

Curriculum Models in Context: Personal Narratives from Practitioner-Parents on Montessori and Reggio Emilia Approaches in Malaysian Preschool Settings

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Abstract

This study investigates two influential early childhood curriculum models, the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, through the unique dual perspective of a practitioner-parent in the Malaysian preschool settings. While existing scholarship has extensively examined the theoretical foundations and pedagogical outcomes of these approaches, limited attention has been given to personal narratives that bridge professional practice and parental experience in the Malaysian preschool settings. Using a reflective qualitative framework, this research explores how these models are perceived, implemented, and adapted within the Malaysian preschool settings. A total of 27 practitioner-parents were interviewed to gain in-depth narratives on the study's research objectives. Data analyzed using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis approach indicated that practitioner-parents found the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches to be suitable and appropriate for early years development in the Malaysian context. However, certain issues pertaining to space, weather, resources, and balancing facilitator and instructor roles were also expressed. Overall, the findings are beneficial as it aims to contribute to curriculum discourse by situating evaluation within lived experience, offering insights for educators and parents seeking culturally responsive and contextually grounded approaches to early childhood education in the Malaysian preschool landscape.

Keywords: Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Practitioner-Parents, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Early childhood education continues to be shaped by diverse curriculum models emphasizing child-centered learning, autonomy, and holistic development, as highlighted in Singh and Rashid's (2023) conceptual paper on integrated preschool curriculum design. Among the most influential are the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, which continue to shape early childhood education through their emphasis on autonomy, creativity, and holistic development (Aljabreen, 2020; Chukwuka, 2025; Nairn, 2023).

Each model offers distinct philosophies and practices, yet their implementation often varies across cultural and institutional contexts. While much research has explored these models theoretically and empirically, limited attention has been given to the dual perspective of practitioner-parents—individuals who simultaneously navigate professional teaching roles and parental responsibilities (Tang, Dhamotharan, & Abdul Rahman, 2021; Kurniati & Nibrosurrahman, 2025; OECD, 2023).

Early childhood education (ECE) in Malaysia has evolved through a blend of national policy frameworks and the adoption of international curriculum models, reflecting the country's multicultural and multilingual context. The Malaysian National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC) emphasizes holistic child development, integrating cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical domains (Sarawak Tribune, 2026; The Vibes, 2026; Asia Education Review, 2026). In Malaysian preschool settings, private institutions often incorporate global approaches such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia to enrich practice, adapting these philosophies to local cultural and educational contexts (Little Steps Asia, 2025; MIGS International Preschool, 2024; Odyssey Preschool, 2023).

These imported models are adapted to local cultural values and parental expectations, creating a dynamic interplay between global pedagogical philosophies and local realities. However, despite their growing adoption, there remains limited understanding of how these approaches are interpreted, negotiated, and adapted within Malaysian preschool settings. Existing scholarship has largely focused on theoretical foundations and pedagogical outcomes, often overlooking the lived experiences of practitioner-parents. This gap is particularly significant in light of ongoing debates within the social sciences concerning the localisation of global pedagogical models, the tension between standardised educational expectations and culturally responsive practices, and the role of individual agency in curriculum enactment. In Malaysia's multicultural and increasingly performance-oriented educational landscape, the uncritical adoption of international curriculum models raises important questions about relevance, sustainability, and alignment with local needs.

Within this context, practitioner-parent narratives provide valuable insights into how curriculum models are interpreted, negotiated, and implemented in everyday preschool settings, highlighting both opportunities for innovation and challenges of contextual adaptation (Mustafa, 2020; Omar & Aziz, 2021; Rouse, 2022). This study seeks to address this gap by drawing on personal narratives that illuminate how these curriculum models are experienced, interpreted, and adapted in practice within Malaysian preschool settings, thereby contributing to more contextually grounded and culturally responsive early childhood education.

Research Objectives

Building upon the earlier discussion, this study seeks to address the identified gap by drawing on personal narratives that illustrate how these curriculum models are lived, interpreted, and adapted within Malaysian preschool contexts. The research study has the following research objectives:

1. To explore how Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches are experienced and interpreted through the dual lens of being both a practitioner and a parent;
2. To identify the similarities and differences which emerge in the practical implementation of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches from both professional and parental perspectives;
3. To explore the gaps between curriculum theory and lived practice, offering insights for future curriculum adaptation in the Malaysian preschool settings.

