

Malaysian Early Childcare and Childhood Education (ECCE) Curriculum: Perspectives of Malaysian ECCE Educationists

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Abstract

Upon realising the importance of early childhood education for the nation's development, Malaysian government began to enhance the quality of the ECCE curriculum through policies and legislation. Such developments are evident in the government agenda and several initiatives, including the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) in the 11th Malaysia Plan, the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and the Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The quality of the ECCE curriculum in Malaysia has not yet received the required attention, as the focus continues to remain largely on achieving quantitative academic targets. This qualitative study examined educationists' perspectives on the quality of current Malaysian Early Childcare and Childhood Education (ECCE) curriculum. The study employed a semi-structured interview protocols to probe the views from 11 Malaysian educationists. It concludes that educationists believe the documented Malaysian ECCE curriculum today is already aligned with the holistic child development philosophy, but the country may need a higher impact programs of teacher education and training, to produce qualified and competent teachers who would implement the curriculum effectively.

Keywords: early childcare, early childhood curriculum, educationists

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Introduction

In Malaysia, the childcare industry is managed by two different ministries. Childcare centres for new-born babies to 4-year olds are placed under the Department of Social Welfare Services, an agency in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). It emphasizes on the growth and development of infants and toddlers. The centres for 5 to 6-year olds are co-managed by three ministries: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, and the National Unity Department. The government-run non-profit childcare centres are generally located in rural and sub-urban areas. They focus more on the socio-emotional development compared to the non-government for-profit centres which are usually located in urban areas and emphasized more on academic aspects (UNESCO, 2006). Government-funded centres are free, follow a standard national curriculum, and the medium of the instruction is in Malay. On the other hand, private centres charge a fee for registration, may choose their own medium of instruction, and practice their own curriculum. However, they still need to implement the national curriculum as the core structure (Majzub, 2003). Before considering the quality aspect of the Malaysian ECCE curriculum, here is some brief background on the Malaysian Education System. The National Philosophy of Education stated:

“Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal wellbeing as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society, and the nation at large.”

Kurikulum Standard Pra-sekolah Kebangsaan, KSPK

[National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC), CDC, MOE, 2016, page xi]

The National Philosophy of Education (NPE) has underlined the focus of holistic development of the child, and to ensure the NPE is followed through, the government introduced the *Kurikulum Standard Pra-sekolah Kebangsaan, KSPK* (National Preschool Curriculum Standards, NPCS) which was implemented in 2010 for children aged four to six

years old. It was the guidelines used in government and private preschools in Malaysia. *KSPK* aims to enhancing the potential of four to six-year olds holistically and integrate their physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social dimensions through a safe, fun and enriching learning environment, with creative and meaningful learning activities (Ministry of Education, 2017). Specifically, *KSPK* provides students with the opportunity to achieve the following objectives:

1. Use language to communicate effectively.
2. Practice Islamic values in daily life for Muslim students.
3. Practice the noble values of Malaysian society.
4. Appreciate and understand the culture of Malaysian society.
5. Love and appreciate the environment.
6. Develop positive self-concept and self-confidence.
7. Practice good health, fitness and safety measures.
8. Apply critical, creative and innovative thinking and problem-solving skills in learning and daily life.

In short, the curriculum aims on producing students who believe in God, can communicate and socialize confidently, able to cope with challenges, solve problems, have the desire to learn, and are always ready for further learning. There are six learning areas documented in the curriculum:

1. *communication*: verbal and non-verbal interaction skills
2. *spirituality, attitude and values*: appreciation of religious practices, beliefs, attitudes and values
3. *humanity*: exposure to local, national and global knowledge and practices
4. *self-esteem*: fostering leadership and self-esteem through curriculum and co-curriculum activities; and an appreciation for the spirit of patriotism and unity
5. *physical and aesthetic development*: physical development and health for personal well-being; and development of imagination, creativity, talent and appreciation
6. *science and technology*: scientific knowledge, skills and attitudes; and mathematical knowledge and skills.

Besides *KSPK* (for children aged four to six years old), the formulation of policy related to the care and education of children aged zero to four years was also an extremely important milestone for the Malaysian ECCE, in which the *PERMATA Negara* programme

was introduced and implemented in 2007. The *PERMATA* curriculum was designed based on the following philosophy:

“From birth children have been raised and educated for develop their personality, potential and intelligence to succeed mastering communication skills, early literacy, early math, logic thinking, and basic knowledge of the surrounding world, at along with self-care skills and the practice of pure values to be individuals who are virtuous, self-reliant, high-minded, patriotic, and can adapt to the advancement of modern technology and the environment various national and international cultures. This effort requires commitment and collaboration between educators, parents and communities, because every child is like the priceless PERMATA (gem).”

