

Strategies to enhance early childhood education institution selling point

Sri Wahyuni

Faculty of Education
State University of Malang

Abstract

This research was aimed at developing substantive theory about strategies to enhance the selling point of early childhood education institution. This was conducted in three institutions in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. This research employed qualitative approach with multisite study design. Data were collected by using interview, observation, and documentation. The analysis was done by using inductive analysis. Results of this research showed that these three institutions used a three-way strategies, which were (1) external strategy by creating identity with innovative and creative program, (2) internal strategy by developing quality services through educators character development, facilities fulfillment, educative media provision, and creation of conducive and pleasant learning environment, and (3) interactive strategy by developing mutual connection among schools, parents, a community, employing the use of connecting book, and easy payment.

Keywords: Strategy, Selling point, Early Childhood Education

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I. Introduction

One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target is the establishment of *Education for All* (EFA), which is education without discrimination and which must cover all ages including Early Childhood Education (ECD). UNESCO (2005) describes that the target of EFA on the ECD up to the year of 2015 has been 85% participation level of children aging 0-6 years. Such participation level also has been the long terms primary priority of the *Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization* (SEAMEO) program up to the year of 2035 (<http://edukasi.kompas.com>). These show that the ECD has been significantly gained attention and have important position in regional, national, and international levels. The Government of Indonesia Republic locates ECD as an important part of the National Education. Various efforts have been done by the government considering the growth and development of early year children determine the physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual, learning ability, behavioral, and personality development (Nutbrown, 2006:62).

Since 200 the Indonesian Republic Government has managed to increase the ECD participation level to 72.6% in 2016. In 2014, it was found out that the achievement was 69.4% (<http://paud.kemdiknas.go.id>). This indicates that 5.6% of the ECD in Indonesia have not gained ECD to match the EFA target of 75%. The increase of the ECD participation levels has been clearly manifested by the increasing numbers of the ECD every year both those managed by the governmental institution and the private institutions. In 2013 there were 174.367 institutions comprising 74.487 Kindergartens, 70.477 Play Groups, 3.1354 Day Care, and 26.269 ECD equivalent or the so called lembaga satuan PAUD Sejenis (SPS) (Kemdikbud, 2013). However, There still are lots of problem in the quality of operation and services including the coverage of services, types of services, children need services, and quality of the services (Kemdikbud, 2013).

To overcome such problems, the Indonesia Republic Government made the program priority in the National Education Development of 2010-2014. This has been put into the strategy to attain the golden generation 2045 as the outcomes of the ECD (Kompas.com, 2013). The Indonesian Republic Government also launched integrative wholistic integrated ECD which covers 1000 PAUD. Each village must have one ECD to implement the Dakar Convention in 2000 (<http://kompas.com>, 2013). This policy has implicated to the large numbers of new ECD established by the community managed by the Government institutions, Private institutions, and Social as well as Religious institution.

East Java has been noted as having the highest level of participation reaching 76.39% (Kemdikbud, 2013), which means that the ECD services in this province has been very high. This evidence shows the existence of the competition among ECD institutions. One of the regions and municipalities having high competitions of the ECD is Malang municipality. The development of ECD in this city has been satisfactory reaching the establishment of 572 institutions as follows:

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Table 1 ECD INSTITUTION DATA IN MALANG

Organizing Body	TK/RA/BA (Kindergarten)	KB (Play Group)	TPA (Day Care)	SPS (Similar ECD Service)	Total
State/Governmental	26	1	0	2	29
Private	419	52	4	68	543
Numbers	445	53	4	70	572

(Source: <http://referensi.data.kemdikbud.go.id>)

The quantity development must be balanced with the quality development to make them acknowledged, chosen, and expected by the community and to enable them professionally compete with other institutions. The ECD Institutions have responsibilities to develop strategies of service quality enhancement continuously. An important thing to conduct for the success of the institutions is creating innovative education service socialization (Wijaya, 2012:2). The ECD institutions need to be proactive in providing best quality educational services to parents by employing proper strategies.

