

Understanding the Causes Behind the Shortage of Qualified Early Childhood Educators in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors contributing to the shortage of qualified teachers in Malaysia, with a specific focus on the early childhood education sector. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews featuring open-ended questions were conducted with 30 purposively sampled teachers from private schools. This approach allowed participants to share their candid insights into the challenges they face. The analysis was based on Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which distinguishes between motivators (intrinsic) and hygiene (extrinsic) factors that influence job satisfaction and retention. Findings reveal that the shortage of qualified educators is driven by a combination of issues, including inadequate pay, limited opportunities for professional development, long working hours, high workloads, unfavourable staff-to-child ratios. These factors collectively reduce job satisfaction and motivation, leading to attrition and difficulty attracting new talent. The study underscores the need for comprehensive strategies—such as improving compensation, increasing professional growth opportunities, and reducing non-teaching workloads—to address the root causes of teacher shortages and ensure a sustainable, high-quality early childhood education workforce in Malaysia.

Keywords: Teacher Shortage, Qualified Teachers, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECCE) is globally recognized as a foundation for lifelong learning, holistic development, and social equity. In Malaysia, the sector has experienced significant growth, driven by increasing parental awareness, increasing female workforce participation, and government efforts to improve access and quality. However, a persistent and critical shortage of qualified early childhood educators threatens to undermine this progress and undermine child development outcomes across the country.

The quality of ECCE is fundamentally linked to the qualifications and professionalism of its educators. Research consistently shows that well-trained teachers are essential for

fostering children's cognitive, social and emotional development, as they are better equipped to implement effective pedagogical practices and create nurturing learning environments. Inadequate teacher qualifications not only affect individual child outcomes but also hinder national progress towards educational equity and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2), which require universal access to quality early childhood education (Olatunji et al., 2024)

Malaysia's early childhood education sector faces a persistent and critical shortage of qualified educators, a challenge that has significant implications for the quality of early learning and child development across the country. Despite policy initiatives such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which mandates that all preschool teachers hold at least a diploma in early childhood education by 2020, the proportion of private preschool teachers meeting this requirement remains low (Kong, 2023). As of 2023, only 18 percent of private preschool teachers hold the required qualifications, highlighting the gap between policy intentions and actual workforce readiness. This shortage is not just a matter of numbers; it directly impacts the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children, as qualified teachers play a crucial role in shaping these foundational skills (Ridza et al., 2024).

The shortage of qualified early childhood educators is not just a statistical issue—it is a matter of national development and children's rights. Without urgent intervention, Malaysia risks perpetuating a cycle of low achievement and social inequality, as children who miss out on quality early learning are more likely to struggle academically and socially later in life (Ilie, Rose & Vignoles, 2021). In addition, the shortage is driven by a range of challenges, including low salaries, limited career progression, high operating costs for centres, and a societal perception that belittles the profession. These factors prevent talented individuals from entering or remaining in the field, further widening the talent gap. Examining the causes of the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia is essential to inform effective policy, guide resource allocation, and ensure that every child receives the strong foundation they deserve. Addressing this issue is not just about meeting regulatory targets but about securing the country's future by investing in its youngest citizens.

Problem Statement

Several interrelated factors contribute to the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia. Low salaries are often cited as a major barrier, driving many qualified teachers to leave the sector in search of better pay opportunities. Those who remain often struggle to make ends meet, leading to high staff turnover and a shortage of experienced educators in the field. This situation is further complicated by the high operating costs of preschools, which make it difficult for operators to offer competitive salaries while ensuring affordable fees for parents (Aziz et al., 2021). As a result, the sector struggles to attract and retain talent, with some staff serving for an average.

