

Critical Issues in Preschool Education in Malaysia

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Abstract: - Malaysia is currently transforming its education system to achieve world class status. High-quality preschool education improves children's 'health and promotes their development and learning. Research evidences show that there are cognitive and social gains as a result of early childhood care and education. Educators have a role in promoting the quality of early education and child care through examining the issues and challenges involved. This paper examines the issues and challenges in preschool education in Malaysia and suggests recommendation to enhance quality. The study involved a purposive sample of 30 experienced practitioners in early childhood education including teachers, college lecturers, post graduate students and government officials .The data was obtained through a roundtable focus group discussion. The data was analysed by looking at emerging themes. The findings of the study indicate several pertinent issues involving curriculum, teacher training, equity and accessibility, assessment, and monitoring of preschool centers. Recommendations are forwarded to enhance the quality of preschool and early Child Care and Education.

Key-Words:- early child care and education, quality preschool, issues in preschool education

1 Introduction

The Malaysian statistics on preschool education shows the existence of 15,627 preschool classes in government preschools and government agencies preschools with 17,899 and the average class ratio of 1 teacher to 24 children and a class size of 23 children [1]. It is noted that 60-70% of preschool aged children attend preschool classes .The government's efforts in transforming the education system also affect the preschool stage whether directly or indirectly. The Malaysian government has recently embarked on the Plan to transform its education system which involves equally improving early childhood education.

Why does quality in preschool education matters? Research evidences have established that every child's early experiences, whether at home, in child care, or in other preschool settings, matters .The child is regarded as the jewel of the nation as children are potential leaders of tomorrow [2]. At present, approximately 60% of children younger than 6 years attend some type of early childhood program. Thus approximately 40% of preschool aged children do not attend preschool or have the opportunity to do so. Children exposed to a poor-quality environment, whether at home or outside the home, are less likely to excel and perform well in elementary schools.

Enhancement of quality preschools must be addressed at both the more macro and micro level .Early brain and child development research unequivocally demonstrates that human development is powerfully affected by learning during the foundation years [3].

A child's day-to-day experiences affect the structural and functional development of his or her brain, including intelligence and personality. Experiences influence every child's development and learning, and these experiences can be positive or negative, with long consequences for the child, family, and society. Studies on high-quality, intensive early childhood education programs for low-income children confirm lasting positive effects such as greater school success, higher graduation rates, lower juvenile crime, decreased need for special education services later, and lower adolescent pregnancy rates [4].

Children who attend high quality early childhood programs demonstrate better math and language skills, better cognition and social skills, better interpersonal relationships, and better behavioral self-regulation than do children in lower-quality care [5]. Inferior-quality care, at home or outside the home, can have harmful effects on language, social development, and school performance that are more

difficult to ameliorate, especially for children in schools with fewer resources. The positive effects from high-quality programs and the negative effects from poor-quality programs are magnified for children from disadvantaged situations or with special needs [6].

Undoubtedly, most preschool centers with less than minimal standards need to be improved. The range of services is dependent on the type of preschool depending on fees paid, and the background of the clientele. Barriers to high-quality programs include lack of quality setting, and the necessary funding. This infrastructure has to address, on a statewide or community level, high-quality standards, quality training for teachers, services for parental education and referral, and a sound financing system [7, 8, 9, 10]. Thus improving access to quality of early childhood educational experiences is an important social and educational agenda because investment in early childhood brings both short term and long term rewards. Challenges surrounding the quality of preschool education often hinges on community-center collaboration, meaningful curriculum and appropriate pedagogy and assessment [10,11].

2 Methodology

This is a qualitative study involving a purposive sample of 30 educators and officials related to early childcare and preschool education. The sample included preschool teachers, college lecturers, university academics, post graduate students and government officials who have experiences in preschool education for more than five years. The data was collected using a focus group round table discussion involving five groups of six members with a balance of males and females and mixed experiences; Both teachers, lecturers, education officials and students were in each discussion group. The round table was conducted and sponsored by the Malaysian Council of Professors. The focus group discussion was guided by the main question which is open ended "What are the issues and challenges facing early childhood and preschool education in Malaysia which affect quality?. Each group discusses the same question concurrently with other groups. At the end of the discussion, each group responses were tabulated and emerging themes were identified, reflected in the following domains: (a) Curriculum and curriculum related issues, (b) Management & monitoring, Learning, (c) Teaching &

Learning, (d) Philosophy and goals, (f) Equity and Accessibility, (g) Parental Involvement.

3 Results

Excerpts that describe the themes from the above domains are discussed below:

3.1 Curriculum

(a) The responses indicated the need to learn many languages to be seen as a future global player

"Children should learn a third language."

