

Early childhood care and education trainees' perspectives of their career path

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ABSTRACT

Education, either formal or informal, plays an important role to help the masses. As such, educators, especially trainees, are entrusted to teach young generations all important elements, principles, or concepts in a wide range of disciplines. Surely, such an undertaking, especially for early childhood care and education, requires quality teachers. In this regard, existing early childhood care and education modules or curricula should be periodically reviewed and revamped (if necessary) to help produce competent teachers who are excellent in all aspects encompassing content, pedagogical, and technological knowledge. This paper discusses the professional growth and development of trainees in early childhood care and education (ECCE) in terms of short- and long-term goals, missions, and career path-planning. The paper also elaborates on the relevant training workshops, courses, modules, and curricula that can be implemented to help improve their practical skills. The discussion also highlights the importance of incentives, such as attractive salaries, bonuses, acknowledgments, and awards, from employers that can not only motivate trainees but also advance their professional growth and development. Certainty, strong development knowledge, practical skills, and experiences can help such trainees to become highly competent, which can significantly contribute to nation-building efforts in Malaysia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have debated the concept of learning since thousand years ago. For example, Marton and Booth [1] eloquently state that “learning is about how we perceive and understand the world, about making meaning.” From a practical perspective, Fink [2] argues that the impact of learning will result in a number of changes that can significantly affect our lives. Through learning, the behaviours of humans and the environments in which they inhabit will change, affecting the causal relationship between the two [3]-[5]. From the cognitive perspective, Baden and Major [6] asserts that learning is based on 'surface' and 'deep' approaches in order to develop more sophisticated approaches to thinking, called sophisticated thinking.

In this regard, the educational sector plays a crucial role in providing quality education to build better nations by striving for excellence. A study by Selvaraj, *et al.* [7] indicates that four main factors can help improve the Malaysian educational system, namely teaching and learning, governance, globalization, and knowledge-based society. Together, these factors can ensure quality assurance, employability, and

English language competency of Malaysian students. Clearly, efforts to uplift the quality of education in Malaysia have to be given top priority to help provide excellent learning opportunities for students at all levels. Arguably, only through such efforts that the aims to produce the required knowledgeable and skillful workforce, as outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, can be met as planned [8]-[11].

As such, they were fulfilling such requirements entails making important changes to existing practices in the educational sector. For example, educators, being one of the key players in education, need to have not only hard skills but also soft skills. Put simply, their intellectual, emotional, and physical attributes have to be well developed and balanced, especially in dealing with early childhood care and education (ECCE). In the Malaysian context, ECCE encompasses both formal and informal education and care, which are conducted at two main types of centers, namely Childcare Centre (*Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak - TASKA*) and Preschool or Kindergarten (*Taman Didikan Kanak-Kanak - TADIKA*) involving children whose ages range from birth to three years and from four to six years, respectively [12]-[15].

Presently, ECCE (generally referred to as preschool system) is not part of the Malaysian formal educational system that mandates compulsory enrolment of such children [16]. Nonetheless, its importance cannot be emphasized enough as it provides early exposure for young children to the school life and makes them independent. As one of the Malaysian government initiatives conducted through its Ministry of Education, the preschool education is structured based on several successive phases to ensure all children will have equal opportunity and a head start for early education. Thus, for children to experience quality ECCE, early childhood educators, including teacher trainees, need to be knowledgeable and competent, which entails them to undergo professional growth and development on a continual basis. Admittedly, such trainees need to learn new knowledge, acquire new competencies, and attain short- and long-term goals through sound planning of their career path [17]-[20]. To date, the main issues of ECCE in Malaysia are mainly concerned with quality, qualification, language and ethnicity or race [21].

Career pathway refers to an organized approach for career planning by charting a course to identify occupational interests, determine education and training needs, and establish an action plan for reaching career goals [22]. Creating a career pathway begins by evaluating the current state of career awareness and readiness. Identifying a potential career opportunity based on interests, skills, work experiences, and work values are the motivation behind this evaluation. Work values (such as working conditions and potentials of job advancement) are worth identifying because of their connections to career satisfaction. After pinpointing a specific career choice, a reasonable, workable pathway needs to be ascertained with the help of appropriate resources. Figure 1 shows the components of the career development process [23]-[26].