Kurikulum *PERMATA* Negara (2013), Early Childhood Department (*PERMATA*),
Prime Minister Department, Malaysia, p. 11.

The *PERMATA* curriculum aims to provide an integrated childcare and early childhood programs for the 0-4 year olds and adheres to the following principles:

- I. Every child has a unique potential that must be respected, developed and honoured.
- II. The first three years of a child's life is crucial for personality and intellectual development, and building sensory and motor skills.
- III. Kids naturally love to explore, experiment, and create.
- IV. Learning practices and resources are appropriate for children development, suitable with local culture, and integrated with technology and global networks.
- V. The learning environment should be cheerful, friendly, and stimulating, with safe indoor and outdoor learning for children.
- VI. Collaboration with parents / families and communities is important.
- VII. Respect for children's rights, religion and culture, of normal children and those with special needs.

Both curricula have now been implemented in Malaysia for more than seven years, and it's about time to examine the turn out of the curriculum. The quality of the ECCE curriculum in Malaysia has not yet received the required attention, as the focus continues to remain largely on achieving quantitative academic target figures. Children are expected to be able to read and write very well, as well as mastering good mathematics before they go to primary school. Most parents seemed to be more concerned about their children's

academic performance and pay less attention to their children's social, emotional, and soft skills (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2018).

According to Shao-Wen (2012), the curriculum is defined in many ways. The curriculum elements could refer to content and goals (Barrow & Milburn, 1990); to teaching methods, content, and goals (Pratt, 1994), and could also have a combination of content, goals, methods, and assessment (Brady, 1995). In the broadest scope, the curriculum encompasses extracurricular activities, learning environment, and even hidden curriculum as well as cultures that would entail learning experiences (Marsh, 1997). Instead of regarding curricula narrowly as prescriptive and formalized, it may be useful to think of them more holistically as programs for experiences. Following this line of definition, Marsh (1997) posits curriculum as "*an interrelated set of plans and experiences which a student completes under the guidance of the school*" (Marsh, 1997, p. 5). Thus, the subject matter provided for children, actions of teachers in the classroom, actions of children, instructional materials, and learning environment could all be understood as components of the curriculum.

While the curriculum is an interactive process developed among learners, teachers, materials, and the environment (Chen, 2007), it also reflects cultural beliefs, social and political values, and the community. The *hidden curriculum* or learning culture (Myles et al., 2004) plays an important role in cultivating wholesome students who acquired many skills through participation in the learning activities, rather than by what has been directly taught.

A review of the literature suggested the following framework for developing the ECCE curriculum (Figure 1). In Malaysian's context, however, it is imperative to include a spiritual dimension to the framework as the National Philosophy of Education is carefully articulated based on faith in God. Thus, the suggested framework for developing ECCE curriculum is as follows (Figure 2).

