

## Welcoming Diversity: Parent-School Participation in Mauritian Preschools across Socio-Economic Backgrounds

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Received on: 15-04-2024

Accepted on: 19-05-2024

### Abstract

This study aimed at exploring how Parent School Participation was enhanced in preschools of Mauritius for quality education. The research objective was to compare how far private and public preschools from different socio-economic backgrounds in Mauritius provided the preconditions for preschools to be a welcoming place for promoting parent school participation to address diversity as an objective of Sustainable Development Goal 10 set by United Nations. The method was qualitative observation with interviews of teachers and observations of physical facilities to explore the preconditions for encouraging parents' participation in preschools. The sample consisted of six purposively selected preschools: three private preschools and three public preschools selected through stratified purposive sampling method from three socioeconomic backgrounds namely; the high, the middle and the low socioeconomic ones and one teacher conveniently selected in each preschool. The results revealed what the pre-schools were doing to attract parents by addressing to their welcome by teachers and preschool amenities that would facilitate parental participation. The private preschool of high socioeconomic background provided remarkable preconditions but the middle socioeconomic background had a lesser attractive one and that of the low socioeconomic background was even less attractive. However, the public preschools did not exhibit preconditions to welcome parent as they were getting children from the Ministry.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Private and Public Preschools, Socio-Economic Backgrounds, Parent School Participation, Mauritius.

### Introduction

This research was mainly concerned with the preschool as a welcoming environment to promote parent school participation from varied socio-cultural and socio-economic background (Zickafoose, et al., 2024)) for quality education and inclusion of parent to address diversity as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10. This goal aims to reduce inequality

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within and among countries, and this involves taking measures to ensure the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, regardless of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status (Oestreich, 2018). Responding to an urgency to focus on solutions for the high dropouts at secondary levels (Kumar et al., 2023) and the changes in family structures as well as the high educational expenses in Mauritius (Kooraram & Durbarry, 2023), it was prompt time to explore the possibility of parent school participation as one of the solutions for reforms in education. In this pursuit, the research would throw light on opportunities and barriers that the preschool represents (Wildmon, et al., 2024). Research also stated that children with a good start at early year's education tend to keep such trends through high level and high-quality childcare has been associated with good parental participation (Tellegen, 2024) in school and extra school activities, with the strongest effects for children from disadvantaged environments (Waite, et al., 2023). Besides, the preschool environment should be fit enough to welcome parents' participation and quality of education could best be promoted when parents have easy access to work together with teachers in a sort of joint venture (Aleksić, et al., 2024)).

**Literature Review:**

Some parents' model parental participation and share support relationships with teachers for their children welfare (Devaney & Crosse, 2023). The study by Selnes (2024) on examining parental engagement in early intervention presents parents' perceptions of their participation connecting to childcare, whereas some preschool teachers had a perception that parental participation connected to matters of teaching only (Lin, et al., 2024). Further study showed that parents' perceptions were not noticed when there was a lack of time for reciprocal conversations between parents and teachers. Poor parent school participation interaction could hinder parents' abilities to express their perspectives in early childhood education (Wildmon, et al., 2024). The perception of what is considered as parental participation in preschools varies between parents and teachers. Parents can have a feeling of participating as they prepare children for school, communicate with other parents, and go through children's work at school (Yulianti, et al., 2022). Parents give different reasons for their lack of participation in preschool activities or conversations, such as difficulties in their work time schedules, or duties at home, (Hakyemez-Paul, et al., 2020). Besides, the teachers' welcome and teachers' attitudes towards parents and children also affect parents' desire to participate in school activities (Breneselović, et al., 2021).

**Research Objective.**

The research objective was to compare how far private and public preschools from different socio-economic backgrounds in Mauritius provide the preconditions for preschools to be a welcoming place for promoting parent school participation.

**Research Methodology**

The research was a qualitative one, intended to gather detailed information (Hatch, 2023) the type of welcome available for parents in preschools by teachers and about the physical facilities offered by preschools in this connection (Steed, et al., 2024). The sample consisted of six purposively selected preschools: three private preschools and three public preschools

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selected through stratified purposive sampling method from three socioeconomic backgrounds namely; the high, the middle and the low socioeconomic ones. The sample also included total six teachers selected through convenient sampling; one teacher each from the same six preschools having high, middle and low socioeconomic status. The researcher opted for qualitative observations consisting of interviews for teachers and observations of the preschool's physical facilities (Schensul, et al., 1999). The interviews were open ended during which the researcher personally asked questions to teachers in one-on-one conversations and it consisted of five questions. As for the observations based on ten characteristics of the preschool which the researcher recoded in details as field notes of what he heard, saw or encountered.

