

Educationists' Voice on Quality Early Childhood Care and Education in Malaysia

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This study is to explore the educationists' voice on the quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scale. **Methodology:** In depth semi-structured interview was employed as the main data gathering method. Purposive sampling was involved in this study in which three educationists were selected based on their expertise in ECCE. **Main Findings:** The themes emerged are characteristics of quality teachers, both the cooperation and involvement of parents, the continuity of the development of children, continuity of the children's development, solidification of professional development, a dynamic and conducive environment, a sustainable management system, and collaboration between agencies and communities. **Applications of this study:** These themes can be examined as essential elements in the development of a quality framework of ECCE in Malaysia as well as other countries. **Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study confirmed that the elements are based on Malaysian ECCE context and relevant according to the existing ECCE practices.

Key words: *Quality of Early Childhood Care; Education; Quality Framework; Qualitative Approach.*



Introduction

The provision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) should extend from the accessibility of quality ECCE to its sustained development. This has been highlighted as one of the essential entry points among the 13 Entry Points Projects (EPP) under the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA). While having access to ECCE is an urgent need of some two million pre-school children, ensuring the quality of the care and education industry seems equally pressing. This monitoring should involve long-term, multi-prong research and development of quality ECCE that focuses not only on the provision of ECCE services but its educational, social and economic returns.

The current state of ECCE is at a crossroad. At the national level, ECCE-NKEA is a policy that transcends the early care-education provision across multi sectors from urban through rural to the interior, with the annual national budget even offering incentives to manufacturers and corporations to have workplace childcare facilities. Research findings carried out by UNICEF as early as the 1970s have shown that providing quality child care services will increase productivity through a reduction in absenteeism, parental peace of mind, lower or distress and enhance family bonding, which will contribute to the increment of Gross National Income (GNI) of 2 billion by 2020 under EPPI. The development, implementation and follow-up of the national pre-school curriculum (NPCS) for the four to six (4-6) and PERMATA for the under-four (0-3) year old children reflect the developmental breadth that ECCE has reached and progressed in the last one decade.

The Ministry of Education hopes to improve the quality of preschools through the National Pre-School Quality Standard (SKPK), which serves as a self-assessment tool launched in 2013 to measure quality. He said 70% of the 5,540 kindergartens had surpassed the minimum standard, while at least 21% are still not meeting the standard (Menon, 2017). As for the Child care, PERMATA developed the quality assurance tool which is called as PERMATA Q. Among the main objectives of PERMATA Q is to reinforce the management's and child care educator's understanding of the importance of maintaining the quality of child care and education services.

The Study

In any existing research study and development of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE), universally accepted qualities of ECCE are not necessarily deemed high quality practice for all countries and cultures. Furthermore, researchers are still debating the concept of "quality" in ECCE. In fact, to assess the quality of ECCE provision, researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders involved in the design, assessment and funding of ECCE schemes need to first agree on what constitutes good quality – and how to assess it.



Views on what constitutes quality in the context of ECCE provision depends on several aspects, such as a country's socio-economic context and widely-held views and beliefs, as well as the needs, roles and motivations of the different stakeholders involved in defining and assessing ECCE provision (Litjens & Taguma 2010).

Many families have no quality ECCE options in their local communities. The positive effects from high-quality programs and the negative effects from poor-quality programs are magnified in children from disadvantaged situations or with special needs, and yet, these children are least likely to have access to quality early education and child care.

To date, there is a scarcity of studies that explore and examine high quality of ECCE from the experts' view focusing on Malaysia context. According to a model proposed by Katz 1995, summarised in Harrist, Thomson, Norris, 2007), the following perspectives should be examined when determining the quality of early childhood childcare:

- The perspective of a researcher (the top-down approach)
- The perspective of parents, social service professionals and policymakers (outside-in)
- The perspective of caregivers and directors (inside-out)
- The perspective of a child (bottom-up).

Therefore, this study by exploring the educationists' views on what and how to attain quality for Malaysian' ECCE. These views are important as they are discussed in the light of government policies and the current scenario as well as relevant research.

Literature Review

In exploring the educationists' voice on the quality of ECCE, it is seen that such voice is multifocal: from going back to the core definition of 'quality' to the practical tools to enhance it.