Workforce demographics and working conditions also play a significant role in exacerbating this situation. The early childhood education workforce in Malaysia is predominantly young, underqualified, and predominantly female, with limited male participation due to low status and unattractive salaries. High turnover rates are evident, with approximately 65 percent of the workforce having only two years of experience on average,

indicating that many educators do not remain in the sector for the long term. In addition to inadequate pay, long working hours, heavy workloads, and inadequate administrative support further reduce job satisfaction and motivation among early childhood educators (Ridza et al., 2024)

Another contributing factor is limited access to professional development and further training opportunities. While there is widespread awareness among educators of the need to improve their qualifications, barriers such as the cost and accessibility of training programmes hinder their ability to do so. Governments and stakeholders have recognised the urgent need to address these issues, but progress has been slow, and comprehensive solutions are still needed to ensure that the workforce is adequately trained and supported (Lopes et al., 2024).

Given the rapid growth of early childhood education in Malaysia, particularly in the private sector, understanding the causes behind the shortage of qualified educators is more important than ever. This research aims to explore these underlying factors in depth, using current educator perspectives and relevant theoretical frameworks such as Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory to analyze the interaction of motivators and hygiene factors that influence teacher retention and satisfaction. By identifying and addressing these challenges, Malaysia can work towards building a more robust and professional early childhood education workforce, ultimately benefiting the country's youngest learners and their prospects.

Significance of Study

The importance of this study lies in its potential to address the critical shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia, a challenge that directly impacts the quality of preschool education and, consequently, the developmental outcomes of young children (Yang et al., 2025). High-quality early childhood education has been shown to foster cognitive, social, and emotional growth, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success. By understanding the causes of the educator shortage, this research can inform targeted interventions to improve teacher qualifications, retention, and overall workforce stability, thereby improving the quality of early learning environments across Malaysia (Yang et al., 2025).

Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing efforts to meet the national education goals outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which emphasizes the importance of all preschool teachers obtaining at least a diploma in early childhood care and education. Despite this policy directive, progress has been slow due to persistent issues such as low salaries, limited professional development, and inadequate working conditions (World Bank, 2023). By investigating these factors through the lens of educators' lived experiences, the research will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders to develop more effective strategies that support teacher development and improve the quality of preschool education (Adams & Tan, 2022).

This study is important because it addresses a critical issue that affects the quality of early childhood education in Malaysia—the shortage of qualified educators. It offers valuable insights for policymakers to develop more effective strategies and policies to attract and retain skilled teachers. Training institutions and universities can benefit by aligning their programs more closely with industry needs, ensuring that future educators are well-prepared.

Preschool operators will gain a deeper understanding of workforce challenges, enabling them to improve recruitment and retention practices. For current and aspiring early childhood educators, this study highlights professional concerns and advocates for better recognition, career opportunities, and working conditions. In addition, this research contributes to the academic field by filling gaps in the local literature and providing a foundation for further research on ECE workforce development in Malaysia.

Finally, this research has wider societal significance by contributing to Malaysia's vision of becoming a high-income nation with a skilled and competitive workforce. Early childhood education plays a crucial role in equipping children with essential skills such as communication, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, which are essential for future academic achievement and social competence (Rumbidzai, & Achebe, 2023). Addressing the shortage of qualified educators will help ensure equitable access to quality preschool education, reduce disparities and promote social cohesion. Ultimately, this study supports efforts to build a sustainable early childhood education system that benefits not only children and families but also the country's long-term economic and social development.

Research Objective

1. To investigate the underlying factors contributing to the shortage of qualified educators in the early childhood education sector.

Research Question

1. What are the underlying causes of the shortage of qualified educators in Early Childhood Education?

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Frederick Herzberg's Two Factor Theory as a theoretical framework to explore the causes behind the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia. Herzberg's theory distinguishes between hygiene factors and motivators, which separately influence job dissatisfaction and satisfaction, respectively. Hygiene factors, such as pay, working conditions, and administrative support, are important to prevent dissatisfaction but do not necessarily motivate employees when improved. Motivators, including achievement, recognition, responsibility, and opportunities for growth, are intrinsic factors that drive higher job satisfaction and motivation. Applying this theory helps to systematically analyze the factors that influence early childhood educators' decisions to remain in or leave the profession (Ihensekien & Joel, 2023).