Literature Review

The Montessori and Reggio Emilia Approaches were formed in the early 20th century, each arising from unique social and cultural circumstances that have shaped their development and approaches.

Montessori Approach

The Montessori Approach was developed by Dr Maria Montessori, an Italian physician. It started with the establishment of the Case dei Bambini (Children's House) in Rome. During her work, Montessori's scientific observations of children's learning processes led her to create a unique approach which emphasizes independence, sensory-based learning, and self-directed activity, aiming to develop every child's intrinsic desire to learn (Burnett, 1962). Children learn to think critically by engaging with specially designed materials that promote exploration and discovery, as emphasized in Montessori education where hands-on, inquiry-based materials foster autonomy and problem-solving (GIIS Kuala Lumpur, 2025; Montessori Family Center, 2023; Cole, 2025). Montessori believed in nurturing the whole child, focusing on intellectual, physical, and emotional development (Carter, 2023; Ruhl, 2024; Starshine Montessori, 2025). The Montessori method encourages independence and self-regulation, with children learning to assess their own work and make improvements based on their observations (Burnett, 1962). The teacher's role is to monitor the children's growth and provide appropriate advice and assistance (Priede & Vigule, 2016). Several studies (Ishak, Awang, & Mansor, 2025; Kastari, 2020; Othman, Safiani, Mamat, & Mohamad, 2024; Saha, 2023) emphasize that teacher has a dual role not only as instructional experts but also as knowledge facilitators. In these roles, the adaptation of the adult or teacher to the children's needs and demands is significant to their development and the failure to adapt will harm the process and their learning ability (Phang, Chong, Mustaffa, & Mohd Jamil, 2023; Saari, Abdul Azia, Rasli, & et al., 2022; Saha, 2023).

Montessori defines its classrooms as a prepared environment. It is designed to meet the diverse developmental needs of the children where materials are organized and accessible, allowing for freedom of choice and movement (Cossentino, & Brown, 2022; Feez, 2020; Lillard, 2021; Ruhl, 2024; Saha, 2023). The Montessori classrooms are organized and aesthetically pleasing to create an environment that promotes concentration, independence, and a sense of responsibility (Montitute Montessori Training Institute, 2025; Jones, 2024; Zhang, 2025). A dedicated area for practical life activities, such as pouring, spooning, and

dressing themselves, helps children develop fine motor skills, coordination, and a sense of self-sufficiency (Abdullah, 2024).

Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia Approach originated in the post-World War II Italy, conceived by educator Loris Malaguzzi in the town of Reggio Emilia. The Reggio Emilia Approach believes that children learn effectively through social interaction (Manera, 2022), emphasizing the child's relationships with others, such as peers, teachers and the larger community (Aden & Theodorotou, 2019). In this approach, children are encouraged to explore, question, and reflect on their experiences (Al-Hidayah, 2025; Menara, 2022; Sriarun, Srikao, & Jantharaji, 2025;). The conception of the child as a capable individual underpins this approach, promoting a sense of agency and critical thinking from a young age (Fernández-Santín & Feliu-Torruella, 2020; Rouse, 2022; Al-Hidayah, 2025). The competency of teachers is to facilitate rather than direct learning, helping children develop problem-solving skills and the ability to engage in reflective thinking (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). The Reggio Emilia approach sees teachers to be less interventionist but allows children to make their own decisions and come to their own comprehension of learning through the guidance of the teachers (Aljabreen, 2020). In this context, the teacher acts as a co-collaborator in the learning process. Teachers work with students to co-create knowledge and meaning.