II. Method of the research

This research was aimed to understand the phenomenon of the strategy of the ECD Institution Selling Point among the three ECD institutions in Malang. The ultimate purpose has been to develop the substantive theory on the matter. Therefore, this research needed meaningful and thorough information or data which could not only be done by questionnaires. Therefore, this research employed the qualitative approach with multisite study design. The researcher took place as the main instrument and was present in adequate time in the research location to conduct in-depth interview, diligent observation, documentation, and implement triangulation, make track record, and conduct *member check* to check the validity and reliability of the data. This research used *inductive analysis* technique comprising the within site and cross site analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998)

This research was conducted in three Integrated ECD Institutions in Malang, which are The Restu 2 Integrated ECD, As-Salam Integrated ECD, and Pelita Hati Integrated ECD. The informants were taken by using *purposive sampling* technique. The Principle of these three institutions were as key informants due to their important positions in their institutions. The researcher also involved educators, parents, administrators, and school committee. The followings are the informants.

Table 2. Informants List

No	Informants	Restu 2	As Salam	Pelita Hati
1.	Principals	1	1	1
2.	Educators	3	2	3
3.	Parents	4	4	3
4.	Administrators	1	1	1
5.	School Committee	1	1	1
Total		10	9	9

III. Research Findings

Based on the multi-sites analysis it was found out that there were *three-way strategies* to enhance the selling point of the ECD Institutions. What is meant by the selling point is strategic values of the ECD Institutions by which the institutions become acknowledged, expected, and chosen by the community as the trusted center of their children care. Strategies are meant as ways and efforts made by the ECD Institutions to enhance their service values. There have been three strategies employed by the three ECD Institutions comprising external, internal, and interactive strategies.

3.1 External Strategies

The ECD Institutions needed to develop brand identity to make them easy to recognize by the community. Each of the institution must have primary programs showing their quality characteristics. Such efforts turned out to appear in the external strategies as follows:

3.1.1 Creating Institution Characteristics

The Institutions characteristics have been very important to attract the community interest in their education services. Efforts to work on this made by Restu 2 was making the institution be the so-called Pesantren or Islamic Boarding School. The institution developed learning program focusing on the development of character and islamic values. The prioritized activities included memorization of daily prayers, short verses of Al Qur'an, and habituation of the prophetic behavior, and habituation of deeds and prayers. Every day children were trained to do Dhuha Shalat Morning Prayers and Dhuhur Prayers or Noon Prayers collectively together, and implementing islamic values such as giving every Friday, being truthful, learning to apologize, learning to thank. And learning to help. To support these, Restu 2 made school motto as "*terbaik dalam iman, ilmu, dan akhlaq*" (Best in dead, science, and morals).

As-Salam prioritizes on the formation of the moslem personality with noble characters and morals by focus in on the religious values and formation of the islamic morals based on the teaching of Prophet Muhammad SAW. The featured activities included memorization of the daily prayers, sort verses of Al Qur'an which is the so called *juz amma*, Names of Allah or the so called *asmaul husna*, and the so-called *hadist arbain*. For the memorization, this institution targetted children to memorize the first up to fourth names of Allah in semester one and the fourth to the ninth names of Allah in semester 2, more than 30 daily prayers, and memorizing *juz amma* up to surah *ad dhuha*. The character development was done by focusing on the believe or Akidah and the life history of Prophet Muhammad or *shirah nabawiyah*. All activities were directed to the habituation of characters and morals both in mind and practices.

The characteristics developed by the Pelita Hati was the school concept on the basis of religion and environment. This Institutions prioritize not only the religious values, but also scientific environmental based learning. This institution developed a notion of utilizing environment for learning through *gardening* and *outing classes*. Children were trained to like vegetables by planting vegetables, and cooking vegetables. The school environment was designed nicely and greenfully to support the development of children characters in loving the environment.