In the context of early childhood education, hygiene factors such as inadequate pay, long working hours, and poor work environment have been identified as major contributors to teacher dissatisfaction and attrition in Malaysia. These factors create a baseline of dissatisfaction that, if not addressed, can lead to high turnover rates and a shortage of qualified staff. However, in research by Bristle (2023), Herzberg's theory also emphasizes that addressing hygiene factors alone is not sufficient to increase motivation or job satisfaction. Motivators such as professional development opportunities, recognition for achievement, meaningful work, and career advancement are important to foster intrinsic motivation among educators. This dual perspective allows the study to capture both the extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions of teacher motivation and retention.

Grounding the research in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how different workplace factors influence the motivation and job satisfaction of early childhood educators in Malaysia. This framework guides the investigation of hygiene factors that require immediate improvement to reduce dissatisfaction and motivators that can be strengthened to increase teacher commitment and professional growth. Finally, the theoretical framework supports the development of targeted policy recommendations and practical strategies to address the educator shortage by improving both working conditions and the intrinsic rewards of teaching in the early childhood sector.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative methodology to explore in depth the factors contributing to the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia. Qualitative research is particularly suited to this study as it allows for a deep understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of participants, which is essential for uncovering the complex social and professional dynamics that influence teacher shortages. Through methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this study captures rich descriptive data that quantitative approaches alone cannot provide, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by educators in private preschools (Stutterheim, & Ratcliffe, 2021).

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who are directly involved in early childhood education, ensuring that the data collected is relevant and meaningful. This sampling technique, commonly used in qualitative research, involves selecting individuals based on specific characteristics such as teaching experience, qualifications, and school type. Interviewing 30 private preschool teachers with varying experience and educational backgrounds will provide a variety of perspectives on the causes of shortages. The qualitative approach also facilitates flexibility in data collection, allowing researchers to delve deeper into emerging themes and tailor questions to better understand the realities of participants (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).

Data analysis will involve thematic coding, where patterns and themes related to salary, and workload, are identified and interpreted. This study will use Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory as a conceptual lens to categorize factors into hygiene and motivator elements, which differentially influence teacher retention and satisfaction. Using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo can enhance the organization and rigor of the coding process (Allsop et al., 2022). Overall, the qualitative methodology provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the multiple causes behind the shortage of qualified early childhood educators, offering valuable insights for policy and practice improvements in the Malaysian early childhood education sector.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Factors that contribute to why teachers are leaving the job and less are taking up this line of work

Low Salary

The study found that many believe Early Childhood Education teachers as an unimportant job that only requires minimum qualifications which is why the salary is low. Earnings will affect teacher's job satisfaction. Some participants say:

"I think, uh, one of the reasons for the teacher shortage is because of low salary." (R1)

"So, we can say that they also didn't receive high payment or salary." (R5)

"No, I feel that early year's teachers are not greatly compensated if you consider their day-to-day job" (R6)

"No, it is not compensated greatly at all" (R14)

"Even the increment was not given this year, because of the pandemic" (R22)

"I disagree, I don't feel compensated well despite the workload and long hours. If a better offer comes along, I will leave for the better" (R19) 47

"Not greatly compensated because it's not far from minimum wage" (R20)

"No. Don't think so cause early years teachers are not considered high paying salary brackets for many years" (R21)

"Poor compensation or wages is the common factor of teacher shortages" (R23)

"Looking at our amount of work, I don't think it's adequate or it is even justified" (R24)

"One of the factors of teacher shortage is low wages and heavy workload" (R25)

"Teacher shortages, I feel commonly due to low salary or compensation" (R29)

Responses from multiple respondents consistently highlighted low salaries and poor compensation as key factors contributing to the shortage of early childhood educators. Many teachers felt that their salaries did not reflect the demands of their daily workload, long hours, and responsibilities. Overall, low salaries combined with heavy workloads were widely seen as the main reasons why teachers left or avoided the profession.