"To compete internationally children should be multi lingual knowing English, Korean or Japanese and their mother tongues. It is best to learn many languages." (R 26)

"Yes we need two or more languages: Malay and English are essential to communicate effectively." (R 8)

"Malay preschool children being Muslims should learn Arabic." "The younger they start the better." (R 7)

"Children should be exposed to many languages other than the mother tongue." (R 9)

Make multilingualism compulsory at the preschool level. (R 5)

(b) An issue of importance is the curricular orientation as described below

"Preschools should promote the total and holistic development in children; Children should be encouraged to participate in various sports and school clubs." (R 16)

The curriculum should emphasize values and personality development which rather appear to be more of the hidden curriculum. (R 4)

"Each stakeholder has to understand role of teachers, community leaders, and parent's in developing quality preschool education. They should be given the opportunity to discuss issues on curriculum and make

the curriculum alive.”(R 10)

“There is need to ensure co-curriculum activities are provided to develop the ability and talent of each child” Today preschools attempt to produce the super kids and they become like robots in learning.” (R6)

There’s too much focus on learning the academics whereas the preschool stage should implement play and learning by discovery.”(R 8)

(d) Responses also revealed that the curriculum should be pragmatic and global by nature such as:

“The curriculum should inculcate higher order thinking skills to prepare children for the future. Children should be able to reason and do problem solving. I think most urban preschools over stress academic achievement in Maths and English.” (R 9)

“The curriculum need to include knowledge of Malaysia, Asia and the world and not limited to learning about Malaysia only.”(R 14)

“Preschool children should master cognitive skills problem solving, creative thinking skills.” Yes we need young thinkers “(R 5)

“Curriculum should address global skills such as ICT skills and higher order of thinking skills including conflict resolutions. (R 19)

(c) Stress was given on multiculturalism in Malaysia

“Malaysia is multi racial society and the Prime Minister propagated the 1 Malaysia concepts. Yet preschools in Malaysia are more heterogeneous in nature “Thus every preschool should take into account the need to instill respect and tolerance among the ethnic groups.”(R 110)

(e) The Continuity of the Curriculum was also mentioned as described below:

“There should be continuity between the preschool curriculum (0-4) to (4-6 year old) and to the elementary school. Care should be taken to ensure the gap between types of preschools and to ensure the curriculum given to children is not so far apart as to

affect Year One entry into the elementary school.”

3.2 Management and Monitoring

The responses regarding monitoring highlight the necessity to have proper supervision as to the quality of preschools and teachers’ self-evaluation

“We need to increase the personnel to conduct adequate supervision of the preschool centers by 2014.”(R 1)

“Although the government stipulated the need to implement the National Standard Preschool Curriculum as the guidelines we have no way of monitoring whether this directive has been adhered to as there are too many preschool centres and fewer supervisors.”(R 12)

“There is need to obtain feedback from all stakeholders in the community as to the quality of the preschools in both urban and rural areas.” (R 14)

“Preschool teachers are themselves leaders at the preschool centers. Thus there is need to develop strong leadership skills and to do self-reflection and self-evaluation “(R 20)

“Parents should also be actively involved in providing feedback about the quality of preschools their children attend to” (R 4)

“How effective are teachers self-evaluation of the class?”(R 9)

3.3 Teaching and learning in the preschool classroom

Responses on teacher competencies and classroom climate were also recorded which delve into several aspects including career pathways, lack of male teachers and teaching competencies

“Preschool teachers with proficiency in English are greatly needed.” (R 3)

“Teachers do not have the self-confidence to Communicate in the English language.”(R 5)

“How can a preschool teacher’s model be good in English language when they are hardly able to use the English language without any errors.”(R 15)

“Some teachers do not know how to integrate theories into practice: when asked about the theoretical premise relevant to the activities they were not able to do so” (R 18)

“In certain academic oriented preschool centers classes are more teacher directed than children centered; when asked the teachers say that they wish to ensure the basic skills are transferred without losing time and that children pay attention”(R 26)

“Teaching learning climate varies from preschool centers: those that do not value play seems not to use play as a method in teaching preschool children; teachers say parents do not seem to like the play approach.”(R 7)

“Why are there so few male preschool teachers? Males should be encouraged to teach preschoolers so that they can model male behaviors.”(R 2)

“Classes at the preschool centers are normally of one age group and do not cater for mixed abilities. Children with special needs are not included in the normal Preschools due to administrative reasons.” (R 10)

“Preschool teachers need to teach using varied approaches in the preschool class; however there should also be creativity in teaching using varied methods to avoid boredom and poor responses from the children.”(R 16)

“I sympathize with the preschool teachers as there seems to be no clear career pathways. It is regarded as a dead end job unless one enjoys teaching.” (R7)

“Teachers should learn from their peers or other more knowledgeable experienced teachers”(R 9)