Standardising the Meaning of 'Quality' in Policy and Practice

Focusing on the term 'quality', Elwick, Osgood, Robertson, Sakr and Wilson (2018) highlights how the use of the term can be problematic due to the lack of standardisation in its definition. Their paper is critical of the policy discourse in pursuing quality in early years education especially since there is a disconnection between policy and practice with regards to how 'quality' is measured and understood. Focusing on England, discourse on a few key government documents alongside a series of interviews held with early years stakeholders being analysed. This was done to help with the identification of issues that will resonate and provide a source of information to the crucially-needed debates on the very meaning of



‘quality’. The result of the research shows that there was considerable uneasiness amongst early years practitioners regarding the current training landscape and qualifications especially due to the lack of proper dialogue with the sector seen in the ‘ideologically-driven’ policy-making

Using Assessment-based Training as a Tool to Enhance the Overall Quality of Care

Moving onto the practical aspect of pursuing ‘quality’, Wilcox-Herzog, McLaren, Ward and Wong (2018) utilises assessment-based training as a tool to determine the practicality and possibility of the enhancement of the overall quality of care in center-based preschools. Six center-based child care programs serving preschool-age children were contacted to recruit participants of the study, which included teachers, teacher aides, program administrators, and the enrolled children. The relevant assessments used according to the subject are as follows: The administration of the assessments was held at two time points which had the provision of individualised targeted training in between. After 7 months of such intervention, it became apparent that at the teacher and child levels, the effect was relatively small when compared to the larger effects seen at the levels of program administration and classroom.

The Competence of Preschool Teachers

Besides the quality of ECCE as a whole, the educationists’ voice is also seen to dissect the specific roles of certain stakeholders in ECCE. In Lillvist, Sandberg, Sheridan & Williams’ study in 2014, the focus is on the teachers whereby their competence is examined with regards to two aspects: the dimensions to it and its development. The dimensions were explored as reported by 810 students who were enrolled in early childhood teacher education at 15 Swedish universities. The table below indicates that the compilation of the students’ definitions of preschool teacher competence can be summarised as follows A general pedagogical competence, A general pedagogical competence, distinct teacher competence, play competence, competence of child perspective and collaborative and social competence: The dimensions shown above are discussed with regards to the content of the early childhood teacher education in Sweden, the curriculum for the preschool and the concept of professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care. Overall, the students’ perception of the concept of the preschool teacher competence and the extent to which this is developed during their course of education varies.

In terms of the development of the competencies during teacher education, several matters were assessed in detail: early childhood teachers' beliefs about the relevance of competencies, their competence-related self-concept and objective measures of knowledge regarding language and language development. This was done by having a sample of 1120 prospective early childhood teachers of different educational tracks in Germany (professional schools and

universities in which half were assessed at the beginning of pre-service teacher education and another half assessed at the end. Descriptive analyses give insight into perceived relevance and competence-related self-concepts in various domains and language-related knowledge at the beginning and the end of teacher education. Meanwhile, multilevel analyses show that there exist differences in subjective and objective competence-faceted between beginners and graduates as well as between students of different educational tracks. The discussion also extends to the implications for early childhood teacher education.

The Role of Parents

Moving onto another important set of stakeholders in ECCE, i.e. the parents, two aspects were discussed: the partnership between parents and educators and family engagement in schools.

The first aspect is presented by Fenech, Salamon & Stratigos(2019) in which they call for a broader construction of educator-parent partnerships regardless of the value of parent engagement for children's learning, development and wellbeing. Focusing on the issue in the context of marketised provisioning in which parents generally operate as uninformed consumers, the paper proposes a positioning of parent engagement that builds parents' understandings about quality ECCE and early learning and development, and which operates from a strengths-based platform. In an Australian study, such a positioning from the perspective of five centre directors emphasises the challenges involved, with participants exercising different degrees of intentionality. Those who strongly intended to actively build parents' understandings showed a professionalism that viewed parents from a strengths-based perspective, and strategically used time with parents and educators to undertake this work as part of their daily practice. Contrastingly, the less intentional participants appeared to comply with a marketised framing of parents as consumers, whose real or perceived needs took priority.

