Child Friendly Neighbourhood: Children Speak out on Their Local Condition and Future Preferences

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ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received 10 November 2015
Accepted 22 December 2015
Available online 30 December 2015

Keywords:
child friendly, neighbourhood, preferences, urban children

ABSTRACT
Children’s lives are facing huge changes and enormous challenges. Children’s lives, have undergone some massive transformations during the last generation, and will undergo more as they grow up. Global challenges are affecting and will continue to affect their lives. The neighbourhood environments are the closest for children to explore their children well-being. Unfortunately, most of the designs of neighbourhood not fulfill their needs and preferences. The aim of this research is to develop a framework of child friendly neighbourhood that can be used as the guidelines for professional team and government to design a best future urban neighbourhood suitable for Malaysian urban children. The data will be collected by observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in Sekseny 7, Shah Alam. Children age 6 to 9, parents and professional teams are the selected respondents for this research.

INTRODUCTION

Children are seldom involved in the construction of their environment. They are considered too inexperienced, too unrealistic and too unqualified. With the advent of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCROC) and its systematic monitoring, the rhetoric of children’s rights has become universally framed. Never before has there been a time when children have been under such a spotlight. Yet, despite this upsurge of interest in the lives and well-being of children, many children still find themselves at odds with their societies, denigrated to being little more than citizens in waiting. The values that at one time suggested that children should be seen but not heard have yet to be fully dissipated.

The immediate environmental challenges that now face humankind have particular resonance for those whose lives are just beginning. Yet, major social and political barriers often impinge upon how children and their competences are regarded, suppressing their ability to take part in decisions that not only affect their ‘here and now’, but also their futures.

Not days go by read or hear about some horrific crime against a child in television, radio, newspapers or online websites. Statistics from Bukit Aman show that from the year 2008 until April 2011, there were 3,223 missing children below the age of 18. According to the police, 1,708 cases were solved. Although kidnapping are rare, the threat does clearly exist. The problem of pedophiles has become more visible in recent years.. The community and society today has become less concerned about the welfare of others. When living among neighbours who “see but don’t see”, it is always at a disadvantage [9]

Every parent wishes for their children to be constantly safe from harm and danger. A major concern of many parents in allowing their children to roam free and play about is the exposure to various dangers such as accidents and the acts and intentions of other individuals [9]. Dr. Vincents Wong, consultant psychiatrist at the Neuropsy Clinic of the Chinese Maternity Hospital in Kuala Lumpur said “Children must function in the real world and less in a virtual reality environment. Young children need a variety of stimulus for optimal growth and development. Kids should be exposed to nature, games involving social interaction which promote teamwork, leadership skills, skills in managing conflicts, promotion of self-expression, music, art and other activities not involving electronic devices to advocate the healthy and quality living [1].

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In the last decade, Malaysia has made significant progress in the wellbeing of children. The under-5-year old mortality rate is an important indicator of children in a country. In the State of the World’s Children 2014 report from United Nations, Malaysia is ranked at 141 of 194 countries and geographies. The ranking is in descending order of the under-5 mortality rate. Malaysia’s ranking is better than some Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Children’s wellbeing is dependent on their relationships with others and the social, political, physical and environmental contexts that they live in. Different relationships, institutions, systems and structures create an enabling environment where children can thrive, from the closest in micro level such as families to the farthest in macro level such as social, political, cultural and communities [10]. Besides, strengthening resilience and capacity of communities need to respond for present and future challenges to child wellbeing. World Vision Malaysia Chief Executive Officer Liew Tong Ngan wanted all the communities to remember the rights of the children to health and education, to grow without fear and play in their environment. The celebration of Children’s Day on October 25 was an opportunity to again recall back the crucial role of children in the future of the nation [10].

In Malaysia a community-based initiative has been developed to promote child friendly environments in Malaysian cities. The Malaysian Child friendly Cities Initiative is a complement of the International Child friendly Cities Initiative, which works towards helping to translate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) into concrete actions that can be implemented at the local level by anyone. In September 1996 a National Conference on the Rights of the Child was organised in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The conference resulted in raising serious concern about the quality of life of the urban child, and culminated in a national level workshop in July 1997. The workshop concluded with concrete proposals on how to improve the socio-economic environment of children, addressing issues that arise within the home, school or community space, as well as the safety and health of urban children. Out of these deliberations there emerged the 'Malaysian Charter on Making Urban Areas Child-friendly', and its associated 'Ten Strategic Actions' that are aimed specifically at urban local authorities. There also developed from this initiative an important child-friendly survey instrument that involved the participation of children in assessing their own urban environments as to how child friendly their neighbourhoods may be, called the ‘Children’s Report Card’. The Initiative has also commissioned the compilation of action-oriented activities that are presented in a user-friendly book called ‘Ideas for Action: Making Urban Areas Child-friendly ~ A Sourcebook for Community Initiatives in Malaysian Cities’ [14].