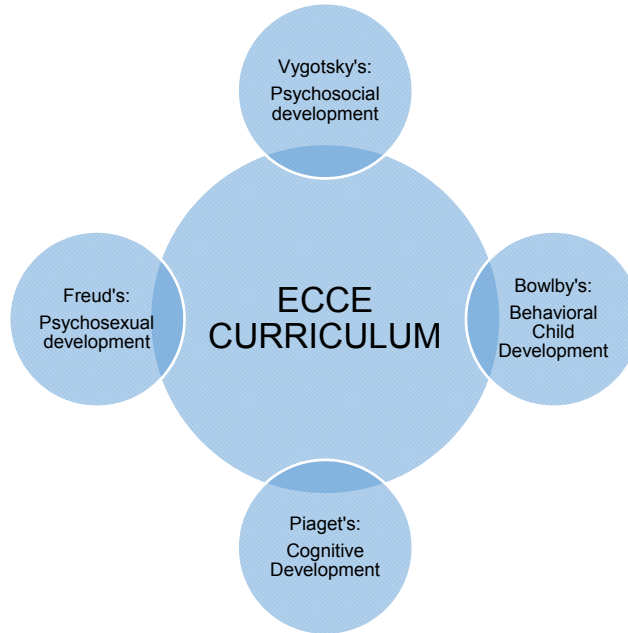


Figure 1. Theoretical perspectives in developing ECCE curriculum

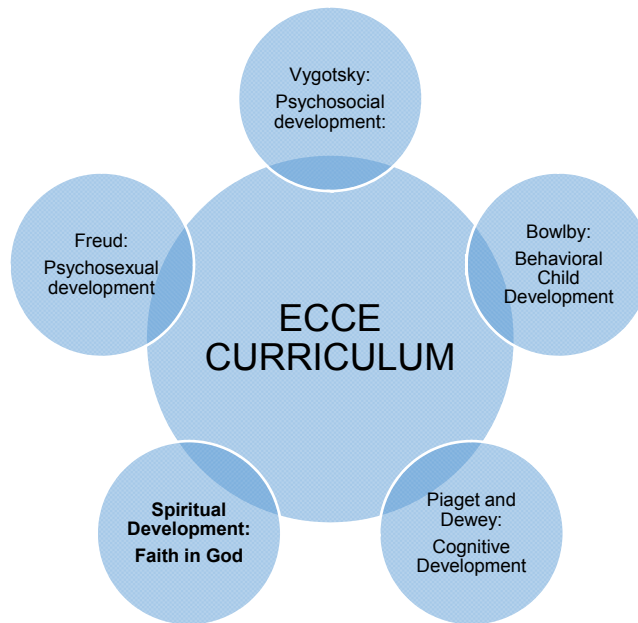


Figure 2. Suggested curriculum framework for Malaysian ECCE curriculum

The purpose of the main research is to develop a framework of what may constitute best practices for quality Malaysian ECCE curriculum. This paper however would focus on ECCE educationists' perspectives regarding the present ECCE in Malaysia. Educationists defined in this study are academicians who specialize in ECCE and are mostly involved in teacher training and teacher education program for ECCE. Some of these educationists, however, are also involved in the industry itself, as members of the Malaysian ECCE council. The justification for the study is based on the importance of early childhood experiences for children's development, and their learning experiences very much depended on early childhood teachers' and carers' beliefs and practices. These teachers/carers implement what they have learned and trained on during their courses. Therefore, this study is interested to see if the educationists believed the teachers/carers implement what they have been taught or build up their own interpretation of what is the best way to implement the curriculum. Considering the background above, this study seeks to explore EC educationists' perspectives regarding the present ECCE in Malaysia and what may constitute best practices of ECCE. Thus, these objectives could be translated into the following research questions:

- I. What are the Malaysian ECC educationists' perspectives regarding the present ECCE in Malaysia?
- II. What are the Malaysian ECC educationists' perspectives on the quality of Malaysian ECCE curriculum?
- III. What are the Malaysian ECC educationists' perspectives on the documented Malaysian ECCE curriculum and its implementation in Malaysian ECCE centres?
- IV. What are the Malaysian ECC educationists' perspectives on the issues and challenges that hinders the implementation of quality Malaysian ECCE programmes?
- V. What are the Malaysian ECC educationists' perspectives of the features that may constitute best practices of ECCE?

Methods

This qualitative study is a part of a bigger research that employed a combination of a national survey, interviews, observations, and document analysis to serve as data collection

instruments as well as means of data triangulation. This paper highlights findings only from the interviews with 11 Malaysian ECC educationists. They were purposively selected since they were regarded as critical informants of the field, for their involvement in ECCE and were regarded as the curriculum experts.

The semi-structured interview protocols were constructed through a series of workshops by the research team, and two ECCE experts from local universities validated the instrument. Based on the high degree of agreement between the two experts on the instrument, a pilot study was administered on 10 respondents (ECCE teachers). Teachers were selected as the pilot sample since they are involved directly in the implementation of the curriculum and are thought to have a good grasp of the ECCE curriculum. After the successful trial session, the interview protocol was just amended for some rephrasing and rearrangement of the items. The reliability of the instrument was estimated through member checking method and data triangulation procedures.

Table 1. *Composition of respondents*

No	Respondent	Designation (Specialization)
1	A	Public University lecturer (Special needs)
2	B	Member of Malaysian ECCE Council (ECCE curriculum)
3	C	Public University lecturer (Child growth and development)
4	D	Public University lecturer (Early science and numeracy)
5	E	Teacher Training College lecturer (Arts and creativity)
6	F	Teacher Training College lecturer (Behavioural management)
7	G	Private University lecturer (ICT)
8	H	Teacher Training College (ECCE Curriculum)
9	I	Member of Malaysian ECCE Council (ECCE curriculum)
10	J	Private University lecturer (Social studies)
11	K	Public University lecturer (Pedagogy)

The individual semi-structured interviews of the educationists were done by at least two researchers for each respondent to facilitate member checking. A total of 18 questions were asked during a two-hour interview session. Interviews were conducted at respondents'

offices, or wherever was convenient to them. Respondents' consents for audio recording were also procured prior to the interviews while observing the confidentiality of data. After each question, respondents were asked to look at researchers' notes to ensure precision and to avoid over-interpretation of data. To ensure data saturation, an analysis was exhausted for all 11 respondents. Sample questions of the interview are as follows:

Part 1. Philosophy and Core Principles

- 1. What is your opinion on the philosophy and core principles of PERMATA/KSPK?*
- 2. In your opinion, do the PERMATA/KSPK programmes fulfil the holistic development based on the developmentally and/or culturally appropriate practice?*
- 3. Can you give us examples of the practice?*