The second aspect pertaining to the role of parents in enhancing the quality of ECCE is discussed by Prieto (2018). Acknowledging that parenting is one of the primary influences on children's development and family engagement is crucial in children's educational success, a descriptive analysis of ECCE tutors' perspectives (N = 120) about family engagement across schools in Spain is presented. Data were obtained from the Spanish National Education Council (the Consejo Escolar del Estado) to assess parental school involvement in a total of 63 ECCE centres. From the findings, it is suggested that early childhood tutors play a key role in supporting active school involvement of parents that enhance the quality of ECCE programmes. The tutors' perspective of parental involvement is also seen to be positive.



The Relationship between the Quality of Home-learning Environment and the Quality of Child Care

The educationists' voice regarding the quality of ECCE extends to the quality of the home-learning environment as it is seen that there is a relationship between the two. This is shown in a study conducted by Kuger, Marcus and Spiess (2019). In this study, how both of the environments are interrelated is explored as the quality of both fosters children's development. Utilising abundant data from NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, it is shown that even after taking into account the lagged dependent variable and a rich set of control variables, ECCE quality has an association with the home learning environment.

Research Methodology

Qualitative case studies can be characterised as being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). Particularistic means that case studies focus on a particular programme, event, or phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This specificity of focus makes it an especially good design for the educationists to share their insights on components of quality ensuring this quality in early childhood education. Descriptive means that the end product of a case study is rich, 'thick' description of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009).

Participants and Data Collection Methods

The samples for the study were three educationists who have been involved in early childhood education at tertiary level in Malaysia. The educationists were the experts in the field as they have been commonly consulted on the development of curriculum as well as issues pertaining to early childhood. Conducting expert interviews can shorten time-consuming data gathering processes, particularly if the experts are seen as "crystallisation points" for practical insider knowledge (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). This type of research involves the open nature of questions that allows the expert to tell their point of view on the issue under study (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015).

The in-depth interviews were conducted with the educationists and each interview session lasted between one to two hours. The in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to capture rich, descriptive data (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009) about the perspectives of the educationists on the quality ECCE in Malaysia.



Results of Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data deductively. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. The themes that emerge from the analysis were useful in understanding the educationists' views on what entails the quality of early childhood education.

Characteristics of Quality Teachers

Early childhood teachers have particularly challenging professional responsibilities for which they must be carefully prepared. As they educate, nurture, and advocate for young children, high quality early childhood teachers address the needs of a diverse range of learners from birth through age 8, whose early care and education experiences take place within a wide array of settings and programs (Susan L. Recchia, Lisa Beck, Ann Esposito & Kate Tarrant, 2009).

Attributes and Personalities

The educationists highlighted that both attributes and personalities play significant roles in determining the quality of teachers....teachers who have passion, motivation, are actively interested in children, have patience, adhere to the ethics of professionalism as a preschool teacher...

Competencies

Among the competencies deemed important for quality, early childhood teachers are English proficiency, skills on developing high order thinking skills among children and skills on nurturing development.... if they cannot have old preschool teacher with English, they must have a special English trained a teacher who has the Early Childhood Education [background] as well as English proficiency even for preschool, and now we talk high order thinking skills..... how to nurture [child] development ...

Cooperation and Involvement of Parents

Fenech, Salamon & Stratigos (2019) highlighted that educator-parent partnerships have long been constructed in a discourse of improving outcomes for children.



Contribution of Expertise, Resources, Finances and Time

While efforts are being made by schools to involve parents in co-curricular activities, the educationists illustrate how such involvement is still lacking.... Co-curricular activities, involving children, are made compulsory for them. Their involvement is very little unless the school makes extra effort regarding this.’

Two-Way Communication (The Action of Teachers and Parents)

The educationists emphasise the role of the school in initiating the two-way communication between parents and teachers. They also highlight how it is essential for both parents and teachers to maintain such a relationship.

‘It starts with our school. Our school itself does not welcome parents to the school. ... this makes me concerned since I think of the children as my own. I am looking after the children of the parents; thus, I want to talk to them about their children and I want to listen to them talking about their children. That kind of relationship and understanding must exist between parents and teachers.’

Continuity of the Children’s Development Pedagogical Surrounding

The educationists recommend that the management committee of the school should have some level of understanding concerning early childhood to ease and facilitate the teachers in ensuring the holistic development of the children.