Child Friendly Initiatives could become a new paradigm for urban development that seeks to provide happy, healthy childhood environments in cities. Nonetheless, no Child Friendly Indicators developed by Malaysia. But even with the best intentions to promote child friendly urban environments, huge budgetary or programs are not feasible without understanding environmental child friendliness. Wide researches on the “best interests” of children are very important when making policy decisions for cities. Therefore, turn the lens on children to understand their perspectives. This research seeks to address this gap with a particular focus on child friendly neighborhood and the physical environment.

2.0 Objectives:

The main objective of this research is to explore the children’s view on their neighbourhood environment. The other objectives are to determine the factors of parents afraid to let their child play outside, to investigate professional’s perspective to create child friendly neighbourhood and lastly to determine children’s priorities to create a child friendly environment on their neighbourhood.

3.0 Literature Review:

Young citizens today are growing up in a world that is very different from their parents and grandparents. Yet children’s fresh perspectives may be exactly what are needed to see clearly into realm of new possibilities. Studies around the world have shown that there is a significant correlation between young children’s development and the neighborhood environment in which they are brought up [8]. Galea, Freudenberg and Vlahov [7] emphasized the urban environment has an important influence on health and communities where we live to provide both serious threats and enhancements to public health. Sallis and Glanz[12] justified one important impact of urbanization and increasing motorization is the associated sedentary lifestyle as fewer people ride a bicycle or walk as means of transportation. Moreover, the environmental changes such as automobile-oriented neighborhoods and heavy traffic have directly and indirectly reduce physical activity among populations in communities.

As stated in The Habitat Agenda, the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlement in Istanbul in 1996;

“The needs of children and youth, particularly with regards to their living environment, have to be taken fully into account. Special attention needs to be paid to the participatory process dealing with the shaping of cities, towns and neighbourhoods; this is in order to secure the living conditions of children and of youth and to make use their insight, creativity and thoughts on the environment” Cited by Chawla [4]
Li [1] stated that, most of community activities take place within the setting of urban space and within a physical built environment shaped by urban planning and land use policies, this experience path of young people should be encouraged and taken more seriously. Children are often denied access to voice their needs in urban planning which affect substantially their childhood development. In practical terms, such a denial of children’s needs in the production of urban space has excluded children from the broader category of “public” in the enjoyment of open space for their own activities.

The ideal towns should be the place where children can socialize, observe and learn about how the society functions as well as to contribute to the cultural fabric of a community. Nevertheless, Camstra cited in Li [8] declares the urban environment is not the most suitable environment for a child to grow up as cities are crowded, polluted and hectic, the urban environment is seen as a less favorable living environment for children as well as grownups. Despite the growing trend of “hot-housing” children where parents demand academic excellence from their children at a very young age, there are those who think it is important to recognise that children are, after all, children and should be allowed to enjoy their childhood. Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development states that children acquire concepts through active involvement with the environment, and construct their own knowledge as they explore their surroundings [3].

Children’s lives are facing huge changes and enormous challenges. Children’s lives, have undergone some massive transformations during the last generation, and will undergo more as they grow up. Global challenges are affecting and will continue to affect their lives. As mention by Freeman and Tranter [6] the most dramatic change in children’s lives over recent decades has been the loss of children’s freedom to engage in unstructured play and to freely explore their own neighbourhoods and cities as they mature. These changes are due to factors such as a growing culture of fear, increased competition among parents to help their children achieve success in a consumerist world, the impacts of changing technologies (particularly mobile phones), and changing household structures and urban forms. It can also identify variability in children’s lives according to variability in socio-economic status, urban versus rural living, different levels of housing density and different cultures. Throughout the development debate over the past years, there has been increasing realization of the need to generate participation of vulnerable populations in the design and implementation of projects that affect them.

Too much tokenism still exists, such that where participation has been advocated and applied, outcomes become measured not on the results that change those circumstances that bind children, but in the process of taking part itself. It would seem that children’s active engagement is often no more than a tick-box exercise, which once recorded enables decisions to be taken regardless of what has been expressed. Listening becomes the end, not the start, of a journey of enlightenment. Another scenario is where well-meaning adults define themselves as the authentic witness to children’s voices, but in doing so take charge of those situations in which children could readily and willingly get involved.

The Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFI) was launched in 1996 to act on the resolution passed during the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) to make cities liveable places for all. The UN Conference declared that the wellbeing of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and of good governance.

As promoted by UNICEF National Committees and Country Offices, child friendly city is the embodiment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the local level. Children are active agent, their voice and opinions are taken into consideration and influence decision making process [15]. As a consultant of United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Pauline Meemeduma, 59 said the nature of child protection has gotten more difficult and complicated. The ways children have harm have gotten more serious [13].