The environment, known as the "third teacher" has an immense role in Reggio Emilia approach (Domingues & Carlotto, 2025; Rouse, 2022; Yufiarti et al., 2022). Spaces are meticulously planned to be aesthetically pleasing, exciting, versatile, with the goal of promoting exploration, collaboration, and creative expression to enhance creativity (Domínguez, 2024; Domingues & Carlotto, 2025; Nguyen, Duong, & Duong, 2025). The environment is constantly evolving and changing according to the contexts in which it takes place (Manera, 2022). The 'atelier' is a dedicated space for creative exploration with a variety of materials, while the "piazza" serves as a central gathering place for interaction and community building (Domínguez, 2024; Rouse, 2022; Vecchi & Giudici, 2021). Documentation of children's work, thoughts, and ideas are being displayed prominently within the environment or space of learning (Rinaldi & Moss, 2021; Rouse, 2022; Vecchi & Giudici, 2022). Thus, making learning visible and fostering a sense of ownership and pride. Feedback or surveying students' reflection and feedback are opportunities created to gain knowledge and information before any new research commences (Manera, 2022). The Reggio Emilia approach was conceived as a community-driven effort to rebuild society through education, emphasizing children's natural curiosity, the *Hundred Languages of Children*, and the importance of supportive, collaborative learning environments (Chicken, 2023; Fernández-Santín & Feliu-Torruella, 2020; Rouse, 2022).

The Reggio Emilia approach is highly collaborative, using project-based activities that are driven by children's interests, thereby fostering exploration, agency, and collective learning (Atabey, 2020; Fernández-Santín & Feliu-Torruella, 2020; Rouse, 2022). Teachers act as co-researchers rather than traditional instructors, engaging in collaborative inquiry with children instead of serving as mere dispensers of knowledge (Aljabreen, 2020; Guo & Rouse, 2025; Rouse, 2022). In hindsight, this approach includes a lot of paperwork as teachers and students reflect on their work, and the documents produced are revised frequently as a formal record of students' progress in learning.

Conceptual Framework

This study situates curriculum adaptation within Malaysian preschool contexts by drawing on personal narratives from practitioner-parents engaged with Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches (Figure 1).

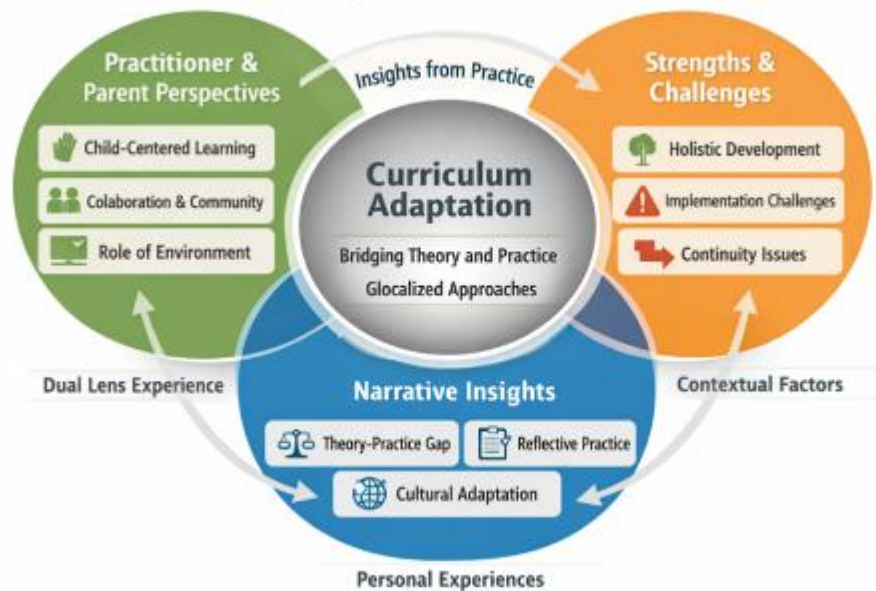


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the study

Prior the start of this study a conceptual framework was designed to bring forward the three interrelated domains: 1) practitioner and parent perspectives, 2) strengths and challenges, and 3) narrative insights that collectively bridge theory and practice through glocalized approaches. Insights from practice emphasize child-centered learning, collaboration, and the role of the environment, while contextual challenges reveal tensions in implementation, continuity, and holistic development. Narrative reflections further illuminate the theory-practice gap, cultural adaptation, and the value of reflective practice. Together, these dimensions underscore how curriculum models are not merely transplanted but dynamically reshaped through lived experiences, fostering culturally responsive and contextually relevant pedagogy in Malaysian preschool settings.