Part 2: Curriculum Content

- 1. What are the defining features in the PERMATA/KSPK curriculum?*
- 2. How do these standards contribute to the quality of an PERMATA/KSPK programme?*
- 3. The PERMATA/KSPK programme covers the main areas for the child's learning and development. In your opinion what are some OTHER AREAS which could be included in the curriculum?*
- 4. Could you please justify.*

Interview data was transcribed from the audio recordings and then analysed using a combination of manual thematic analysis and n-vivo applications. Transcripts were analysed in a series of workshops to thrash out the child, axial, and systematic nodes. Relationships between the axial nodes were scrutinized to narrow them down into major themes. Each transcript underwent pair-comparison analysis, then each pair presented their mapping in the groups' comparison sessions, and finally, the mapping for the National Quality Framework (NQF) was drafted based on factors that contribute to the quality of ECCE curriculum. The interview analysis procedure is summarized as below:

Phase 1: Pair comparison of transcripts

- 1 • 2 researchers analyze same transcripts
- 2 • Pair-comparison
- 3 • Intra-group comparison
- 4 • Inter-group comparison
- 5 • nvivo : nodes
- 6 • axial nodes
- 7 • systematic nodes
- 8 • emerging themes



Phase 2: Pair Comparison Analysis

- 1 • validate & refine interview data
- 2 • refine nodes
- 3 • complete provisional NQF
- 4 • check coding & writing of Components & Indicators
- 5 • determine axial nodes



Phase 3: Intra-Group Comparison Analysis

- 1 • validate & refine interview data
- 2 • refine nodes
- 3 • complete provisional NQF
- 4 • check coding & writing of Components & Indicators
- 5 • determine axial nodes



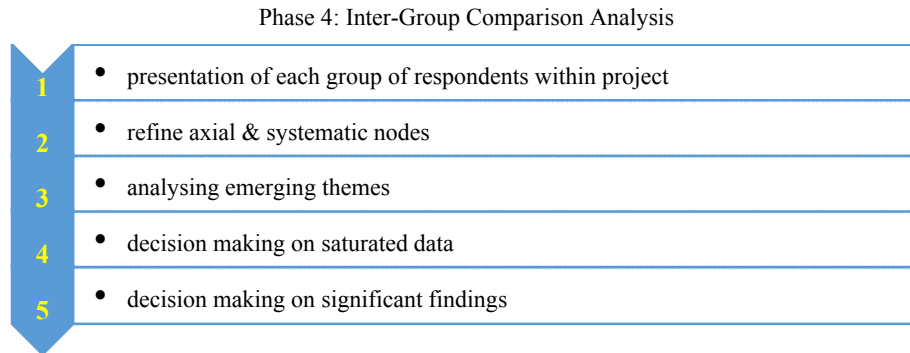


Figure 3. Procedure of interview analysis

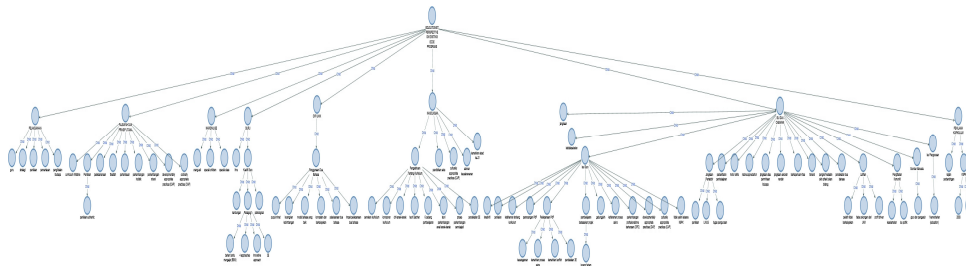


Figure 4. Nvivo's nodes diagram (downscaled)

Respondents' transcripts from the individual interviews were analysed by qualitative content analysis method which consists of four steps: data making, data reduction, inference, and analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). Sub and main categories were inductively formed from the content analysis without imposing preconceived perspectives on them (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each interview was analysed separately in order to identify sub-categories that described the content of data in relation to the research questions.

Results

Four dimensions of educationists' perception towards ECCE curriculum are discussed here: (i) Philosophy and Core Principles, (ii) Curriculum Content, (iii) Teachers' Qualification, Competencies, and Attributes, and; (iv) Learning Environment. In this report, all excerpts are translated into English.

Philosophy and core principles

All respondents agreed Malaysian ECCE curriculum is based on children holistic development philosophy and principles that emphasize on developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.

“The philosophy and the principles of PERMATA or KSPK curriculum... is to produce balance... holistic development in children...everything, physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and social development. I do not deny that the curriculum is in line with the country's philosophy of education.”

[ID/EDU/001]

“In Malaysia we have a national curriculumand if we look at the private kindergarten, they can have their own curriculum but must refer to our national curriculum. That's unique to us.”

