teaching. In turn, this builds confidence, trust, and commitment with the parents and students. Furthermore, parents consider certain criteria when choosing the right early childhood education centre for their children. These elements are explored below.

#### 2.6.4.1 Early childhood education teaching quality

Ho (2008) points out that the definition of quality of early childhood education programmes in Hong Kong consists of high learning motivation and effectiveness, intimate staff-child relationships, close communication with parents, and total support given to families. However, six experienced early childhood educators and teachers with experience in Africa, Europe, India, and the United States report that the quality of programmes for early childhood education depends on philosophies and goals, high-quality physical environments, developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculums, attention to basic and special needs, respect for families and communities, professionally prepared teachers and staff, and rigorous programme evaluation (Jalongo et al., 2004). The quality of programmes relates to human capital and the importance of investing in the care and education of young children.

#### 2.6.4.1.1 Learning motivation and effectiveness

A good programme should provide enjoyable learning experiences based on individual needs and interests; and while it should support children's all-round development, it should also emphasize effective learning and motivation to learn (Ho, 2008).

The ideology of early childhood education in Hong Kong is influenced by the field of developmental psychology in the United States, where developmentalism has been translated into terms such as "child-centredness" and "developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp, 1986; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

#### 2.6.4.1.2 Intimate staff–child relationships

Parents, teachers, and support staff value the close and intimate relationship between the staff and children. This caring attitude should not only be shown by teachers in a school or education centre but also by the support staff as well, thereby allowing children to learn in a safe environment and trust the teachers and support staff (Ho, 2008).

Teachers play an important role in shaping children's experiences at school. Beyond the traditional role of teaching academic skills, they are also responsible for regulating activity levels, communication, and contact with peers (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994; Pianta, 1997). Teachers also provide behavioural support and teach coping skills to children (Doll, 1996). From the teacher's perspective, strong, positive relationships with students can provide motivation to spend extra time and energy promoting children's success. From a child's perspective, positive relationships with teachers may protect against poor school performance associated with an unsupportive home environment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). From both the teachers' and children's perspectives, the emotional connection between adults and children in schools is an important factor in the school performance of children. Through the early elementary years, there is substantial evidence supporting the link between the quality of teacher–child relationships and children's adaptation. Teacher self-report measures reveal three dimensions of teacher–child relationships: conflict, closeness, and dependency (Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Pianta, 1994; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Birch and Ladd (1997) find correlations between the quality of teacher–child relationships and academic performance, with both closeness and dependency

contributing to performance of visual and language skills in kindergartens.

#### 2.6.4.1.3 Close communication with parents

Staff members should make a wholehearted, joint effort to take care of children. From the parents' perspective, a good programme is more than simply the care and education provided to their children by the school. Parents generally focus on how well the schools maintain close communication (Ho, 2008). To respond to the demands of parents, staff members including school principals, teachers, and support staff, should consistently try to maintain communication through various channels, such as open days, parents' meetings, opinion surveys, newsletters, and phone calls. Schools also provide opportunities for parents to observe classes and perform voluntary work. One study found that teachers believe those parents who volunteer at school valued education more than those that did not volunteer. This belief, in turn, is associated with the teachers' ratings of students' academic skills and achievements (Hill & Craft, 2003).

For young children, parental school involvement is associated with early school success, including academic and language skills, and social competence (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003). Bastiani (2000) points out that there are lasting benefits in terms of students' progress and school effectiveness when schools are able to capitalize on the active support of parents and families.

#### 2.6.4.1.4 Support and respect given to families and communities

Schools tend to view providing total support to families as part of their responsibilities, with some even offering free-custodial care, emotional support, and financial assistance.

Preschool educators can empower children and families by forming a spirited commitment to social justice reflected through advocacy for children. In this child and family advocacy role, caregivers asset the rights of children and families, and accept personal responsibility for the educational, social, and civic climate. There is a responsibility for strengthening the family–child bond, keeping families informed about programmes, and inviting them to participate in a variety of ways that improves existing preschool programmes, develops leadership among parents/families, and contributes to the care and education of the children (Ho, 2008).

Some schools make their students feel part of a 'school family' that looks out for their interests and provides unique experiences for each child. This particularistic treatment, associated with family relations, implies a degree of favouritism or special attention to the unique and endearing qualities of the individual. Students receive family-like treatment, attention, and even affection from the teachers (Epstein, 2018), which enables schools to establish relationships with the families and better support the students' learning and growth.

**2.6.4.1.5 High-quality physical environments**

The physical environment of preschools should reflect knowledge of and respect for the safety, physical well-being, intellectual stimulation, and social support of very young children. Although the quality of the space and materials will be dictated by cultural, geographic, and economic realities of the different nations, environments for young children should always reflect concern for all aspects of child development; physical, intellectual, social, and emotional (Jalongo et al., 2004). Space and materials for preschoolers should enhance socialness, support a sense of emotional safety, and reflect respect for the familial and cultural experiences of the child.

Anekwe (2006) views a learning environment as consisting of all the physical sensory elements (e.g., colour, lighting, space, social, and furniture, etc.) that characterize the place in which students are expected to learn. Anekwe is cited in Nwanekezi and Iruloh (2012) suggested the learning environment to be:

- The complete makeup of the parts of the home or centre used for caring for children, which includes the space, how it is arranged and furnished, routines, equipment, and other materials.
- All the variables involved in the physical, social, and psychological context of learning.
- The physical or virtual setting in which learning takes place.
- An environment that instigates the education of the learners involved.

The physical environment of a school includes the buildings, classroom furniture, equipment, instructional materials, laboratories, libraries, and playground, etc. (Obong et al., 2010); everything that is necessary for effective teaching and learning. The

physical learning environment of the classroom consists of the spatial arrangement of the room itself, the furniture, chalk/dry-erase board, lighting, fittings, and decorations, as well as all the physical enablers of teaching and learning.

In a classroom context, the school and its surroundings also influence students' achievements. The nature of the classroom environment has a powerful influence on how well students achieve a wide range of educational outcomes. The classroom environment, including its physical, emotional, and aesthetic characteristics tend to enhance students' attitudes towards learning (Goodlard, 1984). According to Asiyai (2014), an appropriate learning environment is key to safe and effective learning and development. She maintains that such an environment is supportive and productive for functional training of the head, heart, and hand. All children deserve a safe, respectful, caring, and positive learning environment, which should foster a sense of belonging, and enhance the joy of learning, honour, and diversity, as well as promote respectful, responsible, and caring relationships.

**2.6.4.1.6 Developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculums**

Quality preschool education creates well-established avenues of access for all children to participate in what their societies value. Thus, equity, in terms of exposure to excellent curriculums and pedagogy, should be a fundamental part of all early childhood education initiatives (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Pedagogy, in the broadest sense, should ensure that care and education come together, and concerns upbringing, nurturing, socialization, learning support, and development (Petrie et al., 2009). It should focus on the child as a whole person and support their overall development, with the teacher seeing themselves in a form of relationship with them. Children and staff are seen as inhabiting the same life space, not as existing in separate hierarchical domains.

Pedagogy connects the relatively self-contained act of teaching and being an early years' educator, with personal, cultural, and community values (including care), as well as curriculum structures and external influences. Pedagogy, in the early years, operates from a shared frame of reference (a mutual learning encounter) between the practitioner, the young child(ren), and their family (Moyles et al., 2002). There is not

'one' effective pedagogy, instead the effective teacher orchestrates pedagogy by making interventions (e.g., scaffolding, discussions, and monitoring) which are sensitive to the curriculum concept or skill being taught and take into account the child's 'zone of proximal development'. Evidence also suggests that the achievements of settings against the cognitive outcomes appear to be directly related to the quantity and quality of the teacher/adult-planned and initiated focused group work that is provided (Sylva et al., 2010).

A curriculum is "the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (MOE, 1996, p. 10). A curriculum is responsive to the idea that everyday knowledge and activities are important to children's learning. All imply that children will participate in a wide range of activities in early childhood settings that reflect the experiences, understandings, and values of the relevant culture, including what and how children learn (Hedges & Cullen, 2012).

Curriculum experiences in preschool are planned for a wide range of abilities. Furthermore, children's abilities should be regarded as fluid rather than fixed, meaning that early childhood educators should anticipate frequent developmental changes. Keen powers of observation are fundamental to providing quality programmes, and competent preschool teachers use these thoughtful observations to provide relevant supportive educational experiences. Each curriculum provides an aspiration statement for children's participation in their communities/societies that has both a present and future orientation for children as learners and citizens.

**2.6.4.1.7 Professionally prepared teachers and staff**

Teaching is a social profession that requires care for children and a commitment to caring, with preschool children requiring warm and supportive interactions with adults.

Although specific certifications and accreditation plans vary from country to country, there are some basic minimum requirements for those entrusted with the care and education of children. The core competency areas for preschool teaching include the history/philosophy of early childhood education; child growth, development, and learning; health, safety, and nutrition; home, school, and community relationships;

curriculum development and implementation; appropriate assessment practices and programme management; professionalism and collaboration skills; and successful performance during supervised internship (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Two types of training for preschool educators need to be addressed: initial training and continuing professional development. At the initial level, before entering the field of preschool care and education, caregivers must possess a basic knowledge of the general progression of child development and show appreciation for the developmental variations which exist among children. Well-trained caregivers understand that children consistently respond in a positive way to warm, nurturing adults who are capable of identifying children's needs and concerns.

#### 2.6.4.2 School selection criteria

School choice is the parents' rights to select the most preferred school for their child (Burgess, 2009), and is primarily based on the service quality of the school. Students who go to their favoured school will have better academic achievement than students who do not (Cullen et al., 2003; Cullen et al., 2005). Parents subsequently understand and engage in the school selection process or education marketplace with varying degrees of sophistication (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Ball et al., 1996; Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2010; Wilkins, 2010a, 2010b). In addition to teaching quality, parents also select schools based on class size, location, and tuition fee.

##### 2.6.4.2.1 Class size

Cheng et al. (2016) agree with the theory that smaller class sizes are part of the private school brand. This is also consistent with Kelly and Scafidi (2013), who find that offering smaller class sizes is one of the most popular reasons why parents enrol their children in private schools, since a small class size has a positive impact on student performance (Aria & Walker, 2004).

Using qualitative and quantitative data, Blatchford (2003) points to increased interaction between students and teachers in smaller classes, revealing more teacher support and a deeper knowledge of students. That said, a less positive finding from Blatchford's (2003) study is that students are more social in large classes than small classes, suggesting that small classes may be better academically but not socially.

Studies in Hong Kong (Harfitt, 2012a, 2012b) have echoed the aforementioned findings on classroom processes, with students in small classes being more engaged in learning English, feeling more confident about using English (the second language of students in Hong Kong), and enjoying more peer support in and out of class. Wang and Finn (2000) claim that students enjoy improved relations with their peers and their teachers, form more harmonious groups, and participate actively in small classes. In their extensive review of class sizes, Finn et al. (2003) advocate the utilization of psychological and social theory to explain why smaller classes appear to have a positive influence on students' social and academic behaviour. They point to two principles, 'visibility of the individual' and a 'sense of belonging' as important components of any explanation of learner behaviour in large and small classes. They argue that the membership of a large class can lessen the sense of responsibility in students, who can become largely anonymous. In contrast, a smaller class size means that individuals cannot easily hide and are therefore more likely to participate.

**2.6.4.2.2 Location**

School location affects how students get to school (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2003; The Oregon School Siting Handbook, 2005; McKoy et al., 2008). According to Roya Shokoohi et al. (2012), students are more likely to use cars as the mode of transportation to get to school. Larger school may have a wider catchment area, making walking to school impossible for students living far away (Ewing et al., 2004; The Oregon School Siting Handbook, 2005).

Kaiser et al. (1995) and Ewing et al. (2004) both mention that school location is influenced by built environment factors, since location determines the accessibility and transportation mode of students getting to school. According to the Home to School Transport Policy (2011), walking distance was calculating by determining the shortest distance between the home and school entrance. Crucially, school distance is one of the key attributes when choosing a school (Beavis, 2004; O'Mahony, 2008; Burgess et al., 2009). According to Gibbons et al. (2006), parents consider distance as a fundamental criterion because by living closer to the school, children will have easier access to academic achievement; a factor which has always been a primary concern to parents when choosing a school (Beavis' 2004, Wilkinson et al., 2004, ISCA Research

Report, 2008; Burgess et al. 2009; Roy & Chakrabarti, 2010; Yusuf & Adigun, 2010).

When schools are located within the same neighbourhood and are able to serve as local institutional anchors, school-based social ties may create and reinforce neighbourhood-based social ties, making it more likely that residents feel socially connected to both their neighbours and their fellow parents. In contrast, when schools are located outside of the neighbourhood, residents may feel themselves pulled socially and spatially from the area around their home. Those who leave their own neighbourhood on a daily basis are likely to have fewer local connections, if for no other reason than the time it takes to make those trips means there is less time for local socializing (Ebbert & Russell, 2011; Shedd, 2015). Additionally, families who attend schools outside their neighbourhood are likely to have the nonlocal school competing for their time and attention in ways that may socially draw them out of their own neighbourhood.

Schools can be especially important formal organizations, and are likely to serve as local social and spatial anchors. Parents and their children travel to them on a daily basis and are likely to interact frequently with one another at different school-sponsored events. The focus on children and socialization both requires and generates a level of trust and comfort that may not be present in other local adult-oriented organizations (Small, 2009). After school, students often spill into the surrounding streets and frequent the local commercial district, thereby increasing their familiarity with the area (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2016). Schools also play an important role in building community through parent out-reach programmes and services (Epstein, 2018).

Regarding schools in the same neighbourhood, Jacobs (2011) mentions that it is worth factoring in the time it takes to get to school, the cost to get there, that the school would not be far from home in an emergency, and that, overall, getting to school would be far less burdensome than if the school were far away. The decision to choose a school closer to home represents less of a change in routine for many parents.

The school location and its premises are where students enjoy the education services, with a convenient location being an important consideration for parents. In the sense

of service marketing, convenience is a related construct that refers to temporal and spatial aspects of service delivery (Yale & Venkateash, 1986; Brown, 1990; Zhu et al., 2002; Peterson & Balasubramanian, 2002). Access convenience is suggested to be especially critical for services that require customer participation because customers must be present at the right time and place (Berry et al., 2002).

**2.6.4.2.3 Tuition fee**

Marcucci and Johnstone (2007) identify that the word 'tuition' means instruction, therefore the fee charged must be called a tuition fee. The distinction between a tuition fee and other kinds of fees is imprecise and is sometimes even deliberately intended to hide what could just as well be termed a tuition or a tuition fee because of either legal obstacles or political opposition to the very idea of such a fee. However, a tuition fee generally refers to a mandatory charge levied upon all students (and/or their parents) covering some portion of the general underlying costs of instruction. On the other hand, a fee generally refers to a charge levied to recover all or most of the expenses associated with a particular institutionally provided good or service that is frequently—although not always—used by some but not all of the students, which might—in other circumstances—be privately provided. Thus, charges to cover some or all of the costs of food or transportation services would normally fall under the category of fees, as might the charges to cover special expenses associated with instruction, such as consumable art supplies or transportation associated with a special off-campus experience.

A tuition fee is the price that parents pay for their children in the context of private early childhood education in Hong Kong. Private tuition, also known as "shadow education" (Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Bray, 1999; Bray, Mazawi, & Sultana, 2013; Bray, 2006; Stevenson & Baker, 1992), is the term generally used for paid supplementary instruction for academic subjects provided outside of regular school (Aslam, 2011). Jokić et al. (2013), in a comparative study of private tuition, argue that one important factor contributing towards widespread reliance on private tuition is its affordability. In this context, 'affordability' meaning that each family can easily afford the fee of their chosen early childhood education, with some exemption being offered to families in need (Li et al., 2014). Jokic, Soldo and Dedic (2013) identify that a competitive market supplies a sufficient variety of quality and quantity of private tuition across a range of

fees, making some form of private instruction affordable for parents of different socio-economic backgrounds. Heung-ju (2006) argues that this enhanced investment in private tutoring results in social position and wealth, consequently making the educational environment more stratified on the basis of economics rather than individual ability.

Some factors such as the level of family income, occupation and education of parents, number of children in the family, distance to school, and school quality have been shown to influence how parents respond to education (Long & Toma, 1988; Al-Samarrai & Peasgood, 1998; Kitaev, 1999; Gulosino & Tooley, 2002; Colclough et al., 2003). Where there have been significant reductions in the direct costs of schooling, this has resulted in an increase in demand (Bray, 1996; Colclough et al., 2003; Watkins, 2004). Education costs can either be direct or indirect. Direct costs are explicit costs associated with payments in cash, such as tuition fees, books, and transport. Indirect costs, often referred to as opportunity costs when a child is enrolled in school (Bray & Bunly, 2005).

**2.7 Consumer vulnerability**

Vulnerability can be defined on both the cognitive and behavioural levels of consumer response. With the former, the focus is on the various forms of cognitive response, such as the degree to which consumers deviate from optimal decision making, the ability to filter false promotional claims, limited information processing (e.g., noncompensatory information processing), and the use of ineffective decision rules (e.g., heuristics) (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005; Smith & Moschis, 1985; Yoon, Cole & Lee, 2009). On the behavioural level, the focus is on the consequences of those cognitive responses. Such consequences are usually inferred either from favourable responses to fraudulent activities or actions taken as a result of dissatisfaction with products or services received (e.g., complaints to the seller and authorities, and negative word-of-mouth communications, etc.) (Moschis, 1992; Waddell, 1975).

Consumer vulnerability focuses on disadvantaged groups. Most definitions involve demographic variables, such as age (Andreasen & Manning, 1990; Lee & Soberon-Ferrer, 1997), income (Garrett & Toumanoff, 2010; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997), and education (Jae & Viswanathan, 2012) and so on. However, the standards within these definitions differ. For example, Andreasen and Manning (1990, p. 13) define vulnerable

consumers to include “children, the elderly, the uneducated, the structurally poor, the physically handicapped, ethnic and racial minorities, and those with language problems”. In contrast, Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) ignore age and physical state, maintaining that consumer vulnerability results from demographic characteristics (e.g., income, education, and race) which limit consumers’ ability to maximize their utility and welfare.

As research has evolved, some scholars insist that consumer vulnerability is not limited to demographics but instead includes other factors, such as consumer competence and marketing contexts (Morgan et al., 1995; Brenkert, 1998; Langenderfer & Shimp, 2001; Ringold, 2005), and is the consequence of interactions between consumers’ internal influences and external social influences (Morgan et al., 1995; Baker et al., 2005; Commuri & Ekici, 2008).

The individual charaterists from demographic variables in early studies to the individual state and competence are explored currently. Some scholars focus on vulnerable consumers in some specific marketing contexts, for example illegal ones, and integrate internal factors to investigate consumer vulnerability. Baker et al.’s (2005) model of consumer vulnerability offers a macro-marketing perspective which conceptualizes consumer vulnerability as a context-dependent state, identifying consumer responses to vulnerability in a consumption context. This definition has some limitations when applied to public policy, however, because the policy maker cannot recognize all the contexts in which consumers will experience vulnerability (Commuri & Ekici, 2008). In other words, to provide useful suggestions to public policy makers, it is necessary to abandon definitions that depend on contexts, and take all situations into consideration.

According to Baker et al.’s (2005) model, the definition of consumer vulnerability is:

> Consumer vulnerability is an individual characteristic that refers to a tendency to make decisions that will damage one’s welfare when stimulated or tempted by external factors in a consumption situation.

This definition holds that consumer vulnerability is an individual characteristic, but it is

not restricted to sociodemographic variables. All consumers can experience vulnerability as the result of interactions between internal and external influences (Brenkert, 1998; Langenderfer & Shimp, 2001; Baker et al., 2005; Ringold, 2005); the only distinction is the degree of vulnerability. For example, highly vulnerable consumers will be more impulsive in the face of temptation exerted by product information expressions, which in turn leads to more useless products being bought.

External stimuli and temptations include all the marketing tools within the whole consumption process, such as advertisements (An et al., 2014) and marketing fraud (Lee & Soberon-Ferrer, 1997; Langenderfer & Shimp, 2001; Gregory, 2014; Scheibe et al., 2014). Scheibe et al. (2014), for example, point out the pervasiveness of telemarketing fraud, to which millions of people have fallen victim.

This definition indicates that the result of consumer vulnerability is the loss of consumer welfare—specifically, negative emotional experience and dissatisfying product or service utility (Lyon et al., 2002; Jae & Viswanathan, 2012). The consumer cannot distinguish which alternative is the best because of limited knowledge (e.g., product knowledge), thus leading to a suboptimal decision. Moreover, the consumer does not have the ability to choose the best option due to factors such as social pressure and purchasing ability. These two conditions comprise two types of consumer vulnerability: lack of knowledge and powerlessness.

### 2.7.1 Children as vulnerable

Children are not always discerning enough to realize that advertising contains empty promises, perceiving it as informative and reliable (Ward, 1972). It is therefore relatively easy to convince those whose judgment skills are undeveloped.

This psychological view of individual consumer vulnerability tends to visualize the lone consumer confronting the might of corporate marketing structures and, in particular, the information power imbalance that may ensue in the face of persuasive commercial messages. Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 1) claim that “one of a consumer’s primary tasks is to interpret and cope with marketers’ sales presentations and advertising”. Importantly for this present study, it is within this stream of research that the child consumer is very often situated. Indeed, a great deal of research into children as

vulnerable consumers has sought to understand whether children are capable of understanding marketing messages, and what effect advertising and marketing has on them in the short and long terms. The pinnacle of this approach is child 'consumer socialization' literature, which has sought to identify categorically at what age children develop the various levels of cognitive capacity required to render them invulnerable to the pressures of marketing. For example, John's (1999) study—almost exclusively underpinned by cognitive developmental psychology—aims primarily to understand how individual children accrue, across predictable 'age-stages' (Piaget, 1960), an increasing level of sophistication in interpreting marketing messages and operating competently and autonomously within the market place (Chaplin & John, 2007, 2010; John, 1999; Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2002).

This paradigmatic lens provides a view of consumption as a force exerted by marketers on individual children; and has tended to focus public debate on definitions of 'fair' marketing, specifically on pinpointing the age at which children are cognitively and socially capable of being 'savvy', and thus no longer 'vulnerable' to undue external commercial pressures (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004). While treating the individual cognitive competence of children, it implies that all children are 'automatically' not vulnerable once they have reached the 'magic age' (Nairn & Fine, 2008) when cognitive competence protects them. Corollary, this approach also implies that all children are 'automatically' vulnerable before this age.

### 2.7.2 Parents as vulnerable

People become vulnerable when there is a risk that someone (an agent) or something (an outcome) may cause them harm while they are in a particular state (Commuri & Ekici, 2008). When parents decide which early childhood education centre to choose for their children they take a risk, since these centres have the possibility to provide a below average service. Consequently, the children will be the ones who suffer.

Earlier studies imply that despite product category, the marketing of more harmful products to any group is generally considered to be unethical (Nwachukwu et al., 1997; Smith & Cooper Martin, 1997). Furthermore, subjects marketing harmful products to target populations exhibiting a higher degree of vulnerability are deemed even more unethical. Yet, these studies tell us little about whether consumers can identify the

consumer groups deemed vulnerable in the literature. Nor do we have any indication of whether the targeted consumer can accurately identify a product that is potentially harmful based on the information provided by the seller.

Responsible parents—for their children's own good—can rightly decide to intervene in their children's lives, without giving them the opportunity to choose among the options the parents consider harmful. Parents have a responsibility to protect and advance their children's interests, regardless of, or even against, their own preferences (Elegido, 2016). Kultgen (1995) characterizes this action as paternalistic "if it is an intervention in a subject's life for his benefit without regards to his consent" (p. 62). He argues that people are justified in acting paternalistically if and only if they believe that the expected value of the action for the recipient is greater than any alternative, and that they have reason to trust their own judgment in spite of any opposition, including the recipient. However, paternalists suffer from a significant deflect in knowledge, which greatly handicaps their efforts to do what is good for another, especially when the strategy they pursue often prevents them from asking their customers directly about their preferences.

### 2.7.3 Product harmfulness

Harmful products have been defined as any product that is known to be unsafe and/or unfit for its intended use (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). While much of the literature focuses on product harmfulness in relation to physical harm (e.g., tobacco products, Kessler, 2001; alcohol products, Davidson, 1996), others include economic (e.g., payday loans, Geller, 2001; mortgage loans, Fortney, 2000) and psychological harm (e.g., transient skin damage induced by the inappropriate use of alpha hydroxy acids, Davis, 1999) in their definition of product harm. Society may view such products as differing in degrees of harmfulness on a continuum that ranges from 'less harmful' (i.e., non-sinful or guilty pleasures), to 'more harmful' (i.e., filthy habits), to 'most harmful' (i.e., sinful or socially unacceptable). For example, sinful products could include tobacco, alcoholic beverages, firearms, gambling, and pornography (Davidson, 1996). Thus, the marketing environment may be hostile for products considered to be more or most harmful, as evidenced by the organized opposition of social, religious, political, and regulatory groups. This hostility occurs despite the fact that these socially problematic products, though strictly regulated, are generally legal and highly desired by certain

customer segments (Davidson, 1996; Rotfeld, 1998).

Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) suggest a process by which consumers integrate perceptions of target vulnerability and product harmfulness when making ethical evaluations of specific selling strategies. This process begins with a marketer developing a targeting strategy based on the key characteristics of the product and the attributes of the target. The public's perceptions of product harmfulness and target vulnerability are expected to affect their judgments of the ethicality of the strategy, which in turn influence any behavioural responses. Any approving and disapproving behaviours provide feedback to the marketer and can affect subsequent marketing strategies. Although this process sounds reasonable, it is reliant on the consumers' ability to identify the level of product harm, as well as the intended target markets' degree of vulnerability. Unethical early childhood education services mostly result in psychological harm to young children (i.e., the vulnerable) because they have a low ability to identify harmfulness.

Other models of the ethical evaluation procedure suggest that consumers follow a four-step decision-making process: the consumer must (1) first recognize a moral issue is present; (2) make a moral judgment; (3) establish a moral intent; and finally (4) engage in a moral behaviour (Hunt & Vitell, 1992; Paolillo & Vitell, 2002; Rest, 1979). Thus, if the consumer is unable to identify or incorrectly identifies either the level of product harm or the degree of consumer vulnerability, the consumer may not even recognize that a moral issue is present, resulting in a flawed ethical evaluation process.

The general public does not normally know the average levels of product harm found in many popular products (Alcohol Fact, 2003). Companies typically do not promote that information, and the government does not require that information to be printed on the promotional materials. As such, the general public will be unable to distinguish a vulnerable consumer. Finally, if the average consumer is not able to accurately identify product harm and consumer vulnerability, they may not have the ability to recognize that a moral issue exists when a firm targets vulnerable consumers with harmful products.

Research indicates that consumers make evaluations of product harm based on

information they 'remember' (explicit memory), 'know' (implicit memory), or 'guess' (Monroe & Lee, 1999). Direct tests of memory entail priming, or specific exposure to a context cue that aids in the retrieval of information from memory. Priming is a condition under which "a previously presented item or event facilitates recall or recognition of a following item or event" (Beer & Diehl, 2001, p. 329). The prime, or stimulus, serves as a point of reference or anchor. Earlier research finds that the decision maker often exhibits a shift toward the prime as a decision-making anchor, rather than searching their own categories and assumptions to complete their evaluation (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981; Kahneman & Tversky, 1988). These studies find that while priming may alert the target as to the product's attributes, it may actually cause them to more consciously and specifically attend to the stimuli, resulting in more extreme responses (Martin, 1986; Stafford & Stafford, 2000). If no prime is introduced, subjects are more likely to rely on information they know or guess. That is, if no reference point is provided, the consumer is less likely to accurately recognize the harmfulness of a product.

Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) define vulnerable consumers for their subjects as "those who are more susceptible to economic, physical, or psychological harm in, or as a result of, economic transactions because of characteristics that limit their ability to maximize their utility and wellbeing" (p. 4). Thus, the vulnerable consumer has been labelled "the least sophisticated", and is often described as anyone who does not have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes which enable them to make efficient consumer decisions (Hill, 2002; Nwachukwu et al., 1997). In this sense, marketing ethics should be considered and applied by the service providers (i.e., early childhood education centres) to protect customers (i.e., parents and young children) in the early childhood education sector.

### 2.8 Marketing ethics

Ethics, historically, is one of the main branches of philosophy that focuses on morals and values (Yücel et al., 2009), and relates to people's actions and decisions. It broadly conveys concepts such as right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice, and of being held accountable (Brinkmann, 2002; Ferrell et al., 1989). While values are standards which provide guidance, morality refers to patterns of thought, actions, and decisions that are operative in everyday life (Brinkmann, 2002). Morals, such as honesty and

integrity, are attributed to a system of beliefs (e.g., religious and political). In a business context, marketing ethics and marketing morality relate to issues such as product safety, bribery, deceptive advertising, and deceptive pricing, etc. Hence, good ethical practices and decision making will bring long-term benefits for a company or an organization.

The growing interest in ethics has given rise to the notion of ethical marketing, which refers to the extent to which a firm's marketing policies and practices are characterized by transparency, trustworthiness, and responsibility; thus creating a feeling of fairness and rightness among stakeholders in general and consumers in particular (Murphy et al., 2005). Marketing ethics is "the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviours, and institutions" (Murphy et al., 2005, p.xvii). In the 1960s and 1970s, marketing ethics literature primarily focused on marketing research and managerial issues, such as purchasing and the four P's (product, price, place, promotion), and to a lesser extent theoretical and consumer concerns (Murphys & Laczniak, 1981). The normative perspective of "developing guidelines or rules to assist marketers in their effort to behave in an ethical fashion" was developed in the early stages (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, p. 6). Subsequently, development of theoretical models of marketers' ethical decision-making processes inspired a large amount of research (Ferrell & Greham, 1985; Ferrel et al., 1989; Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Since then, marketing ethics has built on both of these streams, applying normative guidance from moral and political philosophy, such as social contracts theory and virtue theory, to the more complex understanding of the marketing ethics decision-making process provided by descriptive research (Dunfee et al., 1999; Murphy, 1999; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997; Takala & Unsitalo, 1996). Donaldson (1982, 1989) states that firms may offer advantages to society in an exchange for the right to exist and prosper. This type of exchange relationship between firms and customers is important and fundamental to marketing.

Marketing ethics systematically examines marketing and marketing morality relating to four issues: unsafe products, deceptive pricing, deceptive advertising or bribery, and discrimination in distribution (Simth & Quelch, 1993). Four basic sets of values are prominently appealed to in these discussions: truth, freedom, well-being, and justice. Although some marketers still speak of the main ethical issues facing marketers as the

"key values of trust, honesty, respect, and fairness" (Smith & Quelch, 1993, p. 11). Often, the values of truth, freedom, well-being, and justice are used to criticize marketing for various ethical failures. Accordingly, with regard to truth, advertisements, purchase agreements, and promotions have been attacked for dishonesty or misleading customers (Carson et al., 1985; Jackson, 1990). The nature and limits of false claims (hyperbole) in advertising has been a constant source of concern (Preston, 1975; Pollary, 1986). Other issues were later added, including stealth marketing, predatory leading, promotion of off-label uses of pharmaceuticals, and online privacy (Karpatkin, 1999; Murphy et al., 2005).

