



## DO PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' EDUCATION AFFECT THEIR CLASSROOM PRACTICES AND CAREER PATHS?

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### ABSTRACT

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Studies by leading educators and researchers indicate that ECCE teachers' level of education affect their classroom practices and career paths. This paper is based on a descriptive study carried out among 296 preschool teachers in Peninsula Malaysia. The objective of the study is to investigate the effects of preschool teachers' education on their classroom practices and career paths. Questionnaires were used as instrument (instruments) to collect the data. The data were analyzed using one-way ANOVA and Tukey HSD. The findings indicated that preschool teachers with higher levels of education (diploma and above) significantly have better classroom practices than their counterparts with lower levels of education (below diploma). Similarly preschool teachers with higher levels of education have significantly better career paths than those with lower levels of education. The findings have crucial pedagogical and practical implications towards early childhood education in Malaysia. In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings suggest that a diploma should be the minimum educational qualification for preschool teachers because the results indicated that better educated teachers are more effective in their classroom practices. In terms of practical implications, policy makers should look into this matter seriously and take the necessary steps to enhance preschool teachers' level of education and skills.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study is one of the few studies which has investigated the effects of preschool teachers' education on their classroom practices and career paths in Peninsular Malaysia. It is hoped that this study will act as a guide to the Ministry of Education to enhance preschool teachers' knowledge and skills on their best practices.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Childcare Centre Act 1984 in Malaysia requires a minimum standard for childcare centres in order to provide care and education to preschool children (School Malaysia, 2017). This was followed by Childcare Centres Amendment Act 2007 which brought about the emergence of various childcare centres such as the government supported community childcare centres, subsidized workplace childcare centres, institution based child care centres and home-based childcare centres. The National Education Acts 1996 and 2005 officially declared that preschool is a part of the national school system. As such, all public and private preschools are required to follow the National

Preschool Curriculum. The government preschools comprising 80% are built in rural areas to provide preschool education to children from families of low socioeconomic background. According to [Sham'ah \(2013\)](#) there are two types of preschools in Malaysia, that is government funded and private preschools. The study stressed that teachers in private preschools are highly qualified and their programmes emphasize on cognitive, social and emotional development, whereas teachers in government preschools have comparatively lower qualification and their programmes lay emphasis more on social and emotional development. A study by [Badiei and Sulaiman \(2014\)](#) in Kuala Lumpur also indicated that children in Montessori kindergartens performed better in their cognitive, social and language skills compared to those from the (in) public preschools. In addition, they found that preschool children in Montessori (learning under the Montessori methods) love to play in groups, participate in class activities, love to accept responsibilities, and maintain relationships with their classmates. The Montessori preschool teachers' practices were reflected in the children's learning outcomes.

Many studies have emphasized the importance of skills and professional qualifications of preschool teachers to sustain (in sustaining) the quality of children's care and education. However, Malaysian preschool teachers' professional qualifications ranged from degree to diploma and below diploma levels.

Studies by [Bowman et al. \(2001\)](#); [Oden et al. \(2000\)](#); [Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog \(2001\)](#) indicated preschool teachers' educational levels significantly affect the quality of care and education provided to young children. [Barnet \(2016\)](#) stressed that better educated preschool teachers have more knowledge and skills. This make them better teachers because they expose children to a wide range of vocabulary, are better at planning and implementing lessons, are better problem solvers and spend more time conducting rich learning activities for children. [Rohaty \(2013\)](#) also advocate (advocated) the need for higher quality teachers and upgrading teacher professionalism in order to achieve quality preschool education. She also suggested that all Malaysian preschool teachers should be graduates because they are more reliable, knowledgeable and have better skills than the non-graduates. In short, preschool teachers with higher levels of education have better classroom practices and are more effective teachers compared to those with lower levels of education.

Similarly, a study by [McMullen and Alat \(2002\)](#) clearly showed that preschool teachers with ECE (Early Childhood Education) had developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) compared to their counterparts without ECE backgrounds. They also advocated that a four year degree is desirable for preschool teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills and best practices as an early childhood educator. A study by [OECD \(2017\)](#) indicated that improved training and qualification levels can enhance the quality of interaction and pedagogy in early childhood education and care.