‘The school putting up children’s work is a way of acknowledging [the children]. Plus, these works can be used as a point of reference during conversations, especially during circle times. You could also ask and get the children to talk about them as a reflection of their experiences. That is also a learning resource.’

Some management staff undermine the necessity of play-based activities. I recommend that such committee must be able to appreciate and understand early childhood education.... such education should not just focus on English while neglecting the social and emotional development of the children. ... without capturing the interest of the children and building their confidence, it will be difficult for them to have a positive attitude towards the language.’



The Guidance of Parents at Home

The educationists highlight the importance of the involvement of parents in guiding the children, especially with regards to the aims of the curriculum of PERMATA.

‘, the original philosophy, i.e. the principle guideline, of the curriculum of PERMATA is to get parents to be involved. Children belong to their community and their parents. So, we want parents to understand what the curriculum of PERMATA is... and for the practice to continue at home.’

Suitability of Evaluation

According to the educationists, concerns arise as to whether the evaluations are authentic and appropriate in terms of the development of children.

‘Evaluations must be authentic, i.e. it can be used by both parents and teachers.... Even some teachers are finding it hard to conduct an authentic assessment. Authentic assessments mostly rely upon the market so some parts of it might not be developmentally appropriate e.g. in LINUS....When the children sit for LINUS, we find that quite a number of them do not achieve the minimum standard especially in schools situated in rural areas.’

Solidification of Professional Development

Campbell-Barr (2017) argued that the ECCE workforce as central to quality. In many respects, this seems logical, as those who work within ECCE services will, of course, influence the quality of provision, as they determine much of what happens within the setting (interacting with children, the pedagogical practice, the resources, etc.).

Positioning Scheme

The educationists mark the difference in the positioning scheme of teachers when the public and private sectors are compared against each other.

‘The career path of a teacher in the ministry [i.e. the public sector] is as per usual (using the grading system, e.g. DG44, 48). Such is not the case in the private sector: it depends on the decisions and stability of the companies.’



Variety of Training and Courses

The updating and upgrading of knowledge with regards to early childhood education among teachers are deemed crucial by the educationists. Such a process should take place using means such as courses, training and modules. The current system of required courses among preschool and childcare teachers is briefly talked about.

‘Despite everything, the upgrading and polishing of teachers has to be done. Perhaps there is an issue with the budget now, but the teachers must be trained via courses etc. as the knowledge has to be upgraded.

... Although simply the experience of being a teacher for 4 years can become an important learning resource, training has to go on, e.g. continuous preparation development (CPD), service training, pedagogy. Such measures are needed to help the teachers have a deep understanding. Not just how, but why you do this. Plus, we talk about school as a learning community.... There is in-house training in which the companies hold internal courses to update and upgrade their knowledge. There are no orders from anyone to ensure such updating.

Quality of Courses and Training

Campbell-Barr (2018) also proposed that ECCE professionalism is a combination of initial training, time in practice and continued professional development, and it is not a fixed state. The educationists criticise the attitude of putting importance on financial motives instead of quality in training the teachers.

‘The idea of associating courses with simply making money is wrong since importance should instead be put on the quality of the courses and training.... It is sad when many teachers come to the training but they do not understand what is being taught. We insisted that they have to come for a longer time of training but the organisers’ do not want to. Instead, they want to shorten everything.... PERMATA does some of the training. PERMATA always asks for us to do the training as well. They usually ask for universities instead of agencies as they do not recognise all those agencies. This is because they think of money while handling the training.’

Opportunities and Encouragements to Further Studies

Through voicing out concerns on the limited reading done by the teachers, the educationists call for more opportunities and encouragements for teachers to further their studies.

‘Sometimes, in terms of reading, the teachers are lacking... perhaps it’s the lack of resources for some. So, much of their knowledge is based on their experiences and



general knowledge... and it's limited to that. This is of concern as the knowledge they have mostly source from outdated classes e.g. in college.'

The Monitoring of Educators and Trainee Teachers in the Classroom

The educationists argue that teachers should adopt more open approaches with regards to their classroom to facilitate the monitoring of their class and the exchange of experiences.

'Some teachers are so secretive and private about their classroom, so they do not share about their class with others, and they do not let others in.