Marketers should ensure that the consumers enjoy capability, information, and choice (Murphy al et., 2012). Capability is denied by vulnerability and requires that the consumer is able to make effective decisions in relation to a given product (Smith, 1995). Information requires that consumers have sufficient knowledge to understand the risks of a given product and judge whether their expectations at the time of purchase are likely to be fulfilled. Consumers have choices if they have other options and are actually able to switch to other companies if they are not satisfied with a given seller's offer.

Business enterprises should consider the interests of all those affected by the firm's actions (Bishop, 2000). They have a moral obligation to consider the interests of all stakeholders, i.e., stockholders, employees, and customers, etc., regardless of whether or not this is instrumentally beneficial to the firm or its own owners. Hasnas (1998) suggests that a business's financial success can best be achieved by giving the interests of the business's stakeholders, customers, employees, and suppliers, etc., proper consideration, and adopting policies which produce the optimal balance among them. It implies management's basic obligation is not only to maximize the firm's financial success, but also to ensure its survival by balancing conflicting claims of multiple stakeholders. When implementing educational marketing, marketing ethics should be considered to protect the stakeholders. For example, deceptive advertising should be avoided. Hence, in the early childhood education sector, the interest of the parents, students (i.e., the vulnerable), and even the teachers should also be protected.

### 2.8.1 Attributes of ethical marketing

The importance of marketing products and services has generated extensive attention

in recent decades. Many companies take initiatives to respond to consumer expectations towards products and services that promote ethical principles (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin & Raghunathan, 2010). It is generally believed that consumers will respond more favourably to ethical products and services that have attributes which reflect moral principles. The attributes of ethical marketing are explored below.

#### 2.8.1.1 Trust

Hosmer's (1995) study, which builds upon social exchange theory, draws several conclusions in regards to trust: it "occurs under conditions of vulnerability and dependence upon the behaviour of others"; "is associated with willing, not forced, cooperation"; and "is accompanied by an accepted duty to protect the rights and interests of others" (p. 391-392). According to Blau (1964), social exchange theory is based on the concept of negotiated exchanges between two parties in which people form subjective cost–benefit analyses and the comparison of alternatives. In other words, if one partner helps or in any way benefits the other, there is likely to be an expectation that the party which benefited will reciprocate. Social exchanges bring satisfaction when people receive a fair return for their expenditure. According to Stafford (2008), social exchanges involve a connection with another person; involve trust and not legal obligations; are more flexible; and rarely involve explicit bargaining. Seligman (1997) points out "were trusting acts to be dependent upon the play of reciprocity it would not be an act of trust at all, but an act predicated on confidence" (p. 44). Hence, trust is mainly required when consumers feel vulnerable and ignorant (Gibbs, 2004).

Rotter's (1967) definition is the most widely accepted, in that trust is a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied upon. By this definition, trust implies a certain expectation and confidence about the behaviour of others and an implicit vulnerability to that person's actions. Because trust is cooperative and not enforceable, it is an inherently ethical notion. Going further, he suggests that one of the key drivers in every organization is trust between individuals, and that the existence of any social group is highly dependable on it.

Trust is also defined as having some faith in the workings of systems or processes of which one possesses only limited knowledge (Gidden, 1990). For instance, as

consumers become aware of a corporation's reputation, they trust that the firm will maintain certain quality standards to maintain that reputation. In turn, this trust provides organizations with the legitimacy (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) to take risks in a variety of ways, such as new types of products or service variations which allow the company to develop certain economies of scope (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). In addition, there are two key components and characteristics essential to brand trust: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness refers to the consumer's confidence in the brand providing quality performance in a sincere and honest manner. Expertise is the extent to which a brand is perceived to be skilful and knowledgeable, which comes from experience or training in the product/service category (Sung & Kim, 2010).

Salcuiuviene et al. (2011) defines trust as grounds for constructiveness, credibility, and confidence in another individual's reliability and competence. Trust is also defined as the belief that the other party will meet the expectations of their role (e.g., teachers) and will be open, honest, benevolent, and reliable (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Forsyth et al., 2011). Openness and authenticity (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, 2000), and effective communication (Dunsmuir, Frederickson, & Lang, 2004; Ebmeier & Nicklaus, 1999; Stoner et al., 2005) also influences trust.

Trust is seen as an important driver in relationships and relationship enhancement, in that it would seem to reduce risk perception. As well as generating cooperative behaviour, trust may also (Rousseauch et al., 1998):

- Reduce harmful conflict
- Decrease transactional costs (e.g., negating the need for constant checks)
- Promote adaptive organizational forms (e.g., network relationships)
- Facilitate the rapid formation of ad hoc groups
- Promote an effective response to a crisis

Berry (1995) suggests trust in a relationship reduces uncertainty and vulnerability, especially for so-called 'black-box-type' services that are difficult to evaluate due to their intangible, complexity, and technical nature. As such, he proposed that customers who develop trust in service suppliers based on their experiences with them have good reasons to remain in these relationships. This implies that loyalty to a firm will be greater when consumers have perceptions of trust or confidence in the service provider.

Bitner (1995) echoes this proposition when she asserts that each service encounter represents an opportunity for the provider to build trust and thus increase customer loyalty.

Hoorens-Maas and Naafs-Wilstra (1997) indicate that when teachers and parents build up a positive relationship, feelings of safety and trust will develop, and they will become more predictable with respect to each other, becoming partners in education. The feeling of safety also influences students at school. Evetts (2008) suggests that the ideas of trust, competence, and professionalism are inextricably linked and interconnected. The position of early childhood educator is complex and requires a diversity of skills in "knowing, being, experiencing, and acting" (Goodfellow, 2001, p. 17; Miller, Dalli, & Urban, 2012). The role requires an educator to be a keen observer of children's needs, as well as a teacher of skills and knowledge in literacy and numeracy, and social and self-care management (Varga,2000). This gives confidence to parents that teachers with professional knowledge are able to identify learning needs and effectively teach students. early childhood education has been conceptualized as a caring vocation and one that has a professional workforce (Moyles, 2001). The professionalism of the teacher builds confidence in the minds of the parents and leads to parents' trust in teachers.

Gaining the trust of customers has long been considered one of the key issues by marketers, since it legitimizes firms to take various risks (e.g., developing new products, introducing support services, and entering new markets) that can ultimately enhance their market and financial performance (Choi et al., 2007; Chow and Holden, 1997). Trust, as a variable that influences marketing managers and their behaviour, has received substantial analysis over the years, with the most extensive study being one in an industrial/business-to-business setting (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Ganesan, 1994; Salmond, 1994). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust is one of the most essential constructs for successful relationship marketing. They define it as existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partners' reliability and integrity. Trust has also been studied in the context of retail relationships (Crosby et al., 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Ganesan, 1994) and within marketing channel relationships in Australia (Young & Wilkinson, 1989). Moorman et al. (1992, 1993) identify trust as a critical variable in marketing research relationships. Several studies

also indicate that relational selling flourishes where high levels of trust are present (Hawes, 1994; Hawes et al., 1989). Trust relationship can be the magnitude of asymmetric information and hence the uncertainties consumers face in assessing the quality of the product due to the asymmetry (Darby & Karni, 1973; Jeffries & Reed, 2000; Nelson, 1970; Schmalensee, 1982). Although trust is the mutual confidence that exchange partners will refrain from exploiting the other's vulnerabilities, different types of trust can exist in different economic exchanges (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Bernstein, 1996; Jeffries & Reed, 2000), and it can also be fundamental to societies. Donaldson (2003) introduces the idea of an ethical wealth of nations, where the importance of welfare and trust are fundamental to the workings of society.

Both trust and the ethical execution of the classic marketing concept are driven by precisely the same characteristics. According to Shaw's (1997), "Trust in the Balance", the creation of a marketplace requires four elements:

- consumers perceive that product and service claims are honest and can be relied on;
- integrity and consistency motivate marketplace practices; and
- the well-being of consumers is kept in fair balance with the sometimes
- competing interests of the selling organization.

#### 2.8.1.2 Commitment

Commitment can be defined as an implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between buyers and sellers (Dwyers et al., 1987). Willingness to remain committed assumes that the relationship will produce continued value or benefits to both parties (Hardwick & Ford, 1996).

Commitment is considered an affective emotional attachment to the organization, such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization. This view is taken by Kanter (1968), who describes 'cohesion commitment' as "the attachment of an individual's fund of affectivity and emotion to the group" (p. 507). Commitment is generally regarded to be an important result of good relational interactions (Dwyer et al., 1987). Moorman et al. (1993) state that customers who are committed to a relationship might have a higher propensity to act because of their need to remain consistent with their commitment. Bennett (1996)

proposes that the strength of customer commitment depends on their perceptions of efforts made by the seller. Customer commitment is "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992, p. 316). This variable reflects self-focused attitudinal facets of an exchange, such as dedication, personal identification with the partner, and a focus on long-term benefits over short-term alternatives (Garbarino & Johnson 1999; Morgan & Hunt 1994). As a global evaluation of the relationship with a temporal facet, signalling expectations of continuity and customer commitment is key to the long-term success of a relationship (Palmatier et al. 2006). Allen and Meyer's (1990) study presents the affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment.

Commitment is an exchange party's long-term desire to maintain a valuable ongoing relationship with another (Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Gudlach and Murphy (1993) indicate that the characteristics of commitment are thought to be stability, sacrifice, and loyalty. Berry and Parasuraman (1991) suggest that, in the services marketing area, relationships are built on the basis of mutual commitment. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) define customer commitment as an exchange partner's willingness to maintain an important enduring relationship.

Existing literature recognizes trust as a preceding state for the development of commitment (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Soloman and Flores (2001) indicate that trust is necessary for making commitments. Soellner (1994) suggests that trust stimulates communication which makes commitment possible; while Day (1995) proposes that commitment often involves managerial actions leading to information sharing among partners that is totally open, thus giving the cooperative arrangements a formal status not embodied in the initial cooperating teams but rather in the organizations themselves. Trust has been identified as an important predictor of commitment (Coote et al., 2003; Geyskens et al., 1996; Anderson & Weitz, 1989). A number of studies report significant relationships between trust and commitment (Palmatier et al., 2007; Lohtia et al., 2005). As commitment is closely linked to sacrifice, partners would look for others they can trust and would commit themselves only when trust is established (Garbarino & Johnson, 1989).

Commitment implies the importance of the relationship to the parties, as well as their desire to continue (Wilson, 2000). It also suggests that both parties will be loyal, reliable, and show stability in the relationship. As it usually takes time to reach a point where a commitment can be made, it may also imply a certain 'maturity' in a relationship (Bejou & Palmer, 1998). High levels of commitment are also associated with perceptions of future rewards, relationship identification, limited desire to seek out alternatives, the amount of effort expended in a relationship, and the individuals assumed accountability (Grossmann, 1998). It is important to build trust and commitment if the establishment of a relationship is the final goal.

#### 2.8.1.3 Integrity

Integrity—often referred to as reliability, honesty, or credibility—reflects the ethical traits of the trustee, is similar to benevolence, and is considered critical for establishing trust (Mcknight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002). However, integrity, and the keeping of agreements and commitments, reflects rather altruistic motives in some contrast to benevolence. Erhard et al. (2009) defines integrity as a matter of a person's word—nothing more and nothing less. When you honour your word, your word is whole and complete; when your word is whole and complete, your identity is whole and complete; when your identity is whole and complete, you are unbroken, unimpaired, sound, and complete, which becomes the state and condition of integrity. While integrity is also not purely an individual attribute, but a moral commitment in interaction with and shared by other community members (Bauman, 2013).

Integrity-based trust is when exchange partners are confident that neither side will engage in behaviour that is self-interested in nature, because such behaviour would violate a set of principles that the partners find acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995). It also includes aspects such as a belief that the partner has a strong sense of fairness and that their actions are congruent with their words. In general, it is about keeping promises. People try to back up their words with actions and are honest when dealing with others.

#### 2.8.1.4 Benevolence

Benevolence, in the context of commercial trust relationships, is defined as the probability that the trustee places the interest of the trusting party ahead of their own (Chen & Dhillon, 2003). It is the belief of the buying firm that the counterparty is

interested in the buyer's welfare (Kurmar et al., 1995). Ganesan and Hess (1997) state that benevolence-based trust is confidence in the motives of the other party in conditions involving risk or a belief in the benevolent intentions of the other party. Benevolence goes beyond fairness to support a partner firm in a risky situation.

Previous studies (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992; Ganesan, 1994) suggest that benevolence-based trust is a trust expectation resulting from goodwill, and point out that benevolence-based trust not only drives genuine concerns and care, but also characterizes the intent and motivation to offer benefits to other parties. The partners trust each other that they will not behave in such a way that the other "wants to do good… aside from an egocentric profit motive" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 718). Whether partners will take each other's best interest into account when making decisions is considered one of the vital aspects of benevolence-based trust (Carson et al., 2003). In the marketing context, consumers believe that the firm is genuinely interested in their welfare and will not take unexpected actions that are harmful to themselves (Lam & Shankar, 2014).

It is about people who care about the well-being of others and who are also sincerely concerned about the problems of others. Most of the time, people care enough to try to be helpful rather than just look out for themselves.

#### 2.8.1.5 Competence

Competence refers to the trustee's ability to fulfil the promise as initially communicated to the trustor (Chen & Dhillon, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). In contrast to benevolence, which refers to a moral intention, competence reflects the necessary skills to fulfil an expectation. Consumers believe that the firm marketing a brand has the required expertise to create an offering that performs its job effectively and reliably (Lam & Shankar, 2014). Therefore, it reflects consumers' confidence that the delivered results will meet an adequate level of quality. Competence assumes that professional people do a very good job and are knowledgeable in their chosen field and they are competent in their area of expertise.

#### 2.8.1.6 Shared values

Kelman (1961) suggests that holding the same values as another person or group leads

to more positive attitudes. Furthermore, parties that have overlapping opinions about fundamental beliefs with regards to right or wrong, or high/low importance or unimportance, are more likely to share similar values in the dyadic relationship.

According to Thibaut and Kelly (1959), shared values are closely linked to norms, which are a behavioural rule that is accepted—at least to some degree—by both members of the dyad. Heide and John (1982) propose that shared values also contain information exchange, flexibility, and solidarity elements. Morgan and Hunt (1994) see shared values as one of the precursors of trust. Shared values aid trust and create a propensity to trust (Brashear et al., 2003). When parents and the school share the same values, it implies the parents have a certain degree of agreement towards the behaviour of the school. Shared values assist in experiencing the highest levels of unconditional trust (Jones & George, 1998), and also contribute to the development of trust (Nicholson, et al., 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Dwyer et al., 1987). As such, in a private early childhood education centre context, the trust and confidence that parents gain, allows them to better recognize the education service being provided.

**2.9 Government regulation and legislation**

Education institutions in Hong Kong for preschool children are supervised by the Child Care Services Ordinance and Education Ordinance.

The Child Care Service Ordinance (Chapter 243) (Social Welfare Department, 1997) states that any premises which habitually receives at any one time more than five children who are under the age of three years for the purpose of care and supervision requires registration as a register childcare centre. Currently, registered childcare centres are subject to regulation in accordance with the Child Care Service Ordinance by the Social Welfare Department and the Joint Office for Pre-primary Services set up under the Education Bureau.

According to the Education Ordinance (Cap. 279) (Education Bureau, 2000), any institution, organization, or establishment which provides for 20 or more persons during any one day, or eight or more persons at any one time, by any means, is required to be registered or provisionally registered as a school. Hence, any group that provides activities consisting of educational courses, such as language learning, irrespective of

the mode of activities and the age of students, is required to be registered or provisionally registered as a school under the Education Ordinance, so long as it meets the above thresholds regarding the number of students. Schools registered or provisionally registered under the Education Ordinance have to fulfil the requirements of the Education Ordinance in respect of school premises, fee collection, teacher qualification, teacher–pupil ratio, and curriculum, etc., as well as to comply with guidelines issued by the Education Bureau from time to time. Education Bureau officers can also conduct visits to any school to ensure its compliance with the Education Ordinance and that it is being run satisfactorily. In other words, private early childhood education centres which provide courses aimed at facilitating children's mental development or at developing their physical and social skills, do not need to register with the Social Welfare Department or Education Bureau. Therefore, there is room for these private early childhood education centres to exist in the market. Management need only obtain a business registration certificate that complies with the Business Registration Ordinance (Chapter 310) (Inland Revenue Department, 2013) and an insurance notice to protect the staff that complies with the Employees' Compensation Ordinance (Chapter 282) (Labour Department, 2018). Ultimately, private early childhood education centres can be operated as a business, not a school, and the Secretary of Education has indicated that the Education Bureau has no plans to amend the Education Ordinance (Legislative Council, 2016).

In addition, the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Chapter 362) (Customs and Excise Department, 2012) prohibits specified unfair trade practices deployed by traders against consumers, including false trade descriptions of services, misleading omissions, aggressive commercial practices, bait advertising, bait-and-switch practices, and wrongly accepting payment.

## 2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature on neoliberalism and educational marketing, consumer vulnerability, marketing ethics, and the regulations of the Hong Kong government.

In the context of neoliberalism, marketization reveals an emerging stage of

deregulatory focus. Through creating new markets, marketing is necessary to facilitate communication. Educational marketing has been developed for schools to more precisely meet the needs of its customers and consumers. An ongoing and strong relationship between the customer (i.e., parents, consumers, and students) in the early childhood education sector is a powerful tool to retain students. It demonstrates the adoption of relationship marketing in the context of educational marketing, in which marketization is nurtured under neoliberalism.

While parents and students evaluate the quality of early childhood education through teaching quality and other criteria, consumer vulnerability exists. They can be harmed by unethical education services and marketing, such as deceptive advertising. As such, the attributes of ethical marketing (i.e., trust, commitment, integrity, benevolence, competence, and shared values) should be considered in order to protect the interests of parents and students, thereby mitigating impacts on them when implementing educational marketing. Not only does this chapter highlight the importance of taking into account marketing ethics in order to protect the interests and well-being of parents and students as the customers and consumers, the existing regulations regarding business operations in Hong Kong that apply to private early childhood education centres have also been reviewed.

Therefore, the adoption of the marketing activities in the private early childhood education centres sector should be understood. Moreover, the effect of marketing of education on teaching quality will be explored in this study in the context of marketization in the private early childhood education centres sector in Hong Kong. During the implementation of marketing, the ethical issues will also be evaluated as the parents and students are the vulnerable.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

A mixed methods approach, whereby researchers integrate quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to best understand a research purpose (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) has been applied to this research (Figure 3.1). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that this approach emphasises explanation and application factors, and is able to better interpret and understand the applications and implications of the subject matter. Rocco et al. (2003) suggest that one of the advantages of a mixed methods approach is that the legitimacy of quantitative methods is enhanced by incorporating qualitative methods—known as triangulation.

Explanatory design is a two-phase mixed methods approach, which starts with collection and analysis of quantitative data. This is followed by collection and analysis of qualitative data, which follows on from and connects with the results of the first phase.

A follow-up explanations model is used when a researcher needs qualitative data to explain or expand on quantitative results (Creswell et al., 2003). This model identifies specific quantitative findings that require additional explanation (e.g., statistical differences among groups, individuals who scored at extreme levels, or unexpected results), then qualitative data is collected from participants of focus groups who can best help explain these findings. In this model, the primary emphasis is usually on the quantitative aspects.

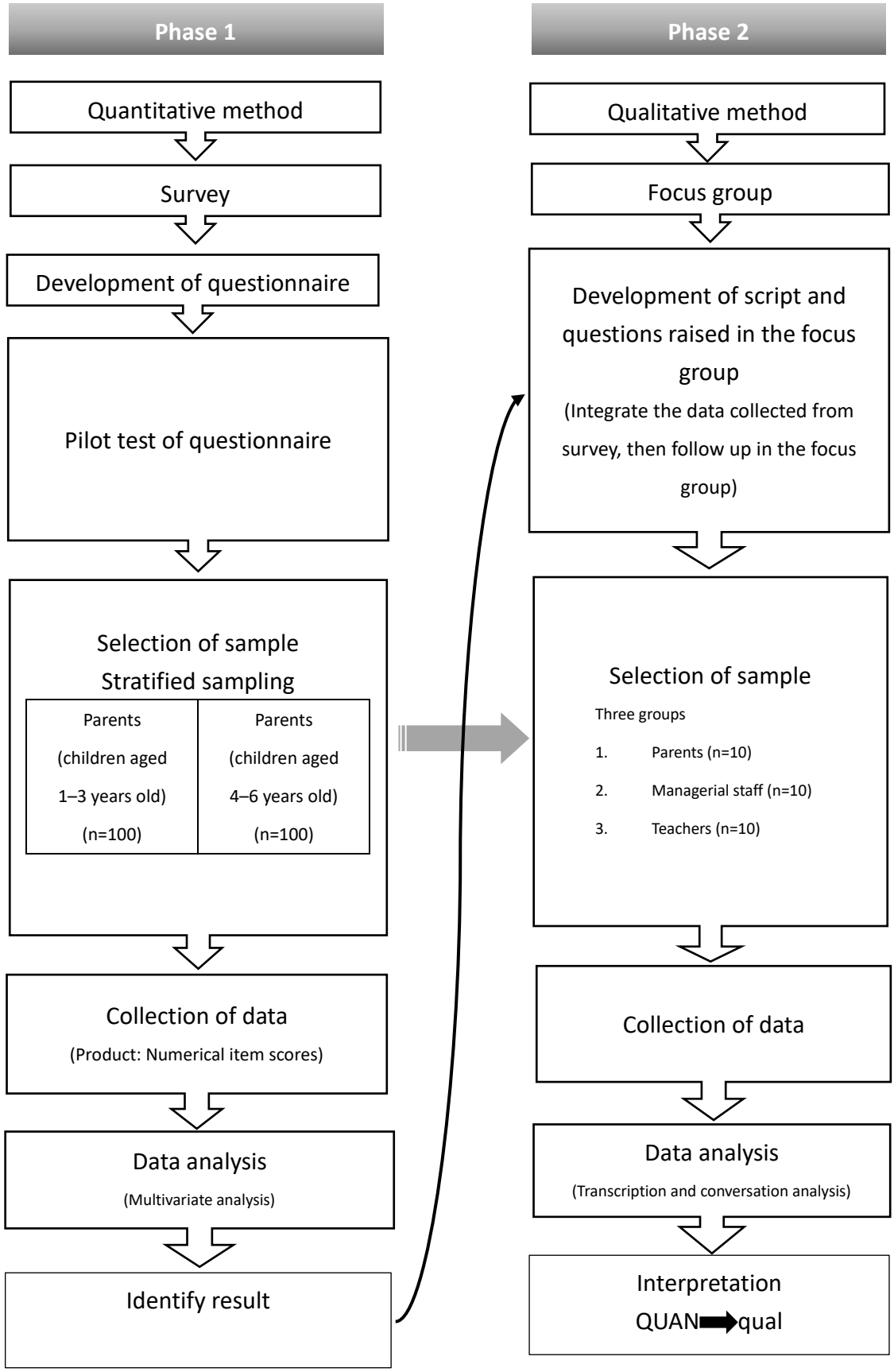


Figure 3. 1: Mixed methods approach: Explanatory

In this study, a quantitative method was applied in phase 1. A survey with a questionnaire was developed, which was followed by a pilot test to reduce unanticipated problems when fine-tuning the questions in order to yield more accurate findings from the survey. A stratified sampling method was used to select respondents who are parents with child(ren) aged between 1–3 and 4–6. After collecting the data, analysis using different tests was conducted to identify the results. These results were then taken into consideration when developing phase 2 in order to explain the quantitative findings.

In phase 2, a qualitative method was adopted, in which three focus groups were conducted. The themes and questions of the focus groups were developed based on the findings and results from phase 1. In addition to the parents, the managerial staff and teachers at private early childhood education centres were also invited to participate in order to obtain a more holistic stakeholder view. The discussions of all three focus groups were then transcribed and analysed, so as to build a comprehensive picture of the results from phase 1.

Based on Murphy, Laczniak, and Prothero's (2012) model, the primary research for this study mainly focused on the primary stakeholders (Figure 3.2) and their views.

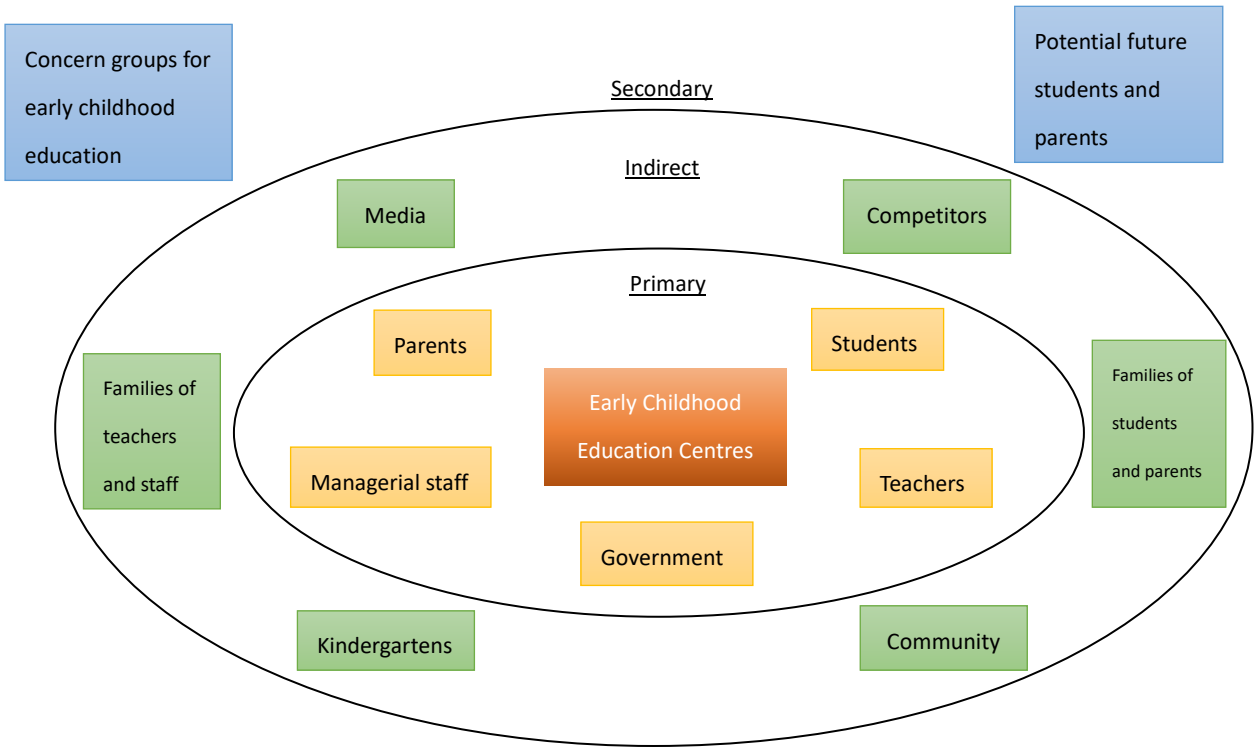


Figure 3. 2 Stakeholders of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong

Adoption of stakeholder orientation is essential for the advancement and maintenance of ethical marketing decision-making in an organization. In the broadest sense, a stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organization's objectives (Freeman, 1984). This definition covers those that influence decisions, such as employees and marketing managers, as well as people impacted by marketing practices, such as customers and suppliers. Stakeholder orientation embodies the idea that the marketing system operates in and for society.

Stakeholders can be classified in three ways. Primary stakeholders have a continuing and essential interest because the organization would cease to exist without them. With private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong, for example, students aged under 6 years old are the consumers, while the parents are the customers. While managerial staff and teachers are service suppliers with an interest in managing and teaching. Hence, these primary stakeholders have direct impacts on private early childhood education centres.

Indirect stakeholders possess a long-lasting but separated interest in an organization, with the distinction being that the relationship is not as close as with those in the primary category. The term “indirect” is used in that the interaction with the organization is a more distant one. However, these are not fringe stakeholders, since they have an ongoing interest in the organization. For instance, their interest and stake are more immediate than the secondary group but their support for firm success is not as essential as the relationship with primary stakeholders. In the private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong, the media, competitors, families of students and parents, families of teachers and staff, kindergartens, and the local community have an impact on the primary stakeholders, and have an indirect impact on the centres themselves.

Secondary stakeholders have a potential interest in the firm, and although they are not always affected or influenced by the organization, that potential still exists. In the private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong, concern groups of the early childhood education give attention to the quality of the private early childhood education centres. The potential future students and parents consider different private early childhood education centres and possibly choose one or few of them to enrol. These stakeholders do not directly affect the operations of the education centres, but nevertheless have the power to influence them if they express their views to other types of stakeholders.

### 3.1 Phase 1 – Quantitative method

The phase 1 survey, in the form of a questionnaire, collected respondents' views about the marketing activities, marketing ethics, teaching quality, and the selection criteria of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Stratified sampling, which involves dividing the population into mutually exclusive subgroups, was used to draw respondents from:

1. Parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 years old
2. Parents with child(ren) aged 4–6 years old

Of the 200 invited respondents, 100 parents had child(ren) aged 1–3 years old, and 100 parents had child(ren) aged 4–6 years old. Of the 171 respondents who returned the questionnaire, 88 had child(ren) aged 1–3 years old, and 83 respondents had child(ren) aged 4–6 years old. All parents were able to provide holistic responses about private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong, since they had direct experience enrolling their children in centres providing courses for the two age ranges.

Students aged below 6 years old were excluded from the research because they were considered vulnerable. Although they are the users of the education services, their parents are the decision makers. Thus, their parents' views reflect marketing strategy performance and the practices involved in marketing ethics. The two age ranges were chosen because they represent different developmental stages in early childhood. As such, the parents who had child(ren) in these two age ranges were able to provide holistic responses about private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong for this survey. It was because these parents enrolled their child(ren) in private early childhood education centres that provided different courses which targeted and suited their child(ren) at different developmental stages.

Stratified sampling was adopted in the phase 1. It involved dividing the population into mutually exclusive subgroups. The parents with experiences in enrolling their child in private early childhood education centres were the target respondents to be invited for the survey.

Parents from ten private early childhood education centres that mainly recruit students aged below six years old were invited to take part in the self-completed questionnaire

(distributed in October 2017). This ensured the respondents had the experience in enrolling their children in private early childhood education centres. Instructions and the mechanism to select the respondents was given to staff at the private early childhood education centres. Each centre was required to opportunistically select 20 respondents (10 being parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 years old, and 10 being parents with child(ren) aged 4–6 years old). The staff selected the respondents at different time slots. 2–3 parents of each age range placed in either the morning or afternoon session in order to spread the opportunity to select the respondent for minimizing the bias. To determine eligibility, parents were asked the age of their child(ren), at the same time, staff were also able find out the age of students by referencing who had registered on the courses. Parents were first asked if they were willing to participate in the survey. If the answer was yes, the staff would explain the purpose of the survey. Staff then provided each participant with an information sheet (APPENDIX 1) and a consent form (APPENDIX 2) for their perusal.

The respondents were then invited to fill out the questionnaire in the waiting room while their children were having their lesson in the classroom. This enabled respondents to complete the questionnaires in private and allowed them to devote time to complete the questionnaires which aided the response rate. It also avoided any potential threat or pressure from other personnel in the centre. The parents were told of the approximated time to complete the questionnaire and it was stated in the introduction of the questionnaire. This was an estimate and no time limit was imposed. They were required to hand in the completed questionnaire when they finished. A staff member who handed out the questionnaire was present in the room to provide some basic assistances, and to minimize the opportunity of parents to discuss and share their answers. After completing the questionnaire, respondents returned them to the staff member. Completed questionnaires were then placed in an envelope and returned to the researcher.

