

Challenges in Providing Optimal Development for Young Children

Cabaran dalam Penyediaan Perkembangan Optimum Kanak-kanak

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Abstract: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Malaysia, like in many other developing countries, has currently gained more interest and awareness. This is due to the numerous research studies which strengthen the notion that children's early years involve a vital stage for the growth, development and advancement of their actions and behaviour, character and personality, and also their mind and intelligence. Studies have also focused on the idea that early childhood teaching and learning can be enhanced, albeit occurring within culturally, socially and economically sensitive contexts. This paper presents part of a bigger study on ECCE from the perspectives of the owners and managers of selected private kindergartens in Malaysia. Detailed and thorough information of the owners' and managers' personal practice in handling their centres, their methods and techniques of dealing with both children and parents, and their ideas on the issues of ECCE in Malaysia were gained through focus group interviews with 5 participants. Based on the results of the interviews, 'magical expectations from parents' is the most demanding predicament to deal with. The owners also deemed that other dilemma such as 'competent and qualified teacher hunts', 'managerial and organisational responsibilities' and 'staying relevant in the industry' are also the problems they encounter. Regardless of these challenges they are facing, the owners and managers of the ECCE centres continue to be optimistic and positive in the journey they have embarked upon.

Keywords: ECCE; private kindergarten; challenges; owners; managers; Malaysia;

Abstrak: Asuhan dan Pendidikan Awal Kanak-Kanak (ECCE) di Malaysia, seperti di banyak negara membangun yang lain, kini telah mendapat lebih banyak minat dan kesedaran. Ini disebabkan oleh banyak kajian penyelidikan yang mengukuhkan tanggapan bahawa tahun-tahun awal kanak-kanak melibatkan peringkat penting untuk pertumbuhan, perkembangan dan kemajuan tindakan dan tingkah laku, watak dan personaliti mereka, dan juga minda dan kecerdasan mereka. Kajian juga memberi tumpuan kepada idea bahawa pengajaran dan pembelajaran awal kanak-kanak boleh dipertingkatkan, walaupun berlaku dalam konteks budaya, sosial dan ekonomi yang sensitif. Kertas kerja ini membentangkan sebahagian daripada kajian yang lebih besar tentang ECCE dari perspektif pemilik dan pengurus tadika swasta terpilih di Malaysia. Maklumat terperinci dan menyeluruh mengenai amalan peribadi pemilik dan pengurus dalam mengendalikan pusat mereka, kaedah dan teknik mereka berurusan dengan kedua-dua kanak-kanak dan ibu bapa, dan idea mereka mengenai isu ECCE di Malaysia diperoleh melalui temu bual kumpulan fokus dengan 5 peserta. Berdasarkan hasil temu bual, 'jangkaan ajaib daripada ibu bapa' adalah kesusahan yang paling mencabar untuk dihadapi. Pemilik juga menganggap bahawa dilema lain seperti 'pencarian guru yang cekap dan berkecualan', 'tanggungjawab pengurusan dan organisasi' dan 'kekal relevan dalam industri' juga merupakan masalah yang mereka hadapi. Tanpa mengira

cabaran yang mereka hadapi, pemilik dan pengurus pusat ECCE terus optimis dan positif dalam perjalanan yang telah mereka lalui.

Kata kunci: ECCE, tadika persendirian; cabaran; pemilik; pengurus; Malaysia

Introduction

The future of a nation depends on its generation of today's children. They may be doctors, scientists, politicians, teachers, engineers or others—who will bear many kinds of responsibilities and bring the country towards progress and prosperity. Therefore, a first-class education should be made available to our children right from the early phase of life to safeguard their positive well-being and balanced development. In Malaysia too, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has become a central concern to the nation. It has undergone numerous changes to ensure that children are able to get access to excellent education system starting from an early age. One of the efforts taken by the government can be traced from the formulation of the National Child Care Policy and Preliminary Education. Introduced in 2008, the document is a "...comprehensive policy to ensure a holistic development of all children from birth to 4-year-old, which is a solid foundation for the development of children's potentials based on Malaysian standards to the existing National Education Policy" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1).