Demanding Physically

This study also found that most teachers have experienced some form of injury, and feel shortchanged, like they have not been paid enough, i.e., salary is too low. Some participants say:

"Like too much of caring of the children and always bending down to cater to the children." (R2)

"I've already suffered a few back pains and back strains already. I think that's why people don't choose this field that much." (R30)

"Especially during covid 19 last time. Early educators put their life at risk often without health benefits to serve children and families." (R29)

"Even my eyes were dry because of online learning...there was a lot of IT work involved in lesson preparations." (R22)

The responses revealed that the physical and emotional demands of early childhood education have a significant impact on teachers' well-being and contribute to shortages in the field. Respondents highlighted the physically demanding nature of the work, such as constant

bending and caring for young children, which has led to health issues such as back pain and strain. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risks for educators, who often work without adequate health benefits while supporting children and families. The shift to online learning has also added significant stress, with teachers experiencing eye strain and increased workload due to extensive IT-related tasks. Collectively, these factors contribute to challenges and reluctance to choose or remain in the early childhood education profession.

Benefits Offered

This study found that in some schools such as private schools, the benefits provided to their teachers are sufficient, but in many private or public schools, the benefits provided are insufficient. This leads to many leaving their careers. Some participants say:

"Like from my personal experience, uh, I've worked in companies where they provide annual holidays." (R9)

"My current company, it gives like free education for the first child and also like inpatient hospitalization." (R26)

"Some offer the best package to their teachers. Some also give a good bonus, but some are the opposite, maybe they, they didn't give." (R18)

The responses indicated that benefits and incentives for early childhood educators vary widely across different employers. Some respondents shared positive experiences where companies provided annual leave, free education for the first child, inpatient admission coverage, and bonuses as part of their compensation packages. However, others noted inconsistencies, with some employers offering limited or no additional benefits. Variations in these benefits contribute to different levels of job satisfaction and can influence educators' decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Theme 2 - Factors contributing to teacher's job dissatisfaction

Minimum Qualifications

The minimum qualification is set at a minimum of a Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. However, we found that this is not the case in some schools, as they were still engaging teachers below the minimum qualification recommended by MOE. This could be due to the lack of teachers in certain areas. Still, in the Klang Valley, educators are qualified, because there is more knowledge of the effects of qualified or unqualified teachers when working with young children. Some participants say:

"I think the minimum qualifications are not too difficult to obtain. Uh, sometimes the courses are also short, so you can do it part-time." (R24)

"Most centres are more than happy to invest in the teachers, so they would usually help them to get the certifications." (R17)

"Difficult to change the mentality of our people.....they're thinking anyone can be a teacher in ECE because with the little the academic knowledge, preparation, and skills as well." (R5)

"In my school, the teachers that were not qualified were asked to take the Diploma course and the school paid for it." (R19)

The responses highlighted mixed perceptions about qualifications and professional development in early childhood education. Several respondents stated that obtaining a

minimum qualification, such as a diploma course, is generally manageable and is often supported by employers through part-time options and financial assistance. Many centres are willing to invest in their teachers by funding certification programmes to improve their qualifications. However, there is still a common perception among some that early childhood education does not require extensive academic preparation or specialist skills, which poses challenges in raising the status of the profession and promoting higher standards of qualification. This perception may hinder efforts to professionalize the sector despite the opportunities for training and development.

Working Hours

Most of the participants do work within the working hours set by the Ministry of Education, which is 8 hours a day, although studies have revealed that the time is not adequate, as teachers have a lot of other things to do, for instance, planning and preparations. Some participants say:

"There's a lot of extra co-curricular activities, staff meetings, and training." (R7)

"They don't provide adequate classroom preparation time." (R14)

"My working hours are eight hours, for me is too long because children, uh, yeah, because, uh, we provide ECE to them." (R19)

"Working hours is not a big difference with other pre-schools that I know" (R27)

"Working hours better than my previous job" (R29)

Feedback indicated that although most participants worked the official eight-hour day set by the Ministry of Education, many felt that this time was not sufficient due to additional tasks such as extracurricular activities, staff meetings, and training sessions. Some stated that the time allocated for classroom preparation was not sufficient, making the workload feel longer and more challenging. However, perceptions of working hours varied, with some teachers seeing their hours as comparable to other preschools or better than their previous jobs. Overall, the consensus indicated that the official working hours did not fully capture the amount of time and effort required for their role.