### 3.1.1 The design of the questionnaire

The questionnaires (APPENDIX 4) were designed to collect data about parents' views on marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria of private early childhood education centres. Comparison and analysis were performed between the two groups

of parents, with the data collected from the survey (QUAN) being integrated into the script and questions of focus group (QUAL). Any points of interest found in the survey could then be further discussed during the focus group for additional explanation.

The questionnaire looked to measure the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong and was based on the virtuous model about foundational virtues of trust, commitment, and diligence, supported by firmness, integrity, respect, and empathy, surrounded by transparency, as identified by Murphy et al. (2007). Based on this, the questions and statements made in the questionnaire could be further developed.

A pilot test, which allows for preliminary testing, was conducted to fine-tune the questions and statements, as well as discover any errors before distribution to the target respondents. Doing so reduces the number of unanticipated problems and provides an opportunity to redesign parts of the study should the pilot study reveal any difficulties that need to be overcome. Ten respondents were invited to take part in the pilot test to ensure the questions and statements were able to be fully understood and to identify any problems with the wording or measurements. Some wording was subsequently amended for better presentation and more accuracy. Furthermore, the sequence of statements in part B using different measurement criteria were rearranged and mixed throughout the questionnaire (their question number and codes are shown in table 3.1). This was done because respondents might have become restless and bored more easily when reading similar questions one after another. Changing the sequence of questions helped vary the pace and maintain interest.

Table 3. 1 Question sequence

| **Measurement** | **Question number** | **Code** | **Question number** | **Code** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trust | Question 3 | T1 | Question 31 | T8 |
| | Question 7 | T2 | Question 33 | T9 |
| | Question 9 | T3 | Question 35 | T10 |
| | Question 14 | T4 | Question 36 | T11 |
| | Question 19 | T5 | Question 39 | T12 |
| | Question 24 | T6 | Question 42 | T13 |
| | Question 28 | T7 | | |
| Commitment | Question 1 | C1 | Question 15 | C3 |
| | Question 11 | C2 | Question 40 | C4 |
| Integrity | Question 16 | I1 | Question 25 | I2 |
| Benevolence | Question 2 | B1 | Question 17 | B2 |
| Competence | Question 27 | CT1 | | |
| Teaching Quality | Question 5 | TQ1 | Question 26 | TQ6 |
| | Question 10 | TQ2 | Question 29 | TQ7 |
| | Question 12 | TQ3 | Question 34 | TQ8 |
| | Question 18 | TQ4 | Question 38 | TQ9 |
| | Question 23 | TQ5 | Question 41 | TQ10 |
| **Measurement** | **Question number** | **Code** | **Question number** | **Code** |
| Class Size | Question 6 | CZ1 | Question 37 | CZ3 |
| | Question 30 | CZ2 | | |
| Location | Question 4 | L1 | Question 32 | L3 |
| | Question 20 | L2 | | |
| Tuition Fee | Question 8 | TF1 | Question 21 | TF3 |
| | Question 13 | TF2 | Question 22 | TF4 |
| Shared Value | Question 43 | SV1 | | |

For easy reference, Table 3.2 shows the statements by category.

Table 3. 2 Statements by category (measurement criteria)

| Code | Question Number | Statements |
|---|---|---|
| **Trust** | | |
| T1. | Q.3 | This private early childhood education centre gives me a feeling of trust. |
| T2. | Q.7 | The brand of this private early childhood education centre gives me a trustworthy impression. |
| T3. | Q.9 | This private early childhood education centre can be relied upon to keep promises. |
| T4. | Q.14 | This private early childhood education centre is honest about their teaching content. |
| T5. | Q.19 | This private early childhood education centre is consistent in the delivery of courses/programmes. |
| T6. | Q.24 | This private early childhood education centre takes good care of the well-being of my child. |
| T7. | Q.28 | I trust the teachers at this private early childhood education centre. |
| T8. | Q.31 | I rely on the teachers at this private early childhood education centre. |
| T9. | Q.33 | My child feels safe at this private early childhood education centre. |
| T10. | Q.35 | This private early childhood education centre employs education professionals who know how to effectively teach students. |
| T11. | Q.36 | Teachers at this private early childhood education centre are knowledgeable about my child's educational needs. |
| T12. | Q.39 | This private early childhood education centre provides good advice on how I can support my child's learning at home. |
| T13. | Q.42 | This private early childhood education centre has the ability to effectively educate my child. |
| **Commitment** | | |
| C1 | Q.1 | I feel emotionally attached to my child's private early childhood education centre. |
| C2 | Q.11 | I feel like part of the family at this private early childhood education centre. |
| C3 | Q.15 | My preference for my child's private early childhood education centre would not willingly change. |
| C4 | Q.40 | I feel a strong sense of belonging to my child's private early childhood education centre. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Integrity** | | |
| I1 | Q.16 | The promise made on the advertisements of this private early childhood education centre will be kept (e.g., with regard to provided information, course delivery, etc.). |
| I2 | Q.24 | The advertisements of this private early childhood education centre, in general, and its content, in particular, are reliable and truthful. |
| **Benevolence** | | |
| B1 | Q.2 | This private early childhood education centre will act in the students' interests. |
| B2 | Q.17 | This private early childhood education centre is interested in my child's well-being, not just in its own. |
| **Competence** | | |
| CT1 | Q.27 | The provided recommendations/information/advice about my child's learning from this private early childhood education centre is accurate and competent. |
| **Teaching quality** | | |
| TQ1 | Q.5 | The teachers at this private early childhood education centre are able to motivate my child to learn. |
| TQ2 | Q.10 | My child has intimate relationships with the teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre and do not resist attending classes. |
| TQ3 | Q.12 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre are willing to communicate with parents about the learning of the students. |
| TQ4 | Q.18 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre are willing to communicate with parents about the centre (e.g., activities of the centre, the goal and direction of the centre, etc.). |
| TQ5 | Q.23 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre are willing to offer assistance and support to students' families (e.g., consultation to parents.). |
| TQ6 | Q.26 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre know the individual learning needs of their students. |
| TQ7 | Q.29 | This private early childhood education centre provides an appropriate environment that is able to facilitate learning. |
| TQ8 | Q.34 | This private early childhood education centre has an effective pedagogy and curriculum that suits my child's learning needs. |
| TQ9 | Q.38 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre are professionally trained. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| TQ10 | Q.41 | The teachers and staff at this private early childhood education centre are able to show their professionalism when teaching and assisting the students and their families. |
| **Class size** | | |
| CZ1 | Q.6 | The class size is reasonable at this private early childhood education centre. |
| CZ2 | Q.30 | The class size is a major factor for me when considering which private early childhood education centre is best for my child. |
| CZ3 | Q.37 | The teacher is able to take care of every student in the class at this private early childhood education centre. |
| **Location** | | |
| L1 | Q.4 | It is important that my child's private early childhood education centre is close to home. |
| L2 | Q.20 | Access to a private early childhood education centre should be less of a change in route from home. |
| L3. | Q.32 | The good teaching quality of the private early childhood education centre does not affect my choice if the location is far from home. |
| **Tuition fee** | | |
| TF1 | Q.8 | The tuition fee of this private early childhood education centre is reasonable. |
| TF2 | Q.13 | The tuition fee of this private early childhood education centre is affordable. |
| TF3 | Q.21 | The tuition fee of this private early childhood education centre could be reduced if their marketing (e.g., advertisements) is also reduced. |
| TF4 | Q.22 | I will still enrol my child in this private early childhood education centre, even if it looks less attractive due to a reduction the marketing (e.g., advertisements). |
| **Share Value** | | |
| SV1 | Q.43 | In general, my values and the values held by this private early childhood education centre are very similar. |

In addition to collecting the demographic data of the respondents, the reasons for being attracted and/or switching to another centre was explored. To do so, 43 statements (Table 3.2) designed to understand the attitudes and views of respondents regarding marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria were created.

Marketing ethics

*Trust*

A series of statements were designed in order to get an understanding of the respondents' trust in the management of private early childhood education centres. The first statement (T1) looks to gauge the general level of trust towards private early childhood education centres. The second statement focuses on the trustworthiness of the brand (T2) and refers to the customers' confidence in the brand providing quality performance (Sung & Kim, 2010); since trust exists when one party has confidence in an exchange partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Reliability (T3) is also a component of trust. Salcuiuvience et al. (2011), Shaw (1997), and Rotter (1967) indicate that reliability builds trust, with customers then perceiving that products and services can be relied upon. While honesty (T4) also affects customers' perceptions of trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), consistency in delivering the products and services (T5), as well as the well-being of the customer (T6) should be kept in fair balance, enabling customers to build confidence in the organization (Shaw's, 1997).

Regarding trust in the teacher, first a statement about the general level of trust (T7) was asked, followed by a statement focusing on the reliability of the teacher (T8). Adam and Christenson (2000) identify trust as being defined as the belief that the other party will meet the expectations of their role (e.g., teacher) and be reliable. A feeling of safety is based on a positive relationship relating to trust (Hoorens-Mass & Naafs-Wilstra, 1997). In turn, this is linked to the students feeling safe (T9) in the education centre. Furthermore, professionalism (T10) is connected to trust (Evetts, 2009), in that teachers with professional experience know how to effectively teach students. Also, teachers are able to observe and better understand the needs of the children (T11) (Varga, 2000), which then gives confidence to the parents. Openness, authenticity (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, 2000), and effective communication (Dunsmuir, Frederickson, & Lang, 2004; Ebmeier & Nicklaus, 1999; Stoner et al., 2005) affect the level of trust between parties. If teachers offer advice (T12), this enhances the openness and communication between them and the parents, which then builds trust and positive relationships. The last statement is designed to reveal the overall ability of the centre to educate the students, by asking about the trust of the respondents in the private early childhood education centre.

*Commitment*

According to Kanter (1968), commitment can be considered as an emotional attachment (C1) to an organization. Because the characteristics of commitment are thought to be "stability, sacrifice, and loyalty" (Murphy, 1993), this implies that customers have an intention to stay with the same organization and not willingly change (C3). Allen and Meyer (1990) indicate that when a person commits to a specific organization, they feel like part of a family (C2) and have a strong sense of belonging (C4).

*Integrity*

Erhard et al. (2009) define integrity as a matter of a person's word, nothing more, nothing less. In other words, the promise (I1) someone makes. Since this study aims to look at the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong, a statement regarding the promise made on the advertisement was specifically asked to respondents. Integrity often refers to reliability, honesty, and credibility (Mcknight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002). In this way, the reliability and truthfulness of the content of the advertisement (I2) were also evaluated.

*Benevolence*

Kurmar et al. (1995) point out that benevolence concerns the counterparty being interested in the buyer's welfare. In this study, although the students are not the buyers, they are the users of the services. As such, their interests should be considered (B1). At the same time, in a commercial trust relationship context, the trustee should place the interests of the trusting party ahead of their own (Chen & Dhillon, 2003). In other words, private early childhood education centres should consider the well-being of the students ahead of their own interests (B2).

*Competence*

Customers believe that a firm has the required expertise to create an offering that performs its job effectively and reliably (Lam & Shankar, 2014), that the expectations of the customers can be fulfilled, and the professionals will do a good job. Teachers or

staff providing accurate recommendations, information, or advice about the students' learning reflects the competency of education centres (CT1).

*Shared values*

Kelman (1961) explains that holding the same values as another person or group leads to more positive attitudes. Shared values aid and create a propensity to trust (Brashear et al., 2003). Hence, similar values held between the respondents and private early childhood education centres (SV1) implies the parents' trust in the centres.

Teaching quality

According to Ho (2008) and Jalongo et al. (2004), the teaching quality of early childhood education programmes should consider the motivation to learn (TQ1), the intimate relationship between the staff and children (TQ2), the communication between the staff and parents about the children (TQ3) and the school (TQ4), the support given to families (TQ5) and the learning needs of the children (TQ6), the quality physical environment (TQ7), the effectively pedagogy and curriculum (TQ8), the professional training of the teachers (TQ9), and their professionalism shown in school (TQ10).

Selection criteria regarding private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong

*Class size*

A reasonable number of students in a class has a positive impact on students' performance (Aria & Walker, 2004); often a smaller class size (Finn et al., 2003). As such, a reasonable class size (CZ1) is a factor that affects parents' choice (CZ2). Additionally, the interaction between students and teachers in smaller classes reflects more teacher support for each student (Blatchford, 2003). Therefore, if every student is taken care of in a class, this reveals a reasonable class size (CZ3). When choosing a private early childhood education centre, parents consider class size as one of the factors that affects their children's learning outcome.

*Location*

According to Gibbsons (2006), parents consider distance to the school as a basic criterion. That is, the closer to the school, the easier access to academic achievement for their children. Thus, distance from home to school (L1) and access (L2) affects parents' decision making. Since good teaching quality in spite of distance might affect parents' decisions, question 32 (L3) was specifically asked to get a better understanding of the effect of private early childhood education centres with good teaching quality at locations that were far from home.

*Tuition fee*

A reasonable (TF1) and affordable (TF2) tuition fee affects parents' choice of a private early childhood education centre. Tuition fee is a cost for the education (Bray & Bunly, 2005). Affordability implies that every family can easily afford the fee of the chosen early childhood education (Li et al., 2014). As such, although respondents might feel that the tuition fee is reasonable, they might not think that it is affordable, hence the two different statements.

Question 21 (TF3) and 22 (TF4) were asked to further understand the impact of the tuition fee on marketing activities, as well as its influence on parents' decisions. People often believe that organizations shift the cost of marketing to the customers. Question 21 asks respondents to express their views about the relationship between the tuition fee and marketing activities. Furthermore, it also poses the question that if marketing

activities are reduced, will respondents still enrol their children in the education centre? It is hoped these questions allow for parents' attitudes regarding the balance between the amount of marketing activities and the tuition fee to be further explored. It is possible that respondents may consider teaching quality or other factors when choosing a private early childhood education centre.

### 3.1.2 Data analysis

Phase 1 data analysis (quantitative) had been processed by SPSS, with the following tests being performed.

T-test

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the views between parents with children aged 1–3 and those with children aged 4–6 to reveal attitudes towards marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria. The means scores reveal the differences, with statistical significance being identified.

MANOVA

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied to analyse the survey findings. It assessed the views of parents across the two age groups. MANOVA requires independent variables that are categorical with two or more groups. As such, the demographic data from the questionnaire provides two or more options (e.g., education background, family income, experience in joining the private early childhood education centre, etc.), while two or more dependent variables are continuous. The statements in the questionnaire invite respondents to rate their degree of agreement on a scale. In addition to MANOVA being able to measure multiple dependent variables, the ability to measure the effects of an independent variable on multiple dependent variables is useful when comparing the effects of the independent variable. Not only can MANOVA test multiple dependent variables at once, it can also test the effects of independent variables simultaneously. MANOVA also increases the chance of finding an independent variable's effect. When measuring the independent variable's effect on multiple dependent variables, it may be found that there is a significant influence on one of the dependent variables. For example, MANOVA can measure the relationship between a parent's number of years of private early childhood education centre experience with trust and teaching quality.

The mean scores on shared value, trust, commitment, integrity, benevolence, competence, location, class size, and tuition fee can then be examined. MANOVA reveals whether there are any significant differences between the groups on a linear combination (Harlow & Duerr, 2013).

Correlation matrix

A correlation matrix is a table showing correlation coefficients between sets of variables. It is used to investigate the dependence between multiple variables at the same time. This study's dependent variables are shown in a table for their relationships.

Factor analysis

Factor analysis is used to investigate variable relationships for complex concepts. These concepts are measured by collapsing many variables into a few interpretable underlying factors. Multiple observed variables have similar patterns of responses because they are associated with a latent variable. In this study, factor analysis is used to identify parents with different concerns, such as marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria, when choosing a private early childhood education centre for their child(ren). Factor analysis helps to identify the different types of parents in the market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.

Regression analysis

Multiple regression predicts the value of a variable based on the value of two or more other variables. It also helps to determine the overall fit and relative contribution of each predictor to the total variance.

Structural equation modelling

This is multivariate statistical analysis used to analyse structural relationships between measured variables and latent constructs. In this case, the relationship between marketing ethics and dependent variables will be identified, which will help to generate a model predicting marketing ethics based on the views of parents for private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong.

The choice of a mixed method approach allows for multiple perspectives to be taken on a particular research topic. In this study, quantitative data were gathered to understand the views of parents. By analysing the findings from the survey, the views of parents regarding selection criteria, marketing practices among private early childhood education centres, and the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres was determined. However, the quantitative data still needed to be placed in the context of managerial staff and teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of marketing and its impact, as well as marketing ethics. Thus, the findings and results from phase 1 were used to develop questions to be discussed in the focus groups in phase 2, in which the views of managerial staff and teachers of private early childhood education centres were also gathered. This provided a rich database from which to triangulate the results.

Methodological triangulation and data triangulation were employed in this study (Denzin, 2006). Methodological triangulation is where more than one methodological approach and a mix of two or more methods is used to collect data in a single study (Adams, Bateman, & Becker, 2015; Jackson, 2018). A quantitative method (survey) was adopted in phase 1 to collect the parents' views and a qualitative method (focus group) was used in phase 2 to further analyse the findings from phase 1 through discussion with parents, teaching staff, and managerial staff. This enabled gathering and interpreting a wide range of views from the different stakeholders to create a holistic picture of early childhood education in Hong Kong. It also confirmed findings, built up a bank of more comprehensive data, increased validity, and enhanced understanding of studied phenomena (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). The quantitative data helped to understand marketing ethics, teaching quality, and parents' selection criteria. The qualitative data not only complemented but also clarified the quantitative findings by helping to identify common themes; namely, the implementation of marketing and its impact on teaching quality and regulation by the government.

Data triangulation, which involves numerical information, is where the data collected is from more than one data source or respondent group (Adams, Bateman, & Becker, 2015; Jackson, 2018). Upon completion of the phase 1 survey, focus group discussions based on the findings were held in phase 2, in which parents, teaching staff, and

managerial staff were invited to participate. The implementation of marketing, marketing ethics, impacts on teaching quality, and regulation by the government were further explored in these discussions.

It can show that the inter-relationship on the research design and support from the two approaches. This can give a more detailed and balance picture of the situation in Hong Kong. Eventually, they aim at explaining the same phenomena in private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong.

### 3.2 Phase 2 – Qualitative method

A focus group consists of in-depth group interviews on a given topic, in which participants are selected for a particular reason (e.g., sampling of a specific population) (Thomas et al., 1995). Participants are selected on the basis that they have something to express on the subject, have similar socio-characteristics, and are comfortable talking to the moderator as well as each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Furthermore, they are selected because of their knowledge and experience in the study area (Burrows & Kendall, 1997). Group dynamics is one of the features of focus-group interviews. Thus, the range of data is often deeper and richer than that obtained from one-to-one interviews (Thomas et al., 1995).

In addition to the parents, the respondents of survey, the managerial staff and teachers from private early childhood education centres were also invited to the focus group for further discussion about the marketing strategies of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Three focus groups were conducted and focused on:

1. Parents
2. Managerial staff
3. Teachers

For each focus group, 6–10 people were invited to take part. The rationale for the size of the group being that a small number of people would facilitate discussion. Krueger and Casey (2000) point out that the size of the group needs to be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. With fewer than six participants, it may be difficult to sustain

a discussion, while with more than ten participants there is little opportunity for each participant to actively participant in the discussion, and it becomes difficult for the moderator to manage the discussion. The small group discussion in this study enables the participants to share their views about private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Specific to this study, parents were able to share their experiences of selecting and enrolling their children in education centres, while the managerial staff and teachers shared their experiences of recruiting and teaching students. With focus groups, in general, it is anticipated that each participant contributes more to a discussion in which they have intense involvement or experience (Bloor et al., 2001; David & Sutton, 2004).

The three focus groups were conducted in March 2018 and were comprised of nine parents, eight teachers, and six members of managerial staff, respectively. The location for the discussions was a regular classroom in a private early childhood education centre in Lai Chi Kok, Hong Kong, which was easily accessible by public transport and private cars, and had adequate parking. The classroom provided a quiet, private, neutral, and distraction free environment, which could accommodate up to 20 people; although each focus group only consisted of no more than nine participants, a moderator, and a note taker. The layout of the room could be arranged to create a comfortable and conducive environment for discussion. In this case, participants were seated in a circle and face each other, which allowed for an interactive group dynamic that is central to focus group discussions.

The note taker was responsible for recorded only what was said, and refrained from writing down any personal judgments or opinions. They also operated the tape recorder. The moderator's role was to facilitate an open, permissive environment, in which participants felt comfortable to share their genuine opinions and feelings. The moderator was also responsible for steering the group discussion so deeper and more insightful information about the subject could be gathered.

The questions in the focus group (qual) were based on the results of survey (QUAN) and were designed to identify a wide range of views and experiences. In addition to the primary goal of provoking discussion about the current situation in private early

childhood education centres in Hong Kong, they also sought to reveal the decision-making process of the parents and managerial staff of the centres. Ultimately, this allows for the interpretation of the research to go from QUAN to qual. A consent form for the focus group (APPENDIX 3) was given to each participant before the discussion. The focus group schedule is presented in APPENDIX 10, 12, and 14.

Conducted in Cantonese, the discussions were all recorded on tape then transcribed and translated into English, with an intelligent verbatim style used for the transcription—pauses and phrases such as 'uh' and 'you know' were omitted. The process involved first transcribing the tape-recording in Cantonese, then translating it into English, resulting in two transcripts: one in Chinese and one in English. In this instance, the researcher was the translator. The transcript focused on translating the meaning rather than the literal translation of the words. It also made sure to retain the vernacular style of Cantonese, with key terms, phases, and local proverbs being maintained.

### 3.2.1 Data analysis

The data was cleaned, labelled, and anonymized before formal analysis. The data cleaning involved listening to segments of the recording and following the transcripts to ensure completeness and accuracy of the written record of the discussion. The translation was then checked for accuracy. The names of all participants, places of employment or services, and any additional information which may have revealed the identities of the participants were removed and replaced with a code. Each of the three discussion transcripts was then labelled. For example, P1 denotes a participant in the parent focus group and numbered 1, M3 denotes a participant in the managerial focus group and numbered 3, and T5 denotes a participant in the teacher focus group and numbered 5.

Identifying themes throughout the discussion involved using parts of the focus group schedule, with the main areas being the marketing practices of private early childhood education centres, and the effect of these practices on the marketing ethics and teaching quality of private early childhood education centres.

After the data was gathered, analysis involved indexing the entire data set, using the themes mentioned above as labels to mark specific segments of the transcripts where the discussion relates to each one. The coding was then processed.

Hierarchical clustering and descriptive analysis then followed. This involved using the theme labels to identify all segments of the text related to a specific theme, then examining the discussion of each theme across the entire data set. This was done by focusing on one theme at a time and examining each issue in detail.

# Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

## 4.1 Phase 1 – Quantitative method (Survey)

200 questionnaires were distributed to parents with experience in enrolling their children in private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. 171 completed questionnaires were received (a response rate of 85.5%).

Table 4.1 Gender of respondents

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Male | 76 | 44.4 | 44.4 | 44.4 |
| | Female | 95 | 55.6 | 55.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Among the 171 respondents, Table 4.1 shows that there were 76 males (44.4%) and 95 females (55.6%).

Table 4.2 Age of respondents

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 18–22 | 7 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 4.1 |
| | 23–27 | 28 | 16.4 | 16.4 | 20.5 |
| | 28–32 | 45 | 26.3 | 26.3 | 46.8 |
| | 33–37 | 49 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 75.4 |
| | 38–42 | 26 | 15.2 | 15.2 | 90.6 |
| | 43–47 | 14 | 8.2 | 8.2 | 98.8 |
| | 48–52 | 2 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 98.8 |
| | 53 or over | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.2 indicates that most (49) of the respondents (28.7%) were aged 33–37. There were 45 respondents (26.3%) aged 28–32; 28 (16.4%) respondents aged 23–27; 26 respondents (15.2%) aged 38–42; 14 respondents (8.2%) aged 43–47; 7 respondents (4.1%) aged 18–22; and 2 respondents (1.2%) aged 48–52. There were no respondents

aged 53 or above.

Table 4.3 Education background of respondents

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Secondary school | 28 | 16.4 | 16.4 | 16.4 |
| | diploma | 14 | 8.2 | 8.2 | 24.6 |
| | Associate degree or higher diploma | 30 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 42.1 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 54 | 31.6 | 31.6 | 73.7 |
| | Postgraduate certificate / diploma | 12 | 7.0 | 7.0 | 80.7 |
| | Master's degree | 33 | 19.3 | 19.3 | 80.7 |
| | Doctorate degree or PhD | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Most of the respondents (31.6%) possess a bachelor's degree. 33 respondents (19.3%) and 30 respondents (17.5%) have a master's degree and an associate degree/higher diploma respectively. 28 respondents (16.4%) are secondary school graduates. 14 respondents (8.2%) reached the diploma level and 12 respondents (7%) obtained a postgraduate certificate or diploma. No respondent possesses a doctorate or PhD (table 4.3).

Table 4.4 Family income per month of respondents

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Less than HK$10,000 | 3 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 1.8 |
| | HK$10,001–20,000 | 14 | 8.2 | 8.2 | 9.9 |
| | HK$20,001–30,000 | 18 | 10.5 | 10.5 | 20.5 |
| | HK$30,001–40,000 | 27 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 36.3 |
| | HK$40,001–50,000 | 24 | 14.0 | 14.0 | 50.3 |
| | HK$50,001–60,000 | 30 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 67.8 |
| | HK$60,001–70,000 | 23 | 13.5 | 13.5 | 81.3 |
| | HK$70,001–80,000 | 17 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 91.2 |
| | HK$80,001–90,000 | 11 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 97.7 |
| | HK$90,001–100,000 | 4 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 97.7 |
| | HK$100,001 or more | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

30 respondents' (17.5%) family income per month is between HK$50,001–60,000; 27 respondents' (15.8%) family income per month is between HK$30,001–40,000; 24 respondents' (14%) and 23 respondents' (13.5%) family income per month are between HK$40,001–50,000, and HK$60,001–70,000 respectively; 18 respondents (10.5%) and 17 respondents' (9.9%) family income per month are between HK$20,001–30,000, and HK$70,001–80,000 respectively; 11 respondents' (6.4%) family income per month is between HK$80,001–90,000; 4 respondents' (2.3%) family income per month is between HK$90,001–100,000; and 3 respondents' (1.8%) family income per month is below HK$10,000. There was no respondent with a family income per month above HK$100,001 (Table 4.4).

Table 4.5 Years of parents' experience with joining private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 6 months or less | 11 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 6.4 |
| | 7–12 months | 27 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 22.2 |
| | 1 year–1 year 6 months | 38 | 22.2 | 22.2 | 44.4 |
| | 1 year 7 months–2 years | 34 | 19.9 | 19.9 | 64.3 |
| | 2 years–2 years 6 months | 16 | 9.4 | 9.4 | 73.7 |
| | 2 years 7 months–3 years | 19 | 11.1 | 11.1 | 84.8 |
| | 3 years–3 years 6 months | 11 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 91.2 |
| | 3 years 7 months–4 years | 4 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 93.6 |
| | 4 years–4 years 6 months | 5 | 2.9 | 2.9 | 96.5 |
| | 4 years 7 months–5 years | 3 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 98.2 |
| | 5 years or more | 3 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

38 respondents (22.2%) had 1 year–1 year 6 months' experience in joining private early childhood education centres; 34 respondents (19.9%) had 1 year 7 months–2 years' experience; 27 respondents (15.8%) had 7–12 months' experience; 19 respondents (11.1%) and 16 respondents (9.4%) had 2 years 7 months–3 years and 2 years–2 years 6 months' experience respectively; 11 respondents each (6.4%) had less than 6 months' experience and 3 years–3 years 6 months' experience; 5 respondents (2.9%) had 4 years–4 years 6 months' experience; 4 respondents (2.3%) had 3 years 7 months–4 years' experience; 3 respondents (1.8%) each had 4 years 7 months–5 years' experience and more than 5 years' experience.

Table 4.6 Number of parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 and 4–6

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Aged 1–3 | 88 | 51.5 | 51.5 | 51.5 |
| | Aged 4–6 | 83 | 48.5 | 48.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.7 Number of parents with child(ren) aged 1–3

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 child | 79 | 89.8 | 89.8 | 89.8 |
| | 2 children | 9 | 10.2 | 10.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 88 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.8 Number of parents with child(ren) aged 4–6

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 child | 77 | 92.8 | 92.8 | 92.8 |
| | 2 children | 6 | 7.2 | 7.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

88 respondents (51.5%) have child(ren) aged 1–3. Among these respondents, 79 (89.8%) have 1 child and 9 (10.2%) have 2 children aged between 1–3 (Table 4.7).

83 respondents (48.5%) have child(ren) aged 4–6 (Table 6). Among these respondents, 77 (92.8%) have 1 child and 6 (7.2%) have 2 children aged 4–6 (Table 4.8).

Table 4.9 Numbers of parents that did or did not switch private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Yes | 94 | 55.0 | 55.0 | 55.0 |
| | No | 77 | 45.0 | 45.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 171 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

94 respondents (55%) switched private early childhood education centres, while 77 respondents (45%) did not switch centre.(Table 4.9)

Table 4.10 Number of parents that switched private early childhood education centres for their child(ren)

| | Cases | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Valid | | Missing | | Total | |
| | N | Percentage | N | Percentage | N | Percentage |
| Amount who switched | 94 | 100.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 94 | 100.0% |

Table 4.11 Gender of parents that switched private early childhood education centres for their child(ren)

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Male | 53 | 56.4 | 56.4 | 56.4 |
| | Female | 41 | 43.6 | 43.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 94 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Among the 94 respondents who switched private early childhood education centres, 53 were male (56.4%) and 41 were female (43.6%).

Table 4.12 Age of parents who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 18–22 | 1 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| | 23–27 | 2 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 3.2 |
| | 28–32 | 32 | 34.0 | 34.0 | 37.2 |
| | 33–37 | 26 | 27.7 | 27.7 | 64.9 |
| | 38–42 | 20 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 86.2 |
| | 43–47 | 11 | 11.7 | 11.7 | 97.9 |
| | 48–52 | 2 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 94 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

32 respondents (34%) were aged between 28–32; 26 respondents (27.7%) were aged 33–37; and 20 respondents (11.7%) were aged 38–42.

There were 2 respondents (2.1%) each for the 23–27 and 48–52 age groups, while only 1 respondent was aged 18–22 (1.1%) (Table 4.12).

Table 4.13 Education background of parents who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Secondary school | 9 | 9.6 | 9.6 | 9.6 |
| | diploma | 6 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 16.0 |
| | Associate degree or higher diploma | 18 | 19.1 | 19.1 | 35.1 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 27 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 63.8 |
| | Postgraduate certificate / diploma | 8 | 8.5 | 8.5 | 72.3 |
| | Master's degree | 26 | 27.7 | 27.7 | 72.3 |
| | Doctorate degree or PhD | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 94 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.13 shows that most respondents who switched early childhood education centres possess either a bachelor's degree (28.7%) or a master's degree (27.7%); 19.1% possess an associate degree or higher diploma; 9.6% graduated from secondary school; and 8.5% and 6% of respondents possess postgraduate certificate / diploma and diploma respectively.