Figure 1. Career development process [22]

A career pathway is directly linked to the goals and objectives set by an individual who starts with self-actualization and self-assessment of one's interests and capabilities, which is then matched with available options [22]. Surely, educators require adequate training by going through professional workshops or courses to improve their knowledge and acquire new skills, which can help them effectively teach children placed in nurseries and kindergartens. Specifically, they need to learn and master all aspects of the ECCE program to become good early childhood education teachers [27]-[30]. Additionally, by learning other aspects of education, such as leadership, good governance, time management, communication management, and team management, they can determine and shape their career paths [22], [30]. In this regard, educators must identify and take relevant courses to improve their professionalism in the educational realm.

Several research findings indicate that income and career path are two external factors that wield significant differential impacts on ECCE educators' career decision. For example, ECCE educators with a higher income and a desirable career path will likely to stay committed with their profession in the long run. By contrast, some findings unveil that several internal factors, such as professionalism and self-esteem, are not important determinants of career decision among ECCE educators. Despite concerted efforts by the Malaysian government, turnover rates of early childhood educators were alarming high as highlighted by 2000-2015 data of Malaysia's Ministry of Education [31]. Surely, such a revelation portends bad news to the ministry's efforts to produce a sufficient number of such professionals.

In light of the above problems, this paper discusses a review on the professional career development of early childhood education educators by focusing on their continual professional growth and development based on short- and long-term goals and their career path planning. In particular, the discussion centers on the findings of studies of pre-service teachers and other related works of literature. The discussion of this paper is organized in several sections. Section 1.0 discusses the main elements of education, concepts of learning, and the teacher trainees' perspective of their professional growth, development, and career path. Then, in Section 2.0, the discussion delves into the specific methodology applied for a preliminary survey (as reported in this paper). Later, in Section 3.0, the paper elaborates the findings regarding continual professional growth and development and career path plans of trainees. Finally, Section 4.0 summarizes the discussion by highlighting the main points raised.

In terms of short- and long-term priorities, missions, and career path preparation, this paper addresses the professional growth and advancement of trainees in early childhood care and education (ECCE). The paper also addresses the required training seminars, courses, modules, and curricula that can be placed in place to further develop their practical skills.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology used in this study involved several steps, namely interview, transcription, coding, intra- and inter-group comparison, categorization, and summarization of quantitative data of pre-service teachers, which helped the researchers to analyze such data descriptively. Figure 2 shows the overall flow of the methodological steps of this study.

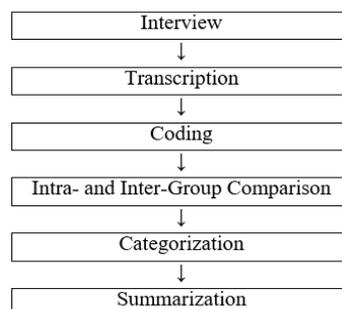


Figure 2. The overall flow of the methodological steps

The first step involved a series of interviews in which several practitioners were recruited to provide their perspectives on the importance of professional growth and development in their careers. Such an approach is deemed appropriate to reveal important information regarding issues or problems that prevail in a particular program or situation [30]. Specifically, the interviewees were made up of four *Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM)* providers and seven *Kursus Asuhan PERMATA (KAP)* providers (their inputs served as the qualitative data of the pre-service teachers). Then, these data were transcribed into more meaningful transcripts, known as the national quality framework (NQF) comprising eight main standards, separated into several components and indicators.

The national quality framework (NQF) is part of the early childhood education and child care policy of the Australian Government, which focuses on providing high-quality, available and affordable integrated early childhood education and child care to Australian families. The NQF seeks to enhance quality and drive continuous improvement and continuity in the services of education and care by: a national legislative framework; a national quality standard; a national quality rating and assessment process; a new national body called the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority.

The inter-rater reliability technique was then applied involving three experts on qualitative research (with vast experience in interviewing techniques) to validate the NQF data. They performed the validation process separately by using a coding scheme developed by the researchers to help them identify and categorize relevant patterns or thematic elements based on relationships of keywords, which helped in the efficient analysis, organization, and interpretation of the research findings. Finally, the findings were summarized based on the research objectives.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed that the trainees had a clear picture of their short-and long-term goals and the need for career path planning and professional growth and development. The awareness is vital not only for the behavioral transformation but also affects attitudinal change and improved intellectual capacity which is even more significant to boost up professionalism levels [32]. In terms of career path planning, the findings indicated that the trainees were aware of the direction that they had to follow in advancing their career, starting by being a teacher, and then by becoming a supervisor, and finally by becoming a manager or an owner of a childcare center or a kindergarten. This is in line with Evans [33] assertion which recommends that ECCE be formed by professional preschool teachers and professional childcare providers.