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3.1.2 Creating Creative and Innovative Featured Program

The Featured Program made by Restu 2 was making learning method change by modifying the BCCT (*Beyond Center and Circle Time*) to integrate the Reggio Emilia Method and Thematic Method. This implementation of this method was focused on the learning center forms. There were seven learning center forms developed including preparation, environment, creativity and arts, and blocks, deed and morals, audio visual, language, and role play. The other program innovation was in the form of the extra curricular program including obligatory English day, computer, drum band, morning kids story, and charity activity as well as the optional programs including drawing, coloring, singing, and the so-called tapak suci self-defense.

As Salam developed morning activities which was different from those done in the previous years? Every morning children were given opportunities to select our kinds of activities which included physical exercises, reading, reciting Qur'an, and making morning journal. This institution also showed the changes in managing the morning activity system called "moving". In the morning activities children could meet different teachers and different friends. After completing the activities children received Great Stamp. As-Salam also modified and innovated the BCCT learning method by having *Moving System*. Other innovative activities were "open house", managed in the "Charming Saturday" program comprising activities arousing the children multiple intelligence and children characters through competitions, affirmation practices, and movement practices. As-Salam recruited "thaharah" teachers to help children do toilet training.

Innovations made by the Pelita Hati were *organic biota (gardening)*, *outing class*, and 3R (*reduce, reuse, and recycle*) programs. Organic Biota learning was about learning organic plantation planted in the limited space, both vegetables and fruits. This program was designed to promote the interest and careness of children to the environment. *Outing class* was activities asking children to experience learning in the environment directly by utilizing resources surrounding the learning area based on the designed theme. 3 R program was done by collecting and processing garbage. Every child was obligated to throw garbage in the garbage appropriate garbage bin based on the categories of wet, dry, paper, and can garbage. Pelita Hati also developed extracurricular programs such as English class and Computer or Kids. In certain time, Pelita Hati conducted *family day* activity designed to involve parents.

The featured programs developed by these three institutions were different from other institutions which made the community be interested in sending their children to the selected these three institutions.

3.2 Internal Strategies

These strategies were made by providing educators having good characters and completing learning facilities. The three Institutions have made tremendous efforts on the followings:

3.2.1 Providing Educators Having Good Characters

The institutions conducted professional development regularly. The development concerned not only the learning and teaching skills, but also character. The character

development became prioritized activities in Restu 2 valuing educators as the most important people to transfer their character to children. Every educator had to own 4 main characters taught by the Prophet Muhammad, which were *tabligh*, *shidiq*, *amanah*, dan *fathonah*, as well as responsibility, caring, helping, and respecting one among others. The educators professional development in Restu 2 has been done since recruitment process in which every candidate was selected by having teaching, attitude, and Al Quran reciting tests. The institution also conducted routine and accidental activities such as daily reflection, weekly reflection, monthly reflection, training, preaching, and competitions. The Principal actively gave behavioral example and monitor the development of the educators characters. He used words and sentence affirmation such as . “*Senyum itu Shodaqoh*” (Smile is a deed), “*Jadilah yang Terbaik*” (Be the Best), “*Bekerjalah dengan Ikhlas*” (*Work willingly*) by hanging these on the wall for giving motivation to educators.

The character development became the important focus of As-Salam, eventhough all educators had been qualified and having university graduate diploma. Efforts made by the school to develop the educators character were (1) habituate the moto of “teaching by heart and examples, (2) provide religious gathering (*liqo*)” and reflection once in every fortnight using topics of *aqidah*, *ukhuwah*, and *akhlak* *tabligh*, *shidiq*, *amanah*, *fathonah*, responsibilities, disciplines, trustworthy, caring, and togetherness, (3) lead by examples, guidance, and monitoring, (4) use affirmation words and sentences, and (5) coordinate and collaborate with Matahati Foundation to educate character.

Pelita Hati also conducted routine character development for educators by obligting every educator to own four characters exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, which were *shidiq*, *tabligh*, *amanah*, and *fathonah*. The character development had been done since the first time educators were recruited and was continued by routine activities every month. In the meetings.