Table 4.14 Family income per month of parents who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Less than HK$10,000 | 1 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| | HK$10,001–20,000 | 4 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 5.3 |
| | HK$20,001–30,000 | 2 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 7.4 |
| | HK$30,001–40,000 | 11 | 11.7 | 11.7 | 19.1 |
| | HK$40,001–50,000 | 15 | 16.0 | 16.0 | 35.1 |
| | HK$50,001–60,000 | 19 | 20.2 | 20.2 | 55.3 |
| | HK$60,001–70,000 | 16 | 17.0 | 17.0 | 72.3 |
| | HK$70,001–80,000 | 14 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 87.2 |
| | HK$80,001–90,000 | 8 | 8.5 | 8.5 | 95.7 |
| | HK$90,001–100,000 | 4 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 94 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.14 shows that among the 94 respondents who switched to another private early childhood education centre, 19 respondents' (20.2%) family income per month is between HK$50,001–60,000; 16 respondents' (17%) family income per month is between HK$60,001–70,000; 15 respondents' (16%) and 14 respondents' (14.9%) family income per month are between HK$40,001–50,000 and HK$70,001–80,000 respectively; 11 respondents' (11.7%) family income per month is between HK$30,001 and HK$40,000; 8 respondents' (8.5%) family income per month is between HK$80,001 and HK$90,000; 4 respondents each (4.3%) have a family income per month between HK$90,001–100,000 and between HK$10,001–20,000; and only 1 respondent has a family income per month below HK$10,000.

Table 4.15 Parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 child | 42 | 91.3 | 91.3 | 91.3 |
| | 2 children | 4 | 8.7 | 8.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.15 indicates that 42 respondents (91.3%) with 1 child aged 1–3, and 4 respondents (8.7%) with 2 children aged 1–3 switched to another private early childhood education centre.

Table 4.16 Parents with child(ren) aged 4–6 who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 child | 44 | 91.6 | 91.6 | 91.6 |
| | 2 children | 4 | 8.4 | 8.4 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 48 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4.16 reveals that 44 respondents (91.6%) with 1 child aged 4–6, and 4 respondents (8.4%) with 2 children aged 4–6 switched to another private early childhood education centre.

Table 4.17 Years of experience of parents who switched private early childhood education centres

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 6 months or less | 1 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| | 7 months–12 months | 5 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 6.4 |
| | 1 year–1 year 6 months | 20 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 27.7 |
| | 1 year 7 months–2 years | 26 | 27.7 | 27.7 | 55.3 |
| | 2 years–2 years 6 months | 7 | 7.4 | 7.4 | 62.8 |
| | 2 years 7 months–3 years | 17 | 18.1 | 18.1 | 80.9 |
| | 3 years–3 years 6 months | 4 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 85.1 |
| | 3 years 7 months–4 years | 3 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 88.3 |
| | 4 years–4 years 6 months | 5 | 5.3 | 5.3 | 93.6 |
| | 4 years 7 months–5 years | 3 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 96.8 |
| | 5 years or more | 3 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 94 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Among the 94 respondents who switched to another private early childhood education centre, 26 (27.7%) had 1 year 7 months–2 years' experience; 20 respondents (21.3%) and 17 respondents (18.1%) have 1 year–1 year 6 months experience and 2 years 7 months–3 years' experience respectively; 7 respondents (7.4%) had 2 years–2 years 6 months experiences; 5 respondents (5.3%) had 4 years–4 years 6 months experience; 5 respondents (5.3%) had 7–12 months experience; 4 respondents (4.3%) had 3 years–3 years 6 months experience; 3 respondents each (3.2%) for those with experience between 3 years–3 years 6 months, 4 years 7 months–5 years, and over 5 years; and only 1 respondent (1.1%) had less than 6 months' experience (Table 4.17).

Table 4.18 Reasons for switching centres

| | | Responses | | Percentage of Cases |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | Percentage | |
| Reasons for switching | Location | 58 | 14.4% | 61.7% |
| | Teaching quality | 79 | 19.7% | 84.0% |
| | Tuition Fee | 57 | 14.2% | 60.6% |
| | Administration | 28 | 7.0% | 29.8% |
| | Curriculum | 44 | 10.9% | 46.8% |
| | Word-of-mouth | 67 | 16.7% | 71.3% |
| | Course completion | 43 | 10.7% | 45.7% |
| | Others* | 26 | 6.5% | 27.7% |
| Total | | 402 | 100.0% | 427.7% |

* Friends or relatives encouraging parents to switch, gifts/discounts offered as an enticement, etc.

94 respondents have experience switching to another private early childhood education centre (Table 4.18). Table 4.11 shows that, of the respondents, teaching quality (19.7%) was the most prevalent reason, with word-of-mouth (16.7%) also being a major factor. Respondents also considered location (14.4%), tuition fee (14.2%), curriculum (10.9%), and course completion (10.7%) when making their decision. Only 7% considered administration as motivation for the switch, while 6.5% cited other reasons.

Table 4.19 Media used to attract parents to enrol their child(ren) in private early childhood education centres

| | | Responses | | Percentage of Cases |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | Percentage | |
| Media used to attract parents to enrol | Word-of-Mouth | 128 | 26.4% | 74.9% |
| | Website | 105 | 21.6% | 61.4% |
| | Social media | 118 | 24.3% | 69.0% |
| | Online forums | 69 | 14.2% | 40.4% |
| | Advertisement in magazines | 37 | 7.6% | 21.6% |
| | Others* | 28 | 5.8% | 16.4% |
| Total | | 485 | 100.0% | 283.6% |

* Interior design, space, celebrity endorsement, etc.

Table 4.19 shows that 171 respondents considered word-of-mouth (26.4%) as the most influential means of attracting parents to enrol their child(ren) in a private early childhood education centre. Social media (24.3%) and the centre's website (21.6%) also influenced respondents. Online forums and messages board (14.2%), as well as magazine advertisements (7.6%), were shown to be used by respondents to obtain information about the private early childhood education centre when considering enrolling their children. 5.8% of respondents indicated other attractive elements as being part of their decision-making process.

### 4.1.1 A comparison between the views of parents with children aged 1-3 and 4-6 (t-test)

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the views of parents with children aged 1–3 to those of parents with children aged 4–6 across a range of dependent variables. The test also allows for an overview of the respondents' views about the marketing ethics and teaching quality of private early childhood education centres, as well as their considerations when choosing centres (refer to APPENDIX 5.1 and 5.2 for the tables and statistics).

Trust

Trust 3 (Reliability to keep promises)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.94, SD=0.514) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.63, 0.788) conditions; t(169)=3.073, p=0.002. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in private early childhood education centres keeping promises than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Trust 5 (Consistency in the delivery of courses and programmes)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.90, SD=0.571) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.60, 0.679) conditions; t(169)=3.145, p=0.002. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in the consistency of private early childhood education centres being able to deliver courses and/or programmes than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Trust 6 (Taking good care of the well-being of children)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.84, SD=0.608) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.50, 0.768) conditions; t(169)=3.207, p=0.002. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in private early childhood education centres being able to take good care of the well-being of their children than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Trust 8 (Reliability of teachers)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=4.11, SD=0.515) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.85, 0.630) conditions; t(169)=3.067, p=0.003. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in the reliability of teachers at private early childhood education centres than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Trust 9 (Children's feelings of safety)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=4.13, SD=0.661) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.94, 0.567) conditions; t(169)=1.971, p=0.05. The results suggest that parents of children aged 1–3 believe their children feel safer at private early childhood education centres than do parents of children aged 4–6.

Trust 13 (The ability to effectively educate the children)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.37, SD=0.552) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.57, SD=0.645) conditions; t(169)=-2.219, p=0.28. The results reveal a difference with the other variables of trust. Parents with children aged 4–6 have a higher level of trust in the ability of private early childhood education centres to effectively educate their children than do parents with children aged 1–3.

There was not a significant difference in the scores on trust 1 (a feeling of trust) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.61, SD=0.688) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.62, SD=0.93) conditions; t(169)=-0.93, p=0.926; on trust 2 (a trustworthy brand) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.62, SD=0.623) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.71, SD=0.669) conditions; t(169)=-1.529, p=0.128; on trust 4 (honest about the teaching content) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.29, SD=0.526) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.37, SD=.576) conditions; t(169)=-0.969, p=0.334; on trust 7 (trust in teachers) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.79, SD=0.593) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.79, SD=0.593) conditions; t(169)=0.085, p=0.932; on trust 10 (employing education experts and professionals) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.40, SD=0.690) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.60, SD=0.604) conditions; t(169)=-1.944, p=0.054; on trust 11 (knowing the children's

education needs) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.6, SD=0.649) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.49, SD=0.611) conditions; t(169)=1.224, p=.223; and on trust 12 (provision of advice on children's learning) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.63, SD=0.649) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.51, SD=0.703) conditions; t(169)=1.163, p=0.246.

*Summary*

In general, parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in private early childhood education centres which is statistically significant. Since these parents may feel that their children are comparatively young, they seem to first carefully select the education centre, then place a higher amount of trust in that centre. The most significantly different variables of trust reveal that parents with children aged 1–3 have a higher level of trust in private early childhood education centres being relied upon to keep their promises (trust 3), have a higher level of trust in the consistency of private early childhood education centres delivering courses and programmes (trust 5), and have a higher level of trust in private early childhood education centres taking good care of the well-being of their children, than do parents with children age 4–6.

However, all parents have similar views on the feeling of trust that the education centres provide (trust 1), the brand of the education centre being trustworthy (trust 2), the education centre being honest about the teaching content (trust 4), the education experts and professionals that the education centres employs (trust 10), the education centres know the children's educational needs (trust 11), and the education centres provide advice about the children's learning (trust 12). The highest mean score among the variables in trust concerns the trust in teachers (trust 10). This implies that all parents trust the teachers in the centres and consider them to be the most important element.

<u>Commitment</u>

Commitment 1 (The feeling of attachment)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=2.74, SD=0.970) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.10, 0.722) conditions; t(169)=-2.743, p=0.007. The results suggest that parents with children aged 4–6 have a

higher emotional attachment than do parents with children aged 1–3.

There was not a significant difference in the scores on commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=2.71, SD=1.077) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=2.88, SD=0.701) conditions; t(169)=-1.206, p=0.229; commitment 3 (not willingly changing preference towards the education centre) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=2.87, SD=1.043) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=2.80, SD=0.741) conditions; t(169)=0.547, p=0.585 ; commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=2.70, SD=1.221) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=2.86, SD=0.697) conditions; t(169)=-1.021, p=0.309.

*Summary*

Although there is only one statement about commitment that shows a statistical significance between the two groups of parents, the mean score indicates that parents have a low intention to commit to a private early childhood education centre. This implies that parents consider switching to other education centres. In general, parents with children aged 4–6 have a higher level of commitment.

Parents have similar views about feeling like part of the family (commitment 2) and having a strong sense of belonging towards the centre. Although they have similar views on these two dimensions, it does not mean they are committed to the education centre. In contrast, the mean scores show that parents have low commitment, implying that they could easily switch to another centre.

Integrity

There was not a significant difference in the score on integrity 1 (the ability to keep promises made on the advertisement) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.39, SD=0.840) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.38, SD=0.657) conditions; t(169)=0.85, p=0.932; on integrity 2 (the reliability and trustworthiness of the advertisement) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.29, SD=0.806) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.36, SD=0.688) conditions; t(169)=-0.608, p=0.544.

*Summary*

All parents generally agreed that private early childhood education centres are able to keep the promises made on their advertisements (integrity 1), and that they are reliable and truthful (integrity 2).

Benevolence

There was not a significant difference in the score on benevolence 1 (acting in the children's best interest) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.14, SD=0.718) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.15, SD=0.630) conditions; t(169)=-0.163, p=0.871; benevolence 2 (interested in the children's well-being) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.21, SD=0.749) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.14, SD=0.518) conditions; t(169)=0.648, p=0.518.

*Summary*

Similar to the views on integrity, parents also tended to agree that private early childhood education centres consider their children's interests and well-being above that of their own interests.

Competence (Provision of accurate and competent recommendations and advice on children's learning)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.94, SD=0.536) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.75, 0.578) conditions; t(169)=-2.529, p=0.025. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 think private early childhood education centres are more accurate and competent in providing recommendations, information, and advice about their children's learning than do parents with children aged 4–6.

*Summary*

This implies the expectations of the two groups are different. Parents with children aged 1–3 expect their children to improve, and their behaviour and experiences to be enhanced, while parents with child(ren) aged 4–6 expect their children to learn new knowledge and skills at the centre. As such, the two groups of parents view the recommendations and advice from private early childhood education centres differently.

Teaching quality

Teaching quality 3 (Willingness to communicate with parents about their children's learning)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.97, SD=0.690) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.60, 0.679) conditions; t(169)=3.537, p=0.001. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe teachers and staff of private early childhood education centres are more willing to communicate about their children's learning than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 4 (Willingness to communicate with parents about the education centre)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.67, SD=0.641) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.29, 0.815) conditions; t(169)=3.404, p=0.001. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe teachers and staff of private early childhood education centres are more willing to communicate about the centre than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 5 (Willingness to offer assistance and support to students' families)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.75, SD=0.735) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.36, 0.771) conditions; t(169)=3.388, p=0.001. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe teachers and staff at private early childhood education centres are more willing to offer assistance and support to students' families than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 6 (Knowing the students' individual learning needs)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.86, SD=0.734) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.55, 0.767) conditions; t(169)=2.740, p=0.007. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe teachers and staff of private early childhood education centres a more aware of the individual learning needs of their students than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 7 (An appropriate environment to facilitate learning)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.91, SD=0.393) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.65, 0.591) conditions; t(169)=3.312, p=0.001. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe private early childhood education centres have a more appropriate environment that is able to facilitate learning than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 8 (An effective pedagogy and curriculum)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.71, SD=0.608) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.45, 0.609) conditions; t(169)=2.795, p=0.006. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe private early childhood education centres have a more effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit their children's learning needs than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 9 (Professionally trained teachers and staff)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.66, SD=0.679) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.32, 0.563) conditions; t(169)=3.492, p=0.001. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 believe that teachers and staff at private early childhood education centres are more professionally trained than do parents with children aged 4–6.

Teaching quality 10 (The ability to show professionalism)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.64, SD=0.628) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.33, 0.717) conditions; t(169)=3.013, p=0.003. The results suggest that parents with children aged 1–3 recognize that teachers and staff of private early childhood education centres are more able to show their professionalism when teaching and assisting students and their families than do parents with children aged 4–6.

There was not a significant difference in the score on teaching quality 1 (teachers' ability to motivate children's learning) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.68, SD=.638) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.49, SD=0.784) conditions;

t(169)=1.742, p=0.083 ; teaching quality 2 (intimate relationship between teachers and children) for parents with children aged 1–3 (M=3.71, SD=.820) and parents with children aged 4–6 (M=3.51, SD=0.685) conditions; t(169)=1.734, p=0.085.

*Summary*

Parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 have higher mean scores on all statements about teaching quality. This implies they have a higher level of satisfaction in the private early childhood education centres for teaching. In contrast, parents with child(ren) aged 4–6 have more and longer experience in the private early childhood education centres. They are more familiar with what happens in the education centre and how they operate. As such, they have given lower scores. The most significantly different variables about teaching quality reveals the following: parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 believe the teachers and staff are more willing to communicate with parents about student learning (teaching quality 3); are more willing to provide information about the education centre (teaching quality 4); offer assistance and support to students' families (teaching quality 5); are more professionally trained (teaching quality 9); and have a more appropriate environment to facilitate learning (teaching quality 7) compared to parents with children aged 4–6.

The parents have similar views regarding motivation for their children's learning (teaching quality 1) and the relationships between children and teachers (teaching quality 2). Based on the mean score, the parents tended to agree that the private early childhood education centres provide quality teaching.

<u>Class size</u>

Class size 1 (reasonable class size)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=4.02, SD=0.792) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.75, 0.726) conditions; t(169)=2.347, p=0.02. The parents with children aged 1–3 were more satisfied with the class size and believed it was more reasonable than parents with children aged 4–6.

There was not a significant difference in the scores of class size 2 (a major consideration

to select an education centre) for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.24, SD=0.889) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.06, SD=0.797) conditions; t(169)=1.407, p=0.161; on class size 3 (the teacher's ability to take care of every student in a class) for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.85, SD=.638) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.67, SD=0.608) conditions; t(169)=1.928, p=0.056.

*Summary*

The parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 gave a higher mean score than parents with child(ren) aged 4–6. In general, they were satisfied with the number of students in a class.

Location

Location 2 (Less changes in routine from home)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=4.23, SD=0.543) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.92, 0.625) conditions; t(169)=3.501, p=0.001. The parents with children aged 1–3 thought that the location of the private early childhood education centre, which is close to home, is more important than the parents with children aged 4–6.

Location 3 (A centre with good teaching quality but far from home, not affecting parents' choice)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=4.08, SD=0.838) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.63, 0.847) conditions; t(169)=3.487, p=0.001. These results show that the parents with children aged 1–3 were more willing to join a private early childhood education centre with good teaching quality, even with the location being far from home, compared to the parents with children aged 4–6.

There was no significant difference in the scores of location 1 (close to home) for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.99, SD=0.673) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.81, SD=.591) conditions; t(169)=1.845, p=0.067.

*Summary*

The parents with child(ren) aged 1–3 scored higher than the parents with child(ren) aged 4–6. Regarding location, the parents preferred the education centre to be close to their home, with less change of routes (location 2). However, when the parents were aware of a private early childhood education centre with good teaching quality and it was far away from home. The parents, particularly parents with child(ren) aged 1–3, were willing to send their child(ren) to this education centre (location 3).

That said, all of the parents agreed that the location of the private early childhood education centre should be close to home (location 1). This is because their child(ren) would spend less time in traffic, and it would be easier to handle and schedule their children's daily activities.

For the variable of location, the parents tended to give a higher score when compared to other variables. This also implies that location is a prime consideration when choosing a private early childhood education centre for their children.

<u>Tuition fees</u>

Tuition fee 3 (reduction in marketing activities leading to a reduction in tuition fees)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=4.11, SD=0.827) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.76, 0.506) conditions; t(169)=3.353, p=0.001. Parents with children aged between 1–3 had a higher degree of agreement that private early childhood education centres can reduce marketing activities as a consequence of reducing tuition fees, when compared to parents with children aged 4–6.

Tuition fees 4 (still enrolling children to the centre with lower level of attraction due to marketing activities reduction)

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.95, SD=0.791) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.62, 0.619) conditions; t(169)=3.076, p=0.002. Parents with children aged between 1–3 had a higher degree of agreement that they would still enrol their children in a private early childhood education centre, which was perceived as being less attractive as a result of

reducing marketing activities, when compared to parents with children aged 4–6.

There was no significant difference regarding the score on tuition fee 1 (reasonable tuition fee) for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.18, SD=0.947) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.10, SD=.939) conditions; t(169)=1.155, p=0.250; tuition fee 2 (affordable tuition fee) for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.18, SD=0.947) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.10, SD=0.965) conditions; t(169)=0.607, p=0.545.

*Summary*

Parents with child(ren) aged between 1–3 had a higher degree of agreement about tuition fees when compared to parents with child(ren) aged between 4–6. However, they also agreed that if marketing activities were reduced, tuition fees would be lower (tuition fee 3). That said, less marketing by private early childhood education centres did not significantly impact the decision to switch to another education centre (tuition fee 4).

All parents agreed that the tuition fees at these education centres were reasonable (tuition fee 1) and affordable (tuition fee 2).

Shared value

There was a significant difference in the scores for parents with children aged between 1–3 (M=3.67, SD=0.641) and parents with children aged between 4–6 (M=3.31, 0.821) conditions; t(169)=3.177, p=0.002. The results show that parents with children aged between 1–3 have a higher degree of similarity between their values and the values of private early childhood education centres, when compared to parents with children aged between 4–6.

*Summary*

The parents had moderate agreement in terms of share value. This implies that the parents would choose an education centre that holds similar values to their own, but may not be entirely committed to one education centre for an extended period of time.

### 4.1.2 The relationship between the independent variables and dependent variables (MANOVA)

The Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted in this project to measure the effects of an independent variable on multiple dependent variables.

Gender

There are significant differences between males and females on the following:
(Refer to APPENDIX 6.1 and 6.2 for tables and statistics)

*Trust*

Trust 4 (honesty about the teaching content of the private early childhood education centre), F(1, 169)=11.710, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.65, with females (M=3.45) scoring higher than males (M=3.17); on trust 7 (trust in the teachers at the private early childhood education centre), F(1, 169)=15.760, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.085, with females (M=3.94) scoring higher than males (M=3.61); on trust 10 (employing experts and education professionals who know how to effectively teach students), F(1,169)=14.905, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.081, with females (M=3.66) scoring higher than males (M=3.29); on trust 11 (teachers knowing the children's educational needs), F(1,169)=20.494, p=.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.108, with females (M=3.72) scoring higher than males (M=3.33); on trust 12 (the education centre providing good advice on supporting the children's learning at home), F(1,169)=15.377, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.083, with females (M=3.75) scoring higher than males (M=3.36); on trust 13 (the ability of the education centre to effectively educate children), F(1,169)= 17.039, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.092; , with females (M=3.63) scoring higher than males (M=3.26).

*Commitment*

Commitment 1 (emotionally attached to the children's private early childhood education centres), F(1, 169)= 29.034, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.147, with females (M=3.21) scoring higher than males (M=2.54); commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family at the children's private early childhood education centre), F(1, 169)=72.713, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.301, with females (M=3.24) scoring higher than males (M=2.24); commitment 3 (not willing to change the preferences of private early childhood education centres), F(1, 169)=31.858, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.159, with females (M=3.16) scoring higher than males (M=2.43); commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging to

private early childhood education centres), F(1, 169)=48.991, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.225, with females (M=3.20) scoring higher than males (M=2.25).

*Benevolence*

Benevolence 1 (the centre acting in his or her best interests), F(1, 169)=23.890, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.124, with females (M=3.36) scoring higher than males (M=2.88); benevolence 2 (the centre showing interest in his or her well-being), F(1, 169)=41.789, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.198, with females (M=3.43) scoring higher than males (M=2.86).

*Teaching quality*

Teaching quality 2 (having an intimate relationship between teachers and staff), F(1, 169)=4.752, p=0.031, partial $\eta^2$ =.027, with females (M=3.73) scoring higher than males (M=3.47); teaching quality 6 (knowing the students' individual learning needs), F(1, 169)=26.317, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.135, with females (M=3.96) scoring higher than males (M=3.39); teaching quality 8 (effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit the children's learning needs), F(1, 169)=8.399, p=0.004, partial $\eta^2$ =.047, with females (M=3.71) scoring higher than males (M=3.43); teaching quality 9 (professionally trained teachers and staff), F(1, 169)=5.077, p=0.026, partial $\eta^2$ =.029, with females (M=3.59) scoring higher than males (M=3.37); teaching quality 10 (the ability to show professionalism), F(1, 169)=4.752, p=0.031, partial $\eta^2$ =.027, with females (M=3.73) scoring higher than males (M=3.47).

*Class size*

Class size 2 (the major factor when considering a private early childhood education centre), F(1, 169)=37.395, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.181, with females (M=3.89) scoring higher than males (M=3.59); class size 3 (able to take care every student in the class), F(1, 169)= 10.324, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.058, with females (M=3.89) scoring higher than males (M=3.59).

*Tuition fee*

Tuition fee 3 (reduction in marketing leading to a reduction in tuition fees), F(1, 169)=17.602, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.094, with males (M=4.18) scoring higher than females (M=3.75); tuition fee 4 (the retention of enrolment to the centre, of which

appeared less attractive due to reducing marketing activities), F(1, 169)= 10.584, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.059, with males (M=3.99) scoring higher than females (M=3.63).

*Share value*

Share value (similarity between parents' values and the centre's values), F(1, 169)= 13.418, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.074, with females (M=3.67) scoring higher than males (M=3.26).

Summary

Trust in private early childhood education centres was higher for females than males. Based on the statistics about commitment, the mean scores given by males were far lower than females. This reveals statistical significance in the measurement of commitment from the four statements. It is also worth noting that similar findings were found for benevolence. For teaching quality and class size, females had higher mean scores than males. Conversely, males gave higher mean scores for tuition fees—particularly for the reduction of marketing activities leading to a reduction in tuition fees, and enrolment retention appearing less attractive after reducing marketing activities. Moreover, females held more similar values with education centres than males. This implies that females (who could also be mothers) pay more care and attention to their child(ren). The female respondents had more intention to communicate and understand the early childhood education than males (who could also be fathers). However, males may take more responsibility when it comes to paying tuition fees. The findings regarding tuition fees seem to differ from the other findings between males and females.

<u>Age</u>

There were significant differences among the different age groups, such as the following:

(Refer to APPENDIX 6.3 and 6.4 for tables and statistics)

*Trust*

Trust 3 (reliability to keep a promise), F(6, 164)= 3.775, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.121, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest, and parents aged between 48–

52 (M=3.50) scoring lowest; trust 4 (honesty about the teaching content of the private early childhood education centre), F(6, 164)= 2.644, p=0.018, partial $\eta^2$ =.088, with parents aged between 43–47 (M=3.64) scoring highest and parents aged between 48–52 (M=3.00) scoring lowest; trust 5 (consistency in delivering courses/programmes), F(6, 164)=2.930, p=0.010, partial $\eta^2$ =.097, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged between 38–42 (M=3.58) scoring lowest; trust 6 (taking care of the children's well-being), F(6, 164)= 3.110, p=0.007, partial $\eta^2$ =.102, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.43) scoring highest and parents aged between 38–42 (M=3.46) scoring lowest; trust 8 (reliability of teachers), F(6, 164)= 2.377, p=0.031, partial $\eta^2$ =.080, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged between 38–42 (M=3.73) scoring lowest; trust 9 (children feeling safe in the private early childhood education centre), F(6, 164)=2.744, p=0.014, partial $\eta^2$ =.091, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.71) scoring highest and parents aged between 38–42 (M=3.85) scoring lowest; trust 11 (teachers understanding the children's educational needs), F(6, 164)=3.277, p=0.005, partial $\eta^2$ =.107, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents aged between 48–52 (M=3.00) scoring lowest; trust 12 (the centre providing good advice on supporting children's home learning), F(6, 164)=3.435, p=0.003, partial $\eta^2$ =.112, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents aged between 33–37 (M=3.31) scoring lowest.

*Commitment*

Commitment 1 (emotional attachment to the children's early childhood education centres), F(6,164)= 4.984, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.154, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.86) scoring highest and parents aged between 48–52 (M=2.50) scoring lowest; commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family at the private early childhood education centre), F(6,164)= 4.838, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.150, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.71) scoring highest and parents aged between 48–52 (M=2.50) scoring lowest; commitment 3 (unwillingness to change the preferences of the private early childhood education centre), F(6, 164)= 5.538, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.168, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.86) scoring highest and parents aged between 43–47 (M=2.43) scoring lowest; commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging to the children's private early childhood education centre), F(6, 164)= 3.380, P=0.004, partial $\eta^2$ =.110, with

parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.43) scoring highest and parents aged between 33–37 (M=2.41) scoring lowest.

*Integrity*

Integrity 2 (the reliability and truthfulness of advertisements and the private early childhood education centre's content), F=(6, 164)=2.920, p=0.010, partial $\eta^2$ =.097, with parents aged between 33–37 (M=3.67) scoring highest and parents aged between 43–47 and 48–52 (M=3.00) scoring lowest.

*Benevolence*

Benevolence 1 (the private early childhood education centre acting in his or her best interests), F(6, 164)= 4.234, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.134, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.71) scoring highest and parents aged between 33–37 (M=2.88) scoring lowest; benevolence 2 (the centre interested in his or her well-being), F(6, 164)= 5.635, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.171, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=3.71) scoring highest and parents aged between 33–37 (M=2.88) scoring lowest.

*Competence*

Competence (accurate and competent recommendations for the information and advice of children's learning), F(6, 164)= 3.223, p=0.005, partial $\eta^2$ =.105, with parents aged between 18–22 (M=4.14) scoring highest and parents aged between 43–47 (M=3.43) scoring lowest.

*Teaching quality*

Teaching quality 1 (the ability of teachers to motivate the children to learn), F(6, 164)=3.531, p=0.003, partial $\eta^2$ =.114, with parents aged 48–52 (M=4.50) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.39) scoring lowest; teaching quality 2 (having close relationships with teachers and staff), F(6, 164)= 4.276, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.135, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.43) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.33) scoring lowest; teaching quality 3 (teachers' willingness to communicate with parents about the children's learning), F(6, 164)=3.730, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.120, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.55) scoring lowest; teaching quality 4 (the willingness of communicating with parents about the

information of the centre), F(6, 164)=5.342, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.163, with parents aged 48–52 (M=4.50) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.18) scoring lowest; teaching quality 5 (the willingness of offering assistance and support to students' families), F(6, 164)=6.729, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.198, with parents aged 48–52 (M=5.00) scoring highest and parents aged 38–42 (M=3.23) scoring lowest; teaching quality 6 (knowing the students' individual learning needs), F(6, 164)= 4.597, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.144, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged 48–52 (M=3.50) scoring lowest; teaching quality 8 (effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit the children's learning needs), F(6, 164)= 8.618, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.240, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.27) scoring lowest; teaching quality 9 (professionally trained teachers and staff), F(6, 164)= 5.205, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.160, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.14) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.24) scoring lowest; teaching quality 10 (close relationships between the students and the teachers/staff), F(6, 164)= 4.606, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.144, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.29) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.27) scoring lowest.

*Class size*

Class size 1 (a reasonable class size), F(6, 164)= 3.281, p=0.004, partial $\eta^2$ =.107, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.57) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.55) scoring lowest; Class size 2 (the major factor to consider at the private early childhood education centre), F(6, 164)= 4.344, P=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.137, with parents aged 23–27 (M=3.64) scoring highest and parents aged 43–47 (M=2.79) scoring lowest; class size 3 (able to take care of every student in class), F(6, 164)= 5.127, P=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.158, with parents aged 18–22 (M=4.29) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.43) scoring lowest.

*Location*

Location 3 (retention with the centre due to having good quality teaching, even if the location was far from home), F(6, 164)= 4.340, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.137, with parents aged 23–27 (M=4.43) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=3.49) scoring lowest.

*Tuition fees*

Tuition fee 1 (reasonable tuition fee), F(6, 164)= 2.391, p=0.031, partial $\eta^2$ =.080, with parents aged 43–47 (M=3.79) scoring highest and parents aged 33–37 (M=2.88) scoring lowest; tuition fee 2 (affordable tuition fee), F(6, 164)= 2.902, p=0.010, partial $\eta^2$ =.096, with parents aged 48–52 (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents aged 18–22 (M=2.14) scoring lowest.

*Share value*

Share value (similarities between the parents' and centre's values), F(6, 164)= 5.987, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.180, with parents aged 48–52 (M=4.50) scoring highest and parents aged 38–42 (M=3.19) scoring lowest.

Summary

Different age groups had different views on private early childhood education centres. In general, the youngest age group (i.e., parents aged between 18–22) had higher mean scores. This implies that these parents had a higher degree of trust, commitment, benevolence and competence in teaching quality, class size, and location of the private early childhood education centres. However, for tuition fees, the youngest age group gave lower scores, implying that they do not think the tuition fee is as affordable as the other age groups, and prefer lower tuition fees for their child(ren).