Justification of the Study and Research Gap

Despite the extensive body of literature on Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, a clearer justification for examining these models within the Malaysian context is necessary. Recent studies indicate that while global curriculum models are widely adopted across early childhood education systems, their implementation often reflects a complex interplay between imported pedagogical philosophies and local socio-cultural realities. In Malaysia, although structured national frameworks exist to guide early childhood education, challenges persist in the fidelity of implementation and contextual adaptation, particularly within diverse and privatised preschool settings.

Moreover, current research has largely concentrated on specific outcomes or isolated aspects of these approaches, such as cognitive development or classroom practices, rather than examining how they are holistically experienced and negotiated in everyday contexts. While

comparative and theoretical analyses of Montessori and Reggio Emilia models are well established, there remains a limited focus on how these approaches are interpreted through lived experiences, particularly from the dual perspective of practitioner-parents. This represents a critical gap in the literature, especially within ongoing social science debates on the localisation of global knowledge, the negotiation between global pedagogies and local expectations, and the role of agency in curriculum enactment.

Therefore, this study is justified in its focus on practitioner-parent narratives, as it seeks to move beyond descriptive and outcome-based research toward a more nuanced understanding of how curriculum models are meaningfully adapted, contested, and sustained within Malaysian preschool settings. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to current discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy and the contextualisation of early childhood curriculum models.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative research design, focusing on narrative inquiry approach was used in this study as it allowed the exploration of lived experiences and personal stories, capturing the voices of practitioner-parents in ways that illuminate the cultural and contextual nuances of curriculum models in Malaysian preschool settings. Narrative inquiry emphasizes meaning making through storytelling, enabling researchers to bridge theory and practice (Creswell, 2018) by situating Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches within everyday realities of teaching and parenting. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, narrative inquiry provides a framework for understanding experience as both personal and social, while Riessman (2022) highlights its strength in uncovering how individuals construct meaning through reflection and dialogue. More recently, Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella (2020) demonstrate how narrative accounts in Reggio-inspired contexts foster insights into agency and critical thinking, underscoring the value of narrative inquiry in capturing the dynamic interplay between curriculum theory and lived practice.

Research Instrumentation and Sampling

A total of 27 practitioner-parents were selected based on their willingness to be part of the study. Participants were practitioner-parents working in Malaysian private preschools with more than 5 years of teaching experiences. All participants were female and mothers with preschool children. The educational background of the participants was not considered. Participants were approached individually by email and informed of the research intent. Participants were given two weeks to reflect and document their experiences with the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. These responses were short answer questions and were subsequently emailed back to the researchers.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which is well-suited for identifying recurring patterns and themes within qualitative narratives. This method enabled the systematic exploration of practitioner-parent accounts, highlighting key themes such as autonomy, creativity, structure, cultural adaptation, and the alignment or misalignment between theory and practice. Thematic analysis provides flexibility in interpreting complex qualitative data while maintaining rigor through clear

coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More recent applications in early childhood education research demonstrate its value in uncovering nuanced insights into pedagogical practices and curriculum adaptation (Nowell et al., 2017; Fernández-Santín & Feliu-Torruella, 2020). Axial coding was undertaken to reassemble data by linking codes into higher-order categories, facilitating the identification of relationships among concepts and enabling the development of a coherent analytical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). By employing thematic analysis, this study was able to bridge personal narratives with broader theoretical frameworks, offering a deeper understanding of how global curriculum models are contextualized in Malaysian preschool settings (Creswell, 2018).

Findings

The qualitative findings are organized and discussed through thematic categories that directly addressed each research objective.

Theme 1

Experiences and interpretations of Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches through the dual lens of being both a practitioner and a parent.

Findings (Table 1) indicate that practitioner-parents value autonomy, responsibility, confidence practiced in both Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches apart from appreciating the values of creativity and expression integrated in the curriculum. In addition, practitioner-parents appreciate transparency, involvement, and values of respect.

Table 1

Practitioner-parent experiences and perceptions of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia Approaches in Malaysian preschool settings.