These trainees were also able to differentiate the specific requirements of various professions in ECCE and foresee new job opportunities relating to ECCE. In other words, these trainees can appropriately re-defined and differentiate the scope and professional roles of ECCE, conceptualized as multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary [34]. Figure 3 shows the path of the career advancement of ECCE teacher trainees.

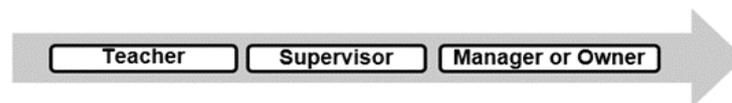


Figure 3. The path of the career advancement of ECCE teacher trainees

As highlighted, the highest attainment in the ECCE profession is to own and manage a nursery, kindergarten, or childcare center. Admittedly, to attain such a feat is not easy, as trainees may have to deal with a myriad of issues and challenges. Obviously, they need to learn the managerial and administrative aspects required to run such a center. Table 1 summarizes the constraints and recommendations in running a childcare center or kindergarten.

Table 1. The constraints and recommendations in running a childcare center or kindergarten

Constraints	Recommendations
Restrictions in the operation of kindergartens or childcare centers.	Supervise the management of nurseries, kindergartens, and pre-schools.
The requirement for management and administrative advice before and after the opening of kindergartens or childcare centers.	Establish nurseries for children with special needs.
Difficulty in managing stress in management.	Relevant authorities to enforce registration licenses and accreditation.
Low-profit rates and poor customer satisfaction.	Distribute classes and activities by age and ability.
The high unemployment rate among postgraduate educators.	Do not enforce children to learn and play.
Restrictions in carrying out certain tasks by male caregivers.	Remind yourself of responsibility, be ethical and be self-fulfilling in your assignment.
Teachers have to put their children to the management to update their management work.	Avoid interfering with personal issues with the management and administration of nursing homes.
Some nursing home employers only benefit from childcare.	Use a variety of teaching aids and set up a comfortable area for leisure activities for children.
Difficulties in getting accurate information about ECCE management.	Requires efficient management and management of nursing homes.
	Teachers need to be creative to improve student learning.

For continual professional growth and development, nine factors were identified as: further study; workshops or courses; salary; bonus; acknowledgment awards; ECCE curriculum; awareness; knowledge, exposure, skills, and experiences; and sports. As suggested by Neuman, *et al.* [31] and Foong, *et al.* [35], the fundamental nature of ECCE quality improvement and access is shaped by competent development, well-trained, and well-supported teachers, as well as the well-being of teachers. Table 2 highlights the detail of each factor relating to the professional growth and development of trainees.

Table 2. The description of key factors in the continual professional development