In contrast, the older age groups tended to give lower mean scores in general. Notably, the age group of 33–37 gave the lowest scores in most of the statements. This implies that these parents demand more quality from private early childhood education centres. The age groups of 43–47 and 48–52 did not rely on marketing when considering education centre enrolment (integrity). However, these age groups gave high scores in teaching quality and share value.

Educational Background

There are significant differences among respondents with different educational backgrounds, which includes the following:

(Refer to APPENDIX 6.5 and 6.6 for tables and statistics)

*Trust*

Trust 1 (a feeling of trust), F(5, 165)=3.557, p=004, partial $\eta^2$ =.0.97, with parents at diploma level (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.33) scoring lowest; trust 2 (a trustworthy impression), F(5, 165)=4.242, p=001, partial $\eta^2$ =.0.114, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.93) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.35) scoring lowest; trust 4 (honesty about the teaching content of the private early childhood education centre), F(5, 165)= 2.822, p=0.018, partial $\eta^2$ =.079, with parents at diploma level (M=3.57) scoring highest and parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.08) scoring lowest; trust 6 (taking good care of the children's well-being), F(5, 165)= 3.900, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.106, with parents at master's degree level (M=3.91) scoring highest and parents at associate degree or higher diploma level (M=3.20) scoring lowest; trust 7 (trust in the teacher), F(5, 165)= 2.604, p=0.027, partial $\eta^2$ =.073, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.96) scoring highest and parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.50) scoring lowest; trust 10 (employing experts and educational professionals to better educate students), F(5, 165)= 2.631, p=0.026, partial $\eta^2$ =.074, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.75) scoring highest and parents at master's degree (M=3.36) scoring lowest.

*Commitment*

Commitment 1 (emotional attachment to the children's private early childhood education centres), F(5, 165)= 8.083, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.197, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.54) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=2.33) scoring lowest; commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family at the children's private early childhood education centre), F(5, 165)= 8.848, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.211, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.54) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=2.24) scoring lowest; commitment 3 (unwillingness to change the preferences of the private early childhood education centre), F(5, 165)=6.537,

p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.165, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.50) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=2.36) scoring lowest; commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging to the private early childhood education centres), F(5, 165)= 12.972, p=0.000 partial $\eta^2$ =.282, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.43) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=1.91) scoring lowest.

*Integrity*

Integrity 1 (keeping promises made on advertisements), F=(5, 165)=4.337, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.116, with parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.83) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.07) scoring lowest; integrity 2 (the reliability and truthfulness of advertisements and content about the private early childhood education centre), F=(5, 165)=3.516, p=0.005, partial $\eta^2$ =.096, with parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.67) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.00) scoring lowest.

*Benevolence*

Benevolence 2 (the centre being interested in his or her well-being), F(5, 165)=2.801, p=0.019, partial $\eta^2$ =.078, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.50) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=2.94) scoring lowest.

*Competence*

Competence (accurate and competent recommendations, information, and advice for children's learning), F(5, 165)=3.215 p=0.009, partial $\eta^2$ =.089, with parents at secondary school level and diploma level (M=4.07) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.65) scoring lowest.

*Teaching quality*

Teaching quality 3 (willingness to communicate with parents about the children's learning), F(5, 165)=2.788, p=0.019, partial $\eta^2$ =.078, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.96) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=3.45) scoring lowest; teaching quality 4 (willingness to communicate with parents about the information of the centre), F(5, 165)=2.338, p=0.044, partial $\eta^2$ =.066, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.71) scoring highest and parents at diploma level (M=3.14) scoring lowest; teaching quality 8 (effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit the

children's learning needs), F(5, 165)=3.415, p=0.006, partial $\eta^2$ =.094, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.82) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=3.27) scoring lowest; teaching quality 9 (professionally trained teachers and staff), F(5, 165)=4.325, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.116, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.89) scoring highest and parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.17) scoring lowest; teaching quality 10 (intimate relationships between students and teachers/staff), F(5, 165)=2.790, p=0.019, partial $\eta^2$ =.078, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.75) scoring highest and parents at postgraduate certificate/diploma level (M=3.25) scoring lowest.

*Class size*

Class size 2 (the major factor when considering the private early childhood education centre), F(5, 165)=2.517, p=0.032, partial $\eta^2$ =.071, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.50) scoring highest and parents at master's degree level (M=2.79) scoring lowest; class size 3 (able to take care every student in the class), F(5, 165)=2.388, p=0.040, partial $\eta^2$ =.067, with parents at secondary school level (M=3.93) scoring highest and parents at associate degree and higher diploma level (M=3.50) scoring lowest

*Location*

Location 1 (the private early childhood education centre located close to home), F(5, 165)=2.301, p=0.047, partial $\eta^2$ =.065, with parents at diploma level (M=4.21) scoring highest and parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.74) scoring lowest; location 2 (less changes in routine from home), F(5, 165)=2.423, p=0.038, partial $\eta^2$ =.068, with parents at master's degree level (M=4.36) scoring highest and parents at associate degree or higher diploma level (M=3.90) scoring lowest.

*Tuition fees*

Tuition fee 1 (reasonable tuition fee), F(5, 165)=3.784, p=0.003, partial $\eta^2$ =.103, with parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.65) scoring highest and parents at associate degree or higher diploma level (M=2.83) scoring lowest; tuition fee 2 (affordable tuition fee), F(5, 165)=3.011, p=0.013, partial $\eta^2$ =.084, with parents at bachelor's degree level (M=3.37) scoring highest and parents at secondary school level (M=2.64) scoring

lowest; tuition fee 3 (reduction in marketing activities leading to a reduction in tuition fees), F(5, 165)=5.230, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.137, with parents at master's degree level (M=4.36) scoring highest and parents at diploma level (M=3.57) scoring lowest; tuition fee 4 (retention of enrolment to the private early childhood education centre, which appeared less attractive after reducing marketing activities), F(5, 165)= 4.475, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.119, with parents at master's degree level (M=4.18) scoring highest and parents at diploma level (M=3.36) scoring lowest.

*Share value*

Share value (similarity between the parents' and the private early childhood education centre's values), F(5, 165)= 2.511, p=0.032, partial $\eta^2$ =.071, with parents at diploma level (M=3.86) scoring highest and parents at master's level (M=3.18) scoring lowest.

Summary

The respondents with a lower educational background—particularly those at a secondary school level—gave higher scores for the above statements. This implies that they have higher trust in private early childhood education centres and perceive a higher teaching quality. Conversely, the respondents with higher education gave lower ratings, particularly for commitment. The mean scores indicate that the respondents with master's degrees have the lowest commitment to their children's private early childhood education centres. The respondents with bachelor's degrees gave the lowest scores for integrity. For tuition fees, respondents with master's degrees believed that tuition fees could be reduced by reducing marketing activities, but they would still enrol to the private early childhood education centre if it looked less attractive. The secondary school level respondents thought the tuition fees were reasonable but unaffordable.

Family Income

There are significant differences among respondents with different family income per month, which includes the following:

(Refer to APPENDIX 6.7 and 6.8 for tables and statistics)

*Trust*

Trust 2 (a trustworthy impression), F(9, 161)=1.990, p=0.044, partial $\eta^2$ =.0.100, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.00) scoring highest and family income from HK$60,000 to HK$70,000 (M=3.39) scoring lowest; trust 4 (honesty about the teaching content of the private early childhood education centre), F(9, 161)=2.722, p=0.006, partial $\eta^2$ =.132, with family income from HK$40,001 to HK$50,000 (M=3.63) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=3.00) scoring lowest; trust 7 (trust in the teacher), F(9, 161)=2.403, p=0.014, partial $\eta^2$ =.118, with family income from HK$10,001 to HK$20,000 (M=4.14) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=3.25) scoring lowest; trust 9 (the children feeling safe at the early childhood education centre), F(9, 161)=3.066, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.146, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.67) scoring highest and family income from HK$30,001 to HK$40,000 (M=3.59) scoring lowest; trust 10 (employing experts and education professionals to better educate students), F(9, 161)=3.545, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.165, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.00) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=2.75) scoring lowest; trust 11 (teachers knowing the children's educational needs), F(9, 161)=2.257, p=0.021, partial $\eta^2$ =.112, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.00) scoring highest and family income from HK$70,001 to HK$80,000 (M=3.18) scoring lowest.

*Commitment*

Commitment 1 (emotional attachment to the children's private early childhood education centres), F(9, 161)=7.429, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.293, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=3.67) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=1.75) scoring lowest; commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family at the children's private early childhood education centre), F(9, 161)=13.194, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.424, with family income from HK$20,000 to HK$30,000 (M=3.78) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=1.50) scoring lowest;

commitment 3 (unwillingness to change the preferences of the children's private early childhood education centres), F(9, 161)=11.472, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.391, with family income from HK$20,000 to HK$30,000 (M=3.72) scoring highest and family income from HK$60,001 to HK$70,000 (M=2.09) scoring lowest; commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging to the children's private early childhood education centres), F(9, 161)=12.977, p=0.000 partial $\eta^2$ =.420, with family income from HK$20,000 to HK$30,000 (M=3.78) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=1.25) scoring lowest.

*Benevolence*

Benevolence 1 (the centre acting in his or her best interests), F(9, 161)=2.539, p=0.009, partial $\eta^2$ =.124, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=3.67) scoring highest and family income from HK$70,001 to HK$80,000 (M=2.71) scoring lowest; benevolence 2 (the centre showing interest in his or her well-being), F(9, 161)=2.920, p=0.003, partial $\eta^2$ =.140, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=3.67) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=2.75) scoring lowest.

*Teaching quality*

Teaching quality 2 (having intimate relationships with the teachers and staff), F(9, 161)=3.011, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.144, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.33) scoring highest and family income from HK$70,001 to HK$80,000 (M=3.29) scoring lowest; teaching quality 6 (knowing the students' individual learning needs), F(9, 161)=2.454, p=0.012, partial $\eta^2$ =.121, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.33) scoring highest and family income from HK$30,001 to HK$40,000 (M=3.44) scoring lowest; teaching quality 8 (effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit the children's learning needs), F(9, 161)=2.499 p=0.011, partial $\eta^2$ =.123, with family income below HK$10,000 (M=4.33) scoring highest and family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=3.25) scoring lowest.

*Class size*

Class size 2 (the major factor to consider when selecting a private early childhood education centre), F(9, 161)=3.85, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.177, with family income from HK$10,001 to HK$20,000 (M=3.64) scoring highest and family income from HK$80,001

to HK$90,000 (M=2.45) scoring lowest.

*Tuition fees*

Tuition fee 1 (reasonable tuition fee), F(9, 161)=2.318, p=0.018, partial $\eta^2$ =.115, with family income from HK$80,001 to HK$90,000 (M=3.64) scoring highest and family income from HK$30,001 to HK$40,000 (M=2.59) scoring lowest; tuition fee 2 (affordable tuition fee), F(9, 161)=4.516, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.202, with family income from HK$80,001 to HK$90,000 (M=3.91) scoring highest and family income below HK$10,000 (M=2.00) scoring lowest; tuition fee 3 (reduction in marketing leading to a reduction in tuition fees), F(9, 161)= 4.745, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.210, with family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=5.00) scoring highest and family income from HK$10,001 to HK$20,000 (M=3.64) scoring lowest; tuition fee 4 (retention of enrolment to the centre appearing less attractive due to less marketing), F(9, 161)=2.957, p=0.003, partial $\eta^2$ =.142, with family income from HK$90,001 to HK$100,000 (M=4.75) scoring highest and family income from HK$10,001 to HK$20,000 (M=3.43) scoring lowest.

*Share value*

Share value (similarities between the parents' and centre's values), F(9, 161)= 1.966, p=0.047, partial $\eta^2$ =.099, with family income from HK$10,001 to HK$20,000 (M=4.07) scoring highest and family income from HK$70,001 to HK$80,000 (M=3.12) scoring lowest.

Summary

The respondents with lower family income tended to have higher mean scores for trust, commitment, benevolence, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value. However, the respondents with higher family income found the tuition fees to be relatively reasonable and affordable. Regarding commitment, respondents with the highest family income (i.e., HK$90,001 – HK$100,000 per month), gave the lowest mean scores for 3 out of 4 statements. This shows that these respondents are not willing to commit to one private early childhood education centre. As such, they perceive other choices in the marketplace. For integrity, all respondents from various groups of family income showed an average view, and tended to agree that

advertisements by the education centres were reliable and truthful.

Years of experience in private early childhood education centres

There are significant differences among respondents with different levels of experience in private early childhood education centres, which includes the following:
(Refer to APPENDIX 6.9 and 6.10 for tables and statistics)

*Trust*

Trust 3 (the reliability to keep promises), F(10, 160)=3.736, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.189, with parents having 5 years' experience or above in the education centre (M=4.33) scoring highest and parents having experience from 2 years to 2 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.19) scoring lowest; trust 8 (reliability of the teachers), F(10, 160)=2.168, p=0.022, partial $\eta^2$ =.119, with parents having 5 years' experience or above in the education centre (M=4.67) scoring highest and parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=3.79) scoring lowest; trust 10 (employing experts and educational professionals to better educate students), F(10, 160)=4.072, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.203, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=3.12) scoring lowest; trust 11 (teachers knowing the children's educational needs), F(10, 160)=2.042, p=0.032, partial $\eta^2$ =.113, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years 7 months to 4 years in the education centre (M=3.25) scoring lowest; trust 12 (the centre providing good advice about supporting the children's home learning), F(10, 160)=2.419, p=0.010, partial $\eta^2$ =.131, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years and below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience above 5 years in the education centre (M=3.00) scoring lowest; trust 13 (ability to effectively teach the children), , F(10, 160)=4.792, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.230, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=3.00) scoring lowest.

*Commitment*

Commitment 1 (emotional attachment to the children's private early childhood

education centre) ), F(10, 160)=2.618, p=0.006, partial $\eta^2$ =.141, with parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.48) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years 7 months to 4 years in the education centre (M=2.25) scoring lowest; commitment 2 (feeling like part of the family at the children's private early childhood education centre) ), F(10, 160)=5.479, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.255, with parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.56) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years 7 months to 4 years in the education centre (M=1.75) scoring lowest; commitment 3 (unwillingness to change preferences at the children's private early childhood education centre) ), F(10, 160)=5.624, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.260, with parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.74) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years 7 months to 4 years in the education centre (M=2.00) scoring lowest; commitment 4 (a strong sense of belonging to the children's private early childhood education centre), F(10, 160)=4.019, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.201, with parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.63) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years 7 months to 4 years in the education centre (M=2.25) scoring lowest.

*Integrity*

Integrity 1 (keeping promises made on advertisements), F=(10, 160)=2.418, p=0.011, partial $\eta^2$ =.131, with parents having experience from 1 years 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=3.76) scoring highest and parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=2.60) scoring lowest.

*Benevolence*

Benevolence 2 (the centre being interested in his or her well-being), F(10, 160)=2.587, p=0.006, partial $\eta^2$ =.139, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=3.73) scoring highest and parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=2.91) scoring lowest.

*Competence*

Competence (accurate and competent recommendations regarding the information and advice of children's learning), F(10, 160)=3.183, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.166, with

parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.36) scoring highest and parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.40) scoring lowest.

*Teaching quality*

Teaching quality 1 (ability of teachers to motivate children to learn), F(10, 160)=1.980, p=0.039, partial $\eta^2$ =.110, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years in the education centre (M=4.33) scoring highest and parents having experience from 2 years 7 months to 3 years in the education centre (M=3.32) scoring lowest; teaching quality 3 (willingness to communicate with parents about the children's learning), F(10, 160)=3.005, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.158, with parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years and above 5 years in the education centre (M=4.33) scoring highest, and parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.20) scoring lowest; teaching quality 4 (willingness to communicate with parents about the information of the centre), F(10, 160)=3.648, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.186, with parents having experience above 5 years in the education centre (M=4.67) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years to 3 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.09) scoring lowest; teaching quality 5 (willingness to offer assistance and support to students' families), F(10, 160)=2.517, p=0.008, partial $\eta^2$ =.136, with parents having experience above 5 years in the education centre (M=4.67) scoring highest and parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=3.29) scoring lowest; teaching quality 6 (knowing the students' individual learning needs), F(10, 160)=2.085, p=0.028, partial $\eta^2$ =.115, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.36) scoring highest and parents having experience from 2 years 7 months to 3 years in the education centre (M=3.32) scoring lowest; teaching quality 8 (effective pedagogy and curriculum to suit the children's learning needs), F(10, 160)=3.297, p=0.001, partial $\eta^2$ =.171, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 2 years to 2 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.31) scoring lowest; teaching quality 9 (professionally trained teachers and staff), F(10, 160)=4.253, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.210, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.27) scoring highest and parents having experience above 5 years in education centre

(M=3.00) scoring lowest; teaching quality 10 (intimate relationships between students and teachers/staff), F(10, 160)=5.259, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.247, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.18) scoring highest and parents having experience from 2 years to 2 years 6 months in the education centre (M=2.88) scoring lowest.

*Class size*

Class size 2 (the major factor when considering a private early childhood education centre), F(10, 160)=5.248, p=0.000, partial $\eta^2$ =.247, with parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.93) scoring highest and parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=2.40) scoring lowest.

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*Location*

Location 1 (the location of the centre being close to home), F(10, 160)=2.301, p=0.047, partial $\eta^2$ =.065, with parents having experience below 6 months in the education centre (M=4.27) scoring highest and parents having experience from 3 years to 3 years 6 months in the education centre (M=3.55) scoring lowest.

*Tuition fees*

Tuition fee 2 (affordable tuition fee), F(10, 160)=2.067, p=0.030, partial $\eta^2$ =.114, with parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=2.59) scoring lowest; tuition fee 3 (reduction in marketing leading to a reduction in tuition fees), F(10, 160)=2.484, p=0.009, partial $\eta^2$ =.134, with parents having experience from 1 year 7 months to 2 years in the education centre (M=4.26) scoring highest and parents having experience from 7 months to 12 months in the education centre (M=3.63) scoring lowest; tuition fee 4 (retention of enrolment to the centre appearing less attractive after reducing marketing), F(10, 160)=2.631, p=0.005, partial $\eta^2$ =.141, with parents having experience above 5 years in the education centre (M=4.67) scoring highest and parents having experience from 4 years 7 months to 5 years in the education centre (M=3.33) scoring lowest.

*Share value*

Share value (similarities between the parents' and the centre's values), F(10, 160)=2.998, p=0.002, partial $\eta^2$ =.158, with parents having experience above 5 years in the education centre (M=4.00) scoring highest and parents having experience from 4 years to 4 years 6 months in the education centre (M=2.80) scoring lowest.

Summary

There is no specific pattern—like other independent variables—for respondents with different years of experience in private early childhood education centres. Generally, respondents with lesser experience showed more commitment and a higher degree of agreement in teaching quality, while parents with more experience placed greater trust in private early childhood education centres and were more satisfied about the communication with teachers and staff.

### 4.1.3 Correlation matrix

A correlation matrix has been adopted to examine the relationship among dependent variables. A summary of the relationships between dependent variables from the correlation matrix is shown in table 4.20.

Table 4. 20 Summary of correlation matrix

| | Trust | Commitment | Integrity | Benevolence | Competence | Teaching Quality | Class Size | Location | Tuition Fee | Shared Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Trust** | | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ |
| **Commitment** | ↑ | | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ |
| **Integrity** | ↓ | ↓ | | ↓ | ↑ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| **Benevolence** | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ |
| **Competence** | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ |
| **Teaching Quality** | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ |
| **Class Size** | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ |
| **Location** | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | | ↑ | ↑ |
| **Tuition Fees** | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | | ↑ |
| **Shared Value** | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | ↑ | |

Remarks: ↑positive correlation, ↓negative correlation

Trust has a positive correlation with commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity and tuition fees. Trust 8–13 have a negative correlation with integrity 1 and 2; the range is from $r$ = -.033 to $r$ = -.191. Trust 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12 and 13 have a negative correlation with the variables about tuition fees; the range is from $r$ = -.001 to $r$ = -.419.

Commitment has a positive correlation with trust, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity and tuition fees. Commitment has the negative correlation with the variable about integrity; the range is from $r$ = -.010 to $r$ = -.182. The variables of commitment also have a negative correlation with all variables about tuition fees; the range is from $r$ = -.040 to $r$ = -.417.

Integrity has a positive correlation with competence, while it has a negative correlation with trust, commitment, benevolence, teaching quality, class size, location, tuition fees

and share value. The positive correlation between integrity 1 & 2 and competence is *r* = .291 and *r* = .367, respectively.

Benevolence has a positive correlation with trust, commitment, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity, competence, and tuition fees.

Benevolence has a positive correlation with trust, commitment, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity, competence, and tuition fees. The variables of benevolence have a negative correlation with all variables about integrity; the range is from *r* = -.213 to *r* = -.312. The two variables of benevolence also have a negative correlation with competence (*r* = -.049 and *r* = -.023). It also has a negative correlation with tuition fees 3 and 4; it ranges from *r* = -.253 to *r* = -.284.

Competence has a positive correlation with trust, commitment, integrity, teaching quality, class size, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with benevolence and tuition fees. Competence has a negative correlation with benevolence 1 and 2, *r* = -.049 to *r* = -.023, respectively. It also has a negative correlation with tuition 1 and 2, the r values are *r* = -.307 to *r* = -.343.

Teaching quality has a positive correlation with trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location, tuition fees, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity. The variables of teaching quality have negative correlations with all variables about integrity. The range is from *r* = -.063 to *r* = -.269.

Class size has positive correlation with trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, location, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity and tuition fees. The variables of class size have a negative correlation with all variables of integrity; it ranges from *r* = -.089 to *r* = -.254. It also has a negative correlation with tuition fee 2, 3, and 4; it ranges from *r* = -.034 to *r* = -.367.

Location has positive correlation with trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, location, tuition fees, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity. It has a negative correlation with integrity 1 and 2, and the r values are *r* = -.303 and *r* = -.400, respectively.

Tuition fee has a positive correlation with teaching quality, location, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with trust, commitment, integrity, benevolence, competence, and class size. Tuition fee generally has positive correlations with teaching quality; it ranges from *r* = .439 to *r* = .001. It also has a positive correlation with location. The r values range from *r* = .525 to *r* = .043. Besides, it has a positive correlation with share value, ranging from *r* = .200 to *r* = .010.

Share value has positive correlation with trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location, tuition fees, and share value, while it has a negative correlation with integrity. It has a negative correlation with the two variables about integrity (*r* = -.015 and *r* = -.052).

In conclusion, for the correlation matrix, positive correlations exist among most of the dependent variables (i.e., trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value). However, integrity and tuition fees, in general, have negative correlations with other dependent variables. This implies that the parents perceive low integrity in private early childhood education centres while they perceive high level of trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value in private early childhood education centres. Similarly, when the parents believed the education centres to be high in trust, commitment, benevolence, competence, teaching quality, class size, location, and share value, the tuition fees should be reduced and lowered.

### 4.1.4 Cronbach's alpha

Table 4. 21 Reliability statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | N of Items |
|---|---|---|
| .864 | .867 | 43 |

The Cronbach's Alpha is 0.864. This implies the statistics have a good internal consistency (Table 4.21).

### 4.1.5 Factor analysis of parents

At total of 43 statements relating to marketing ethics, teaching quality, and reasons to choose a private early childhood education centre were analysed using principal component analysis with Varimax (orthogonal) rotation. The analysis yielded six factors, explaining a total of 57.157% of the variance for the entire set of variables (Table 4.22).

Table 4. 22 Factor analysis

**Rotated Component Matrix[a]**

| | Component | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Trust1 | | | | .459 | .533 | |
| Trust2 | | | | .511 | | |
| Trust3 | | | | .558 | | |
| Trust4 | | | | .409 | | |
| Trust5 | | | | .608 | | |
| Trust6 | | | .628 | | | |
| Trust7 | | | | | | |
| Trust8 | | | .510 | | | |
| Trust9 | | | .526 | | | |
| Trust10 | | | .699 | | | |
| Trust11 | | | .618 | | | |
| Trust12 | | | .697 | | | |
| Trust13 | | | .615 | | | |
| Commitment1 | | .767 | | | | |
| Commitment2 | | .866 | | | | |
| Commitment3 | | .805 | | | | |
| Commitment4 | | .810 | | | | |
| Integrity1 | | | | | .868 | |
| Integrity2 | | | | | .847 | |
| Benevolence1 | | | .437 | | | |
| Benevolence2 | | .404 | .430 | | | |
| Competence | | | | | .540 | |
| TeachingQuality1 | .452 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality2 | .709 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality3 | .705 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality4 | .697 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality5 | .745 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality6 | .625 | | | | | |
| TeachingQuality7 | | | | .527 | | |
| TeachingQuality8 | .431 | | | .565 | | |
| TeachingQuality9 | .488 | | | .402 | | |
| TeachingQuality10 | | | | .551 | | |
| ClassSize1 | .622 | | | | | |
| ClassSize2 | .403 | .530 | | | | |

| | Component | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| ClassSize3 | .416 | | .603 | | | |
| Location1 | | | | | | .575 |
| Location2 | | | | | | .714 |
| Location3 | .666 | | | | | |
| TuitionFee1 | .564 | | | | -.502 | |
| TuitionFee2 | .481 | -.514 | | | | |
| TuitionFee3 | | | | | | |
| TuitionFee4 | | | | | | .574 |
| ShareValue | .605 | | | | | |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.[a]

a. Rotation converged in 10 iterations.

Factor 1 is based on teaching quality concerns due to the high loadings by the following items: teaching quality, class size, location, tuition fees, and share value. This implies that a group of parents were concerned about the quality of the private early childhood education centres. The first factor explained 27.762%.

Factor 2 is based on commitment concerns due to high loadings by the following items: commitment and class size. This implies that a group of parents are committed and loyal to their children's private early childhood education centre. They would not prefer to switch to another education centre. The second factor explained 12.047%.

Factor 3 is based on trust in teachers due to high loadings by the items about teachers in the variables about trust. This implies that a group of parents trust the personnel who teach and take care of their children at private early childhood education centres. The third factor explained 8.475%.

Factor 4 is based on trust in the management and operations due to the high loading of items about managing private early childhood education centres. This implies that a group of parents trust the overall management and operations of the education centres. The fourth factor explained 6.197%.

Factor 5 is based on integrity concerns due to high loading by the following items: integrity, trust 1, and competence. This implies that a group of parents were concerned about the reliability and truthfulness of promises made by the private early childhood education centres. The fifth factor explained 4.732%.

Factor 6 is based on location concerns due to high loading by items about location. This implies that a group of parents were concerned about the convenience and distance of private early childhood education centres from their home. The sixth factor explained 3.943%.

Based on the factor analysis findings, different segments of parents have been identified, of which are discussed in the following chapter.

### 4.1.6 Regression analysis

A regression analysis has been used to estimate the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. The statistically significant relationships are reported as follows:

(Refer to APPENDIX 8 for tables and statistics)

Benevolence

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Benevolence 1 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 4.800, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .171. Participants' predicted Benevolence 1 is equal to 2.904+.394. This implies that the female respondents perceived private early childhood education centres to care more about the interests of the children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Benevolence 2 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 7.531, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .244. Participants' predicted Benevolence 2 is equal to 2.744+.501. This implies that the female respondents perceived private early childhood education centres to consider the interests of children ahead of their own.

Commitment

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Commitment 4 based on family income per month. A significant regression equation was found F(1, 169) = 90.693, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .345. Participants' predicted Benevolence 2 is equal to 4.263 -.273. This implies that higher family income per month and the sense of belonging to a private early childhood education centre is lower.

A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict commitment 4 based on family income per month. A significant regression equation was found F(2, 168) = 56.890, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .404. Participants' predicted Commitment 4 is equal to 3.153 + 5.24 (gender) - .219 (family income per month). This implies that the female respondents had a higher sense of belonging, but the respondents with higher family income per month had a lower sense of belonging.

A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict commitment 4 based on family income per month, gender, and age. A significant regression equation was found F(3, 168) = 42.967, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .436. Participants' predicted Commitment 4 is equal to 2.830 + .154 (age) + .529 (gender) - .264 (family income per month). This implies that the older female respondents had a higher sense of belonging, but higher family income per month had a lower sense of belonging.

A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict commitment 4 based on family income per month, gender, age, and education background. A significant regression equation was found F(4, 166) = 35.147, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .459. Participants' predicted Commitment 4 is equal to 2.965 + .130 (education background) + .142 (age) + .585 (gender) - .187 (family income per month). This implies that the older female respondents with a higher education background had a higher sense of belonging, but higher family income per month had a lower sense of belonging.

Competence

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict competence based on years of experience in joining a private early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.650, p=0.001, with an $R^2$ of .136. Participants' predicted competence is equal to 4.784 -.073. This implies that a person with less years of experience would perceive a private early childhood education centre to provide accurate and competent advice about student learning.

Integrity

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Integrity 1 based on education background. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 1.883, p=0.075, with an $R^2$ of .075. Participants' predicted integrity 1 is equal to 3.565 + .112. This implies that a person with a higher education background would perceive private early childhood education centres to keep promises made on advertisements.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Integrity 1 based on years of experience in joining a private early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 1.883, p=0.075, with an $R^2$ of .075.

Participants' predicted integrity 1 is equal to 3.565 - .104. This implies that a person with less experience would perceive the private early childhood education centre to keep promises made on advertisements.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Integrity 2 based on years of experience in joining a private early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 1.541, p=0.157, with an $R^2$ of .062. Participants' predicted integrity 2 is equal to 3.619 - .094. This implies that a person with less experience would perceive advertisements about the private early childhood education centre to be reliable and truthful.

Trust

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 3 based on parents with children aged 1–3 or 4–6. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 2.254, p=0.032, with an $R^2$ of .88. Participants' predicted trust 3 is equal to 4.442 - .409. This implies that parents with children aged 1–3 perceive private early childhood education centres to be reliable about keeping promises.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 4 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.122, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .180. Participant' predicted trust 4 is equal to 3.187 - .217. This implies that females (i.e., mothers) perceive private early childhood education centres to be honest about their teaching content.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 4 based on age. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.122, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .180. Participants' predicted trust 4 is equal to 3.187 - .155. This implies that younger parents perceive private early childhood education centres to be honest about their teaching content.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 5 based on education background. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 2.165, p=0.040, with an $R^2$ of .085. Participants' predicted trust 5 is equal to 4.516 - .088. This implies

that parents with a lower education background perceive private early childhood education centres to be more consistent with the delivery of courses and programmes.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 6 based on age. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.705, p=0.001, with an $R^2$ of .137. Participants' predicted trust 6 is equal to 4.095 - .143. This implies that young parents perceive private early childhood education centres to take care of the well-being of their children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 7 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.262, p=0.003, with an $R^2$ of .123. Participants' predicted trust 7 is equal to 3.414 - .267. This implies that females (i.e., mothers) have a higher trust in the teachers of the private early childhood education centres.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 8 based on age. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.892, p=0.001, with an $R^2$ of .143. Participants' predicted trust 8 is equal to 4.323 - .106. This implies that the younger parents rely more on the teachers of private early childhood education centres.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 8 based on years of experience in joining the early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.892, p=0.001, with an $R^2$ of .143. Participants' predicted trust 8 is equal to 4.323 + .098. This implies that parents with more experience in joining private early childhood education centres rely more on the teachers.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 9 based on age. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.326, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .186. Participants' predicted competence is equal to 4.470 - .232. The younger parents perceive that private early childhood education centres provide a greater feeling of safety for their children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 9 based on family income per month. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.326, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .186. Participants' predicted trust 9 is equal to 4.470 + .084. This implies that parents with a higher family income per month perceive private early childhood education centres to provide a greater feeling of safety for their children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 9 based on years of experience in joining the private early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.326, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .186. Participants' predicted trust 9 is equal to 4.470 + .109. This implies that parents with more experience in joining private early childhood education centres perceive that these establishments provide a greater feeling of safety for their children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 10 based on family income per Month. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 6.700, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .223. Participants' predicted trust 10 is equal to 3.338 - .122. This implies that parents with less family income per month perceive the professionalism of private early childhood education centres to effectively educate students.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 10 based on years of experience in joining the private early childhood education centre. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 6.700, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .223. Participants' predicted competence is equal to 3.338 + .086. This implies that parents with more experience in joining private early childhood education centres perceive the professionalism of private early childhood education centres to effectively teach students.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 11 based on Gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 4.613, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .165. Participants' predicted trust 11 is equal to 3.655 + .342. This implies that females (i.e., mothers) perceive that teachers are knowledgeable about their children's learning needs.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 12 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 3.492, p=0.002, with an $R^2$ of .130. Participants' predicted trust 12 is equal to 3.541 + .355. This implies that females (i.e., mothers) perceive that private early childhood education centres are able to provide good advice on children's home learning.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 13 based on gender. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.216, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .183. Participants' predicted trust 13 is equal to 2.993 + .295. This implies that females (i.e., mothers) perceive that private early childhood education centres are able to effectively educate their children.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Trust 13 based on age. A significant regression equation was found F(7, 163) = 5.216, p<.000, with an $R^2$ of .183. Participants' predicted trust 13 is equal to 2.993 - .148. This implies that younger parents perceive that private early childhood education centres are able to effectively educate their children.