Pattern	Codes (Patterns)	Verbatim Transcript	Practitioner-Parents
Independence and Responsibility (Montessori)	Practitioner-parents value autonomy, responsibility, confidence	<i>"We have created a simple open-spaced playroom... Through these learning materials, the children learn about the practical life skills that also help children to be independent."</i>	P3
		<i>"Montessori classrooms emphasize experiential learning and the development of practical, real-world skills."</i>	P5
		<i>"My toddler enjoys book reading... I observed the impact of fostering self-directed learning in my toddler through the Montessori method."</i>	P19
		<i>"Children are empowered to explore materials at their own pace, which promotes independence and autonomy."</i>	P26
		<i>"I introduce the concept of addition using concrete materials, such as the Montessori golden beads... children discover patterns and relationships on their own."</i>	P27

Creativity and Expression (Reggio Emilia)	Arts, environment, self-expression valued by practitioner-parents	<i>"Being within such an environment of arts that encouraged creativity was something that definitely had a huge effect on me."</i>	P2
		<i>"Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes the hundred languages of children. One of the months, we had a project on geographical landmarks, which involved building landmarks, listening to music from different countries, and exploring stories of cross-continental travel."</i>	P4
		<i>"Reggio Emilia approach allows the children to explore, experiment and problem-solve and express themselves."</i>	P10
		<i>"Artworks, rather than being tucked away, were treated as masterpieces, proudly displayed throughout the school."</i>	P13
		<i>"The Reggio Emilia approach promotes children's connection with nature and encourages outdoor exploration."</i>	P18
		<i>"Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes expressive art over numeracy and literacy."</i>	P21
		<i>"Creating a warm, inviting, and stimulating learning environment supports children's development and growth."</i>	P25
Parental Trust and Communication	Practitioner-parents appreciate transparency, involvement, respect	<i>"We will always encourage them to speak up and share their views and opinions openly to us so they feel seen and heard."</i>	P3
		<i>"Teachers explained that to foster meaningful conversations between the student, the parent, and the teacher, the child's learning is tracked daily."</i>	P8
		<i>"Parents are part of the curriculum where they will invite parents to actively join special days and celebrations."</i>	P23
		<i>"To promote learning, involve parents in the project by helping their children complete the assigned tasks."</i>	P25

Theme 2

Similarities and differences emerging in the practical implementation of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches from both professional and parental perspectives.

The study found that in terms of classroom environment, Montessori applies more structured approach than Reggio Emilia. However in Montessori there is more individualization as compared to collaboration as in Reggio Emilia. In terms of assessing children's development, Montessori uses observation whilst Reggio practices in-depth collection of documentation. Table 2 below provides detailed codes versus actual transcription to demonstrate the findings of Theme 2.

Table 2

Similarities and differences which emerge in the practical implementation of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches from both professional and parental perspectives.

Pattern	Codes (Patterns)	Verbatim Transcript	Practitioner-Parents
Classroom Environment	Montessori = structured materials; Reggio = open-ended spaces	<i>"Montessori teachers work hard to create places that are open, safe, and conducive to children's exploration and discovery all day long."</i>	P12
		<i>"Gone were the sterile walls; they were replaced with vibrant murals and open-ended materials that sparked creativity."</i>	P14
		<i>"The classrooms are fully furnished with child-sized furniture and are divided into five significant areas: Practical Life, Sensorial, Math, Language, and Culture."</i>	P18
		<i>"Children interact with specifically curated resources that are both appealing and instructive in the Montessori classroom."</i>	P20
		<i>"Reggio Emilia curriculum classes are designed based on specific interest areas such as housing, art, small toy area."</i>	P21
		<i>"Montessori environment uses specialized, self-correcting materials, while Reggio Emilia inspired classroom utilizes open-ended materials."</i>	P27
Individualization vs Collaboration	Montessori = independence; Reggio = collaboration	<i>"Montessori approach focus on independence and project approach focuses on collaboration."</i>	P1
		<i>"Children are encouraged to work together on projects and investigations, sharing ideas, perspectives, and resources."</i>	P7
		<i>"Reggio Emilia approach provides opportunities for the children to work together, in various learning activities."</i>	P11
		<i>"Older students reveled in the opportunity to act as mentors, patiently guiding younger students."</i>	P14
		<i>"The Montessori approach focuses on autonomy, self-guided education and experiential investigation."</i>	P20
		<i>"Children work together in small groups to plan, implement, and reflect on their lemonade stand project."</i>	P24
		<i>"Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes community cooperation and participation in learning."</i>	P26
Documentation and Assessment	Montessori = observation; Reggio = documentation	<i>"Observation and assessment are the next key point where Montessori approach focuses on observation and project approach focus on assessment."</i>	P1