[ID/EDU/005]

“You know, basically they are in line with universal principal of early childhood that is looking at the child development as a whole... we also have... culturally appropriate development as well. The whole child balanced development...”

[ID/EDU/007]

“The concept we use is whole brain learning ... whole brain means left and right brain development...plus emotional part, so it must be...holistic...they are the qualitative elements...but the emotional element in our brain also plays an important role in building a child.”

[ID/EDU/009]

Hence, educationists believe Malaysian ECCE should holistically nurture children to provide optimal education for children’s learning and development and this holistic view is already stated in the ECCE curriculum policy (CDD, 2007). They also believed the current ECCE curriculum is aligned with children’s developmental process.

“Teachers only teach them the basics. ...we must follow the milestone, for example, the four-year-old...they learn to count from one to ten only. The English language taught is also very basic...”

“Even standard one and two shouldn’t be too academic. They should still be doing developmentally activities you know... a lot of learning through play activities, storytelling, role play, drama, singing, you know...”

[ID/EDU/007]

However, educationists expressed concern that the present curriculum seemed to have

some hiccups in its implementation. Some respondents spoke about how some single-race centres seem to only focus on a single culture and do not expose children to the other cultures.

“We learn culture when there is a festive season only ... when it is Chinese New Year, then the theme is Chinese New Year, right? And so on...however...most centres, do not follow the culture theme actually... most pre-schools I observed do not even have mixed races.”

[ID/EDU/004]

“Since all are coming from Malay families, so there is no need to let children learn about Chinese New Year etc.... It’s not relevant. So, they have a misconception about multicultural education. What I mean is to embrace diversity ... because many of them actually said it is not important because there are no other races in my kindergarten...But they must also realise, you still have to... inculcate respect for differences ... so that part I think is still lacking.”

[ID/EDU/007]

Curriculum Content

Educationists seemed to perceive the content of the Malaysian ECCE curriculum consists of four main domains: (i) cognitive, (ii) socio-emotion (iii) physical, and (iv) language development.

“... .. this is said from the KSPK, which is to produce a balanced human being. Based on KSPK...teachers must plan their learning activities based on children’s...socio-emotional , physical, language and cognitive development.”

[ID/EDU/002]

One respondent voiced her concern on how English is taught in ECCE centres and posited that phonological awareness should be included in the curriculum.

“Of course, we do not expect our pre-schoolers to be able to speak English very well...ok. But more importantly, I think it is to inculcate the interest. Otherwise, they will pick up all the bad English, bad grammar... that is hard to undo... and the part about phonetic when it comes to assessment there’s nothing assessing phonetic. So, they must add it to the curriculum.”

[ID/EDU/007]

On the other hand, some educationists insisted on the introduction of sexual education to

ensure children would know if they are being sexually abused, and the appropriate ways in communicating with people of different gender including their family members. The excerpt below mirrored the educationist's concern and what should be included in the sexual education implementation in ECCE.

“Talking about sex education, people thought we want to teach their child about sex. It is not like that. If ... for example, boy's genital part... a girl's genital part. Who can touch it? Who cannot touch? How and what kind of touch? Children must be able to know if they are being sexually harassed, and to whom can they talk about it...”

[ID/EDU/002]

In addition, respondents maintained that they observed a lack of effort in ensuring children's optimum physical development in Malaysian ECCE centres. The excerpt below shows an example of an educationist view on the physical domain and another, on the socio-emotional domain in ECCE curriculum.

“So ... we want them to have more physical elements, like you know...for physical development, so that a child can climb, can crawl, can go through a tunnel, can run, can ride a bike, can balance his body and so on.”

[ID/EDU/009]

“We must also have musical instrument ... So they can play music, ...have a roleplay area, reading corners, ...so those essential elements that we ask, ... the administrators must design this.”

[ID/EDU/009]

Further probing revealed some educationists perceived road safety must be included in the curriculum. These educationists were those who were involved in the module development of road safety for primary school children.

“Another important element that should be included is...road safety. It's already available for Year 1 to Year 6 (primary school) ... the new module, which comes with explanations on traffic lights and safety guidelines, is inserted in the Bahasa Malaysia subject for two study hours each week.

However, Preschool module still does not include this. God's willing, we're coming up with a pre-school road safety module soon.”

[ID/EDU/011]

Teachers' Qualification, Attributes & Competency

All respondents posited that teachers play an important role in implementing ECCE curriculum. Analysis of the interviews revealed three dimensions of early childhood teachers' that were perceived as crucial to ensuring smooth implementation of Malaysian ECCE curriculum; (i) Qualification (ii) Attributes and (iii) Competency.

