

Managing Early Childhood Care and Education: A Comparison of Government and Private Childcare Centres in Malaysia

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Abstract

Qualified and competent educators in early childhood centres will help to produce better quality early childhood care and education. The Malaysian government places a strong emphasis in this area for both government and private childcare centres. This paper aims to understand and compare the workforce and management of early childhood care and education centres in Malaysia. A quantitative research was conducted for this study. A sample of 3,519 respondents consisting of operators, supervisors, principals, childcare providers and teachers were involved in this study using a purposive proportionate random sampling. The sample was stratified by zone i.e. northern, southern, central, east coast and west coast of peninsular Malaysia as well as East-Malaysia. The findings of the study indicated that the workforce in the government childcare centre had more staff with educational and professional qualification as well as experience. The study also found significant differences in the management of the private and government centres. This present study would benefit policymakers and the relevant authorities related to early childhood education by allowing an insight into the workforce and practices in the government and private ECCE in Malaysia.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, Malaysia, Private ECCE, Government ECCE.

Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become a key policy for most countries to ensure high quality of early childcare and education. ECCE is one of the best investments that a country could have to promote human resource development as it could help to reduce the cost of later remedial programme (UNESCO). According to UNICEF (2020), the care and attention a child receives in the first eight years of life, particularly during the first three years,

are critical and influential for the child's development. The Malaysian government places a strong emphasis on early childhood education, as the latter has become an important agenda in the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025. Given the importance of ECCE, the Malaysian government has also focused on increasing the quality of preschool education in the Government Transformation Programme (PEMANDU, 2015).

ECCE in Malaysia is divided into two age groups, which are between 0-4 years and 4-6 years old. The first group (0-4 years) is placed under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD), which coordinates national programmes on the growth and development of children (also known as taska). Pre-school education for the second group (4-6 years) is placed under three ministries/agencies, i.e. the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KEMAS), and the National Unity Department (JPNIN). ECCE programmes in Malaysia are offered by two types of institutions, namely childcare centres or nurseries or taska and preschools or kindergartens or tadika. Besides public early childhood programmes established by government bodies, there are also large numbers of privately owned nurseries and preschools (Qin & Nor, 2018).

Childcare centre or nurseries or taska has become an important service sub-sector in Malaysia (Mokhlis & Mokhtar, 2019). The increasing rate of married women in the labour market following higher education attainment and the government's encouragement of female involvement in the labour market, caused a shift of the family institution structure. As such, this increased the demand for childcare centres. According to the Social Welfare Department Report, the number of registered nurseries increased for the past 10 years from 372 in 2009 to 4410 in 2018.

Parents in Malaysia are aware of the importance of early childhood education (Foong, Dhamotharan & Loh, 2018). Early childhood education serves as a starting point that greatly affects a child's future. The early stages of childhood are a very important period in the process of children development involving their social, mental and emotional development. Providing good education to children at this life stage will produce a generation with the resilience to face challenges from both physical and mental aspects, as well as building intellectual power.

Taking into consideration the importance of ECCE for the country and for the child's development, good administration and management is essential. The success of an organization depends on the management's efficiency and effectiveness. In the case of ECCE, the nursery and kindergarten managers or owners are the individuals who plan, organise, lead and make decisions about how the organization should use all the available resources to achieve the ECCE goal. They are responsible for the overall operation of the centre and services provided. As cited in Hujala and Eskelinen (2013), Scrivens (2003) described the crucial tasks of ECCE leaders' daily work such as directing people (staff and parents), managing the centre (program development, planning and implementing the curriculum, monitoring children and the child/adult ratios), monitoring the program guidelines and practices (human resource management, financial management, safety and wellbeing, curriculum dissemination, inclusive practices) and maintaining the property.

Thus, the aim of this study are as follows:

- understand the workforce and the management of ECCE centres in Malaysia.
- compare the workforce and the management practices in public and private ECCE in Malaysia.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper were part of a larger research study on Malaysian early childcare. This paper investigated childcare management in both government and private childcare centres throughout Malaysia. A purposive proportionate stratified random sampling involving 3519 operators, supervisors, principals, childcare providers and teachers from all states in Malaysia was used in this study. The sample was stratified by zone i.e. northern, southern, central, east coast and west coast of peninsular Malaysia as well as East-Malaysia.