Examining it at the societal level, a thriving number of preschool business in Malaysia has been detected due to the increased awareness of the importance of ECCE among parents. Apart from government preschools, the number of private preschools has also escalated, as manifested in the 2017 Annual Report by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. It is reported that there are 28,231 private preschools, which is 1.3% higher than public preschools (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 8). This has brought an impact on the enrolment of children, whereby children enrolment has significantly increased by 2% compared to 2016. This figure has also shown that many parents have placed more concerns on their child's early education.

With the added number of both public and private preschools, the issue of quality comes into play, in which places more responsibilities upon the owners of kindergartens. This paper therefore looks at the problems and challenges faced by the owners of preschools, with a guiding research question of 'What are the challenges faced by the kindergarten owners?'

Past Studies

Studies from several countries have evidenced that qualified teachers in early childhood programmes make a substantial difference in providing quality ECCE. Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016) found that in Nigeria, early childhood educators with required professional certificates provide higher quality learning experiences for young learners. In Malaysia, Foong, Veelo, Dhamotharan, and Loh (2018) claimed that there is an urgent need to attend to the expertise of the ECCE educators. The Malaysian private sector ECCE workforce is increasing gradually in size due to demands of some significant development needs (i.e. the child, social, economic and political). Qualified educators were seen to have resulted in greater outcomes for young children. Pakistan is also facing hurdles and issues in ECCE which need urgent attention and solution. Mahek and Shazia (2018) investigated the challenges faced in development of early childhood education in Pakistan. They also found that untrained teachers were one of the challenges. It is therefore recommended the ECE teacher training programme be reorganised and improved in the light of recent needs of society and children.

Reetu, Renu and Adarsh (2017) identified some other major issues and challenges in ECCE in India. The resulting issues and challenges include inadequate teaching and learning facilities, inadequate infrastructure and physical facilities, improper address to key management issues (i.e. lack of job/ refresher trainings, vacant posts) which created dent in the quality of ECCE, lack of developed system of recruiting ECCE teachers who are vibrant, trained and experienced, and lack of parent and community involvement in ECCE programmes. Paseka and Byrne (2019) also discussed on parental involvement in ECCE in their book entitled *Parental Involvement Across European Education Systems*. They claimed that parental demand for voice in education mainly around school choice has increased over the time. Parents in Ireland are seen to have a significant role in challenging the educational ownership and management.

In addition, the curriculum is known as the

'vehicle' to the success of the ECCE implementation in Nigeria (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016). Qin and Mariani (2018) identified the issues encountered in the preschool teaching and learning in actual practice. Therefore, they explored the issues regarding teaching and learning in Malaysian private preschool settings. Open ended interviews and observation were conducted to collect the data. The findings indicated formal preschool environment with excessive emphasis on academic outcomes contradict the national preschool curriculum.

Early Childhood Care and Education (Ecce) in Malaysia

The early education in Malaysia is funded and delivered by several government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but it is not part of the formal and compulsory education system (Ministry of Education, 2005). Government-run non-profit early education programmes are generally located in rural areas and emphasise socio-emotional development, and focus less on academic achievement, whereas non-governmental for-profit preschools are usually established in urban areas, and heavily emphasise the academic aspect (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2000). Public early education programmes are free to parents and are fully funded by the government, whereas private early education programmes charge fees and their administrators are free to choose the curriculum and medium of instruction to be used in their establishments (Rohaty Majzub, 2003). Although guidelines from the Ministry of Education serve as the base for the curriculum of children aged between 4-6 years, there is no specific curriculum guidelines for children under the age of four.