Workload

The study found that the workload of the teachers in this field is actually quite demanding mentally as well as physically because teachers are frequently moving around, answering questions being asked by children, and so on. Teachers are cognitively and spiritually drained due to the heavy workload, and this gives rise to negative work motivation and poor job satisfaction. Some participants say:

"I think it's quite a lot, but for our classroom, because we are the early years, they give us, only five lessons compared to everyone else who has six." (R1)

"It was too much because, at the same time, we have to teach them, play with them, and then we need to handle them and prepare the lesson and also need to check the email every time." (R6)

"Last year we started off with four children and then by the end of the second term we already had like 18 children, so workload increased tremendously" (R23)

"The current workload is not bearable where I have to prepare in a short period and yet more admin work to do like updating every child portfolio" (R27)

"The workload is too much that it starts stressing me up mentally and physically" (R15)

"In my opinion, teacher shortages can be due to heavy workload throughout" (R18)

"I feel the workload is unbearable and I find it hard to cope in my daily life. Not even sure if I'm giving the best I can to the children" (R10)

"Workload is mostly bearable, but sometimes when other teachers are absent, we have to cover for them, and this takes away the lesson planning or lesson preparations time. This happens quite often because of the pandemic and quarantine procedures." (R22)

"The workload is too much considering I am a new teacher. The administrative work makes it difficult to do any planning or research for updated activities for children to ensure the activities given are developmentally appropriate for the child."(R30)

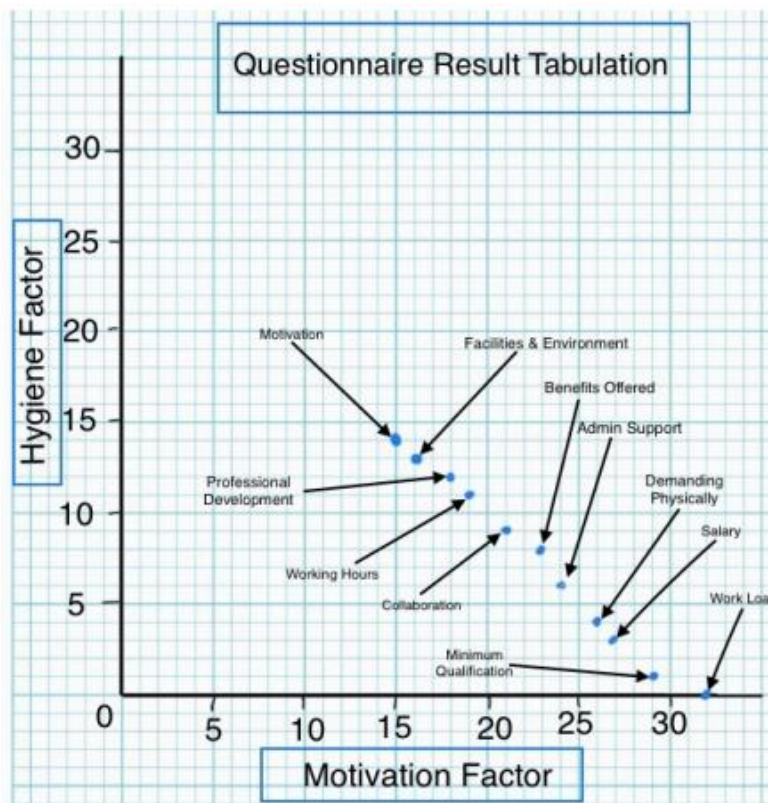
"Daily documentation piles up every day and preparing craft materials takes a lot of time. Due to limited time but the workload increases, this is too much for us teachers which makes me want to give up" (R11)

"Yes, unbearable, I feel like the downside of being a teacher is the heavy workload that I need to deal with" (R24)

"Factors that lead to teacher shortages is the low wages and high workload"(R28)

Feedback from participants consistently highlighted that the workload for early childhood educators is heavy and often overwhelming. Many teachers described juggling multiple responsibilities simultaneously, including teaching, playing, lesson preparation, administrative tasks, and managing growing class sizes. Several respondents stated that the workload led to significant mental and physical stress, making it difficult to maintain the quality of teaching and personal well-being. The burden of daily documentation, limited preparation time, and coverage for absent colleagues exacerbated the stress. Overall, heavy workloads were widely seen as a major factor contributing to teacher dissatisfaction and the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia.