On the other hand, a study by [Early et al. \(2007\)](#) indicated that enhancing teachers' level of education is not sufficient for improving the classroom practices of early childhood educators. Instead, a broad range of professional development activities and supports targeted towards teachers' interactions with children can enhance the effectiveness of early childhood education.

A study by [Brodin and Renblad \(2015\)](#) also indicated that the most important factors in enhancing the quality of preschool education were teachers' attitudes and the number of children in the group and the teacher-to- child ratio. Preschool teachers' education, in service training and competence were ranked low in the study.

According to [Butcher and Pletcher \(2016\)](#) many early childhood educators have little information about the status of early childhood education and this information is important in their career paths, besides their levels of education and experience. Several studies have indicated that there is a relationship between preschool teachers' education and their carrier paths.

A report from [Concordia University \(2017\)](#) clearly indicated that a preschool teacher with a degree qualification may be able to advance from an assistant teacher, to teacher, to the lead teacher and then to director of the preschool. The report also stressed that preschool teachers with master's degrees or doctorates have better career paths and are well-suited to lead day care centres and private preschools. In addition there are other options for

preschool teachers such as elementary school teacher, private family day care provider, civic community leader, preschool assistant director, child care centre director and preschool administrator. As such, it is obvious that preschool teachers with higher levels of education have better career paths.

A study by [Watt and Richardson \(2008\)](#) indicated that many teachers view teaching as a stepping stone to enhance their personal and financial resources in preparation for better career paths. [Partelow \(2016\)](#) argued that teaching career lacks career pathways and opportunities for professional growth. The study showed teachers who left the profession found that their new non-teaching positions provided more opportunities for professional advancement, better practices and higher salaries. However, a study by [Rinke et al. \(2014\)](#) found that teachers' past educational experiences are intricately related to their career paths. [Weston \(2013\)](#) opined it is time for a new approach to teachers' career paths whereby there should be a better direction to ensure teachers are nurtured and retained in their profession. [Podgursky et al. \(2004\)](#) also highlighted his concern that financial rewards in teaching should be large enough to attract and retain the most talented graduate teachers in the profession. Similarly, [Goldhaber et al. \(2010\)](#) highlighted their concern about teacher pay and incentives, tenure, evaluation, and working conditions to enhance the quality of teachers and retain them in the profession.

Studies related to best practices and career paths among preschool teachers in Malaysia are very limited. As such, this study investigates the effects of preschool teachers' level of education on their best practices and career paths.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to investigate the effects of preschool teachers' level of education on their best practices and career paths.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Do preschool teachers' professional qualifications have a significant effect on their classroom practices?
2. Do preschool teachers' professional qualifications have a significant effect on their career paths?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study using the descriptive research design. The researchers used questionnaires as an (as the) instrument to collect the data. 312 preschool teachers from West Malaysia were chosen for the study, using purposive sampling. The questionnaires were distributed to the preschool teachers by hand and by post through their heads of institution (preschool principals) but only 296 teachers completed the questionnaires. As such, 16 respondents who did not return or complete the questionnaires were dropped from the study. In terms of their academic qualifications, 158 respondents did not have ECCE diploma qualification, 92 of them had diploma qualification and only 46 of them had a degree/ Masters/ PhD qualification.

The questionnaires consisted of 16 items on preschool teachers' best practices in the classroom and 12 items on their career paths. Prior to the actual study, a pilot test was conducted among 40 pre-school teachers to obtain the reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach Alfa value for best practices was 0.93, and for career paths the value was 0.91, both of which are highly reliable.

The items in the questionnaires used 4 Likert Scales (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). The scores for all the items for each construct (best practices and career paths) were added and analyzed using the SPSS programs for Windows version 22. One-way ANOVA test and Tukey HSD test were used for data analysis.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3. Do preschool teachers' professional qualifications have a significant effect on their classroom practices?

Table-1a. Preschool teachers' mean scores for best practices and career path.

| Preschool Qualification | Teachers' Professional | Best Practices | Career Path |
|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Below Diploma           | Mean                   | 51.18          | 39.08       |
|                         | N                      | 154            | 154         |
|                         | SD                     | 5.61           | 6.93        |
| Diploma                 | Mean                   | 53.28          | 41.05       |
|                         | N                      | 86             | 85          |
|                         | SD                     | 6.56           | 6.30        |
| Degree/Masters/PhD      | Mean                   | 53.60          | 41.49       |
|                         | N                      | 45             | 43          |
|                         | SD                     | 5.79           | 5.51        |

Findings in Table 1a indicate ECCE teachers' academic qualifications and the mean for their best practices in the classroom and career paths. For the best practices, the mean score for teachers with degree and post-degree qualifications was the highest (Mean= 53.60, N=45, SD=55.79) followed by teachers with diploma qualification (Mean=53.28, N=86, SD=6.56) and the lowest mean score were teachers having a below diploma qualification (Mean=51.18, N= 154, SD=5.61).