**Data analysis:** Thematic analysis was made based on the open-ended questions of interview. While analyzing the interviews the following was carried out:

Reading of the transcripts and field notes, annotating the transcripts to give them a meaning and direction, conceptualizing the data according to the research aim and objective, segmenting or coding the data, analyzing the segments and deriving themes and finally writing the results (Hennink, et al., 2020).

**Research Findings and Discussion.**

For the purpose of clarity, the findings had been classified under two themes: the first theme is about teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards parent school participation as revealed in the interviews and called **Pre-School Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs That Facilitate School Parent Participation** and the second was based on observations made by the researcher during his visit to the school and referred to as **Pre-School as a Welcoming Environment for School Parent Participation**.

**Theme 1: Pre-School Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs That Facilitate School Parent Participation**

Five questions were asked to teachers about their attitudes and beliefs about a parent school participation namely: teachers' understanding about importance of the parents' role in the process of educating children, teachers viewing parents as experts on their children and as equals, teachers' understanding that parents' attitude toward pre-school affect their children's attitudes, teachers recognizing the strengths of families raising children under adverse circumstances, including parents who are in poverty, incarnated, divorced or experiencing domestic violence and, teachers expecting to have personal contact with parents.

First of all, when inquired about **teachers' understanding about importance of the parents' role in the process of educating children**, during the meeting with the teacher of the private preschools in high socio-economic background, she reported that parents felt at home and teachers trust that parents would give maximum effort to make their children comfortable as emphasis was much laid on the comfort required for quality education. The teacher said that she was a graduate and studied management of pre-schools and that she was well aware of the preschool settings and valued her parent partnership. For her, parents were valuable assets who could offer a strong participation in educational activities of their children. The teacher had a plan to involve parents at different points in the pre-school calendar. Main events were already located in advance and parents were well informed of

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their roles in the pre-school description pamphlet given to parents on the day of admission itself. So, parents came to know the preschools' business on the first day itself. The pre-school teacher was the first one to receive the parents and she did not leave the parent until every arrangement was clearly made. The objective of the teacher was that no parent should leave the pre-school gate with a doubt. She added that she meant business and the teacher was full of enthusiasm that pre-schooling needed that parent knew every corner of the pre-school and felt free to suggest for improvements in the system for the benefit of the children in terms of quality (Rahman, 2023). Moreover, as for the government pre-school in the middle socioeconomic background, the teacher was there welcoming and managing the class. She did not underestimate the roles of parents but she did not have the facilities to accommodate parents. This type of pre-school was run by the government who had not yet come up with any refined policy for parental participation in preschool education except in the form of the Parent Teacher Association which was made up of a committee of parents and teachers mainly involved in co-curricular activities. The teachers said that the parents acted as carers of pre-school children from an early year. Researchers said that the pre-school personnel should value and tap this resource for the improvement of the pre-school training program (Ashfaq, et al., 2024; Lanawaty, et al. 2023) and this was found in the private preschool of the high socioeconomic background only. Furthermore, the teacher of the private pre-schools in middle socio-economic background did value the importance of parents in pre-schools to support their children as there was a detached participation of parents. This means that the parent taught for the children at home and the pre-school teachers did so at the pre-school. There was a sort of inter communication barrier between the teacher and parents. The teacher of this private pre-school perceived parental support for efficient academic achievement but they preferred to limit the participation (Peak, 2023). Finally, the teachers of both private and public preschools in low socio-economic background did not actually see the roles of parent in their child education. The teacher believes that parents of low socio economic back ground were mostly illiterate and did not give much care to the education of their children (Goudeau et, al. 2023). Teachers narrated that these parents considered the school as a day care center where they could leave their children and became free to go to work and that these parents showed very little sign of interest in quality education and lesser still in a parent school participation set up.