Like other parties involved in the preschool industry around the world, the owners of preschools in Malaysia also face a lot of challenges in order to make sure that they deliver the quality of services they have promised their clients. While the public preschools, which are under the Ministry, have their own sets of challenges, private preschools may have different vision and mission that lead to the different curriculum and activities. Some of the private preschools adapt the existing teaching technique or method from western countries such as Montessori, or develop their own technique or method, with or without employing the national standard curriculum of ECCE. Some private preschools have also adopted Islamic education as the core of their curriculum and academic orientation, and

such inclusion has been supported by leaders such as the then Prime Minister who suggested that Islamic education should be taught in preschool (Bernama, 2018). With all these existing methods and techniques used in preschools, the execution of ECCE in Malaysia has become a concern and debate among the policy makers and state leaders. Suggestions that arise from various parties also create a dilemma for private preschool owners, and the performance of ECCE itself.

Methodology

This paper gives an account on some part of a larger study related to ECCE in Malaysia. It seeks to answer the research question: 'What are the challenges faced by the kindergarten owners?'. The study employed a qualitative research design through the use of focus group interviews with 5 owners (or managers who act as the representatives of the owners) of Islamic-based private kindergartens in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. A focus group interview is used to gather collective or shared insights from a number of individuals ranging from four to twelve participants (Creswell, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). In this study, one session of focus group interview, comprising 5 participants were conducted. There were a few strong considerations that led the researcher to decide on the use of focus group interview.

First and foremost, through a focus group interview, the researchers are presented with the chance to observe a considerable amount of interaction regarding the issue being discussed. This consequently permits a big volume of concentrated data that are directly related to the researchers' focus and interest (Morgan, 1997). Another strong reason was the fact that the interviewees were all private kindergarten owners (or managers), which allowed them to share their personal views in a similar and comparable context. This was a great plus point as focus group interviews would "likely yield the best information ... when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other" (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). In addition, according to Krueger and Casey (2009) and Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), focus groups can set a less intimidating environment for many participants which allows them to discuss their views, ideas and thoughts more freely.

In this study, the researchers went extra mile to make certain that the questions asked to the respondents were worded appropriately, so that the

respondents were not directed to a specific answer. To allow probing, follow-up and clarification (McMillan, 2008), solid, semi-structured questions were used through the different types of questions e.g. introducing questions, indirect and direct questions, structuring and interpreting questions (Kvale, 1996). In keeping with the objective and research question of the study, the researchers also followed the open-ended nature of the questions. As recommended by Creswell (2008), the focus group interview was guided by an interview protocol. Open-ended questions as listed in the interview protocols were raised during the interviews to create room for serendipitous or unanticipated findings.

The random cluster sampling technique was employed because it is the most appropriate sampling type, and best suited to the ECCE and kindergarten contexts. Random cluster sampling involves “the random selection of naturally occurring groups or units (clusters) ... Examples of naturally occurring groups would be universities, schools, school districts, classrooms, city blocks and households” (McMillan, 2008, p. 117). The session was conducted in an informal and relaxed manner. The informants were free to use Malay or English language, provided that they managed to express their viewpoints and opinions. The interview sessions were recorded using voice recorders.

Analyses of the focus group interview data were guided by the research question mentioned earlier. The interview data were transcribed, saved, and labelled which were then reviewed first, to derive an overall sense of the data, and initial findings were jotted down in the form of reflective notes (Creswell, 2013; Ismail Sheikh Ahmad, 2017). The process was an ongoing, iterative, and also a non-linear one. The data reduction technique was employed through the use of the Coding and Theme-Generation templates (Ismail Sheikh Ahmad, 2017). Further, by reading, classifying and interpreting the data, sub-themes and themes were explored and determined (Creswell, 2013). Finally, in representing the data, explanatory interpretations were developed, accompanied by well-supported data. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, some parts of the generated themes were forwarded to two raters who were experts in the area of ECCE. This was to corroborate that the researchers have given deep thought when developing the themes.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the research question: ‘What are the

challenges faced by the kindergarten owners?’, four main themes have been ascertained from the focus group interview, as presented in Figure 1. The discussion of these themes is then put forward separately in different subsections.