A Child Friendly Cities Secretariat was created in 2000 to serve as a focal point and provide a common reference for the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and movement. As a result, the criteria and indicators have been developed by some countries to determine the level of child friendliness of cities and towns of different sizes. In some cases, these indicators or parameters have been the base for an accreditation or award system in place to encourage and stimulate the process for the fulfillment of children’s rights by local governance structures and to acknowledge efforts promoted in this direction. In the case of an accreditation mechanism or award system, only a city, town or community that performs well according to the indicators defined is considered a child friendly city. The UNICEF countries that developed their own Child Friendly Cities Indicators are Brazil, Canada (City of Vancouver), Colombia, France, Italy, Morocco, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Philippines, Spain and Switzerland.

Freeman & Tranter [6] compelling evidence on how, if expectations are opened up, the interests of children need neither collide nor subservient to those of their fellow citizens, and how children and adults, by working together, can bring about stronger, more sustainable and healthier communities. By examining children’s worlds through their own eyes, new perspectives are provided on how children see and experience the world around them. These visions emphasize that children are creators, not just consumers of places, and that in the absence of strategies that empower children, communities will lack those essential moral and democratic ingredients that enable children to truly flourish.
With the advent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) and its systematic monitoring, the rhetoric of children’s rights has become universally framed. Never before has there been a time when children have been under such a spotlight. Yet, despite this upsurge of interest in the lives and well-being of children, many children still find themselves at odds with their societies, denigrated to being little more than citizens in waiting. The values that at one time suggested that children should be seen but not heard have yet to be fully dissipated [6].

According to Marret, Satar and Ismail [9], children like to explore, to try new things, to play and to make friends. However, they may not have enough knowledge and understanding to recognize danger. They do not have the maturity to look at a situation from different angles and exercise good judgment. When they are having fun, they may easily get distracted and may not react quickly enough to sudden unexpected danger.

In venturing into the world, as children reach school-going age, they will start to have more freedom and opportunities to venture outside the home. However, some of the more serious dangers to children under age of 12 lurk outside the home, including strangers who may lack good intentions [9].

4.0 Methodology:

The methodology implied in this research is based on mixed methodology via the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods can capitalize on the best of both traditions and overcome many of their shortcomings and build a broader picture by adding insights to ‘numbers’ through inclusion of dialogue, narratives and pictures [11]. The main position to lead the research strategies and design is question-driven perspective. This perspective will look into any options listed for the quantitative and qualitative perspective as required by the research questions.

Figure 1 shows the framework of literature review and Figure 2 is the structure of data collection method that will be used in this research.

4.1 Observation:

Visual observation will be conducted to the selected area in Seksyen 7, Shah Alam to indicate the current neighbourhood condition. Photos and video recorded will be useful to support the evidence of research findings.

4.2 Questionnaires:

The research task will be carried out in different urban residential locations that will represent the places where the children age between 6 and 9 live and play. The samples will differ on important socioeconomic factors such as education and financial status related to type of residential location. A workshop will be carried out in three kindergartens and two transits/daycares in Seksyen 7, Shah Alam. The personal appointment with parents and childrens may also be conducted. Questionnaires will be distributed by using “draw and write” techniques. Regarding the consent procedures, letters requesting parental consent for the children’s participation will send to their parents.

In each workshop, the study will take around one hour to obtain the feedback and opinions of the questionnaire items.

In addition, questionnaire survey also will be conducted among parents in Seksyen 7, Shah Alam. The factors of parents afraid to let their children play outside will be investigated.

4.3 Semi-structured Interview:

The data also will be collected by the arrangement of a semi-structured interview among children, parents and professional team.
To ensure reliability of the “draw and write” techniques, a semi-structured interview will be conducted to avoid misinterpretation of drawings during the analysis processes, and the conversation will be recorded using a voice recorder.

Figure 2: The Structure of Data Collection Method

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interview will be analyzed and discussed.

Information will be recorded and electronically processed through content analysis and categorization of the keywords. Drawings will be selected on the basis of well representative of the specific question.

6.0 Challenges And Obstacles:

Mixed methodologies certainly make sense to build as rich picture as possible. It is certainly admirable, but may not able to do it all. Every sub-questions and population need to set the limits depending on time allocation and resources available. The ability to negotiate with these is prerequisite for success. A mixed approach can offer great rewards, but developing the skills and rigour required to do it well will be a true challenge. In this research, working with children may enjoyable but need a proper planning and arrangement to attract their attention.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper is used to develop a framework of child friendly neighbourhood that can be used as the guidelines for professional team and government to design a best future urban neighbourhood suitable for Malaysian urban children. The children’s perspectives, parent’s opinions and professional’s views are very important to form child neighbourliness in next future.

REFERENCES