### 4.1.7 Structural equation modelling of marketing ethics

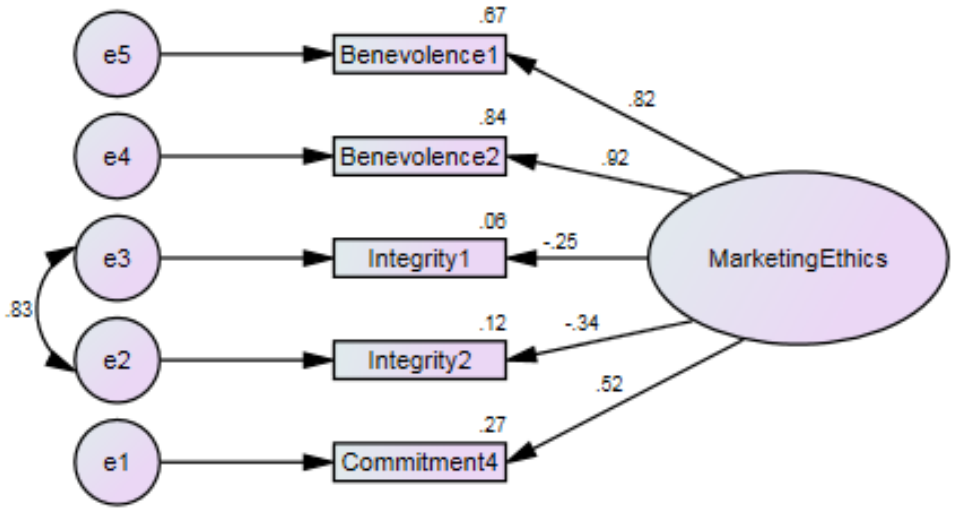


Figure 4. 1 Path analysis (standardized estimates)

There are five significant variables (p<.05) in the path analysis. In the path analysis, the observed variables are benevolence 1 & 2, integrity 1 & 2, and commitment 4. In the SEM, the chi-square is 5.629. The CFI is .996 and implies that it is accepted. RMSEA is .049 and implies that it is a good fit. The AIC is 37.629.

The path analysis shows that there is a relationship between benevolence and marketing ethics. This refers to private early childhood education centres placing the interests of parents and students ahead of their own. Benevolence 1 refers to private early childhood education centres considering the students' best interests, and benevolence 2 refers to private early childhood education centres showing interest in students' well-being, and not just the interests of the education centres. Marketing ethics among private early childhood education centres has a direct relationship with benevolence 1 and 2. The estimates and correlation between marketing ethics and benevolence 1 are .82 and *r* = .67, while the estimates and correlation between marketing ethics and benevolence 2 are .92 and *r* = .84. If a private early childhood education centre considers benevolence, it implies that they can ethically implement marketing in Hong Kong.

The relationship between integrity and marketing ethics refers to reliability, honesty, and credibility. It reflects the ethical traits of private early childhood education centres and is considered critical for establishing trust (Mcknight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002). Integrity 1 refers to the ability of private early childhood education centres to keep promises made on advertisements, and integrity 2 refers to the content of advertisements being reliable and truthful. Marketing ethics among private early childhood education centres has a direct relationship with integrity 1 and 2. The estimates and correlation between marketing ethics and integrity 1 are -.25 and $r$ = .06, while the estimates and correlation between marketing ethics and integrity 2 are -.34 and $r$ = .12. If a private early childhood education centre has considered marketing ethics, it implies that they have also considered the integrity of their marketing activities. Meanwhile, there is a correlation between integrity 1 and integrity 2 ($r$ =.83). When a private early childhood education centre keeps promises made on advertisements, it implies that their advertisements are reliable and truthful.

The marketing ethics of Hong Kong's private early childhood education centres have a direct relationship with commitment 4. Commitment 4 refers to the parents' strong sense of belonging towards their children's private early childhood education centres. The estimates and correlation between marketing ethics and commitment 4 are .52 and $r$ = .27. This implies that Hong Kong's private early childhood education centres consider marketing ethics, and the children's parents have a strong sense of belonging towards these establishments. It also implies that the parents are willing to maintain an ongoing relationship with the education centres.

Benevolence, integrity, and commitment are related to trust. Integrity and benevolence are to establish trust, and trust is to stimulate commitment. This model shows the relationship between marketing ethics and the five variables. It also implies that marketing ethics is relevant to the parents' trust (customers) towards private early childhood education centres (service providers). In other words, if private early childhood education centres want to be trusted by parents, they must ethically implement marketing activities.

### 4.1.8 Further developments to phase 2

The findings and analysis from the survey (phase 1) were developed into questions and themes in order to further explain the results of the focus group (phase 2).

Based on the t-test, “commitment” was generally low. With findings from the correction matrix, integrity and tuition fees had a negative relationship with other dependent variables. To further understand the views of parents, questions about commitment, integrity, tuition fees, and trust were raised in the parents’ focus group.

Integrity is also a major concern in marketing ethics. As such, a question regarding the promises stated on advertisements by private early childhood education centres was designed for parents, teachers, and managerial staff. The factor analysis found that most parents were concerned about the teaching quality of private early childhood education centres. Thus, in order to gain different perspectives, questions about teaching quality and its relationship with marketing implementation was set for parents, teachers, and managerial staff.

In the survey, online marketing (e.g., social media and websites) was found to be the popular way of promoting private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Moreover, word-of-mouth was also regarded as an influential reference for joining private early childhood education centres. For the focus groups, discussions about marketing types were developed to explore other ways of conducting marketing activities, as well as their implications.

The focus group discussions also aimed to better understand the effect of marketing on teaching quality and marketing ethics for Hong Kong’s private early childhood education centres.

**4.2 Phase 2 – qualitative method (focus groups)**

An analysis of the focus group interviews (APPENDIX 17, 19, and 21) unveiled a number of key findings through hierarchical clustering in relation to parents' (figure 4.2), teachers' (figure 4.3) and managerial staff's (figure 4.4) experience in operating, teaching, and joining private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. These findings are shown below. Excerpts from focus group discussions and actual responses by the participants have been integrated into these narratives to provide a better understanding of the themes and experiences of the participants.

Different themes have been developed to understand the perspectives of three groups of participants. The first theme aims to understand the market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong from different stakeholders' perspectives (i.e., parents, teachers, and managerial staff). Additionally, it looks into the demand side (i.e., trends and reasons for joining a private early childhood education centre, and the selection criteria of parents). The supply side can also be examined (i.e., motivations for operating and teaching at a private early childhood education centre). This discussion provides an overview and understands the foundaton of this industry in Hong Kong.

Another theme is the implementation of marketing in private early childhood education centres, which aims to understand and identify different types of marketing activities. Furthermore, it also attempts to investigate the necessity of adopting these marketing activities, and explores the views of parents (i.e., customers), teachers and managerial staff (i.e., service providers), with regards to the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres.

Following the preceding discussion, the impact of marketing will be discussed, which aims at understanding the impact of marketing on teaching quality as well as the purpose of education. It also explores the ethical measures of conducting marketing activities, and finding the balance between marketing and education.

The last theme is government regulation, which aims to understand the participants' views regarding the regulations and supervision of private early childhood education centres. There are currently no specific regulations for private early childhood

education centres in Hong Kong. It is also worth noting that government intervention would likely impact private early childhood education centres.

All of the narratives adopt a simple labelling system. For example, “P1” stands for the participants from the focus group of parents and number 1. “T2” stands for the participants from the focus group of teachers and number 2. “M3” stands for the participants from the focus group of the managerial staff and number 3. There were 9 participants in the group of parents, 8 participants in the group of teachers, and 6 participants in the group of managerial staff.

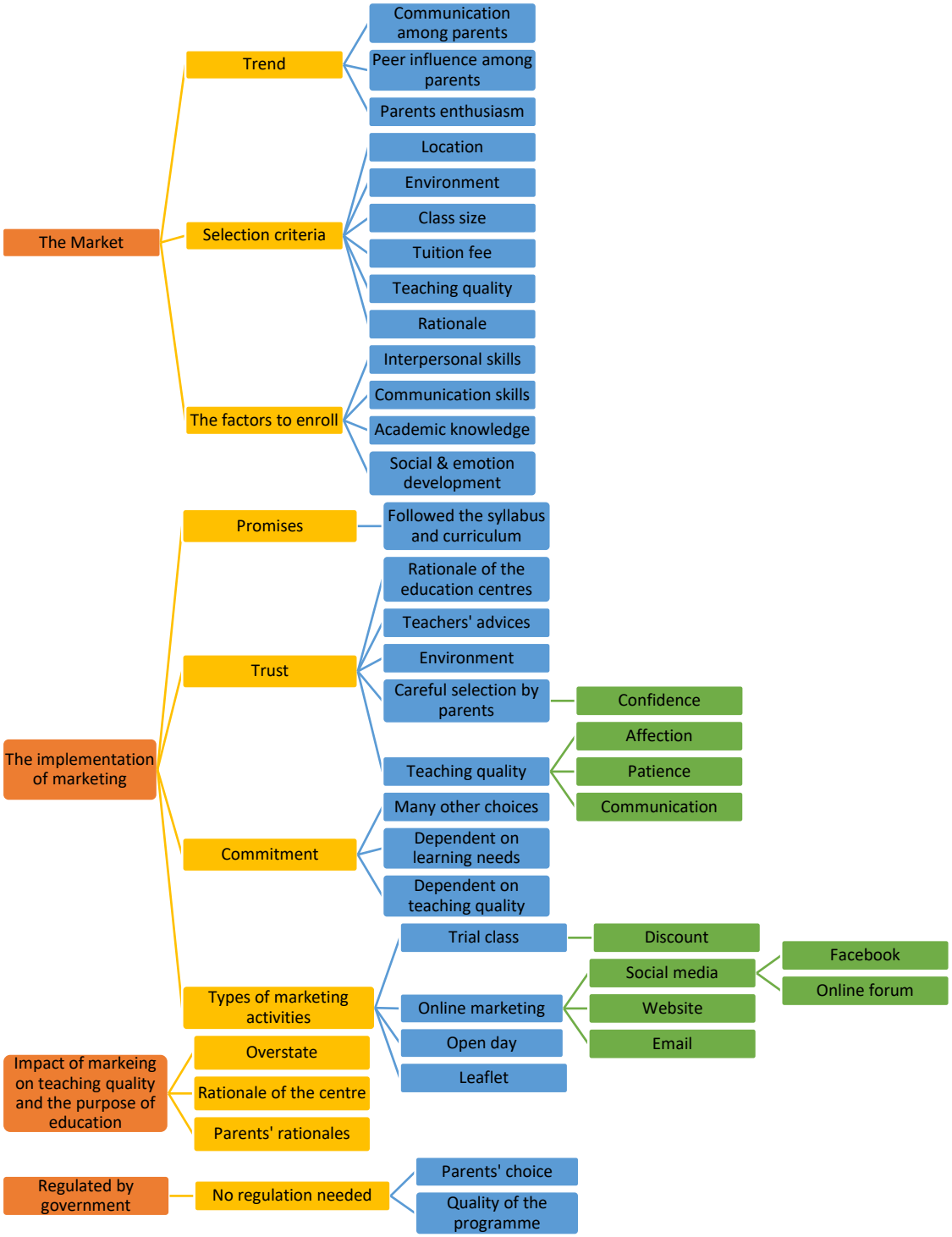


Figure 4. 2 Hierarchy clustering (parents)

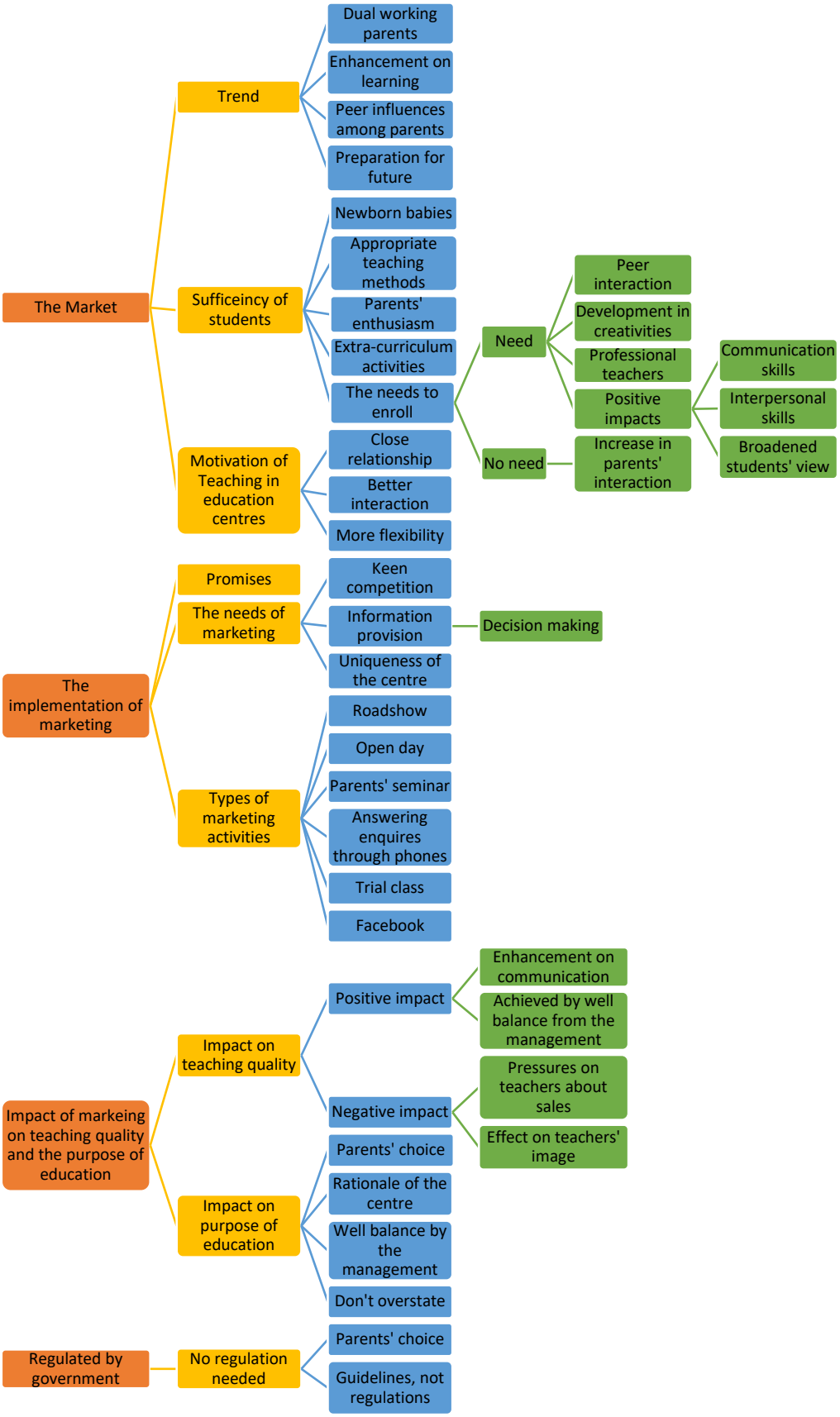


Figure 4. 3 Hierarchy clustering (teachers)

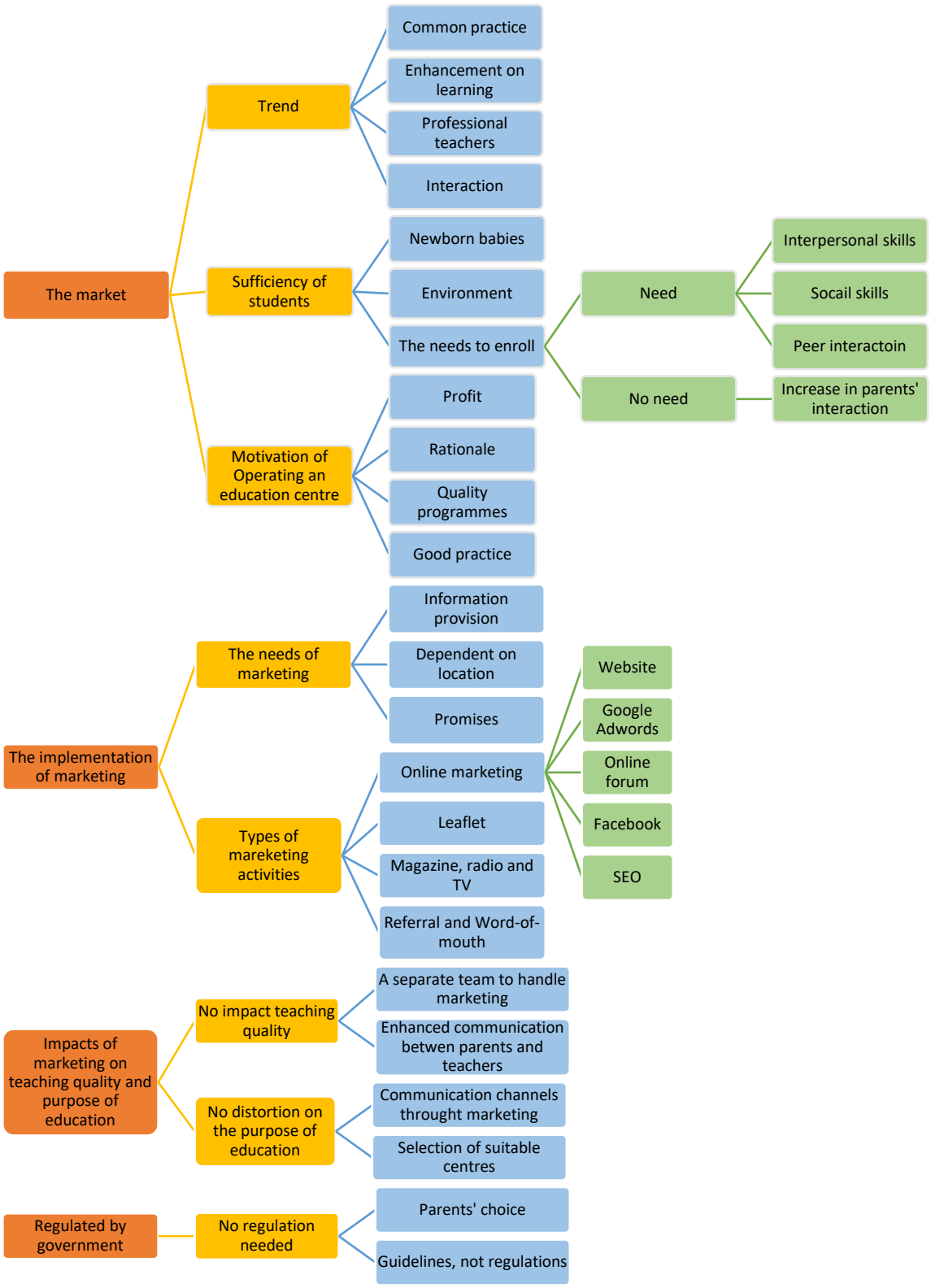


Figure 4. 4 Hierarchy clustering (managerial staff)

### 4.2.1 The market

Trends

Focus group participants were first asked to discuss the trend of enrolling children to private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Nearly all participants described the number of students to be steady, or even increasing. Parents, teachers, and managerial staff described it as "*a common practice*" to enrol children to private early childhood education centres, and explained that joining courses and programmes is likely based on "*peer influences among parents*". As T3 expressed "m*ost of the parents want to offer the same as other parents who enrol their children to the early childhood education centres*." Another two teachers, T4 and T8, described the parents as being "*nervous*" about their children's future, explaining that they want to have "*better preparation*" for their children. T1, T3, and P1 also indicated that "*dual working parents*" are common in Hong Kong, and these parents wanted their children "*not to stay at home and do nothing*". The parents wanted their children to have "*higher abilities in learning*", which was observed by M4 and T2. Some participants from the group of managerial staff also observed that the parents considered the teachers to have "*professional training and experience*" and the teachers to perform the teaching is better than the parent to do so.

Three parents (P3, P5, and P6) and one managerial staff member (M2) indicated that parents have a chance to "*communicate with other parents*" in private early childhood education centres. Such communication involves information about the courses and their children. T3 also explained that some parents are "*enthusiastic*" about understanding the course material. For example, P2 indicated that the parents of her daughter's classmates were "*enthusiastic*" about discussing the courses. T6 offered a statement that is representative of the participants' responses:

> Obviously, the parents of young children are willing to enrol their children to private early childhood education centres. Compared to five years ago, parents nowadays think their children should attend some courses before going to kindergarten for better preparation. Some of the students' parents reflect that almost 80 percent of kindergarten students have attended courses and lessons at various

early childhood education centres. Therefore, I think this trend will continue.

Student sufficiency

The managerial staff and teachers were asked about the sufficiency of students in Hong Kong for private early childhood education centres. They also expressed that the students are "*sufficient to support the market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.*" M6 and T8 explained that "*new-born babies*" are the supply of future consumers for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Moreover, T3 observed that parents are concerned about "*the appropriateness to teach their children*." She added that parents think "*they are not as professional as teachers who have been formally trained to teach.*" M5 had a similar opinion, that "*parents want an appropriate environment for their children…*" These responses imply that parents want to send their children to private early childhood education centres for better education. Besides, M3 explained that "*many students are on waitlists*", and P7 indicated that some parents are "*enthusiastic about looking for extra-curriculum activities and courses for their children.*" These examples show that parents are willing to enrol their children to private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.

The managerial staff and teachers also identified the need to enrol young children to private early childhood education centres. Most of the participants agreed that young children aged 1–6 years old should attend such courses. For instance, they explained that young children are able to enhance "*peer interaction*" with other students at these centres. M4 mentioned that "*the living environment has changed over the past decade in Hong Kong. There are less interactions among neighbours. As such, "interactions among children have significantly decreased*." This shows that parents want to enhance their children's *interpersonal skills*, *social skills*, and *communication skills* via private early childhood education centres. Additionally, T5 believed that the curriculum of private early childhood education centres was more flexible, allowing students to better develop their "*creativity*".

However, some managerial staff (e.g., M1 & M4), and teachers (e.g., T2 & T3) indicated the opposite. They thought that young children did not need to enrol to private early

childhood education centres, unless their parents were able to spend time with their children by "*increasing parental interaction*". This should have the same influence on children. As T2 explained "*If the parents are able to teach and play with their children during their free time, their children would receive the same influence as an education centre*…"

The parents' selection criteria

Some participants in the focus group of parents (e.g., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9) recognized "*location*" as being a prime concern when selecting a private early childhood education centre, explaining that they preferred these centres to be "*close to home*". As P1 further explained "…*this makes it easier to take care of transportation, and travel time is much shorter.*" P3 indicated that he and his wife were dual working parents and *"the domestic helper takes care of my daughter when she needs to go to the education centre. As such, we have chosen an education centre that is not far from home and convenient to access.*" This example shows that convenience and accessibility are important factors for parents when selecting a private early childhood education centre.

The "*environment*" was another concern for parents, with P1 explaining that "*a clean and bright interior is important.*" P8 also said that "*an environment with appropriate hygiene is important for young children*." Additionally, "*teaching quality*" was reflected by parents as another consideration. For instance, they believed that teaching quality had a direct impact on the students. P6 explained "…*learning a language relies on teachers, particularly for pronunciation and accent*…" P3 explained that he preferred private early childhood education centres that have "*similar rationale and value to me*." This suggests that shared value between education centres and parents is also being considered. Class size was another consideration, with P4 indicating that "…*the most ideal class size is 4–6 students, as it allows students to have better interactions with other students and the teacher.*" Additionally, in terms of "*tuition fees*" ~~i~~s a cost on the parents to enrol their children to the private early childhood education centres, the parents wanted affordable courses.

The motivation of operating and teaching at private early childhood education centres

M4 expressed that they wanted to "*provide high quality programmes and courses for young children in Hong Kong.*" M2 explained they had experience working at kindergartens or other early childhood education centres. They did not agree with the "*rationale*" of these organizations, and instead believed that they could provide "*higher quality*" early childhood education. As such, they decided to open private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. The teachers also held similar views; T1 and T2 expressed that they can establish a "*closer relationship with the children because the number of students in a class of a private early childhood education centre is less than an average kindergarten"* and *"there are better interactions between teachers and children."* The teachers identified that the learning is more effective in private early childhood education centres, and there is more "*flexibility*".

M5, an owner of a private early childhood education centre, expressed that she wanted to introduce good practice from overseas. She explained:

> I worked at a kindergarten in New Zealand that adopted the Reggio Emilia approach. I found this approach to be good, and therefore wanted to bring it back to Hong Kong. This pedagogy emphasized learning through play. Thus, I came back to Hong Kong and opened my first education centre.

M1 indicated that "*there is a market and it should be profitable.*" He was attracted by the potential of profitability, while also considering the sufficiency of students and the trends among parents in Hong Kong. Hence, he decided to join the private early childhood education market.

### 4.2.2 Reasons for operating private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong

The needs of private early childhood education centres

The parents of this study identified the factors and reasons for enrolling their children to private early childhood education centres. This implies that there is a demand for these centres in Hong Kong. Many parents (e.g., P1, P2, and P7) explained that they wanted to develop their children's "*interpersonal skills*" and "*communication skills*". As noted earlier, changes in Hong Kong's living environment has weakened these skills for young children. Private early childhood education centres act as an intermediary to enhance these types of skills. P8 explained, "*I hope his social and emotional development can be enhanced. I want him to learn how to take care of himself. Developing life skills is something that I have also considered.*" Hence, the parents considered their children's development as an important reason to enrol their children to private early childhood education centres.

P4 believed that academic knowledge and literacy skills were important for her child's future. She further explained that her child "*needs to acquire academic knowledge to be better equipped for primary school*." As noted earlier, there is major peer competition in Hong Kong. In order to elevate academic skills, parents are willing to send their children to education centres.

Impact on students

The managerial staff and teachers also identified the positive impacts on students according to their observations and experiences. "*Interpersonal skills*" was noted as a development for children who attend private early childhood education centres. As M5 explained "*children can build friendships with consistent contact at private early childhood education centres.*" The teachers added that "communication skills" can also be developed. T2 explained that "the children can observe and understand other children at the education centre." Through this, the children can build their "*confidence*" and "*improve their behaviour*".

### 4.2.3 The implementation of marketing

The needs of marketing activities

The majority of participants in the groups of managerial staff, teachers, and parents expressed that marketing is needed for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. However, some indicated that marketing is not necessary.

The managerial staff, teachers, and parents noted that marketing activities provide information to the market. M6 explained "*marketing helps to let the public know that something good is in my education centre. The programmes and courses may help and benefit the kids.*" M4 explained that "*retaining existing customers is important, but attracting new customers is also necessary to ensure my centre generates income.*" The teachers also agreed that marketing allows parents to analyse and make decisions about enrolling to private early childhood education centres. T7 said that "*marketing tactics allows customers to know what they are offering.*" T8 had the similar view, explaining that "*marketing enables parents to obtain information about education centres and courses, which helps them to make the right choice for their children.*" P4 also expressed that she "*gathers information about education centres, and 'likes' comments that are posted by other parents on Facebook and Baby Kingdom.*" P7 said "*I also require information about courses in order to make the right choice.*" These examples show that marketing helps to disseminate information to parents. In addition to education centres becoming known to the market, parents also need to collect information to make the best decisions for their children.

T6 explained that there is "*keen competition*" among Hong Kong's private early childhood education centres. P4 said, "*I am aware of the keen competition among education centres. It is unavoidable to promote themselves in order to attract the attention of parents.*" P9 also observed "*…the fierce competition among education centres nowadays.*" In this sense, the "*uniqueness*" of private early childhood education centres needs to be promoted. T5 expressed that "*the messages conveyed via marketing allows parents to know the uniqueness of a private early childhood education centre.*" T1 further described that "*each education centre has its own features and characteristics. This might be the uniqueness of each education centre, which may cater to the needs of the children.*" Based on these viewpoints, a managerial staff pointed out that "*exposure*" is important. He said, "*implementing marketing*

*campaigns allows exposure to be maintained in the market.*" One parent indicated that "*promotion and marketing is normal in modern society—everything needs exposure*." M2 indicated an interesting point, explaining that the amount of marketing depends on the "*location*" of the private early childhood education centres. He reflected that "if visibility is high, then the amount of marketing can be lowered. Another managerial staff agreed, explaining that "s*ome private early childhood education centres are located in commercial buildings and not on the ground floor. As such, these centres may need to invest more in marketing."*

T4 and P2 held an opposite view on this subject, explaining that they did not consider marketing to be necessary for private early childhood education centres. They believed that individual opinions are influential for choosing a private early childhood education centre. T4 thought that "*referrals and word-of-mouth are more important and influential. Advertising in magazines, posting on Facebook, and offering discounts are not essential.*" While P2 expressed that "*I usually base my opinion on word-of-mouth, and the brand of the organization. I pay little attention to the promotional activities of education centres.*"

Types of marketing activites

The managerial staff, teachers, and parents identified that the different marketing activities of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong had been implemented and accepted. Some similar marketing activities were identified among the three focus groups, but other methods were also discussed.

Online marketing was widely adopted among the private early childhood education centres. "*Social media*" (especially Facebook) was identified by the managerial staff, teachers, and parents as being the most popular way of promoting education centres. M3 described "…*Facebook fan pages are often used to disseminate promotional messages. Facebook is still popular among parents with young children.*" "*Online forums*" are used by parents to view other parents' comments about specific private early childhood education centres. P4 expressed "*I gather information about an education centre, such as comments on Facebook and Baby Kingdom by other parents.*" Education centres also use "*websites*" to disseminate information. P1 said that "*I usually visit their website to understand more about the education centre. With regards*

*to course information, I prefer websites to be as detailed as possible. This is because I work during the day, and therefore use websites at night when the centres are closed.*" This shows that the parents desire to obtain detailed information via websites. The managerial staff also indicated that they arrange other online promotions (e.g., Google AdWords). M5 explained that *search engine optimization* (SEO) *can increase the possibility of users finding my education centre's website.*" This also shows some associations among different online tools for promotion. P8 identified that he received emails regarding course information. Email direct marketing (EDM) was also adopted by some private early childhood education centres, which is generally a push marketing strategy.