Secondly, when asked about **teachers' viewing parents as experts on their children and as equals**, the teacher of the private high socio-economic background pre-school had a well cultured approach towards pre-schooling. she inquired from parents about their children in order to know the student's background and then built up on that. She shared that pre-schooling was not a training and selecting process where academic performance was measured by using indicative criteria (Rindermann & Ceci, 2009). Parental references helped the teacher to adapt her teaching strategies to meet the need of the children (Goodall & Montgomery, 2023). According to teachers, parents were valued as experts of their child. In the public pre-school of high socio-economic background, the parents were not treated as equals especially when it came to letting the parent involved in some activities that the pre-school would hold. Very few parents, who the teacher trusted them as equals to join in the preparation of the events. Besides, no incentives were given to parents and the teachers considered herself as an experts and parents as outsiders. Moreover, in the private pre-school

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in the middle socio-economic background, the teacher had little knowledge about the capabilities of parents because they had limited financial inputs in the pre-school. Yet, she admitted that owing to their hard-working attitude parents wanted their children to succeed. This was a good attitude of parents for quality education. Therefore, parents were considered as experts on their children mostly in private preschools of high and middle socioeconomic background because most of them were educated. The teacher of public pre-school in middle socio-economic background felt that she had been appointed to do the job of a teacher and she could not make allowance for further matters. She believed that parent might consider themselves as experts but she cannot receive their expertise except as guest with the permission of the Ministry. So, some pre-schools were not conceptualized in a dimension for parents to be participant in their children education (Charamba & Aloka, 2024). In addition, in the pre-schools of low socio-economic background, the parents were from the working class and teachers were well respected by parents and the role of the former elevated to the rank of preachers.

Thirdly, while inquiring about **teachers' understanding that parents' attitude toward pre-school affect their children's attitudes**, the private preschool teacher of in high socio-economic background declared that she treated parents and children on the same footage. This statement seemed to be the motto of this private pre-school. The pre-school was more like one, welcoming parents together with their children on that occasion. The teacher was working closely with parents to build a positive attitude of partnership with the parents. This close relationship and supported facilities not only made the pre-school available at all times but that we they take care of their children (Fayzullaeva, 2020). The teacher shared that those children, likewise trust the pre-school as their parents' felt ownership of the pre-school business and the children felt responsible to perform to their best at school. In public preschools of high socio-economic background, the teacher reported that parents wanted their children to grow in an environment where children had good manners and had a civilized culture. Also, because of subcultures that exist in societies, those parents from high class chose pre-schools in their regions so that their children acquired good behaviors. The pre-school in the high socio-economic background where parents trust government pre-schools, sent their children to these pre-schools because they share the same culture (Wilkinson, 2020). Moreover, teachers of both public and private pre-schools in middle socio-economic background gave similar perceptions from informal talks. They confirmed that parents considered these pre-schools good to send their children especially because of the middle-class culture in Mauritius was characterized by parents and said that education opened the way that they could later earn a good status and a living on their own. So, teachers' attitudes were shared by parents wanted to see their children among others who had the same culture and hence the choice of a middle-class preschools by middle socio-economic background parents. Besides, was the feeling of adaptability and parents, she said, did not want to send their children to pre-schools where the children would feel low. Furthermore, the teachers of pre-schools in low socio-economic background shared similar parental expectations, that is, the letter did not place too much concern on education of their children as for them education was needed for basic adjustment in the society. This perception of parents plus the high rate of absenteeism at preschoolers lowed the hope of successful educational attainment at the end of pre-schooling in low socio-economic background

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(Okitsu et, al. 2023), reported the teacher.

Fourthly, about **teachers recognizing the strengths of families raising children under adverse circumstances, including parents who are in poverty, incarnated, divorced or experiencing domestic violence**, primarily, in the private preschool of the high socio-economic background the teacher's reaction was that it was not strange to find affordable parents spending a lot on the education of their children especially when the family is disturbed. The teacher also declared that she was much willing to help parents from disturbed families as these people were suffering from social problems and did not want their children to feel rejected because they are from single families. She added that, parents who were more cautious for their children looked for pre-schools where they felt that their children would not be bullied or psychologically depressed and so the private pre-schools acted as a refuge for such children. She elaborated that the private pre-school also invested in special counselling services and therapies where parents could join in in evenings and on weekends like, for example, swimming pools were hired and both parents and children could register for swimming sessions. Moreover, there were also sport clubs like football or athletic clubs attached to the pre-school where the pre-school offered afternoon sessions to make mini-communities within the pre-school. The aim was, according to the teacher, building a pre-school parent mini-community (Erlandson & Bengtsson Lau, 2022). The teacher of the private pre-school in middle socio-economic background declared that she did not have a social welfare caring facility and that the preschool typically did not address and entertain community problems as part of the activities at pre-school. Moreover, teachers reported that the public pre-schools were government owned and in one way or another provided free service to the community. They were supposed to work with diverse children who had suffered from disastrous situations, who had single parents or foster parents or who lived in shelters in an inclusion program. This was in line with the government policy for free education for all in Mauritius was to give access to children from vulnerable social conditions and inclusion of families who had no access to pre-school (Gyekye-Ampofo et, al. 2023).