		<i>"Through documentation, teachers capture children's learning experiences, thoughts, and reflections."</i>	P7
		<i>"Documentation is one of the core principles of Reggio Emilia learning."</i>	P19
		<i>"Observing and recording children's learning experiences using visual media such as image and movies, as well as reflecting on these experiences allowed me to have valuable understanding of their interests and cognitive processes using the Reggio Emilia approach."</i>	P20
		<i>"Children may keep journals to record their observations, reflections, and ideas throughout the project."</i>	P24
		<i>"Teachers will observe and document each child's learning process... then plan the environment and learning opportunities."</i>	P25

Theme 3

Gaps between the theoretical principles of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches and their real-world application

Based on findings from the in-depth interviews, three patterns were found that depicts the gaps between the theoretical principles of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches and their real-world application, as shown in Table 3. Reportedly there seem to be issues of limited space, weather, and resources that can affect the implementation of both the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. In addition, the issue of balancing facilitator and instructor roles was also highlighted throughout this study.

Table 3

Gaps between theoretical principles of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches and their real-world application from practitioner-parents' personal narratives.

Themes	Codes (Patterns)	Verbatim Transcript	Practitioner-Parents
Resource and Contextual Constraints	Limited space, weather, resources affect implementation	<i>"Even though there were not enough rooms in the class to fully display the subject."</i>	P2
		<i>"The challenges... were the weather changes, the children motivation to complete the project... and the resources availability".</i>	P6
		<i>"One of the main challenges... is the primary school education system... it causes a huge gap in terms of learning methods."</i>	P9
		<i>"While it may not be feasible to implement the original Reggio Emilia curriculum entirely, given the constraints of resources, space, and academic requirements in Malaysia."</i>	P25
		<i>"Schools with outstanding environment and facilities... are usually charging higher in school fee."</i>	P23
Cultural Adaptation and Parental Expectations	Parents' academic priorities vs. child-centered ideals	<i>"Demands from parents to excel in academic performance had always been the priority of many parents in Malaysia."</i>	P9
		<i>"Children may miss out on valuable hands-on learning experiences due to the well-intentioned love and indulgence of their parent."</i>	P13
		<i>"Parents questioned why their kids could not read at a certain age and compared them with their older siblings."</i>	P21
		<i>"Curriculum gap between preschool and government primary school becomes one of the deciding factors."</i>	P23
		<i>"We have chosen the international Montessori method school because she showed more confidence and security during her visit."</i>	P18
Teacher Role Tensions	Balancing facilitator vs. instructor roles	<i>"Instead of the traditional role of an instructor, the teacher became more of a facilitator."</i>	P2
		<i>"As a teacher following the Reggio Emilia approach, it is important to act as a co-learner and collaborator."</i>	P16
		<i>"A fundamental aspect of the Montessori philosophy is a profound reverence for the child. Teachers serve as mentors,</i>	P20

		<i>providing guidance and assisting the process of learning instead of imposing it."</i>	
		<i>"In Montessori method, the role of adults is excessive compared to that of children."</i>	P22
		<i>"Educators shall let the children be creative but not stray away from the objective of the projects."</i>	P24
		<i>"Flexibility, creativity, and a commitment to continuous improvement are essential elements of successful curriculum integration."</i>	P27

Discussion

The findings from the 27 practitioner-parent narratives reveal consistent themes of independence, creativity, and contextual challenges in implementing Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches in Malaysian preschool settings. These themes resonate with recent scholarship that has examined the global relevance and local adaptation of alternative curriculum models.