Qualification

Educationists agreed that in order to ensure teachers are equipped with the required pedagogical knowledge, every teacher need to have appropriate early childhood teaching certification, the least is at a diploma level. One of the respondents stated:

"... all pre-school teachers should have at least a diploma in early childhood education..."

[ID/EDU/001]

Another educationist expressed his concern that teachers must be able to nurture children's thinking skills and apply 21st century learning that is being emphasised in the ECCE curriculum. He expressed his concern regarding senior teachers who teach children in the way they were taught by their teachers, and this is no longer appropriate with the present millennial children.

"... Sometimes the senior teacher...She teaches...probably based on her experience only... What she learned in teacher training college, 10 or 15 years ago ... Now that we're in the 21st century... children are different nowadays, smarter ... sometimes they are more efficient than a teacher in terms of searching for information."

[ID/EDU/011]

The respondent explained further that some senior teachers only attended some formal training organized by the Ministry or short courses organized by their schools (for private centres). They are very experienced in terms of their service, however very few of them had a proper certification of ECCE qualification.

Competency

Educationist also perceived ECCE teachers need to be able to plan more real and active learning experiences, tailored to children's nature. They seemed to be concerned about how teachers do not seem to apply *learning by playing*; and the lack of exploration and experimentation in children learning activities.

“Ok ... Curriculum is play-based teachers should be playing her role as a scaffolder ... she may be planning... for a water play... teachers may arrange for them to play with things that can soak water, and things that do not soak water... Playing is not just playing per say... we want kids to experiment, ... to explore...so teacher has to plan for that learning environment.”

[ID/EDU/009]

Another respondent was particularly concerned about the teachers' lack of knowledge and efforts in promoting children's science process skills.

“There's also a concern about science process skills you know... that is not actually done.”

[ID/EDU/001]

His concern was echoed by another respondent as below:

“Science is that stuff, which I said it's a bit difficult to teach if there's no module... I once asked the teacher, what is 'science process skills' and then he asked me back! Haha...”

[ID/EDU/011]

“The teacher needs to know children development. For certain age group, the milestones, what can a child achieve, teachers should master certain pedagogy, as well as theories... as I said earlier, ... the Vygotsy's scaffolding theory, right?”

[ID/EDU/001]

Respondents posited that teachers should master theories on early childhood education and have appropriate pedagogical skills. They stressed teachers should have adequate children behaviour and time management skills to cater to diverse children's levels of development.

“So sometimes the teacher, does it in general terms. When he does it like that sometimes ... the good ones get tired of the same activities ... The middle ones follow ... the weak ones fail ... Teacher needs to know time management, behaviour management. Time management in the

classroom is very important. This means ... the teacher needs to prepare 3 things. One for the weak group, the average and, the clever ones, for the clever ones the activities must be more advanced."

[ID/EDU/010]

It is also indicated that educationists believe teachers should implement student-centred teaching approaches such as project-based and *learning through playing*. An educationist suggested teachers should try to as much as possible, involve parents and the community in any learning projects since they could be of very useful learning resources for the children.

"But when it comes to implementation... is very teacher-directed. There's no real exploration, discovering. It's just teacher talking, teacher demonstrate everything you know... not much of... Hands on... real active learning. I also think teacher do not really have a good understanding of project-based learning.... I think the emphasis is too much on the product...parental involvement could be beneficial to project-based learning. Parents is part of the community, sometimes they are experts."

[ID/EDU/008]

Other than that, respondents also insisted teachers need to have good proficiency in both Malay and English since the ministry has instructed that lessons should be conducted in both languages for the entire day.

"The teachers don't serve as good role model. In fact, the teacher said they become so awkward... they are supposed to do it 50 - 50. 50% of the instructional time must be in Malay, 50%, in English."

[ID/EDU/009]

Attributes

Educationists seemed to believe teachers need to have specific attributes or qualities in order to teach children with different backgrounds and capabilities. Teachers need to be passionate, professional, and ethical as exemplified in the excerpt below:

"Interest in children, patience, and good professional ethics as a pre-school teacher who cares for the children...the teachers must really have the passion, and high motivation."

[ID/EDU/005]

Another respondent shared her view on the lack of effort from the teachers to be close to the children, and she voiced her concerns as follows:

“So... the possibility for a child to get personal attention from a teacher is nil. When a teacher sits next to a child, the child would say, 'hey, look who's sitting beside me! They like it, you know. The child feels... the teacher really cares...however I notice, most teachers are always standing at the front of the class.”

[ID/EDU/001]

Learning Environment

Educationists insisted children should have enough space to walk around, play, sing, or dance, and do their group activities such as playing with water and sand. The excerpt below is an example of what should be a good learning environment for children, from the educationist's point of view.

“... so...that's what we're asking for in terms of the learning environment... a big tent to cater to the big groups... space for kids to play. ... blocks, puzzles, sand play area... With nature, sand is also therapeutic...they also need an area for water play... you know, very much loved by children ...,a place where children can climb, crawl, enter a tunnel, run, ride their bikes, balance their body... for physical development.”