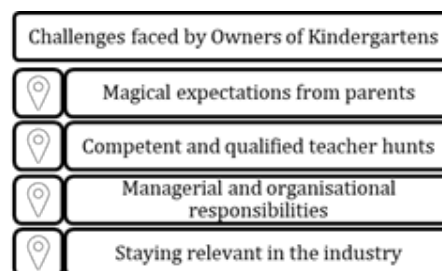


Figure 1: Challenges faced by owners/managers of kindergartens

Magical expectations from parents

The biggest challenge faced by the owners is the fact that parents have set very high expectations upon the centre the moment they choose to enrol their children under the centre’s care, particularly in the aspect of academic. Most parents want their children to be ranked and described as clever, bright and smart. Despite the background of the parents who are mostly professionals and highly educated people, some with the knowledge on multiple intelligences (e.g. logical-mathematical, musical-rhythmic), and many present an awareness that the number of As does not fully determine a child’s future, it is found that emphasis on academic still persists. Parents are hoping for their children to excel at a very young age. All the participants collectively agreed that managing parents’ expectations is not an easy task, as found in the following excerpts:

- “Many parents expect their kids to know ‘everything’ the moment they enrol to our school” (C2).
- “Yes, it’s like we have a magic wand in our hands! Parents assume their children will become a ‘star’ once they enter the school” (C4).

However, they will arrange parents-teachers day to discuss and communicate with the parents so that a mutual agreement could be achieved. The owners believe that they need to collaborate and cooperate with parents because taking care of children is a shared responsibility, not a segregated affair. Some centres

have held courses for parents to inculcate awareness regarding the shared responsibilities in raising a child. They also often communicate with the parents either through the available channels (e.g. Whatsapp application, telephone calls) or through the 'communication book' prepared as a medium of interaction between parents and teachers for some centres.

Existing studies emphasising kindergartens also equated increasing demands by parents with kindergartens. Studies, for instance, by Rahmatullah, Md Yassin, and Omar (2020), show that stark differences between kindergarten operators and demands do not necessarily exist in a linear fashion. Specifically, the demands emphasised by parents typically revolve around privileging curriculum and non-curriculum. Child centres do not adequately fit children; kindergartens should "go beyond the typical painting of murals or practical training engagements" and parents' children should be nurtured at all levels, particularly, "local cultural, social, sports and environmental amenities or engaging in local issues" (p.8). Syed Chear, Hamzah, Mohd Yusof, & Nordin (2021) posit demands by parents in the context of organising and maintaining the pristine conditions of kindergartens and play areas. The play areas and kindergartens, to some parents, do not fit parents' expectations. Across the review of literature, studies continue to generate debates on kindergartens and dramatic surge in demands by parents.

Competent and Qualified Teacher Hunts

One more challenging task that the owners of kindergartens are facing is on finding proficient and qualified teachers. Certified teachers are one of the important elements in ECCE (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Dhamotharan, & Loh, 2018; Mahek & Shazia, 2018). According to the owners and managers, the searches on the desired candidates of teachers need to be conducted with care. Majority of the centres take into consideration candidates with certificates such as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education. Some other centres accept Diploma level and above. In addition to academic qualifications, they also hunt for candidates with teaching experience, and those who are affectionate towards children. They usually need to deal with candidates who think that being a kindergarten teacher is just suitable as a temporary job, while waiting for other more 'promising' offers. Due to this, the kindergartens always face a high turnover rate. This has made it difficult for the owners and managers to plan

for their centres, and also to invest in proper training for their teachers.

- "We always face the problem of teachers coming in and out. Not many would stay with us for long, it's like they feel teaching at 'kindy' as a temporary job" (C1).
- "It's difficult for us – many times we have sent the teachers for training – but then they quit. This affects our planning a lot" (C5)

In addition, they also use social media platform (i.e. Facebook) as a background check of the teachers. The candidates' social circle is found to be one of the ways to ensure they are hiring the desired personnel--one who love children, and suits the character of a pre-school teacher. During the interview sessions, some of the owners and managers also evaluate the candidates' abilities in reciting the Quran as they are Islamic-based centres where parents expect the Islamic teachings to be relayed to their children.