Finally, while inquiring about **teachers expecting to have personal contact with parents**, the teacher of the private pre-school of high socio-economic background voiced out that she had to open the door for personal contact with parents. She usually have cases where parents sought feedback on their children education and behavior from preschool staff. The teacher said that the pre-school was an extension of the family and parents found them as the first door to knock in situation of emergency. Arrangements for daycare service and extra accommodation facilities were entertained for visiting tourists. The teacher also said that Mauritius was a tourist resort and the tourist who were on holidays, especially business holidays, secured the education of their children at that preschool and she had personal contacts with parents to make special arrangements for an adapted education program. Moreover, all public pre-schools could be lumped in the same category when it concerning expectation to have personal contact with parents by teachers. All of them being public institutions, the teachers regretted that they were bound with rules and regulations which did not allow them to have personal contacts with parents. In private preschools of both middle and low socio-economic background, regarding personal contacts with parents, teachers of these pre-school preferred to keep a distant contact with parents because the parents had too many problems. Furthermore, the parents in middle socio-economic

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background of the private pre-schools knew their limit of interference in the pre-school, said the teacher. Yet, teachers of low socio-economic background said that parents were of opinion that they were being discriminated or corrupted (Luff et, al. 2023) when their children did not reach the required standard and children's attitude was the same as that of their parents, added teacher.

**Theme 2: The Pre-School as A Welcoming Environment**

The study investigated ten preconditions for parental involvement in the pre-schools as a welcoming place for parents in Mauritius observed by the researcher on admission day and these are described and discussed below.

This is in line with previous research by Al Mufidah et al. (2023) which demonstrated that the effective pre-school was a place where parents felt comfortable in terms of the aspects and behavior. The researcher explored the preschool environment of the six preschools mentioned in the sample for the following criteria:

a locked entry with clearway for parents, teachers inviting parents in classrooms, a pre-school welcoming committee visiting parents at the beginning of the year, special efforts made to welcome parents and children to the new pre-school, language translators available for parents who were not comfortable, parents being invited to join child for lunch, pleasant and inviting environment in terms of color and welcoming signs, easy to navigate in terms of directional signs and, provision of child day care and transport facilities.

Provision of a **locked entries with clearway for parents** was made by the pre-school which was privately owned in the high socio-economic background showed greater concern for parents by having a special gate and greetings for parents at the gate entry. Such a disposition made parents feel at home and expected for their visits. A warm welcoming attitude helped parents feel reassured and also free to come to the pre-school (Clark, 2020). On the other hand, public pre-schools did not need to have such dispositions because children admission in these pre-schools was made by the preschool teacher but by the Ministry of education sent these children, based on the residential address and the vicinity of the pre-school. So, since public pre-schools were run by the government, there was no need to attract parents to send their children to these pre-schools.

The researcher looked for **teachers inviting parents in classrooms**, described as a very loadable attitude from teachers who were willing to share their intimacy with parents in a joint venture for success of children (Oppenheim-Shachar & Berent 2023). The researcher witnessed that teachers of private pre-school in high or middle socio-economic background were doing that. Yet, it was not the case in the other schools.

When it was about, a **pre-school welcoming committee visits parents at the beginning of the year**, this was a very rare parental relationship building that was found in high socio-economic background private pre-school only. Such an evolved method of persuasion made parents feel that the pre-school really treated them as a family members by giving them a salutation visit (Hummel. et, al. 2023). The students and parents found that they had to give something in return for this visit. This also broke myths that might have existed between the story of the pre-school.

As for **special efforts made to welcome parents and children to the new pre-school**, the pre-school should be able to build a culture of belongingness as children' parent should

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ascertain that they have made the right choice of pre-school (Beleslin & Partalo, 2024). Experience teachers, especially of the high socioeconomic regions of both private and public preschools were found responding quite well to this situation. The teachers of these pre-schools were very caring for new students. However, this was not the case in the public pre-schools and teachers of low who, did not even care about such matters.