Performance evaluation was done to the educators. The educators were also given refreshment, training on the emotional intelligence, training educators to accept critiques and advise, and making accidental religious sessions, training, and competitions. To motivate educators, the principal put affirmative words or sentences in classes, such as words like “*bekerja itu ibadah*” (Work is a deed), “*senyum itu shodaqoh*” (Smile is giving), “*Bekerjalah dengan ikhlas*” (Work Wilingly), and “budayakan 3S (*senyum*, *sapa*, dan *salam*)” (Habituate 3 S, Smile, Call, and greet). These words were put on the places which are easy to be seen by educators.

3.2.2 Providing Appropriate and Quality Facilities.

The three ECD Institutions had made efforts to provide facilities including educative media, classrooms, and educative play toys. In the yard of the Restu 2 there were swing, sliding area, climbing area, small pool, water fountain which were arranged neatly for learning. Inside the classroom, there were indoor play area arrange neatly in every center area. Each of the center had its own room equiped with media and learning materials arranged neatly. To enhance the quality of educational services, the Insititutions had the principles of the numbers o facilities must be equivalent to the numbers of children. As-Salam and Pelita Hati also provided rooms devided into centers dequiped with complete facilities and media. Even, As-Salam provided sepcial playrooms for children.

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3.3 Interactive Strategy

The interactive strategies were developed by the three Institutions with the purpose of promoting mutual relationship among the institutions, parents, and community surrounding the schools. These strategies included (1) forming parents association and school committee involving in the school activities such as open house and outing class, (2) using connecting books, (3) using parenting program such as outing class and talkshow, (4) providing integrated services to help parents consult children problems. The integrated services included day care, play group, and kindergarten, and (5) making parents as media of promotion for the institutions. These strategies were categorized as follows:

3.3.1 Fulfilling The Need of Caring Through Integrated Services

Restu 2 developed three service programs managed by an institution managed by one principal. These were Day Care, Play Group, and Kindergarten the so-called Bustanul Athfal (BA). With these three educational service programs, Restu 2 provided educational services to children aging 0-6 year for 06.30 a.m-17.00 p.m. These services were established due to the request of parents to have children learn and play in the whole day. These services were also meant to take care and educate children aging 0-6 years wholistically. Pelita Hati conducted Day Care for children aging 0-6 years, play group for children aging 2-4 years, and Kindergarten for those aging 4-6 years. Pelita Hati made these services open due to providing parents expectation to have their children taken care in this institution up to the afternoon time. With these integrated services, the Institutions also gained high benefits, which were in every new academic year they did not to recruit new students which also made the cost administration effective.

3.3.2 Providing Parenting Activities

Lots of parenting activities were developed and conducted to promote relationship among schools, parents, and community surrounding the institutions. Restu 2 employed connecting books to communicate children development at schools to parents. Other ways to promote relationship was doing educative activities for parents through parents association activities. The parent association was initiated and established by parents and was named "Az Zahra". This parent association had routine monthly activities such as religious meetings, seminar, cooking class, parenting sessions, and final theme exhibition. Parents also were given opportunity to involve in classroom learning.

As-Salam made effort to unite all stake holders to establish school committee. Such initiation was made for the purpose of involving parents, community, and foundation to maximize their roles in improving the schools. The institution always involved school committee in every school activity such as the final theme exhibition, open house, and other programs. The Institution also promote mutual relationship with mosque committee or the so-called *takmir masjid* and local community the so-called Rukun Tetangga (Neighborhood Group) and Rukun Warga (Collection of Neighborhood Groups), and other schools in the form of benchmarking such as learning to learn character development on the basis of the Prophet life history or the so-called *shirah nabawi*.

Parents were viewed as working partner and the means of the institutional promotion in Pelita Hati. The institution did not have to struggle for promotion when parents were actively help school to share educational information to other people targeting to be the projects of school parents. This institution used connecting book, educative seminar,

parenting session, competition, talk show, cooking class, and provided integrated services. These services were provided to educate children holistically.