[ID/EDU/009]

Educationists insisted that ECCE centres should be open to all. All community members should have access to any ECCE centres and centres could also serve as community centres. This is what is suggested by a respondent as stated below.

“...our centres are like that, its gated and closed most of the time ...because we do not want anybody to come in...there was kidnapping and so on ...for overseas centres, parents could come anytime...they provide place for parents to pursue second degree...third degree...they do open learning system...they even have teen counselling in some centres... Parental counselling... something like that...but we don't have it here.”

[ID/EDU/006]

Discussion

Philosophy and core principles

Basically, educationists expressed that current Malaysian ECCE curriculum is aligned with the universal principals of early childhood which upholds *children is the nation*. In Malaysia, babies up until 4 years old are cared for in TASKA (*Taman Asuhan Kanak-kanak*) whereas 4 until 5-year-old children are taught in TADIKA (*Taman Didikan Kanak-kanak*). The segregation of these two schools is purposely done to ensure the curriculum fits children's development level. Since Malaysian schools normally comprise of various races, teachers should also consider the cultural contexts of each child since children obtained their early education from their family, which might be different between from one child to another. Hence, there is a need to inculcate CAP at a young age to nurture racial harmonisation.

The first emerging theme derived from the interview on the ECCE curriculum is that the curriculum is perceived as a holistic curriculum which is aimed to produce a balanced child in terms of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development of children. Our findings are consistent with Wood and Hedges (2016) which highlighted that the ECCE curriculum should be designed based on what would be appropriate for children. The contents come from various disciplines such as literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, health, and physical education, and arts (Wood & Hedges, 2016). A holistic view means that we are interested in developing a whole person levels of physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual capacity, bearing in mind that human beings are multi-dimensional. The early years is in developmental stage, and thus holistic approach helps in motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional, and spiritual development of a child.

Curriculum content

Educationists perceived the ECCE curriculum content consists of four main domains: (i) cognitive, (ii) socio-emotion (iii) physical and (iv) language development, which aligns with the Standard National Pre-school Curriculum 2017 (Ministry of Education (MOE),

2016). All respondents seemed to show awareness on cognitive, socio-emotion, language, and physical domains in the content of the curriculum, and their perspective reflect the six major thrusts in Malaysian ECCE curriculum (i.e. language and communication; moral and spiritual; science and technology; humanity; socio-emotional development and, physical and esthetical development (MOE, 2016). The *KSPK* and *PERMATA* curriculum emphasizes children's development in physical, emotional, spiritual, personality, and intellectual (*Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum* (CDD, 2016). All learning domains are integrated across the learning activity which were planned according to children's learning disposition.

At the preschool stage, children's phonological awareness increases rapidly as children begin to identify sounds of the word and to describe the phonemes within a given word. Combining phonological awareness concepts with letter knowledge may also be more efficient than teaching these skills separately (Skibbe et al., 2016). The National Pre-school curriculum (*KSPK*) emphasize children's mastery of four major languages: Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil. It is the national aspiration children could communicate with all races and being multi-lingual may help one to be an efficient global player. Hence, respondents' concern about enhancing children's language proficiency in English may have some grounds.

On the other hand, some educationists insisted on the introduction of sexual education to ensure that children know if they are being sexually abused and appropriate ways of communicating with people of different gender including their family members. Physical development emphasised in the Malaysian ECCE curriculum was designed to provide children with motor skills and physical activities (MOE, 2016). The curriculum does not include sex education, and this is quite consistent with almost all early childhood education programs all over the world. None seems to include sex education, but many do include contents on reproductive education (Grammatikopoulos et al. 2012; Sutterby, 2009). Breuner and Mattson (2016) however stated that sexuality education has been shown to help reduce the risks of adolescent pregnancy, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections for children. In the Malaysian context, the introduction of sexual education should be handled cautiously so it would not be misunderstood by parents and the community in general. It could be embedded in the physical domain of the curriculum content since the physical

domain already included topics on reproductive education.

Another content of ECCE curriculum which Malaysian educationists deemed important to be included in the curriculum is road safety. In Malaysia, a lot of concern is directed towards road accident statistics which rises alarmingly especially during the festive breaks. Statistics of road accidents in Malaysia has been showing an increasing trend every year; with the total number of road crashes increased from 397330 in 2009 to a staggering number of 548598 in 2019. The total road deaths reported in 2009 is 6745, increasing to 7152 in 2019 (Naim, 2020). Thus, in primary and secondary school education, teachers are urged to stress on road safety to the children. The Road Safety Department is expanding its Road Safety Education Module (RSEM) to include pre-school children (MOE, 2019). The module, which is currently being taught to primary school pupils, will be updated to make it more interesting and interactive.