Discussion



Graph 1: Questionnaire Result Tabulation

Referring to Graph 1 above, which tabulates the common theme of all the respondents disagreeing or agreeing on a topic for each question. According to the results of our investigation, the respondent's replies fit into the low hygiene & high motivation quadrant of the Herzberg theory matrix. This would imply that most of our respondents, who were chosen at random from a group of thirty-two (32) ECCE teachers, feel sufficiently motivated to continue working, yet they would have numerous complaints or concerns. If these criticisms or complaints are not dealt with properly, it may eventually result in teacher turnover or long-term work discontent. This situation is typical in high-stress workplaces like ECCE centres, where a teacher may be passionate about their subject and find significance in their profession, with a certain amount of independence in the classroom.

However, long hours, little income, and a lack of amenities without adequate breaks might result in a situation where people are highly motivated but have poor hygiene. According to the results of the interview, 29 out of 32 people interviewed believe they are underpaid or that the annual raise may be too small. Most respondents strongly believe that their pay is insufficient since it does not reflect their workload. According to Basalamah, S. A., (2021). (2021), "higher wages and improved conditions of employment affect people's job satisfaction, work motivation, and indirectly, the quality of their teaching, caring, and interaction with children." One of the most crucial factors that determines a person's destiny is compensation. According to Ryu, S., & Jinnai, Y., (2021), "remuneration can be a good attraction of the ECCE profession and may affect teacher's motivation and job satisfaction." Better qualifications should be rewarded with increased pay, which would motivate instructors to continue their education. According to Ibrahim et al., (2025) research, low

earnings in the ECCE have a negative impact on the quality of the program by preventing skilled teachers from applying. As a result, we can conclude that one reason for low teacher retention and a lack of new ECCE teacher recruitment is low compensation. This has created the impression that employment in the ECCE sector is a career with low remuneration.

Based on the feedback from most respondents, particularly on physical and mental well-being, it was clear that many teachers found their working hours and workload to be very demanding. While few explicitly complained about the number of hours they worked, a significant number expressed concerns about the heavy responsibilities they had to manage. The majority considered their workload to be excessive, negatively impacting their mental and physical health. Several respondents reported experiencing physical strain related to the workplace, such as frequent bending or lifting heavy objects. While official working hours may resemble a typical nine-to-five schedule, the nature of teaching requires more physical effort and sustained attention.

Furthermore, the findings show that heavy workload is a major cause of job dissatisfaction among educators, often leaving them with insufficient time for lesson planning and personal activities. This is in line with previous research, which highlights the detrimental effects of excessive workload on teaching quality. For example, Jomuad et al. (2021) argued that teachers who are burdened with many tasks tend to perform worse than their less burdened peers, ultimately impacting children's learning and development. Similarly, Ling, T. E. et al., (2023) confirmed that high workload is closely related to low job satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of addressing this issue to improve teacher well-being and educational outcomes.

Recommendation

To address the shortage of qualified early childhood educators in Malaysia, key recommendations include increasing salaries and benefits to better reflect teachers' workload and qualifications, managing workload to ensure reasonable working hours with adequate preparation time, and improving working conditions to reduce physical and mental stress. Supporting professional development through financial assistance and career advancement opportunities is essential to motivate and retain educators. In addition, raising public awareness of the importance and professionalism of early childhood education can help attract more qualified individuals to join the field. These measures aim to create a more supportive and sustainable environment that improves teacher satisfaction and the overall quality of early childhood education.

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