The data were collected by questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was developed based on the review of literature from previous studies and was validated by a group of early childhood experts and practitioners. The questionnaire was pilot tested before a final version was used in the actual study. The questionnaire was divided into four sections, A, B, C and D. However, for the purpose of this paper, we would focus on Section A and part of section D. Section A consisted of the background information of the respondents, while Section D comprised information about leadership, management and monitoring. However, this paper only focused on the management of the centre. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.88 which suggested an acceptable internal consistency of the items.

The questionnaire was administered directly to operators, supervisors, principals, childcare providers, and teachers during researchers visit to the childcare centres. The respondents were briefed about the study and confidentiality of the response. Prior to the data collection exercise, consent was obtained from the Ministry of Education, and the relevant state education departments and agencies. A total of 3,519 of completed questionnaires were returned.

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. Descriptive statistics and t-test were employed to analyse the data. The results of the analysis are presented in the next section.

A guideline or cut-off point for the mean score was determined to interpret the result. Mean score values ranging from 1.00 to 2.33 were at low levels for each dimension or the variables studied, the mean score value obtained between 2.34 to 3.66 was at moderate stage. On the other hand, the mean score value obtained between 3.67 to 5.00 was at a high level of dimension or variable (Yusof et al., 2014)

Data Analysis

A total of 3519 respondents were involved in this study. Almost half (38%) of the respondents were below 30 years old, followed by 31 to 40 years old (32%). The major ethnic is Malay (79.6%) and 82% are Muslims. The details on childcare workforce and results of the study will be presented using various sub-sections below.

Positions at Childcare Centre

The respondents in this study included operators, supervisors, principals, childcare providers, and teachers. The details of the respondents in terms of their position in the childcare centre is shown in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, more than 50% of the respondents worked at private childcare centres. The highest percentage of the respondents were teachers in both government and private childcare centres. Teachers comprised 80.9% and 36.4% of the total number of respondents in government and private childcare centres respectively.

Table 1

Distribution by position at childcare centres

Position	Government		Private	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Operator	8	0.6	458	20.4
Supervisor	50	3.9	300	13.4
Principals	12	0.9	179	8
Childcare provider	98	7.7	445	19.8
Teacher	1031	80.9	816	36.4
Teacher assistant	76	6	46	2
Total	1275	100	2244	100

Gender

Table 2 shows that the majority of the workforce in this study are females in both government and private childcare centre.

Table 2

Gender

Gender	Government		Private	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Male	53	4.2	83	3.7
Female	1222	95.8	2161	96.3

Education Qualification

The respondents' qualifications related to early childhood care and education are presented in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, a high percentage of the workforce in both government and private childcare centres in this study did not have any qualifications in Early Childhood Education. This category was the highest in private childcare centre (48.7%), followed by Diploma holders (18.7%) and Teaching Certificate holders (18%). At the government childcare centres, slightly over one third (35.6%) had a Diploma in Early Childhood Education, while 26.8% did not have any qualifications in Early Childcare Education.

Table 3

Professional qualification holders in Early Childhood Education centres

Professional qualification	Government		Private	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
PhD in Early Childhood Education	4	0.3	8	0.4
Master's in early childhood education	11	0.9	24	1.1
Degree in Early Childhood Education	133	10.4	89	4
Diploma in Early Childhood Education	454	35.6	419	18.7
Teaching Certificate in Early Childhood Education	280	22	405	18
No qualification in Early Childhood Education	342	26.8	1092	48.7
Did not state qualification in Early Childhood Education	51	4	207	9.2

Professional Course or Training Related to Early Childhood Education

Table 4 shows that the attendance in courses or training programmes related to Early Childhood Education by respondents in both government and private childcare centres was low. Less than a quarter of the respondents had attended courses or training programmes.

Table 4

Professional qualification in Early Childhood Education

Professional qualification	Government		Private	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Kursus Asas Asuhan Kanak-kanak (KAAK)	439	34.4	662	29.5
Kursus Asuhan PERMATA (KAP)	332	26	669	29.8
Kursus Persijilan Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) Tahap 1	16	1.3	99	4.4
Kursus Persijilan Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) Tahap 2	8	0.6	53	2.4
Kursus Persijilan Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) Tahap 3	8	0.6	113	5
Latihan Pengajar (ToT) PERMATA	73	5.7	78	3.5
Latihan Pengajar (ToT) KAAK	103	8.1	88	3.9
Other courses	240	18.8	316	14.1

Working Experience

Table 6 shows that in the government sector, 69.1% of the respondents had more than 6 years working experience and only 9.5% had less than 3 years of work experience. This indicated

that the respondents were experienced in early childhood care. The findings for private childcare centres were different, as 37.8% of the respondents had more than 6 years of working experience, and almost 60% had 6 years of experience and below.