- "We run a background check of the candidates before calling them for interviews, usually through checking the Facebook ... at least we get some general picture of who they are. This matters to us because we are an Islamic preschool, automatically people will have some kind of expectations on our teachers" (C2)

The ability to speak Arabic fluently with proper dictation is another important ability that owners and managers focuses on. One particular owner would refuse to hire a candidate with an excellent academic background if the person's pronunciation of the Arabic language is inaccurate. Even if the centre is in dire need of a good number of Arabic teachers, the owner would rather allocate some time to teach the children at the centre himself rather than hiring an incompetent teacher. While this might seem strict, this strategy essentially helps the owner to maintain the quality of education and teachers at the centre which leads to better intake.

- "For my school, we have additional basic Arabic subject. I am very particular about choosing my teachers, especially for Arabic because that is our specialty – not many preschools have Arabic subject in their timetable. To make sure the quality, I will make sure the teacher we hire achieves a certain standard" (C5)

It is theoretically acknowledged that kindergartens continue to emphasise kindergarten

education certification. Existing studies, for instance, reveal that “professional development gave commendable knowledge on preschool curriculum to gain better preschool curriculum knowledge, while experience as a support for professional qualifications during early service years” (Masnan et al., 2021, p.132). Chun and Gentile (2020) state that “benchmarking professional development and certification of kindergarten teachers” may increase investments in educational inputs (p.2). Recommendations concerning upgrading professional knowledge and certification illustrated the priorities on socio-economic standpoints. Therefore, a surge in demands on highly qualified teachers remain the risks and opportunities for kindergarten operators.

Managerial and Organisational Responsibilities

The other anticipated but unavoidable problem is regarding school management matters. All the owners or managers involved in this study shared their experiences in handling the administrative matters of their centres, as most of them are the pioneers, if not the owners themselves. They recalled that it was not an easy feat, having to adhere to all the requirements for setting up a kindergarten, especially a privately-owned one. These include the registration affairs, kindergarten name search, the location and the premise, the board of governors, the curriculum which is to follow the National Preschool Standard Curriculum or Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK), the fees and the principal and teachers. Nevertheless, as all of them established the centres out of interest towards children, and because they had their own children to look after during the course of setting up the centres, they have managed to overcome the obstacles and dilemma, and have stayed in the ECCE line in the continuum of between 3 to 12 years of operation.

- “Opening a kindergarten is definitely not easy, especially a private one” (C1).
- “What people see is THE school building – ready to go to – but behind the scene, there are so many things to consider ... registration, school name, place, fees, curriculum, teachers and many others ...” (C4).
- “Whatever it takes, I proceed out of love towards children ...” (C3).

The finding is in line with previous studies which found that kindergarten businesses faced challenges such as location problem (Che Omar, 2016), financial management (Kenayathulla & Jupri, 2017),

branding of school name (Dahari & Ya, 2011), and also equipment and manpower issues (Reetu, Renu & Adarsh, 2017; Syed Chear, Hamzah, Mohd. Yusof & Nordin, 2021). This has shown that management and organisational issues can be considered as a shared and familiar challenge among kindergarten owners.

Staying Relevant In The Industry

Amid the growing and burgeoning business of preschool centres due to the demand by parents who are seeking good ECCE for their children, it is not easy to stay relevant in the industry. Majority of the interviewed participants declared that their centres are selected by parents because they offer a package of academic coupled with the teaching of Al-Quran. This indicates that the Islamic elements are gaining much popularity and recognition among Muslim parents who believe that religion must be inculcated at a very young age. One centre focuses on having the Arabic language as the medium of instruction, and by offering this additional value-added element, the centre maintains its relevance and significance.

- “... Islamic-based preschools are much sought-after by parents ...” (C3).
- “One of our specialty is Arabic. Parents nowadays are searching for something towards Islamic ...” (C5).

One of the pull factors for parents to choose a kindergarten is when the centre is capable of equipping the children with the mastery of at least the basics of Arabic language. For example, simple recitation of du’a (prayers) or basic greetings in Arabic is something that parents value. Another example is when their children are able to correct their parents’ pronunciation of the du’a. These are among the results that parents hope for, and positive spread from word of mouth for such achievement becomes an indirect promotional or marketing tool for the centres. Nevertheless, the drawback of such strategy is that, some parents expect their children to be able to speak Arabic straight away once enrolled to the centre without taking into consideration the different learning speed and comprehension level of their children.