The ultimate findings of this research could be illustrated as follow:

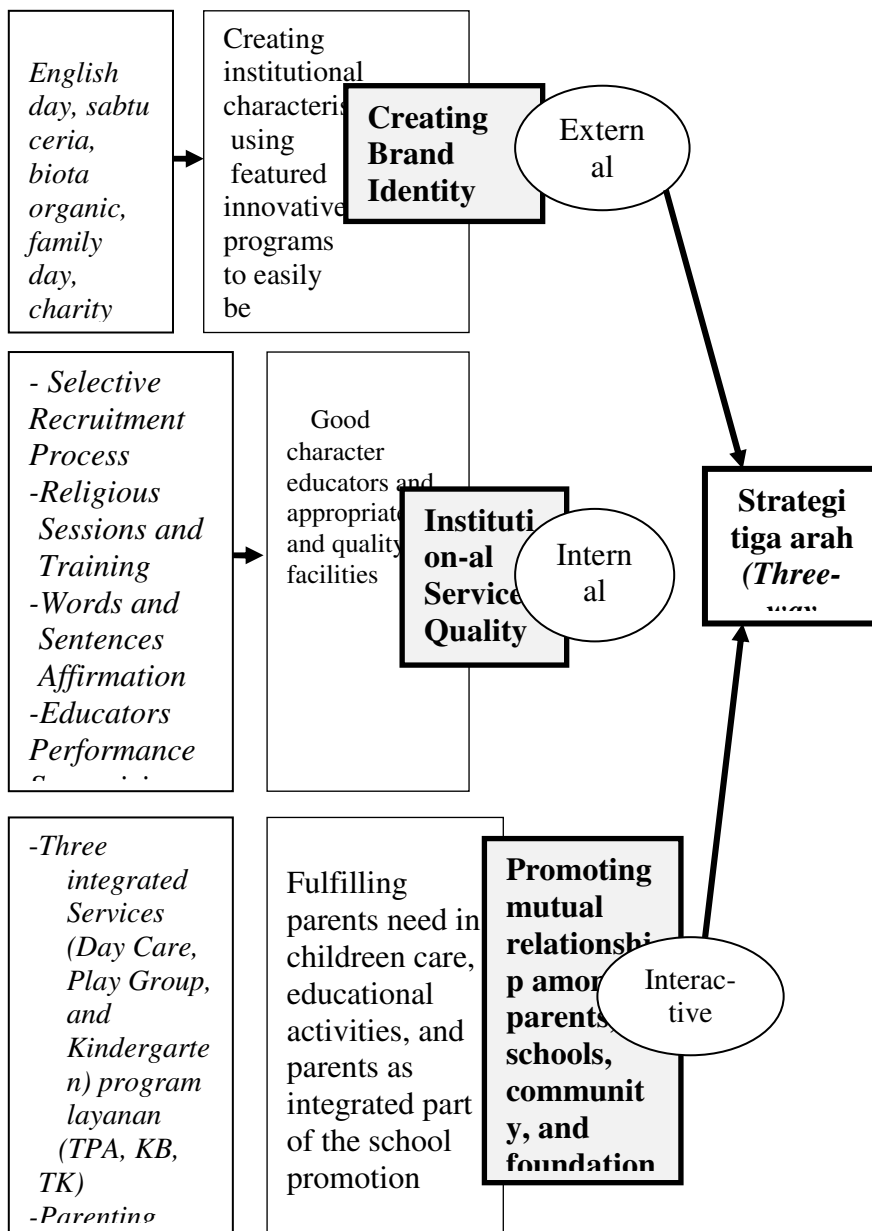


Figure 1. Selling Point Enhancement Strategies of the ECD Institutions.