“Need ICT workshops for teachers to upgrade their ICT skills.” (R 19)

“Looking at Malaysia’s low achievement in PISA and TIMS and the need to improve children’s achievement by international standards we can agree the first place is the preschool.”(R 10)

“The academic qualifications of preschool teachers are still not up to the mark; the government aspires that all preschool teachers become university graduates and obtain their degrees by 2020; however it’s left to be seen.” (R 19)

“Indeed most preschool teachers have intrinsic motivation to teach children; however they also need job satisfaction and start comparing with their peers.”(R 5)

3.4 Philosophy and Values

Responses on the philosophical aspect were given pertaining to national unity, diversity and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged preschools

“As Malaysia is multi-racial and as national unity is important regardless of types of preschool there should be curriculum designed for the interaction among all ethnic groups.”

“What the government aspires and implement such as the RIMUP is commendable; however there should be a more systematic and concrete effort to integrate all ethnic groups in a preschool center.”

“The philosophy of early childhood in Malaysia should ensure the sustainability of national unity and integration and respect for all cultures.”

“Although there are curriculum differences among preschools the basic universal characteristics of how children learn should not be neglected or sideline.”

“The government aspires 100% good quality preschools by 2025; thus the disparity between rich and poor preschools should be studied and the gap reduced by then.”

“The National Preschool Philosophy should address the issue of developing world class preschool centers.”

“We should make preschool attendance free and compulsory for all.”

“We should make multilingualism as a compulsory feature of preschool program.”

“We should ensure the spirit of 1 Malaysia is implemented accordingly amongst all types of

preschools”

3.5 Accessibility / Equity

Accessibility and Equity were seen to be highly important for social justice and are affected by many factors

“There still exists the gap between the preschool in the rural and urban areas: the rural preschools lack facilities compared to the urban ones:...”

“There’s the drive to achieve the infrastructure needs by 2015 such as access to the internet “(R 7)

“Preschool attendance is not 100%; presently only 60% have the opportunity to attend preschools “(R 9)

“Diverse groups should be well accommodated into the preschools; these include the Down syndrome, the mentally retarded, the autistic and the slow learners.”(R 12)

“Street children and stateless children have nowhere to go; they do not have the opportunity to enter schools due to their status.” (R 10)

“Preschools differed across states, by gender and socio-economic status and location.”(R18)

3.6 Parent Education

The responses on parental involvement indicated the more meaningful roles of parents in preschool education.

“There is need to increase parental education as parents is partners in educating their children. However parents are either too busy with their work and have no time to devote to their children’s preschools or the parents are too shy to come forward.”(R14)

“Do all preschool centers educate parents on the curriculum followed by the preschools? “It appears only rich urban preschool centers have parent education programs.”(R 30)

“Parents participation are limited to involving

themselves in the fieldtrips; donating to buy props for the concert and baking cakes for the parents day nothing more meaningful.”(R15)

“Parents need to voice feedback to ensure the preschool is improving its programs continuously.”(R9)

“More males should participate during Parent-Teacher Conference” ”Why are males not attracted to teach in preschools?”(19)

4 Discussion

The above findings revealed the issues surrounding preschool education in Malaysia. The issues revolved around both the macro and micro levels and touch comprehensively the significant domains of education. The issues mentioned need to be addressed to develop a more quality delivery of preschool education services.

The issues also demonstrate the need for reflection and improving the management of preschool; There’s definitely a need to evaluate the preschool scenario in all components both formatively and summative.

There’s also the need for higher quality of teachers and upgrading teacher professionalism. All preschool teachers should be graduates to be seen as reliable and knowledgeable.

Parents being teachers themselves should become familiar with the essential components of quality programs. As trusted family advisors responsible for the well-being of children, they should know the essential components of quality and use the quality framework in choosing preschools for their children.

Programs that should be increased to improve the quality of early experiences for young children, include home visiting and early literacy family programs which need coordinated funding and support.

The aspiration to place Malaysia education world class quality demands that teacher training takes into account the teacher’s qualification and proficiency in English Language and a world class preschool teacher training involving the universities.

5 Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed the issues and challenges of preschool education in Malaysia. There were several restraining forces mentioned that may

impact quality delivery of preschool services.

Indeed while the aspiration of the Education Blueprint of Malaysia 2013-2025 can be saluted as the driving and motivating force the transformation ideals cannot be achieved or discrepancies narrowed without proper plan of action in the preschool scenario.

The policy makers and practitioners as well as preschool experts at all community levels should collaborate to address the fundamental issues in preschool education in Malaysia mentioned in this study

Also, conversations about quality should always emphasize that quality programs include parental involvement and a strong psychologically safe healthy environment. The study has several limitations and future studies of a similar nature should embark on a deeper analysis of the preschool scenario in Malaysia.

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