Another centre, which uses English as its medium of instructions, asserts that the trusted and quality ECCE education that the centre brings are the main attractions why parents have chosen their centre. The centre, which is one of the branches of a well-known kindergarten chain in Malaysia, will have regular book upgrades, and the company also has their own Research and Development (R&D) team.

- “For our centre, having English as the main language is what parents love most ...” (C1).

In addition to that, logistics reason is another factor that parents focus on. Many of the centres provide a ‘transit’ service. This means that parents can leave their children not only for the schooling session, but also during the waiting time for the parents to come and fetch them after work. This service increases the possibility of parents to choose certain centres over the others which do not offer this kind of provision.

- “... providing transit service helps the parents a lot too” (C2).
- “Oh yes, we get many requests from parents to provide transit services too” (C1).
- “We have transit service for parents who are working” (C5).

All the centres also mentioned that the use of IT is also another factor that attracts parents to enrol their children into their institutions as mentioned in previous studies. Other than that, teachers’ creativity, basic routine culture such as friendly good morning and goodbye wishes among friends and teachers and flexibility are some other elements mentioned by the owners or managers which parents find it worthwhile.

- “We also integrate some use of technology into our lessons which the children love so much” (C4).
- “... our teachers are sent for training, so they handle the children so well” (C1).
- “In our centre, we also teach the children simple but meaningful gestures like saying ‘Assalamualaikum’, ‘hi’, ‘bye’ in Malay, English, Arabic ... so parents are impressed!” (C3).

The findings of the current study are supported by the results from a previous study that kindergarten facility, kindergarten’s programme, and teacher characteristics have a significant relationship. Meanwhile, kindergarten teachers’ characteristics were found to have a very strong influence on Muslim parents’ satisfaction towards their choice of kindergarten (Siti Nazeira, Jati Kasuma, Irwan, 2017). Another study found that the main considerations parents make in choosing preschool education are the quality of services offered to their children, the type of programme services offered, medium of instruction, children’s safety, classroom size, location, tuition fees, and teacher skills and knowledge (Ikhsan, 2018).

The four themes presented are identified as the main challenges for owners who are handling private

Islamic-based preschools in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. As mentioned before, some of these challenges are in line with what was found in other studies or other countries i.e. parental involvement (Paseka & Byme, 2019), teacher qualification and certification (Akinrotimi & Olowe, 2016; Dhamotharan, & Loh, 2018; Mahek & Shazia, 2018) and management issues (Reetu, Renu & Adarsh, 2017), whereas some challenges are unique to this study especially those challenges which are related to Islamic, Arabic and Quranic teachings.

Conclusion/Implication of Study Guidelines

Based on this study, it is gathered that there are a range of issues brought up by private Islamic-based preschool owners in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Parents’ towering hopes towards their children’s education is especially difficult to always be realised by preschool owners or managers. Thus, preschool owners or managers make every effort to diversify their teaching and learning methods to create the optimal learning effect to the students. At the same time, preschool owners or managers are also faced with challenges in management. The shortage of quality staff and teachers affects their preschool planning and activities as well as the students’ self-development in preschool. In fact, the positive competition between preschools requires the owners to think of their ability to provide added value or uniqueness to students. This is important to ensure they remain relevant in the ECCE industry.

This study provides information on how the owners of private Islamic-based preschools operate their centres, and the challenges they need to go through in ensuring the success of their schools. Their determination to ensure that more children in Malaysia receive early education in formal schools should be applauded and acknowledged. In addition, the preschool owners need to address the issues involving human resources and the quality of education to achieve the standards set by the National Education Policy. Relevant parties especially the government may provide assistance especially in the area of ECCE training so that the owners and managers can overcome the challenges and operate better centres. Finally, further studies on each set of the challenges discovered in this study should be conducted to fill the existing gap.

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