4. Discussion

The ultimate findings of this research showed that the three ECD Institutions conducted various efforts as strategies to enhance their selling points as educational service institutions. The strategies were categorized into three groups, which were (1) conducted external strategy by developing their brand identities such as defining their institutions as character based schools and environmental based school with their featured programs such as English day, charming Saturday, organic biota, family day, charity activity, and outing class; (2) conducted internal strategy by providing qualified educators with good characters, appropriate facilities, and other supports. For these instants, the institutions made various efforts of (a) developing educators character right since the recruitment process, (b) providing routine religious sessions and training for educators, (c) motivating educators by using words and sentences affirmation, (d) conducting supervision by the principals, (e) completing educative learning media, (f) and creating clean, green, and pleasant school environment and (3) employing interactive strategy by promoting mutual relationship among schools, parents, communities, and foundations to meet parents need and expectation in children education and care as well as providing easy ways to serve parents in the process of the children development. In these instants, the institutions made various activities and programs such as (a) providing integrated educational services including Day Cares, Play Groups, and Kindergartens, (b) providing service working time up to the afternoon, (c) providing parenting activities such as religious sessions, seminar, training, talkshow, or competitions, and (d) establishing school committee or parents association involving in school activities including final theme exhibition, open house, or outing class.

These strategies in the context of the service management can be said as educational marketing strategies, which according to Kotler and Fox (1995) is said as activities of program analysis, planning, implementation, and controlling formulated carefully and designed for resulting educational service customer satisfaction. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) state that educational service marketing is an activity to meet the need, expectation, as well as to meet the promise made by the education service institution for its customers. Such strategy is highly needed as a step to make the institution remain having attention from the communities of service users and be in existence within the competitors.

Similar to Lockhart (2005) who views that educational marketing is highly needed due to the tight competition among educational institutions, Indradjaja and Karno (2007) suggests that education institutions need to reassure the community and service users that their offered education can be understood as fulfilling the users expectation. Every institution makes efforts to provide unique, characterized, and featured learning programs such as having character development based learning and Islamic values based internalized learning. Such featured identities were supported by activities of prayer memorization, Qur'an recitation, deed practices, noble and good morals habituation, and life skill development through extra curricular programs. Such curriculum inclusion was made to create what is called in marketing as brand identities (Jasfar, 2009:224), which are trade marks showing institutional identities as religious schools. Such uniqueness can make the institutions image influence parents perceptions as the service users.

The curriculum development with religious characteristics and character development inclusions need the roles of educators having good characters, too. Realizing this premise, the institutions provided educators continuous professional development. The character development had been done right since the educators were recruited. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) suggests that to build customer satisfaction oriented educational services, schools are encouraged to conduct recruitment process by interviewing and selecting potential candidates. The three institutions turned out to do such program and afterwards the institutions conducted various activities such as reflective sessions. Religious sessions, training, supervision by principals, and affirmation in order to enhance the educators' competence. Such strategy falls into the term internal strategy to demonstrate the educational service values through *one-to-one relationship* (Wijaya, 2012:20). The qualified and competent educators can demonstrate good performance that can meet the service users' satisfaction. Such strategy is in line with what is suggested by Michael G Fullan, as quoted by Suyanto (2000) as a strategy to attract parents interest by enhancing educators quality which can be in line with the quality of educational services. They can help children develop their interest, talent, ability, and potential. Students' interest, talent, ability, and potential cannot be grown without the help of educators (Mulyasa, 2006:35).

Educators are a person giving care, love, exemplifier, and mentor for children (Lickona, 2012: 111). What they do certainly become the concerns of children and people surrounding them (Mulyasa, 2006:46). Therefore, professional development shall be conducted. Such program is meant to meet the competences required by the Government as stated in the decree of the National Education Ministry number 58, 2009. The early childhood learning educators must have minimum qualification of the diploma IV or graduate diploma specializing in the early childhood education or at least they have early child education training.