Key factor	Description
Further study	<p>To become qualified secondary teachers, trainees are encouraged to pursue higher studies through multiple pathways like online education, blended learning and part-time courses [32], such as master's degree and doctoral degree programs in early childhood education at local or international universities.</p> <p>Constraints: Trainees lack opportunities to further their studies at higher levels of education in ECCE.</p> <p>Trainees need to be given more opportunities and freedom by their employers to attend additional workshops or courses to improve and enhance their knowledge and skills in childcare and early childhood education.</p> <p>Trainees should identify courses that can improve their level of professionalism to be on par with those of other teachers.</p> <p>Constraints: Trainees lack information and opportunities to attend relevant workshops or courses organized by key industry players, such as JKM. They also do not have adequate access to the Internet and faced a gap between policy and implementation [36].</p> <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Trainees are required to attend seven courses in a year. – The courses only run on weekends or during holidays. – The courses will only be conducted if the number of participants meets a minimum number. – Trainees have to bear the cost of the courses. If they were sponsored, trainees would be obligated to serve their employers over a longer-term.
Workshops and courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The participation in such courses is not mandatory, as it merely serves to obtain licenses. <p>Recommendations: Employers should bear the cost of training or fees of courses, including transport, food, and lodging or accommodation.</p> <p>The recommended courses for the trainees are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The <i>Kursus Asuhan PERMATA</i> (KAP) course (to help them gain practical experiences). – The PERMATA course (which provides the certification of the PERMATA nursing course). – The PASTI course that encompasses ECCE 1 and ECCE 2 courses, teacher's personality courses and assessments for teacher's eligibility. – The MAKPEM course (which is conducted in a week). – The Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (<i>Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i> Malaysia - JKM) course. – Other relevant courses, such as self-motivational courses, creative and critical teaching aids courses, special education or special needs courses, Islamic courses, and ethical courses that are related to the ECCE curriculum. <p>Note: These courses need to be briefed by JPN on a regular basis.</p> <p>Trainees should be given adequate, competitive salaries in line with their scope of works.</p>
Salaries	<p>Drawbacks: Typically, trainees' salaries are generally low and substantially below the Malaysian Minimum Wages Order 2016 of RM 1000 [37], as they are paid based on the number of days that they have worked. Furthermore, there are no systematic guidelines for employers to follow for the salary increment of their workers.</p>
Bonuses	<p>Trainees should be given sufficient incentives, such as annual bonuses, to motivate them to work harder and to feel appreciated.</p>
Acknowledgement awards	<p>Events for acknowledgment awards at the regional, state, and national levels should be conducted once a year to acknowledge excellent teachers.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The ECCE curriculum should use the PERMATA module, the KAP curriculum, and the PASTI module and curriculum. – The curriculum needs to be consistent with children's developmental stages until they reach the age of entering primary school. – A strong emphasis should be given to the latest modules, curricula, and programs. – The implementation of the curriculum, teaching activities, and the management of ECCE based on the KAP requirements entails strong development in trainees' practical skills.
The ECCE curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The ECCE curriculum must be implemented with the knowledge and understanding of the TASKA or TADIK management. – The ECCE Act in KAP needs to be briefed to all concerned. – Regularly refer to JKM regarding ECCE program affairs. <p>Drawbacks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The ECCE curriculum focuses more on the theoretical aspects rather than on the practical aspects. – Too much emphasis on academic achievements than on ECCE goals involving the sound development of children's personalities, emotions, behaviors, and manners. – Trainees lack adequate exposure to a wide range of skills in ECCE that can help them create engaging and innovative learning activities.
Awareness	<p>Trainees should be made aware of the importance of professional growth and development in ECCE fields by exploring new things.</p>
Knowledge, exposure, skills and experiences	<p>Trainees should learn relevant learning theories, such as Vygotsky's constructivist learning theory, to help them teach children with special needs more effectively.</p> <p>Trainees should gain a firm understanding of the proper use of technical tools and applications.</p> <p>Trainees should prioritize their teaching works by taking children's ages into account.</p>
Sports	<p>Sporting events need to be organized involving teachers, children, parents, and management staff.</p>

As revealed, employers need to provide support for their trainees in their professional growth and development, including competitive salaries, monetary incentives (such as bonuses), and acknowledgment awards. In addition, trainees should be given accurate information regarding available opportunities for their

career path development through which they can upgrade their profession from being a teacher to a supervisor and to a manager or an owner of a childcare center. As highlighted by Dupree [38], by learning new skills like leadership, good governance, time management, communication management, team management and so forth can help to develop and shape their careers. Consequently, individual readiness along with employer's motivation and concerted efforts from all agencies are important factors that must work together to embrace future changes [32]. They should refer to a career pathway framework, which was conceptualized in this study as the Career Pathway Framework for ECCE, which can guide them to develop their profession to higher levels. Essentially, this framework comprises several key factors or concepts, namely, skills, goals, awareness, assessment, and performance.

Such a framework can help the stakeholders, particularly ECCE educators (teachers, trainees, and caretakers), to identify factors that can help practitioners to improve their professions by focusing on the opportunities, constraints, and recommendations related to their professional growth and development. Using such a framework, they can plan and take appropriate measures to equip themselves with relevant knowledge and skills that can help them become highly competent ECCE professionals. As such, this framework needs to be aligned with established standards to facilitate its implementation in all TASKA and TADIKA centers at the state and national levels, given that providers of ECCE services involve both public and private sectors. With no standards having been aligned with such a framework yet, more studies are, therefore, needed to determine the full impact of the Career Pathway Framework for ECCE on the current practice among practitioners.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning in the 21st century are becoming more challenging as children need to learn new knowledge and acquire a new set of skills deemed essential in this technology-driven era. Likewise, ECCE teacher trainees need to learn new knowledge and acquire new skills to become effective teachers in the future. Surely, trainees should take appropriate measures to attain strong professional growth and development that focus on the acquisition of new knowledge, competencies, and short- and long-term goals through proper career path planning. In this study, a framework called Career Pathway Framework for ECCE was developed to highlight all aspects of the advancement of the professional growth and development of such trainees. The use of this framework can help trainees to focus on factors that can help them advance their career more effectively while their employers can focus on the types of support, encompassing both financial and motivational aspects, which can help their employees to achieve a rewarding, self-fulfilling career in ECCE.

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