... when you share your experience, you go into each others' classrooms, and you see what is happening (not in preschool, but primary and secondary schools). Some are more enlightened with PPD objectives than others.'

A Dynamic and Conducive Environment

A Safe and Conducive Environment

In creating and maintaining a safe and conducive environment in schools, the educationists highlight the dangers teachers might overlook in the classroom. Extending beyond physical proprieties of the classroom, they emphasise the importance of the children's safety from abuse and inappropriate actions.

'Sometimes, the use of teaching tools can be dangerous, and this is sometimes overlooked. For example, the use of metal rulers, the sharp edges of a table, the slippery floor...

Especially with regards to special education, teachers must be able to do two things: to identify abuse whether physical or sexual; and to be able to teach children what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. They should also teach children to voice out when they should.'

Funding for the Sustainability of the Centre

In workings towards the sustainability of public centres, the educationists argue that a policy is needed to get proper funding from the government. They also mark the difference in private centres as they depend on their individual budget and income.

'You must have a policy to get good funding. Actually, we only have the policy of early childhood education but we don't have any policy concerning the implementation of the



PERMATA curriculum. So we don't get money for training, we do get incentives but it's limited to that. Incentives should not just be provided to open the childcare centres, but also to run the centres... to make sure the quality of the program. When we have a policy, then we get a budget for it as the government would have to give us the budget.... Private childcare centres are different as they have followed the budget given. It also depends on the fees they set and get. Some centres put much emphasis on quality.

A Sustainable Management System ***Spreading Information Systematically and Effectively***

The educationists highlight how information has to be spread effectively through a system: consistent and direct.

'Changes in preschool should be informed to those in management and parents consistently rather than once in a while.... indirect communication can lead to leakage of information and consequentially, inaccuracy

The Collaboration between Agencies and Communities ***Contribution of Expertise***

The educationists stress on the importance of networking with experts to expand the potential of activities such as counselling.

'In PanGreen, there are programs like teenage and parental counselling in which the counsellor will come from time to time. They have a schedule where the counsellors from universities come to provide counselling to the young and teenagers. But we don't have that: 1) we don't network with experts. That's why even if there are experts, without inviting them for consultation, such counselling activities won't happen.'

Organising Programs

The educationists suggest the involvement of community such as community service to strengthen the collaboration between agencies and communities.

'Community service. Making murals with children in needy preschools'.

The collaboration between agencies and communities are deemed important in ensuring quality in early childhood education.



Conclusion

A well-established body of research shows that the learning and development of children attending early childhood education and care (ECCE) services is best supported when the quality of those services is high (Taggart, Brenda, Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pamela Sammons, and Iram Siraj, 2015). This study aims to explore educationists' perspectives on quality ECCE in Malaysia. Findings from this study are crucial in determining the aspects that needed in realising quality provision of ECCE in early years settings. While this study is not conclusive in exploring the educationists' perspectives in the Malaysian context, and the findings are not generalisable to other educational settings, it does offer helpful insights for quality ECCE in the complex terrain of contemporary early childhood education.

Limitation

Concerning limitations, time was certainly a limiting factor. The educationists who participated in the study noted that they felt they could have a more in-depth discussion if they were given the focus of the interview beforehand. Another limitation was the small sample size. As there were not many experienced educationists in the field of ECCE, it was difficult to increase the number of participants involved. Finally, this study only sought educationists' views on the quality ECCE in Malaysia. It would also be useful to explore other stakeholders who are involved in ECCE in Malaysia and compare their views on the quality of ECCE in Malaysia.

Study Forward

The wide spectrum of issues covered by the educationists' voice shows that the stakeholders, such as practitioners, teachers, students and children, involved in the pursuit for better quality in ECCE will benefit from having clarity, willingness, comprehensiveness and relevant intervention. A clear and standard definition of 'quality' will help policy-makers connect better to the practitioners. This, in turn, will ease the distress of practitioners which will provide a better environment in ECCE centres: increasing the intentionality of the teachers to enhance the quality of ECCE via partaking in relevant assessments and solidifying their partnership with parents. Besides healthily contributing to the development of the preschool children, an enhancement of the quality of ECCE can be associated with the betterment of the quality of the home-learning environment.



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