Practitioner-Parent Perceptions

Parents and practitioners in this study consistently associated Montessori with independence and responsibility and Reggio Emilia with creativity and collaboration. This aligns with Aljabreen's (2020) comparative analysis, which highlights how Montessori emphasizes structured independence while Reggio foregrounds expressive, collaborative learning environments. The narratives show that parents value Montessori's practical life skills such as tidying, food preparation, and self-care as foundational for responsibility. At the same time, they admire Reggio's emphasis on art, nature, and community as fostering creativity and social connection. These perceptions suggest that both approaches are seen as complementary rather than competing, a finding echoed in Chukwuka's (2021) study, which found that Montessori and Reggio both support developmental milestones but through different pathways.

Implementation Similarities and Differences

The findings also reveal similarities in valuing classroom environments but differences in how they are structured. Montessori classrooms are described as meticulously prepared with specialized materials, while Reggio classrooms are open-ended, aesthetic, and flexible. This reflects international literature that emphasizes the "prepared environment" in Montessori and the "third teacher" concept in Reggio (Aljabreen, 2020). Documentation practices further distinguish between the two: Montessori relies on teacher observation, while Reggio emphasizes visible documentation of children's learning processes. These differences highlight how each approach operationalizes child-centered learning in distinct ways, yet both converge on valuing autonomy and engagement.

Gaps Between Theory and Practice

Personal narratives highlighted resource constraints, cultural expectations, and teacher role tensions as barriers to full implementation. Practitioner-parents described challenges such as limited classroom space, weather disruptions, and lack of resources. Parents emphasized the tension between child-centered ideals and Malaysia's exam-focused culture, noting:

“Demands from parents to excel in academic performance had always been the priority” (P9). This reflects broader critiques that global curriculum models must be adapted to local cultural and systemic contexts (Chukwuka, 2021). The shift in teacher roles from instructor to facilitator or co-learner was also noted as a challenge, requiring professional development and mindset change. These findings underscore the importance of contextual adaptation, as highlighted by recent scholarship that warns against “blind reform” or uncritical adoption of foreign models (Aljabreen, 2020).

Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that while Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches are valued by Malaysian practitioner-parents, their successful implementation requires cultural adaptation, resource support, and professional training. The narratives show that practitioner-parents appreciate independence and creativity, but systemic pressures (e.g., exam culture, resource limitations) create gaps between theory and practice. This reinforces the need for hybrid or glocalized curriculum models that integrate the strengths of Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches while responding to Malaysian cultural and educational realities. As Chukwuka (2021) argues, the future of early childhood education lies in contextualized adaptation rather than wholesale adoption.

Limitations of the Study

This study’s sampling strategy presents several limitations. The participants consisted of 27 practitioner-parents from Malaysian private preschools, all of whom were female mothers with preschool-aged children and more than five years of teaching experience. While this homogeneity provided consistency in professional background, it limited the diversity of perspectives, excluding fathers, male educators, and practitioners without children. Additionally, the educational background of participants was not considered, which may have influenced the depth and framing of their narratives. The reliance on voluntary participation and email-based recruitment introduces self-selection bias, as only those willing and available to reflect within the two-week timeframe contributed to the study. Such limitations are common in qualitative research, where purposive and convenience sampling may restrict generalizability but still provide rich, contextually grounded insights (Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, while the findings illuminate valuable practitioner-parent perspectives on Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, they should be interpreted within the constraints of the sample’s demographic and methodological boundaries.

Conclusion

This study contributes to early childhood education research by foregrounding personal narratives as a valuable lens for curriculum evaluation. By comparing the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches, it highlights both their strengths and limitations while emphasizing the importance of cultural adaptation and contextual flexibility. The dual perspective of practitioner-parent provides unique insights into how curriculum models are perceived and implemented, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The implications are significant: educators can benefit from reflective practice that acknowledges parental concerns, while preschool curriculum planners can design curriculum frameworks that are culturally responsive and adaptable. Future research should expand beyond individual narratives to include broader practitioner-parent communities across

diverse states in the Malaysian preschool settings, thereby deepening understanding of how curriculum models evolve in practice.

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