Availability of **a language translators for parents who are not comfortable** as parents usually found themselves not being involved in parental meeting and the second time they escape such meetings (Sadownik, 2023). Two reasons had been found for such a response. First in the high socio-economic background both in private and public pre-schools, it was because of expatriates did not understand the local language or have a difficulty in English. Yet, it was reported that there were few cases in the private pre-schools where teachers helped expatriates to understand what was going in the meeting. Moreover, the situation was quite different in low socio-economic background where some parents did want to participate in conversation with the teacher because they were not at all versed in French or English, especially those grand mothers who actually cared for grandsons or granddaughters. Moreover, were **parents being invited to join child for lunch** as parents of pre-school were always much worried about whether their children had eaten properly (Almeida et al. 2021). Although this required for a larger space to accommodate the parents willing to do so, some teachers consented to it. All private pre-schools in some way or another gave access to parents to do so. In public pre-schools parents were not allowed access during lunch time on the ground that it required much supervision and there had been rare request from parents. Yet, the researcher found that parents of low socio-economic background pre-schools were given access at pre-school during lunch as the parents, being retired or not working, prepared hot meals and came to feed their children themselves.

In connection with **a pleasant and inviting environment in terms of color and welcoming signs**, private pre-school spent a lot to make their pre-school look attractive especially for marketing purposes. This was so to attract parents to send their children to a place which was welcoming. As for public pre-schools, teachers did signify the importance of such attractions but lacked funding to do so. The same applied to teachers of low socio-economic background. Therefore, although a pre-school appearance should be inviting in terms of colors and neatness (Peak, 2023), middle and low socio-economic background pre-schools could not afford for it and parents were also not in a position to finance such projects, noted the researcher from informal talks with teachers and parents.

**Ease to navigate in terms of directional signs** for parents, especially during their first visit, not to be confused about the pre-school settings like, easiness to find the toilets, the teacher's office and recreation areas, was investigated by the researcher. This feature was fortunately present in all pre-schools as it was a requirement as per the rules and regulations of the health and safety certificate for registration of pre-schools (Sello, et al., 2024). There were indicative pointers showing the entrance, exit and assembly points in case of emergency in all preschools.

The researcher also looked for **individual photos, photos of children art work and projects displayed on hall walls** which formed part of both pedagogical and marketing practices to display photos of children on hall walls (Ytterhus & Åmot, 2021). He found that private pre-schools considered it as an important matter. In the public pre-schools some old

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photos which had not been renewed were present but art works were well displayed. Moreover, in the private high socio-economic background pre-school, the teacher insisted that photos were big, well visible and regularly renewed.

Lastly was the issue concerning provision of **child day care and transport facilities** which were in demand these days as family members work and they looked for these facilities especially when pre-schools are distant away (Moussié, 2021). These issues were very important for parental choice of preschools. Affording parents would definitely opt for these services. It was found that private pre-schools in the high and middle socio-economic background provided these services and parents were more willing to send their children there as per impression given by teachers. As for public pre-schools there was no such facilities. So, public pre-schools had a dwindling population because they did not provide these extra services implied the public preschool teachers.

### **Conclusion**

From analysis of the recorded data, it was clear that there was a better parent participation in private pre-schools in high socio-economic background followed by private pre-schools in middle socio-economic background. On one hand, the private pre-schools were doing their best to attract parents by addressing to the preschool amenities, welcome by teachers and additional facilities that they could provide as preconditions for parental participation as also concluded by Sharma (2020). Private preschools were spending for these extra facilities and parents were attracted to participate to improve the quality of education in these preschools as also stated by Okitsu et al. (2023). At the other hand, the public pre-schools were not involved in attracting parents as the Ministry of Education was already sending them pupils. Public pre-schools provided access to education for the vulnerable (Gobena, 2020), but did not exhibit preconditions for welcoming parents to be involved in parent school participation for quality education. Private pre-schools were much more concerned towards quality of service and consumer care and involved parents as partners, in line with Burbaité, et al. (2023), while public pre-schools were merely rendering a governmental service and were not involved in promoting parental school participation through the preconditions investigated in this research.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher recommended that preschool teachers be trained about preschool offering the preconditions for a welcoming environment by offering incentives to parents and motivating children, as Fang, et al. (2023) called it “a learner friendly environment.” Besides, the researcher suggests that the Ministry of Education of Mauritius could work out a policy for motivating high degree of parental involvement in public preschools, as parents are important partners in their child education in agreement with Nurhayati (2021). Finally, teachers could improvise welcoming strategies for parents in preschools as this would motivate parents to take interest in school curricular and co- curricular activities.

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