Similarly, for career paths the mean score for teachers with degree and post-degree qualifications was the highest (Mean= 41.49, N=45, SD=5.51) followed by teachers with a diploma qualification (Mean=41.05, N=86, SD=6.30) and the lowest mean score was for teachers with below diploma qualification (Mean=39.08, N= 154, SD=6.93).

Table-1b. Findings of the one-way ANOVA test for best practices

| Dependent variable |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|------|
| ECCE Training      | Between Groups | 347.985        | 2   | 173.993     | 4.94 | .008 |
|                    | Within Groups  | 9939.011       | 294 | 35.245      |      |      |
|                    | Total          | 10286.996      | 296 |             |      |      |

The level of significance is at  $p < 0.05$

Findings from the one way ANOVA test in Table 1b indicated that teachers' professional qualifications had a significant effect on their classroom practices ( $F=4.94$ ,  $df= 2, 294$ ,  $p=.008$ ). The findings revealed that ECCE teachers with higher academic qualifications had significantly better classroom practices compared to their counterparts with lower academic qualifications. As stressed by Rohaty (2013) and Barnett (2016) better educated preschool teachers are effective teachers because they are more knowledgeable and rich in their teaching skills.

Table-1c. Tukey HSD Test showing ECCE teachers' best practices

| Dependent variable |           | Professional Qualification | Professional Qualification | Mean Difference | SD   | Sig. |
|--------------------|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|------|------|
| ECCE Training      | Tukey HSD | Below Diploma              | Diploma                    | -2.09*          | .79  | .025 |
|                    |           |                            | Degree/Masters / PhD       | -2.42*          | 1.00 | .044 |
|                    |           | Diploma                    | Below Diploma              | 2.09*           | .79  | .025 |
|                    |           |                            | Degree/Masters / PhD       | -.32            | 1.09 | .954 |
|                    |           | Degree/Masters / PhD       | Below Diploma              | 2.42*           | 1.00 | .044 |
|                    |           |                            | Diploma                    | .32             | 1.09 | .954 |

The level of significance is at  $p < 0.05$

Findings in table 1c indicated that the mean score for best practices of ECCE teachers with below diploma qualification was significantly lower than those with diploma (Mean Difference= -2.09, p=.025) and degree (Mean Difference= -2.42, p=.044) qualifications. The mean score for best practices of ECCE teachers with diploma qualification was significantly higher than those with below diploma qualification (Mean Difference= 2.09, p=.025). On the other hand, the mean score for best practices of ECCE teachers with diploma qualification was lower than those with degree/ Masters/ PhD qualifications (Mean Difference= -.32, p=.954) but the difference was not significant. The findings from Tukey HSD test concluded that there were significant differences in the best practices between teachers with below diploma qualification and those with diploma qualification and those with Degree/ Masters/ PhD qualification. But there was no significant difference between teachers with diploma qualification and degree/ Masters/ PhD qualification. Teachers with diploma and degree/ Masters/ PhD exhibited significantly better classroom practices than those with below diploma qualification. These findings support findings by OECD (2017); Bowman *et al.* (2001); Oden *et al.* (2000); Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog (2001) which indicated that preschool teachers' level of education had a significant effect on their classroom practices. However, the findings of the present study do not support those of Early *et al.* (2007); Brodin and Renblad (2015) which indicated preschool teachers' level of education was not the most important factor in enhancing their best practices. Do pre-school teachers' professional qualifications have a significant effect on their carrier paths?