The Institutions continuously made changes by developing creative and innovative programs in enhancing the children characters and potentials. Such innovative program is needed to make changes and to ensure the service user satisfaction. Such programs are called differentiation strategy (Michael Porter, in Jasfar, 2009:104). The strategy prioritizes the existence of unique and different services compared to those same type services. This strategy is also called educational innovation to make the educational service products different from their competitors (Wijaya, 2012:69). The schools provided programs as the manifestation of this strategy in the forms of morning journal, charming Saturday, gardening or organic biota, outing class, and affirmation. Kazmi (2007) says that differentiation strategy is a process to create different offerings and to differentiate the organization from others by using a number of tools so that there are meaningful added values to the organization offers.

Other efforts to attract service users were providing appropriate and complete facilities and arranging the schools environment to be green and clean. The Institutions also provided adequate rooms, indoor, as well as outdoors learning media and equipments. Each of the centers also were completed with complete learning play tools. These efforts were made to establish good images of the Institutions to the service users. The provision of the facilities can help the good physical performance of the Institutions and can be the attraction of the parents. According to Parasuraman such physical appearance enables them to form the first image and create the service user trust (Wijaya,

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2012:225). Zeithaml and Bitner view these as the package of the Institutions and the differentiators of the Institutions to other Institutions.

The success of the educational institutions relates to the roles of parents and surrounding communities. Parents and the surrounding communities as external service users have high influences to determine the continuation of the Institutions. These people are the best marketing agent who are able to give the Institutions feed back and concerns through words of mouth communication. What parents feel about the institutions can be captured by the surrounding community (Wijaya, 2012: 20). Considering these conditions, the Institutions promoted mutual harmonic relationship among the schools, parents, and communities surrounding the schools as the interactive strategy to create service user satisfaction (Wijaya, 2012:21). Such efforts included the parents association and school committee, routine religious sessions, training, parenting education, and competitions. Such efforts are called by Michael G Fullan, in Suyanto (2000) as optimizing parents and students potentials to enhance the community participation in schools activities. Each of the Early Childhood Institution needs to make relationship based on the partnership collaboration and mutual trust (Stokes, 1996). These relationships shall happen both within and outside of the Institutions. Gronroos (1984) says that the relationship among service users, employees, and interaction processes can formulate service triangle marketing.

The three integrated educational service model comprising the Day Cares, Play Groups, and Kindergartens turned out to aim at providing wholistic educational care and learning to children which were not only intended on the cognitive development. Such program is inline with the *Early Childhood Education* (ECE) program developed in the United States of America (Brown, 2011:8). Such educational services will ease parents who have high mobilities and works to have their children safe. Cochran says that the existance of such institutions can provide opportunities to women who involve in job markets and to have their children safely taken care (Brown, 2011:7).

In summary, the three ECE institutions developed strategies to create brand identities, building parents and community trusts, making parents peace of mind, and providing easy children care to parents. Such efforts are the forms of educational marketing strategy. Kotler (1992:126) says that such efforts can enhance the quality of performance and services. Moreover, the efforts would be more beneficial to have the Institutions selective in recruitin educator candidates, provide additional meaningful services, providing useful facilities, and providing additional content of learning. Nurhadi (2005) says that such strategy can be called as a promotion to provide service user satisfaction services. These can be done effectively in order that the service users can be interested in sending their children to the schools. These also are done in order that students, parents, school employees, and communities trust the schools Lockhart (2005).

5. Conclusions

The strategies to enhance the ECE Institution Selling points turned out to be the three – way strategy comprising External, Internal, and Interactive Strategies. The external strategies concerned with the creation of brand identities of the Institutions by developing creative and innovative programs in order that the community could easily acknowledge and trust the institutions. The Internal strategy concerned developing the quality of educational services through continuous profesional development of the educators

including the character development, complete and appropriate facilities provision, and conducive school environment creation so that children were pleasant in learning and parents trust the schools. The interactive strategy concerned promoting mutual relationship among schools, parents, communities, and foundations through the three integrated educational service programs comprising the Day Cares, Play Groups, and Kindergarten, connecting books, parenting activities, easy cost payment services, and fulfilment of the parents expectations.

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