Other than online marketing, other strategies were also adopted. For instance, the parents and teachers mentioned "open days" and "trial classes" during the discussion. P3 said that "*trial classes and open days are appealing. I prefer marketing tactics to be soft.*" T2 also said, "*I feel comfortable about holding trial classes, as it allows parents to observe the classroom environment.*" Some parents also explained that they preferred marketing techniques that allow them to experience operations at private early childhood education centres. This allows them to get a better sense of the education centre in person. P7 also identified "*discounts*", with P8 further explaining that "*education centres usually offer a discount under the condition that the students must attend a trial class.*"

T7 and T8 identified that "roadshows" and "parent seminars" are used by some private early childhood education centres for marketing purposes. T7, who teaches music, explained that "*I led a group of students to perform at a shopping mall, which is almost like a roadshow.*" In terms of parent seminars, T8 said, "*the topic is usually about parenting and children's learning. In fact, I often discuss teaching experiences with parents at seminars.*" These marketing methods attempt to convey information to parents about teaching experiences.

The managerial staff, teachers, and parents mentioned "*leaflets*" in the focus group discussion. However, they felt that leaflets were less effective than online marketing. M1 explained, "people *often throw leaflets away. For example, if 1000 leaflets are*

*distributed, only around 20 parents will call to enquire about the programme. From these enquiries, around 4 or 5 students will enrol*." It was also found that teachers did not want to handle leaflets. For instance, T2 said, "*I cannot accept handing out leaflets on the street, or even at the entrance of the education centre.*" T6 added, "*I resist taking part in such marketing activities. For example, handing out leaflets outside the education centre. I want to maintain my professional image towards students, regardless of whether they are existing or potential students.*" Most parents ignore leaflets. That said, P2 still read leaflets for course information.

### 4.2.4 Marketing ethics

Trust from parents

In general, the parents trusted their children's private early childhood education centre. P2 indicated that they "*are often careful about choosing an education centre."* P4 added, "*before making a decision, I always aim to gather information about the education centre.*" These examples show that the parents tend to gather information before sending their children to an education centre. After joining an education centre, a certain degree of trust is built.

In terms of trust, some parents explained that an education centre's rationale must be taken into consideration. P3 expressed "*if the education centre's rationale matches the thoughts of parents, an element of trust can be established.*" Additionally, an education centre's environment can also be associated with trust. P2 required "*a safe environment*" for her child.

"*Advice from teachers'*" can enhance trust between parents and private early childhood education centres. P7 said, if teachers are able to "*share some experiences with me, particularly regarding my daughter's learning, I can trust them.*" P8 added that the teachers "*are patient and willing to communicate. I think these factors are important, because it can build my confidence."* Additionally, "*knowledge*" and "*professionalism*" towards handling the students' learning was mentioned by the parents when discussing trust.

Commitment from parents

In general, it was found that the commitment of parents to private early childhood

education centres was low. Some parents explained that there are "*many choices in the market*." P4 said, "*as long as there is something new and attractive, the customers may want to try.*" Parents might switch to another private early childhood education centre for the "*learning needs of their children*". P2 explained "*the learning needs of my daughter vary at different stages. As such, I need to look for education centres that suit her development.*" P6 described that "*parents have different preferences when their children grow up. If the courses of the education centre cannot fulfil the learning needs of their children, they will look for another one.*" These examples show that the parents' commitment to private early childhood education centres is low, and other choices exist in the market. The parents also considered the learning needs of their children.

However, other parents said they would not easily switch to another private early childhood education centre once they have found a suitable one for their children. P3 explained, "*I do not have a sudden thought to switch to another education centre if everything goes well. It is a continuous relationship. If an education centre already knows my daughter well, I would not switch to another one, unless something happens.*" P9 added, *"if everything is fine, I won't switch. But I cannot say that I am highly committed to one education centre.*" If parents find a suitable education centre for their children, they will not easily switch to another one, especially during the same stage of learning and development.

<u>Integrity</u>

When the managerial staff, teachers, and parents commented on the promises made by private early childhood education centres in advertisements, they generally agreed that the teaching content can be delivered in the classroom.

All managerial staff claimed they could perform what was expressed in advertisements and promotional messages. M2 expressed that they "*have described what they are able and confident to achieve."* M4 added that they fulfil their promises by "*communicating with parents after class. The can then decide whether our promises have been kept*." M6 also identified that they "*have not over-promised in their advertisements and promotions."*

T2 expressed that "*our teaching content matches what has been told in advertisements.*" T7 said, "*we do our best to meet teaching requirements, and this content is available via Facebook posts and leaflets. I think these promises can be kept.*" T5 added, "*I also believe that learning outcomes can be achieved.*" However, T1 expressed:

> On some occasions, the management exaggerates the effect on the children of some courses. In this case, the management team puts pressure on the teachers to do something extra in order to uplift the students' ability. I can give you a personal example. My former boss asked me and other teachers to intensively teach during the last 10 minutes of lessons; this helped students express and show their parents what they had just learnt in class. Although the course material was covered, it seems somewhat unethical.

This suggests that some private early childhood education centres are involved in the issues of marketing ethics.

In general, although the parents only found "*minor deviations from promotional messages*" with the teaching content, they were still concerned with the "*overstatements*" of advertisements. This may mislead parents and affect the learning of their children. The parents expressed that the teachers were usually able to teach "*according to the curriculum* and *syllabus*".

### 4.2.5 The impact of marketing on teaching quality

<u>Parents' thoughts on the teaching quality of Hong Kong's private early childhood education centres</u>

The parents found teaching quality to be above average, with a few of them being satisfied. They considered communication with teachers as being one aspect of teaching quality. P9 said, "t*he teachers are willing to share their opinions*…" However, P1 explained "*the communication of the education centres that I have experienced is not enough. I don't have sufficient information about my son's learning progress and classroom activities.*" That said, the majority of the parents were satisfied with the

degree of communication. The "*patience*" of teachers was also observed by the parents. P5 said, "*I have noticed the patience of the teachers. This has helped my son to develop skills, such as drawing, after a period of time and with continuous instruction*." P9 said that teachers "*are patient when teaching toddlers.*" P7 added that "*physical environment*" and "the *design of activities*" are also associated with teaching quality. These examples show that the parents evaluate teaching quality, experience, and learning progress in the learning process, rather than teacher qualifications. The parents might believe that learning requirements should emphasise the actual performance of teachers.

<u>The impact of marketing on teaching quality and purpose of education</u>

Regarding the implementation of marketing, the managerial staff, teachers, and parents held different views on the impact of teaching quality and the purpose of education.

The managerial staff generally considered the implementation of marketing to have a low impact, with no distortion on teaching quality or the purpose of education. M3 said, "*marketing and education can be well balanced. I don't think there is a contradiction between them.*" M4 added, "*it depends on how owners or managerial staff handle the balance between marketing and teaching. There is no contradiction among marketing, education, and teaching quality.*" M5 even suggested that "*through marketing, parents can choose a private early childhood education centre that suits their children. Marketing is a communication channel that allows parents to obtain information about various education centres.*" After selection, "*parents can choose an appropriate way to educate their children. In this way, it meets the purpose of education."*

When the teachers commented on the effect of marketing on teaching quality and education, T5 explained "*the management has a good balance between marketing and teaching.*" T4 added, "*if management staff can handle it well and are able to get a balance, I think it would have a positive impact on teaching quality. This is because the teachers would be more involved in terms of understanding the operations of the education centre."* However, some negative impacts were also identified. T2 explained,

"*the teachers might feel under pressure if they are required to participate in certain sales tasks. In which case, teaching quality might be affected."* This may also affect the "*image*" of the teachers. Furthermore, the teachers identified that the purpose of education is dependent on the purpose of parents. T1 said, "*different parents have different purposes for the education requirements of their children. For example, some parents may want their children to be happy during the learning process, while others might want their children to have an extraordinary academic performance. As such, parents must select an appropriate education centre for their children*. *I think this does not distort the purpose of education.*" T6 identified that the "*right rationale*" of the private early childhood education centre would be to not contradict marketing and education. The teachers' view of the impact can be summed up by T8, who explained:

> Marketing is a way of communicating with parents who may be searching for an education centre. Marketing, and the purpose of education, can be seen as two separate things—they can coexist, and yet not interfere with each other. As such, I don't think the implementation of marketing will distort the purpose of education and teaching quality.

The parents were concerned about the "*overstatement*" of learning outcomes. P1 said, "*it gives a false hope to parents, which is unethical.*" P5 explained, "*the purpose of education is sometimes defined by the parents. This means the parents decide what their children should learn. If the education centres are able to teach what the parents want, it can be interpreted that the parents' purpose of education can be met, also, with an appropriate teaching quality."* Hence, the parents' rationale has an impact on their children's purpose of education. P4 added, "*if my son learns and experiences progress, I think it meets the purpose of education.*" P2 and P8 identified that "*marketing and education can be two different things.*" "*If promotional messages are able to convey correct information...and the teaching content matches this, I think the distortion does not exist.*" These examples suggest that parents may believe that marketing can be integrated into education, as long as they are honest about conveying the message.

### 4.2.6 Regulated by government

All participants acknowledged that no regulation is currently required for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. They also held similar views about parents being "*wise about choosing*" a private early childhood education centre for their children. P9 explained that parents are "good monitors" for private early childhood education centres. M3 mentioned that basic "*guidelines*" to follow is good enough. If regulations are required, P2 suggests that only "*safety*" issues must be considered; otherwise, the industry can be run as usual.

# Chapter 5: Discussions

## 5.1 Findings from the survey

The data from the survey (phase 1) has been analysed through a t-test, MANOVA, correlation matrix, factor analysis, regression analysis, and path analysis.

### 5.1.1 Different views between parents with children aged 1–3 and 4–6

In order to provide an overview of the parents' views on private early childhood education centres, a t-test was conducted for parents with children aged 1–3 and 4–6. These two groups have different learning needs because they are at different stages of developing physical and motor skills, social and emotional functions, communication and language skills, and intellectual development (Press, 2016). Hence, parents with children at different developmental stages can provide a comprehensive understanding of the marketing ethics and teaching quality of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. The statistical significance of the findings from the t-test are discussed below.

In general, parents with children aged between 1–3 had higher trust than parents with children aged between 4–6. The parents' response to trust gave the highest scores to the reliability of teachers (trust 8) and their children's safety at private early childhood education centres (trust 9). This reveals the parents place a high trust in the teachers as well as the environment of the education centres. The parents with children aged 1–3 believed that private early childhood education centres would keep their promises, consistently deliver courses and programmes, and to take good care of their children. The parents with children aged 4–6 also tended to agree with these statements, but gave comparatively lower scores. This suggests that private early childhood education centres are able to build trust with the parents. It is crucial for the parents to have confidence in private early childhood education centres because their children are the consumers of such services. Trust is a key aspect of the parents' constructiveness, credibility, and confidence in private early childhood education centres, which also suggests reliability and competence (Salcuiuviene et al., 2011). In fact, it establishes a foundation of trust between private early childhood education centres and parents. However, the parents with children aged 4–6 scored higher for an early childhood education centre's ability to effectively educate their children. This reveals that parents

with older children expect them to acquire knowledge and literacy skills at private early childhood education centres; these parents focus on learning outcomes.

It is interesting to note that parents with children aged 4–6 gave a higher score to "brands giving a trustworthy impression" (trust 2) and "honesty about teaching content" (trust 4) than parents with children aged between 1–3. Although these two dimensions are not statistically significant, it could imply that these parents have more experience dealing with private early childhood education centres and therefore have built a comparatively stronger relationship. These parents might perceive the services to be honest and reliable (Shaw, 1997). The relational selling point for private early childhood education centres is being able to establish high levels of trust (Hawes, 1994; Hawes et al., 1989).

This study found that parents are not highly committed to private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Based on the length of enrolment, parents with children aged 1–3 showed lower emotional attachment to private early childhood education centres than parents with children aged 4–6. Commitment is a long-term desire to maintain a valuable ongoing relationship with an education centre (Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). With this in mind, the parents generally expressed a lower degree of agreement about their willingness to change, as well as having a strong connection with the private early childhood education centre. This implies that parents may choose a different education centre at any time. Referring to question 9 (in the questionnaire), the parents explained that teaching quality was the most important factor when switching to another education centre. Word-of-mouth, location, and tuition fees were other important factors.

Parents with children aged 1–3 believed private early childhood education centres had a higher ability to provide accurate and competent recommendations, information, and advice for their children compared to parents with children aged 4–6. This also shows that the parents with younger children placed higher confidence in private early childhood education centres meeting their expectations, believing that the teachers with professional training were competent. This also relates to trust 3, where parents

with younger children believed that private early childhood education centres could be relied upon to keep promises.

Teaching quality is a major factor to consider when choosing a private early childhood education centre. Similar to trust, parents with children aged 1–3 placed higher interest in teaching quality than parents with children aged 4–6. That said, based on the mean scores, this does not mean that parents with children aged 4–6 did not recognize the teaching quality of private early childhood education centres. The parents with children aged 1-3 cared more about the education of their young children, as they had just started learning.

Parents with children aged 1–3 believed that the teachers and staff of private early childhood education centres were more willing to communicate with them. These communications include student learning (teaching quality 3), education centre information (teaching quality 4), and family support (teaching quality 5). These points suggest that parents focus on how well private early childhood education centres maintain close communication—particularly parents with younger children. Private early childhood education centres can also gain lasting benefits by presenting student progress and the centre's effectiveness, which would allow them to capitalize on the active support of parents and families (Bastiani, 2000). Additionally, parents with children aged 1–3 had a higher agreement about the appropriateness of using the environment to facilitate learning (teaching quality 7). This suggests that private early childhood education centres provide a physical environment with safety, physical well-being, intellectual stimulation, and social support.

Parents with children aged 1–3 considered private early childhood education centres to have a better understanding of individual learning needs (teaching quality 6), and provided effective pedagogy and curriculum (teaching quality 8). This implies that the parents expect teachers and staff to understand and anticipate the developmental changes of young children. Observation is a key principle of providing quality courses and programs at private early childhood education centres. Relevant support and education experience are provided by competent teachers who can act on thoughtful observations. The parents also thought that professionalism was a key aspect of

teaching quality. Parents with children aged 1–3 thought that private early childhood education centres had a higher level of professionalism when compared to the other group of parents. They believed that professionally trained teachers and staff (teaching quality 9) and assistance for parents and students (teaching quality 10) were present at private early childhood education centres. This suggests that teaching is a social profession that requires sincerity, respect, and dedication. It is worth noting that young children require affable and encouraging interactions with adults.

The parents with children aged 1–3 were more concerned about class size than the other group of parents. They also took a reasonable class size (class size 1) into consideration when selecting a private early childhood education centre. Having a reasonable size class implies that the teachers can take care of each student. The parents usually preferred smaller classes at private early childhood education centres (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013), which is a common attribute for these establishments (Cheng et al., 2016).

Location was the most important factor to consider for all parents. Most of them expressed a high level of agreement about private early childhood education centres being located close to home (location 1). Parents with children aged 1–3 showed an even higher level of concern about the route from home to the education centre (location 2). More specifically, have a more direct route to the education centre from home was preferable. This suggests that travel distance is a key attribute when choosing a private early childhood education centre (Beavis, 2004; O'Mahony, 2008; Burgess et al., 2009). Travel time and cost were also taken into consideration (Jacobs, 2011). In practice, younger children require more assistance (e.g., strollers) to access a private early childhood education centre. Thus, it is reasonable for parents to prefer a more easily accessible education centre.

The parents also took tuition fees into consideration when choosing a private early childhood education centre. Parents with children aged 1–3 expressed a higher degree of agreement with regards to private early childhood education centres reducing marketing activities to reduce tuition fees. These parents were also willing to enrol to private early childhood education centres with reduced marketing activities. These

examples suggest that the parents' decisions were not mainly dependent on marketing activities. On the contrary, they considered tuition fees as a factor when making a decision, as it occupies part of their family expenses.

Regarding values shared by parents and private early childhood education centres, there was statistical significance between parents with children aged 1–3 and 4–6, of which they showed moderate agreement. Parents with younger children held more similar values with education centres. When holding similar values, overlapping opinions help to build fundamental beliefs (Kelman, 1961). The shared value between parents and private early childhood education centres assists trust and creates propensity towards trust (Brashear et al., 2003). Hence, this finding suggests that parents and private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong have established trust and shared values (Barber, 1983).

### 5.1.2 The relationships between independent and dependent variables

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to measure the effects of an independent variable on multiple dependent variables. The findings exhibit the relationships between the respondents' demographics and their attitudes towards marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria of private early childhood education centres. The statistically significant findings from MANOVA are discussed below.

Gender

In general, the female respondents gave higher scores. In this survey, the respondents were parents (i.e., mothers and fathers) with children aged 1–6. The mothers put higher trust in private early childhood education centres. They believed that private early childhood education centres were honest about teaching content, understood children's education needs, provided good advice on home learning, and produced effective education. The mothers were also more committed to private early childhood education centres than the fathers. They showed higher emotional attachment and had a stronger connection with the education centres. They also showed a higher willingness to not changing their preferences for a private early childhood education centre. Additionally, the mothers believed that private early childhood education centres also considered the students' interests. From the findings about benevolence,

the fathers indicated below average agreement. As such, fathers might have assumed that private early childhood education centres put their own interests ahead of the students to balance education and business.

The mothers perceived private early childhood education centres to have a higher teaching quality than the fathers. Based on statistically significant findings about teaching quality, the mothers considered teachers and staff to have close relationships with the students, understanding their individual needs with effective pedagogy and curriculum. The professionalism can be shown to effectively teach the students. The mothers also considered class size to be a major factor when choosing a private early childhood education centre, with smaller classes being preferable. Furthermore, compared to fathers, the mothers believed that they held more similar values with the private early childhood education centre.

Conversely, the fathers showed a higher concern about tuition fees. They showed a higher degree of agreement that a reduction in marketing could lead to lower tuition fees, and still considered education centres with reduced marketing output.

These suggest that the female respondents expressed a certain degree of motherhood to their children. They are naturally suited to motherhood and the belief that the best child care is exclusively maternal (Ranson, 1999). In fact, mothers have become more child-centred over the course of the 20th century, and the expectations and tasks associated with good motherhood has expanded. As such, mothers have become more responsible for their children's emotional and psychological well-being (Hay, 1996; Weiss, 1978). More concern about their children's needs and higher motivation to understand the performance of private early childhood education centres was also shown by the mothers. Furthermore, they focused on their children's learning process and cared about their outcomes. Nevertheless, the fathers tended to take care of financial aspects. It is common for fathers to be part-time parents, baby entertainers, and assistants to mothers (Sunderland, 2000). For example, fathers do fewer chores around the house, take a smaller share of parental leave, and work full time to a much greater extent (Leira, 2002). A father's paid job is often taken for granted and is seen as incompatible with caregiving (Nentiwich, 2008); tuition fees are their main concern.

Customers often seek a reasonable price (or as low as possible) for products and services. The fathers thought that the cost of marketing was redundant and did not have a direct impact on the teaching quality of private early childhood education centres. Hence, they supported reducing tuition fees by lowering marketing output.

Age groups

Based on the findings of this study, the younger parents tended to have higher mean scores than the older parents. The younger parents showed a higher degree of agreement towards the marketing ethics and teaching quality of private early childhood education centres. In particular, respondents aged 18–22 gave the highest mean score to 22 statements in the questionnaire. As a result, this group had the most satisfaction towards private early childhood education centres. It also implies that they had a high degree of trust towards the teachers and staff. As this group were rather young, they described having a lack of experience for teaching their children. Thus, they were willing to send their children to private early childhood education centres and preferred teachers with professional training and experience. Usually, parents of this age group have one child, and therefore their focus is solely towards that child. Thus, they have an intention to think positively about private early childhood education centres. However, they gave the lowest mean score for tuition fees, which implies that it was unaffordable. As this group are likely at early stages of their career, it is no surprise that their income would be comparatively lower than the older parents.

In contrast, the respondents aged 33–37 gave the lowest mean score to 13 statements in the questionnaire. This reflects, comparatively, a lower satisfaction to the private early childhood education centres. In particular, they gave the lowest mean score for teaching quality. These parents described having experience in selecting education centres. In the survey, most respondents were aged 33–37, suggesting that parents of this age group prefer to enrol their children to private early childhood education centres. Hence, they are rigorous about the performance of private early childhood education centres and seek the best quality service.

An interesting finding is that parents above 40 years old tended to agree and recognize the teaching quality of the private early childhood education centres. They also found

tuition fees to be reasonable and affordable. However, their trust in private early childhood education centres was not as high as the younger parents, and they had the lowest commitment. This suggests that the mature parents used their own judgment to assess private early childhood education centres and were not influenced by marketing. They also tended to choose education centres that held similar values to their own.

Educational background

The parents with lower educational qualifications had a higher degree of agreement to the statements in the questionnaire. Conversely, the parents with higher educational qualifications had a lower degree of agreement. The parents who graduated from secondary school gave the highest mean score to 15 statements. These parents showed higher trust, commitment, and satisfaction towards teaching quality and class size. This implies that the parents with lower educational qualifications sent their children to private early childhood education centres to provide better opportunities for education. Moreover, less-educated parents were more likely to advocate early didactic, performance-oriented instruction than better-educated parents (Stipek et al., 1992). They also preferred their children to have teachers with professional training. This suggests that these parents may have higher expectations of their children. These parents also expressed budget constraints with regards to tuition fees; providing extra courses for their children created financial pressure. This contrast further supports their desire to improve their children's education in Hong Kong's competitive environment. They also showed a high degree of trust and commitment to private early childhood education centres; upon finding a suitable centre, they were unwilling to switch.

The parents with master's degrees gave the lowest mean scores to 9 statements, and had the lowest degree of agreement to the statements. They also showed low commitment to private early childhood education centres, believing that choices in the market were plentiful. Additionally, the also tended to be less directive, controlling, physically intrusive, and disapproving than poorly educated parents (Phinney & Feshbach, 1980). The middle-class parents relied on their judgment to select an appropriate education centre. These parents also believed that tuition fees could be

lower if marketing activities were reduced. This shows that the parents with higher education were able to make decisions based on their experience and children's needs, without the impact of marketing.

The parents with bachelor's degrees also had lower agreement about marketing integrity. As such, they did not believe in marketing messages, and instead learnt about education centres in other ways (e.g., word-of-mouth). This implies that they preferred to gather information via diverse channels to analyse the quality of private early childhood education centres. These parents agreed that tuition fees were reasonable and affordable.

Family income

Regarding family income per month, the parents with lower family income tended to have higher trust and positive thought about marketing ethics and teaching quality. The parents with higher family income showed lower trust and commitment, but recognized tuition fees to be reasonable and affordable.

In this survey, parents with the lowest family income (less than HK$10,000 per month) did not agree about tuition fees being reasonable and affordable, as it occupied a large proportion of their family income. As such, having enough money to support their children's tuition fees was an issue.

The respondents whose family income was between HK$10,001 and HK$20,000 had comparatively higher trust in private early childhood education centres and believed the teaching quality to be high. These parents believe that private early childhood education centres are able to provide their children with high-quality education. They also believe in the teachers' ability and professionalism to identify and fulfil the learning needs of their children. However, they had less agreement about enrolling their children to private early childhood education centres if marketing was reduced, even if tuition fees were reduced. This reflects that these parents, to some extent, were affected by marketing messages.

Parents with family income per month between HK$20,001 and HK$30,000 had a high commitment to their children's private early childhood education centres. They also believed that they held similar values to the private early childhood education centres. This reflects that the parents with relatively low family income were willing to remain at the same private early childhood education centre. Furthermore, it suggests a certain degree of trust and satisfaction towards teaching quality. The low-income parents believed in the concept of sustained high-quality child care improving cognitive and social outcomes (Campbell et al., 2002). Additionally, these parents believed that educational benefits could translate into lifelong savings in terms of better educational and occupational opportunities (Nores et al., 2005). Thus, they tended to rely on the teachers and services of educational institutions.

The parents with a higher family income showed a lesser degree of agreement about trust, commitment, and teaching quality.

The parents with family income per month between HK$80,001 and HK$90,000 believed tuition fees to be reasonable and affordable. The parents with family income per month between HK$90,001 and HK$100,000 had comparatively less trust in teaching content and teachers, and were less committed to private early childhood education centres. As these groups of parents have higher income levels, they described having more choices in the market, and would use their own judgement to make decisions. They also had the ability to book private tutors instead of joining a private early childhood education centre. This financial advantage creates more opportunities to obtain resources for education. Similar to parents with higher educational backgrounds, parents with higher income relied on their own judgment rather than private early childhood education centres.

Years of experience in private early childhood education centres

Parents with less experience at private early childhood education centres have higher agreement about commitment, teaching quality, and the professionalism of teachers. Parents with more experience at private early childhood education centres have higher agreement about trust and teaching quality regarding communication with parents and student motivation.

Parents with less than six months of experience in joining private early childhood education centres recognized that teachers were able to identify the learning needs of students with effective pedagogy. They also believed that teachers could provide accurate and competent advice, and the private early childhood education centres considered student interests. They also mentioned that location should be close to home. Meanwhile, parents with experience between 7–12 months had high commitment to private early childhood education centres. This suggests that parents with less experience tend to rely on private early childhood education centres. The children of these parents are usually younger (i.e., babies and toddlers). The parents believed that the teachers should have professional knowledge and experience for early childhood education. Once these parents found a suitable private early childhood education centre for their children, they were unwilling to change. These parents placed high expectations on private early childhood education centres to achieve positive learning outcomes.

Parents with more experience placed higher trust than parents with less experience, as well as higher agreement towards teaching quality regarding communication. Parents with experience between four years, seven months, and five years indicated trust in teachers who were knowledgeable, provided good advice, and effective teaching. Parents with over five years of experience trusted teachers and private early childhood education centres to keep their promises. These parents were also satisfied with the amount and quality of communication with teachers. This suggests that more experience with private early childhood education centres could lead to longer relationships. These solid relationships can build trust through communication, where mutual understanding enhances trust.

Parents with experience between three years, seven months, and four years indicated the lowest commitment. They had a moderate length of experience in joining private early childhood education centres. These groups believed that they could choose other private early childhood education centres, as extended relationships were not established and better options might be available. Thus, these parents showed low attachment to private early childhood education centres.

### 5.1.3 Correlations between marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria

The correlation matrix unveiled relationships among dependent variables relevant to marketing ethics, teaching quality, and selection criteria. The statistically significant correlations with moderate or above relationship are discussed and explained below.

The majority of correlations had positive relationships. For instance, trust was positively related to benevolence. The findings suggest that when parents perceive private early childhood education centres to employ professional teachers that understand educational requirements, these centres will consider the children's interests above their own. This implies that parents trust private early childhood education centres that care about the well-being of their children and are concerned about their learning outcomes. This is the foundation of trust between parents and private early childhood education centres, and is also a key component of successful relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Additionally, according to the parents, trust has a positive relationship with class size. If a teacher takes care of every student in the classroom, the parents perceive their children to feel safe. They also believe that the teacher will provide good advice and support their learning at home. This is associated with the amount of attention the teacher gives to each student. The less students in a classroom, the more attention each student will receive. This is because the teacher can better understand the learning needs of each student. The children also receive more attention from the teacher. This aligns with the findings from Cheng et al. (2016) and Kelly & Scafidi (2013), explaining that smaller classes are better.

Commitment also had a positive relationship with benevolence, class size, and shared value. The parents had a strong sense of belonging to private early childhood education centres when they perceived that the education centre placed their children's interests ahead of their own. This suggests that parents observe private early childhood education centres have given cares and concerns to their children. This implies the parents' commitment is an exchange partner's willingness to keep a significant lasting relationship (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). If parents feel connected to a private early childhood education centre and are not willing to change their preferences, class size becomes the major factor to consider. This suggests that smaller class sizes are preferable. When parents hold similar values to private early childhood education

centres, they become unwilling to switch to another centre. This shows that shared values form positive attitudes (Kelman, 1961). This also implies that the behaviour of private early childhood education centres are accepted by parents (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). As such, positive attitudes and behavioural acceptance forms shared values, which helps to build trust (Brashear et al., 2003).

Class size also had a positive relationship with benevolence and teaching quality. According to the parents, more reasonable class sizes helps to generate more interest from the students. They also believed it would allow teachers to have better communication with parents about learning progress, general information, and family support. Having smaller classes suggests improved interaction and communication among teachers, parents, and students. As a result, the satisfaction of parents regarding teaching quality would likely increase. Moreover, an increase in communication between teachers and parents leads to class size being the major factor for parents to consider when choosing an education centre. Furthermore, if parents believe that the teacher takes care of every student, they would further assume that the teacher is able to identify the children's individual learning needs. These examples imply the positive consequences of a reasonable class size, and the effect on teaching quality is positive. Moreover, if class size was reasonable, the parents were willing to enrol to a private early childhood education centre far from home. This reflects that the number class size affects parents' perception of teaching quality. As such, the parents were willing to travel further for good teaching quality.

Teaching quality had a positive relationship with location, tuition fees, and shared value. Taking into account good teaching quality and being located far away from home, the parents indicated their willingness to choose a private early childhood education centre once their children established a close connection with the teachers, in addition to teachers and staff being willing to communicate. Care from teachers and staff can generate trust in a reliable environment. Solid communication also allows parents to determine their children's progress and the education centre's effectiveness (Ho, 2008). Hence, the parents' motivation to send their children to a private early childhood education centre far from home is subject to their relationship and communication with the centre. Furthermore, strong relationships and communication might also

attract and retain parents, which could be promoted through marketing. As such, private early childhood education centres should consider this as a marketing strategy. Regarding the positive relationship between teaching quality and tuition fees, when the parents perceived that the teacher was able to support families and students, tuition fees were seen as being reasonable. This suggests value for money from the parents' perspective. Shared values are enhanced through communication. More communication about the education centre and the students' families, leads to more similar values between the parents and private early childhood education centre. For example, increased interactions could connect the parents' thoughts with the rationale of a private early childhood education centre.

There were also some negative relationships between different dependent variables. The parents thought that if tuition fees were reduced as a result of less marketing, the private early childhood education centre may not employ education professionals. This reflects the parents' concern (and decreased trust) about income received by the private early childhood education centre and the cost to employ professional teachers. Conversely, when the parents thought that tuition fees were reasonable, they also perceived advertisements to not be reliable or truthful. This suggests that the parents considered private early childhood education centres with comparatively low income to convey exaggerated promotional messages to attract parents. Yet, eventually, such promises would not be delivered. In simple terms, the parents were in doubt about the integrity of private early childhood education centres with low tuition fees.

### 5.1.4 The segmentation of parents

From the factor analysis, six types of parents were identified. They were concerned about different factors when selecting private early childhood education centres. Based on these types of parents, different segmentations were identified and labelled. The following discusses the characteristics of these parents when choosing private early childhood education centres and the ways to target them with appropriate marketing strategies.