**Table-2a.** Findings of the one-way ANOVA test for career paths

| Dependent variable |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|------|
| ECCE Training      | Between Groups | 317.03         | 2   | 158.52      | 3.70 | .02  |
|                    | Within Groups  | 11946.45       | 294 | 42.82       |      |      |
|                    | Total          | 12263.49       | 296 |             |      |      |

The level of significance is at p<0.05

Findings from the one way ANOVA test in Table 2a indicated that teachers' professional qualifications had a significant effect on their career paths (F= 3.70., df= 2, 294, p= .02). The findings revealed that teachers with higher academic qualifications have better career paths compared with their counterparts with lower academic qualifications and the difference is significant. These findings are parallel with a report from Concodia University (2017) which indicated that preschool teachers with higher levels of education have better career paths compared to those with lower levels of education. The findings of the present study also support the findings by Rinke *et al.* (2014) which showed that teachers' level of education is strongly related to their career paths.

**Table-2b.** Tukey HSD Test showing ECCE teachers' Career Paths

| Dependent variable         |           | Professional Qualification | Professional Qualification | Mean Difference | SD    | Sig. |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|-------|------|
| ECCE Teachers' Career Path | Tukey HSD | Below Diploma              | Diploma                    | -1.96           | .88   | .070 |
|                            |           |                            | Degree/ Masters/ PhD       | -2.40           | 1.13  | .086 |
|                            |           | Diploma                    | Below Diploma              | 1.96            | .88   | .070 |
|                            |           |                            | Degree/ Masters/ PhD       | -.44            | 1.22  | .931 |
|                            |           | Degree/ Masters/ PhD       | Below Diploma              | 2.40            | 1.129 | .086 |
|                            |           |                            | Diploma                    | .44             | 1.22  | .931 |

The level of significance is at p<0.05

In relation to career paths, findings in Table 2a indicated (indicate) that the mean score for career paths of the ECCE teachers with below diploma qualification was lower than those with a diploma (Mean Difference= -1.96,

$p=.07$ ) and degree/Masters/PhD (Mean Difference=  $-2.40$ ,  $p=.086$ ) qualifications but the difference was not significant. The mean score for career path of ECCE teachers with diploma qualification was higher than those with below diploma qualification (Mean Difference=  $1.96$ ,  $p=.07$ ) and the difference was not significant. On the other hand, the mean score for career paths of ECCE teachers with diploma qualification was lower than those with degree/Masters/PhD qualifications (Mean Difference=  $-.44$ ,  $p=.93$ ) but the difference was not significant. Based on the findings of the one way ANOVA test in Table 2a it can be concluded that preschool teachers with higher academic qualifications have significantly better career paths than their counterparts with lower academic qualifications. These findings do not support the findings by Partelow (2016) which indicated that teaching career lacks career pathways and opportunities for professional growth. However, as stressed by Podgursky *et al.* (2004) financial reward for preschool teachers in Malaysia should be better to attract and retain the most talented teachers in the profession.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that preschool teachers with higher educational qualifications had significantly better classroom practices as compared to teachers with lower educational qualifications. Preschool teachers with higher education level also exhibited better perception of their career paths compared to those with lower academic qualifications. As such, it is pertinent that teachers' training colleges and universities in Malaysia (Public and private) train new preschool teachers at degree level and provide sustained professional development at diploma level for those teaching in the industry to enhance their pedagogical skills in teaching young children. In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings suggest that diploma education should be the minimum qualification for preschool teachers because the results indicated that better educated preschool teachers are more effective in their classroom practices. In terms of practical implications, the findings asserted that policy makers should look into this matter seriously and take necessary steps to enhance preschool teachers' educational qualifications. As stressed by Barnett (2016) Malaysian preschool teachers should be regarded as professionals and paid accordingly. OECD (2017) also advocated that qualifications, education and training of preschool teachers are crucial because only well trained professionals are able to provide quality early childhood education for children. As such, the Ministry of Education should not hesitate to invest in raising the professional qualification of preschool teachers and provide funding for the staff training so that Malaysian preschool education is on par with other world class preschool training. This study has some limitations in that, firstly this was a quantitative study and only quantitative data was employed. As such, it is hoped that future studies will also employ qualitative data such as interviews with preschool teachers for data triangulation and to get a more in-depth results of the phenomena. Since the current study only involved 296 respondents from Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) it is hoped that future studies will use a larger sample comprising preschool teachers from East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The present study only focused on preschool teachers' classroom practices and career paths according to their levels of education. It is hoped that future studies will also investigate preschool teachers' beliefs in nurturing young children and their perspectives of the preschool curriculum.

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