This finding seemed to be supported by Malan et al. (2016) which deduced road safety education is a process which starts during children's early development and should continue as they develop into adult road users. The content and delivery of road safety education and training modules must be designed to appeal to the young. Hence, the Malaysian educationists' call for the inclusion of road safety in the Malaysian ECCE curriculum seemed to be justified.

Teachers' Qualification, Attributes & Competency

All respondents posited that teachers play an important role in implementing the ECCE curriculum. Analysis of the interviews revealed three dimensions of early childhood teachers that were perceived as crucial to ensure smooth implementation of the Malaysian ECCE curriculum; (i) Qualifications (ii) Attributes and (iii) Competency. Educationists agreed that in order to ensure that teachers are equipped with required pedagogical knowledge, every teacher needs to have an appropriate early childhood teaching certification. Subadrah and Sopia (2017) reported indicated in their study that ECCE teachers' professional qualifications have a significant effect on their understanding of the ECCE training. The results showed ECCE teachers with higher professional qualifications have better perceptions of the quality of ECCE training compared with their counterparts

with lower professional qualifications.

Children should be taught according to their individual development progress and they need to be assessed the same way. ECCE teachers need to be able to plan more real and active learning experiences, tailored to the nature of children. Educationists seemed to be concerned on how teachers do not tend to embed learning in playing, as well as on the lack of exploration and experimentation in children learning activities.

Teachers must respond to every child whenever they need it. However, in regular practice, most of the time teachers failed to do this (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013). Hollingsworth and Winter (2013) also stressed that teachers should use general instructional practices with the whole class such as telling stories or playing games with the aim to teach social skills. Thus, teachers' pedagogical skills are important to plan learning activities that stimulate children's thinking skills and creativity.

Educationists insist that teachers should implement child-centred teaching approaches and involve parents and the community in learning projects, since they could be of very useful learning resources for the children. Educationists also posited that teachers need to have good proficiency in both Malay and English to conduct bilingual classroom instruction effectively.

One study in Finland (Heikka et al., 2018) suggested that ECC teachers' leadership was perceived as a responsibility of ECC pedagogy. Specifically, the enactment of teachers' leadership at the centre level included sharing pedagogical leadership. Another group of researchers (Papadopoulou et al., 2014) reported that although their results showed that educators acknowledged the significance of social and emotional competencies for children's learning and well-being, they did not consistently demonstrate the practices which promote such skills.

It could be seen that teachers need to be professional, committed, and passionate about teaching young children. It is a tough call for teachers, and only those with genuine passion and love for children will be able to pull this through.

Learning Environment

Educationists suggest that learning environment in childcare centres should be designed

for children to develop their cognitive, socio-emotion, and physical development. With good facilities, a competent teacher in-house, and an easy access to nature, children would be able to develop holistically. Respondents emphasized the importance of developing children's fine and gross motor skills in classroom activities. It is indicated that children should be allowed to run, fall, and run again, get dirty and clumsy in their learning activities. Children should not be instructed to just sit and keep quiet in a classroom. Children should be given the opportunity to play and that *learning by playing* should be adopted as one of the main teaching strategies for children. Educationists also insisted that every childcare centre should provide a conducive learning environment to stimulate children's thinking skills and creativity.

Concerns on conducive learning environment for ECCE is supported by many in the literature. Grammatikopoulos et al. (2012) reported that children developed healthy habits through their participation in play experiences. Their program concluded that children's attitudes toward a healthy lifestyle could be enhanced positively in a carefully organized physical education program.

Canning (2010) found similar conclusion in a study of how children responded to the use of open-ended resources and materials in the learning environment. Canning's analysis showed that children found ways to fulfil their curiosity through their motivations to play. Teachers could easily facilitate play in content-rich environments because children are already very eager to interact with their surroundings.

In a nutshell, the Malaysian ECCE curriculum is perceived to uphold holistic child development as the core principle. These findings support studies that reported child self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-reliance, are important (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013). Studies also revealed peer interactions provide children with emotional support and assist children to develop social skills that provide children with successful adjustment to the childcare environment (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013). These skills are often considered even more important than early math or literacy skills (Kowalski et al., 2001).

Conclusion

The study revealed that sexual education and road safety are suggested to be added into

the curriculum and that teachers' competency is the most dominant ensuring factor of the implementation of the ECCE curriculum. Malaysian ECCE documented that curriculum today reflects the holistic philosophy. However, the implementation of the curriculum needs qualified and competent teachers to implement the curriculum effectively, and therefore the emphasis on positive teacher-child interactions, conducive learning environment, and developmentally appropriate learning activities are crucial to producing children who are considered as the *PERMATA* (gem) of the nation.

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