<u>The quality-chaser</u>

The first type of parents was concerned about teaching quality, class size, location, tuition fees, and shared value. These parents assessed private early childhood

education centres by the inducement of students' motivation to learn, connections between teachers and students, communication between teachers and parents, and the identification of students' learning needs by professionally trained teachers with effective pedagogy and curriculum. Furthermore, smaller classes allowing teachers to take care of each student was also considered by this group of parents. If teaching quality was good, the parents were not concerned about travel distance. Additionally, tuition fees had to be affordable and similar values with the private early childhood education centre were important. These characteristics explain the majority of parents' thoughts when selecting a private early childhood education centre in Hong Kong. Teaching quality was their major consideration. Therefore, this segment of parents has been labelled "quality-chasers".

These quality-chaser parents place a great amount of emphasis on teaching quality. They also like to communicate with teachers and staff, and intend to gain support from education centres. They consider positive relationships between teachers and students to be an indicator of good teaching quality. This suggests that these parents trust education centres to recognize the individual learning needs of their children. Travel distance was not an issue for these parents if the private early childhood education centre's teaching quality was high. These parents were also concerned about class size. A lower number of students in a class implies better interactions between teachers and students. This suggests that the students would have a better opportunity to be guided and inspired by the teachers.

The way to market private early childhood education centres to these parents would be to provide accurate and update-to-date information of the education centre to secure communication with the parents. Informational strategy (Pickton & Broderick, 2001) could also be adopted. The strategy is based on conveying a message (e.g., detailed information about the course and syllabus) via personalized contact with teachers and staff. For instance, this marketing message could promote how the education centre cherishes and respects parents. Moreover, online marketing (e.g. social media) is widely used nowadays and provides timely communication with the target audience. It also provides a chance to communicate with other audiences (e.g. other users of the products). Websites can also provide update-to-date and free

information. With effective communication, these parents can keep track of the activities regarding teaching and learning. This provides a communication channel about teaching quality of the education centres and secure the confidence from the parents

The affectionates

The second type of parents showed high commitment to the private early childhood education centres. They showed emotional attachment, feeling like a part of family, a strong sense of belonging, and were not willing to change private early childhood education centres. They considered private early childhood education centres to put their children's interests first. Class size was another key consideration, and they did not think tuition fees were affordable.

This segment of parents was willing to develop an ongoing relationship with private early childhood education centres, provided that the centre displayed care towards the students. These parents showed comparatively high loyalty to education centres, and were not willing to switch. They also possessed a positive mindset towards private early childhood education centres, believing that they put students' interests ahead of their own. As such, these parents have been labelled as the "affectionates".

An affective or emotional strategy can be applied to this segment of parents as an attempt to invoke involvement and emotion. For example, inviting parents to be classroom volunteers would increase their involvement. It would also increase their understanding of the private early childhood education centre's operations, as well as increase their sense of belonging and connection with the centre. Resonance strategy could also be applied, as it attempts to recall events that evoke meaning, experience, thoughts, or aspirations that are relevant to the target audience. When the parents' involvement increases, it could evoke feelings from their childhood (e.g., remembering a nursery rhyme). If the brand resonates, the parents will remember the brand and develop their relationship further. In this instance, maintaining a good relationship, in addition to securing commitment and attachment is the key marketing strategy. A loyalty programme is another useful tool to maintain and enhance relationships. This relationship is built on the basis of mutual commitment (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991).

Parents in this segment can act as a reference group for the private early childhood education centres to other segments of parents.

The teacher-reliants

The third type of parents showed trust in the teachers. They believed that private early childhood education centres employed professional teachers to take care of their children's well-being in a safe environment. They also believed that the teachers understood the students' learning needs and taught them effectively. The teachers provided good advice and were trusted by the parents. The private early childhood education centre also showed benevolence to the students.

This segment of parents believed that teaching quality was derived from teachers. As such, the performance of the teachers affected their decisions. The ability and affection of the teachers also influenced the parents' mindset. For these parents, as long as teacher performance was good, trust was able to developed. Hence, the have been labelled as "teacher-reliants".

A positioning strategy that includes attributes, product characteristics, and consumer benefits can be used as a private early childhood education centre's marketing strategy for these parents. This strategy suggests the brand is better than others in a particular way, and market communication can emphasize these features. For these parents, teachers are the core attribute of a private early childhood education centre. For instance, good performance and quality of the teachers leads to good teaching quality. Uplifting the image of teachers is one of the strategies to market private early childhood education centres to these parents. Other strategies include, providing information about teachers, allowing more opportunities to communicate between teachers and parents, and using social media to promote teachers.

The management-reliants

The fourth type of parents trusted the management and operations of private early childhood education centres. These parents had a feeling of trust in the private early childhood education centre. They believed that private early childhood education centres were able to convey trustworthy impressions. Private early childhood education centres could be relied upon to keep promises about teaching, along with

the consistent delivery of courses and programmes. The parents also believed that professionally trained teachers could teach with effective pedagogy and curriculum in an appropriate environment that suited their children's learning. These aspects are relevant to the day-to-day operations of private early childhood education centres. These suggest that parents make their decisions based on a private early childhood education centre's management and operations.

These parents trusted the management of private early childhood education centres. They believed that the overall management led to a smooth operation of programmes and courses. This allows students to enjoy the learning process and gain favourable learning outcomes. Therefore, these parents have been labelled as "management-reliants".

Marketing to these parents include the following: brand enhancement with physical evidence, uniqueness of courses and programmes, professional skills, and patience of teachers and staff. This strategy would show the effective management of the education centre. Unique selling proposition (USP) strategy and brand image strategy should also be considered. USP strategy emphasizes the superiority of a brand based on a unique feature or benefit. The features of a private early childhood education centre can help to improve parents' awareness. Notably, in practice, USPs are more perceptual than real. Distinctions and good creative strategy can be used to great effect in this context. A sense of uniqueness should be implemented either through core or extended offerings, such as expertise or service. These features may then be used in marketing communications to differentiate their products and services from competitors. Conversely, brand image strategy relies on the development of mental or psychological associations through the use of semiotic devices (e.g., signs, symbols, images) and associations. Brands are differentiated not on physical characteristics or claims of uniqueness as such, but on the gestalt or whole formed in the minds of the parents. Al Ries and Jack Trout (1982) explained that the battleground is not in the marketplace but in the mind of the customer and consumers. Thus, uniqueness that leads to differentiation between private early childhood education centres is achieved by winning the hearts and minds of parents. A memorable brand will help parents find education services from a particular private early childhood education centre, as they

tend to gravitate in this direction. Improving the parents' perception of a private early childhood education centre's management will help solidify the brand.

The moralists

The fifth type of parents believed in the integrity of advertisements and marketing. They considered advertisements to be reliable and truthful, and that private early childhood education centres kept their promises, which was crucial. Competence was also a major factor, with regards to accurate recommendations and advice about their children's learning. Moreover, the education centres presented a feeling of trust to these parents, yet tuition fees were seen as unreasonable. Marketing ethics was their major concern; thus, these parents have been labelled as "moralists".

This segment of parents was concerned about the reliability of marketing. As such, they assessed the quality of advertisements to determine a private early childhood education centre's trustworthiness. Information from teachers about the students' learning also affected the trust of these parents towards education centres. Furthermore, these parents focused on the quality of advertisements—regardless of messages being delivered via mass marketing or face-to-face communication.

To target these parents, real experiences (e.g., trial lessons or open days) should be arranged for them to validate the marketing messages. This type of pull marketing strategy encourages end customers and consumers to demand goods and services. Hands-on experience would allow parents and students to verify the reliability and truthfulness of the advertisements, and prove the competence of the information provided. The trust can then be developed.

The expedients

The sixth type of parents were concerned about location and tuition fees. They wanted the private early childhood education centre was close to home with less of change in route from home. They enrolled to private early childhood education centres as a result of less marketing output and lower tuition fees. These parents are comparatively practical and realistic. They preferred convenience and lower cost over other factors. In this sense, this segment of parents has been labelled as "Expedients".

A positioning strategy by a product user can be adopted, focusing on the requirements of the target customers and consumers. That said, there is an implication of specific and increased focus, perhaps on a niche sector. If a private early childhood education centre targets this segment of parents, it should mainly market to students who live nearby. Some marketing activities in the areas nearby should be designed. Apart from online marketing, traditional marketing (e.g., flyers and leaflets) or small-scale events could be arranged to attract more attention and make this segment of parents beware of the presence of the private early childhood education centre.

### 5.1.5 Predictors for marketing ethics of private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong

From the regression analysis, predictors were identified for the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.

It was found that gender predicts benevolence and trust. The female respondents (i.e. mothers) believed the private early childhood education centres to consider student interests ahead of their own. Care shown by the private early childhood education centres was well perceived by the females. This also reflects that benevolence influenced the female respondents. They also considered honesty about teaching content, trust in teachers, teachers' knowledge about students' education needs, advice provided by private early childhood education centres, and the ability to effectively educate the students. These reflect the trust in the private early childhood education centre perceived by the females and they have a higher intention to develop their trust and benevolence.

The younger parents believed that private early childhood education centres were more honest than the older parents do about teaching content and were able to take care of the students' well-being. They also relied on the teachers to effectively educate their children, and their children's sense of security. These imply that the younger parents had comparatively higher trust in private early childhood education centres. As mentioned earlier, these parents often have young children and have less childcare experience. Hence, they tended to rely more on teachers and education institutions than the other respondents. Therefore, age is one of the predictors.

Educational background was another predictor for integrity and trust. For instance, parents with higher educational qualifications believed that private early childhood education centres were able to keep promises made on advertisements. While parents with lower educational qualifications perceived higher consistency in the delivery of courses and programmes. The different levels of educational backgrounds were able to predict views regarding integrity and trust.

Additionally, parents with higher family income believed that that their children were more safe at private early childhood education centres. Parents with lower family income believed in the professionalism of private early childhood education centres and their ability to effectively educate their children. These reflect that parents with different income levels were concerned about different aspects of trust in private early childhood education centres.

Parents' years of experience at private early childhood education centres was able to predict views of competence, integrity, and trust. Parents with less experience believed that private early childhood education centres provided accurate and competent information about their children's learning, and kept promises made on advertisements. Parents with more experience tended to have higher trust. They relied on teachers to effectively educate their children and keep them safe. Parents with different lengths of experience in private early childhood education centres had different concerns. Parents' year of experience at private early childhood education centres can predict parents' views on the reliability of marketing and trust.

Further to the regression analysis, benevolence, commitment, competence, and integrity were significant relationships by the path analysis. The model has been generated to predict marketing ethics among the views of the parents. There are direct relationships between marketing ethics and benevolence 1 & 2, integrity 1 & 2, and commitment 4. When these observed variables are perceived to increase, marketing ethics become higher. Benevolence is the most positively relational to marketing ethics. This implies that marketing ethics is influenced by these five elements in the private early childhood education centre sector in Hong Kong. More specifically, those involved

in a private early childhood education centre's marketing should aim to enhance the customers' perception of benevolence, integrity, and commitment to gain trust and engage in meaningful customer relationships. This would lead to competitive advantages.

### 5.2 Further explanation and discussion on focus groups

Three focus groups (phase 2) were conducted to discuss the implementation of marketing, marketing ethics, and teaching quality. The questions and discussions were designed to further explore and explain the findings from the survey (phase 1) to yield better insights and obtain implications from the participants (i.e., managerial staff, teachers, and parents). The following sections discuss the findings from focus groups by theme.

#### 5.2.1 The market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong

The market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong is supported by parents with children aged below six years old. According to the parents, joining private early childhood education centres is common practice for many parents. Mutual influence among parents is in force. The parents often believed that they could offer similar (or the same) education opportunities for their children as other parents. The parents were also concerned about the future of their children in the learning environment, especially due to Hong Kong's keen competition in this area. This upwardly mobile population believes that preschool education is both desirable and essential (Opper, 2017). Some parents showed enthusiasm towards researching the courses of private early childhood education centres. Some were dual working parents, and preferred to send their children to private early childhood education centres to learn with professional teachers and to be taken care by the staff, rather than stay at home for doing nothing. They also valued opportunities to communicate with other parents about learning and education at private early childhood education centres.

There are a sufficient number of students for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Managerial staff and teachers identified new-born babies as the supply of students. A total of 56,600 babies were born in 2017 (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR, 2018). The parents believed they were less qualified than professional teachers, which is why they enrolled their children to private early

childhood education centres. Managerial staff and teachers further identified the need for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. As the living environment has changed and the number of children per family has reduced, there is lack of interaction at home or with neighbours. One in three households with young children in Hong Kong employ domestic helpers, who usually live in the same residence; especially when both parents have full-time jobs (Cortes & Pan, 2013; Groves & Hui, 2012). Many young children are looked after by domestic helpers while their parents are at work. This implies peer interaction is desired for their development. As such, private early childhood education centres offer specific and systematic programmes for these children. According to the parents, life skills, interpersonal skills, social skills and communication skills are important. The parents believed these skills could enhance the confidence and ability of their children for future development. However, some managerial staff and teachers believed that private early childhood education centres could be replaced by the motivation and action of parents. For example, parents could arrange extracurricular activities at no cost, which may have a similar influence on their children. This suggests the presence of private early childhood education centres could be replaced if the parents were willing to take a proactive role in teaching and guiding their children.

According to findings from the survey, parents' choice of private early childhood education centre was primarily based on location. A convenient location that was close to home with an easy access was important. Additionally, clean physical environment, reasonable class size, and affordable tuition fees were also considered by the parents. The parents also took into account teaching quality and shared values.

The managerial staff and teachers also described their motivations of managing and operating a private early childhood education centre. Most considered that there should be a change in private early childhood education in Hong Kong. They wanted to provide higher quality courses and programmes with greater rationale than kindergartens. Private early childhood education centres allow more encouraging and flexible interactions between teachers and students. Profit is another motivation to operate a private early childhood education centre in Hong Kong.

The motivation of managerial staff and teachers induces the supply of education services for private early childhood education centres. The parents create demand for education services with their children and the environment of education in Hong Kong. The market of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong are gradually shaped.

### 5.2.2 The implementation of marketing

Marketing activities are regarded as an information provision. From the perspective of management (service provider), the purpose of offering promotional messages to the market is to increase exposure. For parents, they require information to assess and make decisions about private early childhood education centres. The parents were careful about selecting a private early childhood education centre for their children because they had specific expectations for their future. The parents' intention was to choose a suitable and quality private early childhood education centre for their children.

There is keen competition for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong, and the uniqueness of each centre needs to be promoted. However, few teachers and parents indicated that word-of-mouth was more important and influential than other marketing activities. This is because personal conversations and informal exchanges of information influenced the parents' choices and purchase decisions (Arndt, 1967; Whyte, 1954), in addition to their expectations (Anderson & Salisbury, 2003; Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996), pre-usage (enrolment) attitudes (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991), and post-usage perceptions of the product or service (courses) (Bone, 1995; Burzynski & Bayer, 1977).

Different marketing strategies were adopted by the private early childhood education centres. Petersen et al. (2015) explained that when communicating with customers, firms must decide on an appropriate communication strategy to evoke desirable customer behaviour. A firm's communication with a customer (regarding the content of communication) is likely to play a key role in how the customer responds to the firm's marketing efforts. Thus, private early childhood education centres should adopt proper channels to communicate with parents—particularly online marketing. Social media has been widely adopted across various industries and sectors, and includes websites and online platforms for people to share their experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This

has also been adopted by private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong (e.g., Facebook). For instance, management disseminates promotional messages on Facebook and parents receive these messages. Also, parents read comments left by others on the same post. These comments can serve as a reference for parents. It uses consumer-to-consumer or peer-to-peer communication, as opposed to company-to-consumer communications, to disseminate information about a course, thereby leading to more rapid and cost-effective adoption by the market (Krishnamurthy, 2001). The parents also read online forums (e.g., Baby Kingdom) for comments by other parents. Similar to Facebook, these comments can be used as a reference for parents to consider a private early childhood education centre. They also induce brand associations, implying that private early childhood education centres with positive comments are socially approved (Keller, 1993). Additionally, the websites of private early childhood education centres disseminate information about courses and programmes by the management, allowing parents to gather information. Some private early childhood education centres have adopted Google AdWords, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and Email Direct Marketing (EDM) for promotional purposes and to increase their exposure. The adoption of these online marketing activities is to increase the exposure and chance in contact with the potential customers who might not know the brands of the private early childhood education centres.

Open days and trial classes are also popular for private early childhood education centres to adopt. The management and teachers produce real experiences, allowing parents to observe and students to experience classes at private early childhood education centres. The parents and students can interact with the teachers and staff, which gives rise to better communication. As a result, this can lead to enhanced customer satisfaction, reduced churn, increased revenue, and greater employee satisfaction (Rawson, Duncan & Jones, 2013). It is worth noting that open days and trial classes are particularly suitable for new parents. They create a moment of truth. Furthermore, roadshows and parents' seminars allow parents to better understand the outcomes of learning and experiences shared by experts. This enhances the parents' recognition towards private early childhood education centres.

However, leaflets are not considered as effective as they were in the past; parents are now used to receiving information via the Internet. Moreover, the effectiveness of leaflets is low but the cost is comparatively high. Online platforms are also more convenient. Thus, the adoption of leaflet distribution has gradually decreased.

Different forms of marketing have been implemented by private early childhood education centres for various reasons. The parents had personal preferences about receiving information (e.g., online, word-of-mouth, etc.). In order to attract their attention, the management aim to determine more effective marketing strategies. That said, marketing ethics are a concern in society.

### 5.2.3 Marketing ethics

The parents explained that they established trust in private early childhood education centres based on understanding and interpreting information about courses and programmes. A detailed and careful selection process enhances communication between parents and education centres. This could be achieved through teachers answering questions by parents. The knowledge and professionalism of teachers can also be observed. The expectations and confidence that parents develop can put on private early childhood education centres (Rotter, 1967). The parents have confidence in the reliability and integrity of private early childhood education centres (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Additionally, parents expressing similar values with private early childhood education centres was crucial for building trust. When they share the same values, trust becomes highly determined (Lewichi et al., 1988). Trust is also crucial to maintaining and expressing share values (Barber, 1983). In general, the parents trust the private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.

The parents also believed that the promises made in advertisements could be implemented in the classroom through appropriate teaching content. The teachers also expressed that they could deliver teaching content without interference from management. The integrity and consistency were observed by the parents, and the well-being of students is kept in fair balance (Shaw's, 1997). The managerial staff indicated that they had not overstated course outcomes, yet one teacher expressed that suspected exaggeration had been established. Nevertheless, overstatement was not severe from the observation of parents and teachers.

Two circumstances of commitment were identified by the parents. Some parents described low levels of commitment due to many choices being available in the market. As long as there were new and attractive alternatives, their preferences were susceptible to change. Moreover, their children's developmental stages made them consider other alternatives. However, some parents expressed that they would not be willing to switch preferences once teachers formed a bond with their children and their learning needs were fulfilled. This commitment is generally regarded to be an important result of good relational interactions, as well as the outcome of relational continuity between buyers and sellers (Dwyer et al., 1987). Trust is the basis of making commitment (Soloman & Flores, 2001), and trust stimulates communication that makes commitment possible. Although there are many choices, the strength of customers' commitment depends on their perceptions of efforts made by the seller (Bennett, 1996). Hence, the degree of commitment is dependent on the effort that the private early childhood education centres are willing to devote.

Ethical issues were not severe among the private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong when marketing activities were implemented. The parents trusted them because of their own analysis of the information, choices, and shared values. The management were able to maintain their integrity in marketing activities, and the parents chose the education centre that they trusted. These suggest the delivery of courses and programmes were not directly affected by the implementation of marketing.

### 5.2.4 Teaching quality

The parents believed that teaching quality was above average at private early childhood education centres. They also mentioned that the teachers were willing to share their advice and opinions. This type of communication is regarded as a medium to understand their children's learning, as well as the teachers' abilities. From the parents' perspective, a good course or programme was not solely about care and education, but also about close communication with parents (Ho, 2008).

The parents also evaluated the teachers' patience. This is linked to the amount of skills that their children can learn when the teachers are willing to spend a certain amount

of time to guide them. Hence, this implies the ability of teachers to identify the learning needs of their students. Thoughtful observation and relevant support with patience leads to effective pedagogy (Jalongo et al., 2004); in this connection, teaching quality can be enhanced.

Physical environment was also a concern. Although the parents indicated a clean environment as a consideration, there are other implications for students at a young age. For example, their physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development. That said, the parents appraised the way in which various classroom activities were designed. The satisfaction of the parents also reflects an effective curriculum design. The curriculum should be planned for a wide range of abilities and the children's abilities should be regarded as fluid rather than fixed (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Regarding the implementation of marketing, the managerial staff indicated that it would have a low impact on teaching quality—as long as they were well-balanced. Marketing and education did not contradict each other; in fact, marketing can enhance the communication with parents. That said, the teachers believed that the impact of marketing on teaching quality was dependent on management decisions; they have the discretion to choose the ways to conduct the marketing strategy. If management failed to find a balance, the teachers would feel pressure, and as such, teaching quality would be affected. In light of this, a proper rationale for management can lead to justified ethics, and teaching quality would not be affected. The parents believed that marketing and education could be separated, and understood the need of marketing in Hong Kong. If integrity can be kept, distortion can be minimized.

The focus group discussions revealed that the parents had different requirements for their children's learning. The purpose of education depends on the parents' requirements. If private early childhood education centres can fulfil these requirements, the purpose of education can be met. The parents learn about private early childhood education centres through marketing, which allows them to make informed decisions. As mentioned earlier, the parents assess private early childhood education centres carefully and interpret marketing messages through various mediums. This can protect their children's vulnerability. As a result, misleading

messages have a low possibility of influencing them. That said, in order to maintain a positive image, the management of private early childhood education centres should not risk overstating the learning outcomes of courses and programmes. Overall, the implementation of marketing has a low hazard to the teaching quality and purpose of education.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

Education is regarded as one of the most crucial means of upward mobility in Hong Kong, and there is fierce competition for academic performance. Parents generally have an intention to confer a learning advantage on their children and equip them for future development. In the long run, parents want their children to be significantly ahead of their peers (Pearson & Rao, 2006). Competitive parenting induces a hyper-competitive style. In Hong Kong, parents rely on private tutoring or private education centres to enhance their children's academic performance in mainstream schools in order to cope with the keen competition; private early childhood education centres cater to this demand. Additionally, marketing helps private early childhood education centres to recruit students for sustainability by encouraging parents to enrol.

This study investigated the effect of implementing marketing on parents' choice of private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. It has explored the possibility of marketing of education deteriorating the teaching quality of private early childhood education centres. It has also analysed the ethical issues related to the impact of marketing on the delivery of courses and programmes.

A mixed method was developed to investigate the views of parents, teachers, and managerial staff about the implementation of marketing and its impacts on teaching quality and marketing ethics. A quantitative method was planned and a questionnaire survey was conducted. Parents with children aged 1–6, who had experience in enrolling their children to private early childhood education centres, were invited for the survey in phase 1. After obtaining the findings and results, a qualitative method was developed for phase 2 in order to have further explanation and exploration, in the form of focus group discussions with the participants of parents, managerial staff, and teachers from private early childhood education centres. This provided a rich data base which is used to triangulate the results and enabled the researcher to better understand the research purpose (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

This study found that the parents relied on messages conveyed through marketing to make decisions and these messages affected parents' choices. The management (service provider) of private early childhood education centres needed to provide

relevant information to parents (customers) in order to identify the uniqueness of the education centre in a competitive market. Educational marketing is a necessary managerial function for educational institutions to survive—effective images need to be forwarded to parents and other stakeholders (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2003). Different types of marketing were identified, with online marketing being the most influential. Websites and social media (e.g., Facebook and online forums), were popular for parents to compare and analyse different private early childhood education centres for making decisions. That said, the parents did not merely rely and trust advertisements and promotional messages; word-of-mouth was also used to verify the quality of private early childhood education centres. Moreover, comments on social media influenced the parents' choice. For the dissemination of information, Google AdWords, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and Email Direct Marketing (EDM) were also adopted, but they provided a low level of interaction with customers compared to social media. Offline traditional promotion methods (e.g., leaflets and flyers) were much less common. However, event-like promotions were considered, such as roadshows and seminars for parents. Thus, online marketing was the most influential way to affect the parents' choice. Based on these messages, the parents were able to further analyse and consider the most suitable private early childhood education centre for their children.

There was no significant deterioration of teaching quality due to the implementation of marketing. The parents considered the teaching quality of private early childhood education centres to be acceptable and above average. They believed that teachers and staff were willing to communicate with them, and the teachers' professionalism could identify the students' individual learning needs. Although there was no significant deterioration of teaching quality, an important finding is the attitude and manner of a private early childhood education centre's management; a well-balanced management is crucial. Teachers and parents understand that the implementation of marketing is necessary in today's competitive environment. Teacher involvement in marketing should be handled properly to avoid distorting their image of professionalism among parents and students. That said, the teachers were willing to take part in marketing activities, but ultimately wanted to focus on their teaching tasks.

Ethical issues surrounding the marketing activities of private early childhood education centres was not severe—the trust of parents was also built through communicating with teachers and staff. The parents were satisfied with the integrity of marketing by private early childhood education centres, although they were still defensive towards advertisements. The management claimed to fulfil promises made on the advertisements. Teachers were able to deliver courses and programmes according to the curriculum and syllabus. However, overstatement was still a concern for parents and added a certain degree of pressure on teachers.

The study also found that parents at a younger age, less experience in joining private early childhood education centres, lower educational qualifications, and lower family income, had higher trust, commitment, integrity, and benevolence towards private early childhood education centres. They relied more on teachers due to their perceived inability to properly teach their own children. However, they also had high expectations for their children. A model was created through structural equation modelling to predict the parents' views on the marketing ethics of private early childhood education centres.

This study contributes to understanding the ethical issues within the neo-liberal socio-political marketplace. Under neoliberalism, the free market encourages private enterprises and consumer choice and assume perfect knowledge on behalf of the consumer. The perfectly knowledgeable consumers do not exist and so the market can encourage exploitation if there are not restraints on what can be done by market players especially where the markets deal with vulnerable participants such as early years education. The results of this study show that education has faced increased marketization over recent decades in response to a neo-liberal agenda. This study has also developed the predictors of marketing ethics for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. Integrity, benevolence, and commitment must be considered to build trust when implementing marketing practices in this market.

High quality marketing ethics ensure that the only supported and evidenced statement is used to promote the marketing proposition. Clearly for parent selecting early years education, they wish to be assured and confident of claims made regarding the

teaching quality, the care and the compassion provided by the schools. These become the critical used by parents and form the basis upon which competitors make claims. In this respect, improving these aspects of the provision improves the marketing proposal and so the ethical marketing needs and encourages improvements in these areas. Marketing recognises what consumers need and so informs those who provide educational services what they need to provide. Maintaining high standards enhances brand reputation and would encourage managers to monitor the delivery of courses and programmes. Transparency helps to provide confidence to vulnerable customers and high quality marketing practices can do this whilst misrepresentation can damage brands and the whole sector.

In the study, the segmentation of parents has been identified. The characteristics of different groups of parents (i.e. customers) help private early childhood education centres develop different marketing practices and strategies. Educating students at a young age helps to equip them with communication skills, interpersonal skills, and social skills to better prepare them for their future education. Furthermore, to keep the market free and make effective competition, no specific regulation from the government is needed. They felt faith in the market and diligence on behalf of the parents would be sufficient to ensure ethical marketing. As it stands, a laisses faire approach should be maintained for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong.

The implication for this sector is honesty towards conducting online marketing. This is also effective for parents who have school-age children that are ready to attend private early childhood education centres. Communication and real experiences develop trust through integrity, benevolence, and competence in the private early childhood education centres by parents and students. This implies that the ultimate concern of parents is the connotation and thoughtfulness of a private early childhood education centre towards their children. Once trust has been established, commitment can be solidified. Private early childhood education centres should also be situated in residential areas because parents found this to be crucial. The convenience and accessability from home is important. Teaching quality relies on teacher performance; one consideration is workload. As such, extra tasks related to promotion and marketing

may create a heavier workload. This suggests that less involvement in marketing activities by the teaching staff, teaching quality would be beneficial. Good quality teaching can be spread via word-of-mouth and accompanied by effective implementation of marketing to cope with fierce competition and to sustain a business of private early childhood education centre in Hong Kong.

In order to enhance the trust and commitment of parents, communication between the private early childhood education centres (service providers) and the parents (customers) is vital. Therefore, private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong should consider making use of information and communication technology to exchange information and communicate with parents, e.g. the Internet. Beyond marketing messages and advertisements, online trial classes and live interactions with teachers should be available for enhancing learning experiences. This would increase the transparency of operations and allow parents to gain more information to make choice. Besides, legalization can be considered. Although there are no stringent regulations to monitor private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong, mild regulations and guidelines could be introduced (e.g. teacher qualifications, location, and space). Although this would increase barriers to entry and operating costs, it would enhance the quality of these education centres and offer greater certainty to parents.

In recent years, the feeling of competition has created an expression that children "should win at the starting line" (Siriboe & Harfitt, 2017). This type of competition places pressure on students and parents. The blossoming of Hong Kong's private early childhood education centres is derived from competition among peers and parents' expectations. Despite this, private early childhood education centres still strive to provide top quality education to young children.

### 6.1 Limitations

Although this research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations. First, due to time constraints, this research was conducted on a relatively small sample size. In order to generalize the results for larger groups, the study should involve more participants from different backgrounds to gather their views about the topic. Second, the busy life of the participant (i.e. parents, teachers, and managerial staff) affected their availability. It was due to being occupied by other matters. Some participants

could not take part in the focus group, although the appointment had made with them before a certain period of time of conducting the focus group discussion. Third, as the field of educational marketing mainly focuses on higher education, there was a lack of prior research about educational marketing and marketing ethics of early childhood education, particularly for private early childhood education centres. Thus, there was lack of references to the related researchers.

### 6.2 Recommendations for further study

In higher education, the confusion of using marketing in education to satisfy the need of customer rather than addressing the essential nature of education with the mission of the educational institution has been raised (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009). Ethical issues associated with marketing might be better managed by institutional leaders. For the private early childhood education centre sector studied in this study, the predictors of marketing ethics have been identified and developed, which can be further discussed. It was found that parents and children are cognitively vulnerable, which is based on cognition and immaturity (Brenkert, 1998). Marketing goods and services to the vulnerable in ways that take advantage of their vulnerability is unfair.

Given the vulnerability of parents due to lack of knowledge and an emotional bond to their children, ethical marketing from owners and managerial staff is both moral and prudence issue. Highlighting of this issue is a contribution of the research and suggests further study in how integrity, benevolence, and commitment in the marketing activities of owners and managerial staff can be monitored, encouraged and identified. If private early childhood education centres fall short of standards set by the sector in association with stakeholders, they should be sanctioned but this is more difficult in a free market economy where profit as well as the implicit goods of education create a tension which government might feel they need to intervene. The topic of ethical marketing standards for this sector and their implementation and control creates an important research agenda raised by this study. Specially, ethics of marketing in early years education further work can be undertaken in the following areas:

- parental responsibility;
- free market conditions and education as implicit good; and
- the externality of profit.

This study developed a model of marketing ethics for private early childhood education centres in Hong Kong. In future studies, this model can be tested and applied in the context of private early childhood education centres in mainland China. Due to the consequences of China's one-child policy and economic reform, the number of public preschools have reduced, yet private establishments have increased phenomenally. Due to a lack of public services, private early childhood education programmes in China now play an important role in providing Early Childhood Education and Care services (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). As such, educational marketing needs to be applied to recruit students. In this context, it would be worth investigating the marketing ethics of these private early childhood education institutes and programmes.

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