Table 6

Working experience

Years	Government		Private	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Less than 3 years	121	9.5	775	34.5
3-6 years	252	19.8	568	25.3
More than 6 years	881	69.1	849	37.8
Did not state	21	1.6	52	2.3

Centre Management

Table 7 shows the mean score for each item in Centre Management. The scores showed that the respondents indicated a moderate level for all the items. However, the overall scores for private childcare centres were higher than the government childcare centres.

Table 7

Descriptive analysis

Items	SD		Mean		Level	
	Govt.	Private	Govt.	Private	Govt.	Private
My TASKA/TADIKAs has skilled childcare providers/teachers in handling basic first aid.	0.565	0.586	3.04	3.20	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs has skilled childcare providers/teachers to handle emergency situations when needed.	0.556	0.571	3.06	3.22	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs has a comprehensive, structured and easily accessible records management	0.474	0.564	3.17	3.24	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs conducts periodic inspections for pest control.	0.647	0.680	2.88	3.07	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs runs fire drill regularly	0.628	0.661	3.03	3.11	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs has well managed and organized space	0.525	0.551	3.22	3.34	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs manages the salary of childcare providers/teachers according to the appropriate rate.	0.782	0.612	3.03	3.31	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs maintains outdoor play equipments in good condition	0.557	0.552	3.23	3.40	Moderate	Moderate
My TASKA/TADIKAs has a clear vision and mission	0.518	0.549	3.38	3.43	Moderate	Moderate

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the centre management scores for government and private childcare centres. There was a significant difference in scores for government childcare centre (M = 3.11, SD = 3.62) and private childcare centres (M = 3.25, SD = 3.92), $t() = 9.623$, $p < 0.5$.

Table 8

Differences between respondents in government and private childcare centre

	Respondent	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value	Significance
Centre management	Government	1275	3.11	3.62	9.623	0.000
	Private	2244	3.25	3.92		

Discussions and Conclusion

The Child Care Centre Act 1993 (Act 506) requires operators to ensure adequate and qualified staff; care centres are well equipped and maintained for care, control, supervision, treatment and training services. This includes providing treatment and recreational facilities. The results of this study found that nearly 80% of the respondents in government childcare centre had academic qualification in early childhood education while the percentage for private childcare centres was lower with only slightly above 50% of the respondents with qualifications in early childhood education. For staff with professional qualifications in Early Childhood Education, this recorded a low percentage in both government and private childcare centres. The level of experience varied between government and private childhood centre, where almost 70% of the respondents in government childcare centre had more than 6 years working experience. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents in private childcare centres had 6 years of experience and below. In terms of the workforce which was involved in the day-to-day operation of the childcare centre, the study results showed that the workforce in the government childcare centre had more educational and professional qualifications as well as experience. A study by Madhawa Nair, Hanafi and Yassin (2017) found that preschool teachers with higher levels of education significantly had better classroom practices than their counterparts with lower levels of education. Their study supported previous studies such as children Barnett (2016) and Rohaty (2013) which highlighted the importance of skills and professional qualifications of preschool teachers in sustaining the quality of children's care and education. Thus, policymakers should make sure that the workforce in early childhood education is well qualified.

The findings of this study also indicated significant difference in childcare centre management. Although the mean value for both the government and private childcare centre was at moderate level, the value for private childcare centre was slightly higher than the government childcare centres. This might be the fact that private childcare centres were largely driven by parental demands and expectations; as such, they were better managed. As cited in Dahari (2011), Thomson et al.(2008) stated that parents trusted private pre-schools due to their business strategy and game plan by upgrading their facilities and services to maintain their competitiveness and market niche.

Theoretically, the current study affirms the theoretical information about the condition of the ECCE workforce in Malaysia. Attention should be given as the Malaysian ECCE is growing in its

importance, primarily due to the demands of the child's developmental needs and the needs of society for social, economic and political growth. In terms of practical consequences, policymakers should look more closely at this issue and take the necessary measures to improve the level of education and skills of the workers especially in the professional qualification in Early Childhood Education which is still lacking.

It should be acknowledged that the data and analysis of this study was subject to limitations and further studies to understand more detailed aspects of early childhood centre management should be conducted. Future studies can take into account other items that are possible to determine early childcare centre management.

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