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Exploring Sustainability within the Preschool Education System in Malaysia

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Abstract

Education for sustainable development (ESD) within preschool education is relatively a new emerging field since 2010. Many researchers concur that ESD should begin in young children due to their potential to act as change agents and foster new attitudes toward a sustainable society. This article sought to explore the features of sustainable development within the preschool education system in Malaysia using secondary data as the basis for comparison. It was found that the preschool education in Malaysia is provided by the government and the private sectors. Public preschools when combined, have been observed to be more accessible due to the enrolment rate and low fee imposed that made them more affordable. Features of ESD is visible in the teaching and learning in both public and private preschools, reflected through the learning objectives, content and materials. However, private preschools are deemed to have more quality based on teacher's qualification, smaller ratio and class size. In addition, private preschools have more enriched teaching and learning resources. In conclusion, there is a need to review the structure of the early childhood education system both within the public and private educational institutions to ensure that sustainable education is attainable.

Keywords: Preschool, Early Childhood, Education for Sustainable Development, ESD, ECCE

Introduction

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) defines preschool education as "specifically structured programmes that incorporate educational content for children aged 3 and above until the start of primary education, which is usually around the age of 6". The preschool's philosophy is to establish a holistic environment in which children feel at ease even while they are away from home. Children who have participated in high quality preschool education demonstrates considerable gains in social, educational, health and intellectual spheres, distinctively different from children who have not (Yoshikawa & Kabay, 2014). According to previous research, preschool is important in a child's growth not just for academic performance but also for psychomotor, affective, and mental development. Furthermore, preschool education also strives to expose children to well-established teaching outside of their family setting (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019). This notion is consistent with the goal of sustainable development, which is to create individuals

who are physically, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually balanced for the future. Early childhood is a natural starting point for education for sustainable development because it has been found that young children have the potential to be a significant change agent in influencing sustainable development (Samuelsson & Katz, 2008). In fact, the importance of young children and pre-school education has been specifically highlighted in SDG 4.2 which call all UN Members to provide “Equal access to quality pre-primary education” (*Agenda 21* ∴ *Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*, n.d.). Preschool education also helps children prepare for primary school through developing literacy, emotional, and social skills. Along with academic abilities, the education a child receives in preschool helps develop communication skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Children exposed to preschool learning environment have a greater likelihood of success not just in school, but in life as a whole (Ting, 2018). The spirit and leadership of the early childhood setting holds a crucial power to develop sustainable citizens of the future. Therefore, this article aims to *explore the early childhood and preschool education in Malaysia; outline a brief comparison on preschools in Malaysia in both public and private; and examine the features of ESD within the preschool education in Malaysia.*

Methodology

The methodology used to arrive at these findings and discussions in this paper includes references to secondary data, namely data published by The Ministry of Education. Other than that, the author also refers to publications presented or published in various sources of journals pertaining to early childhood and preschool education, education for sustainable development within early childhood education as well as policies and regulations related to preschool education established by the government of Malaysia.

Early Childhood and Preschool Education in Malaysia

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Malaysia existed since 1950s and has flourished in the 1960s (Rawai et al., 2021). The National Policy for Early Childhood Education was developed to address the various needs of children from birth to age six and was devised to represent the importance that the government placed on this sector (Boon, 2010). Currently, Malaysia's governance structure for ECCE is separated into two distinct groups: the early childhood care for children aged 0 to 4 years old and preschool education for children aged 5 to 6 (Foong et al., 2014). The early childcare components for children from birth to age 4 falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (MWFCD) while the Ministry of Education is in charge of the preschool component for children age 5 to 6 years old (Ting, 2018). The ECE policy and implementation for children aged 0 to 4 generally focuses on providing guidelines for their physical and mental development, protection, safety, health, and well-being, with little emphasis on preparing them for formal primary education whereas the ECCE policy and programs for children age 5 – 6 focuses more on preparing the children for primary education, often referred to as preschool education (Anip, 2008). According to Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2035, around 77 percent of pupils are presently engaged in some type of preschool education (public or private), and the aim is to achieve universal enrollment through the Education National Key Results Area (NKRA) in the Government Transformational Program (GTP). Thus, the Ministry aspires to ensure universal access and full enrollment of all children by encouraging every kid aged five and older to be enrolled in a registered preschool, whether public or private (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013).

Malaysia has three ministries responsible for preschool education. They are the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD), and the Prime Minister's Department of National Unity and Integration (Mustafa et al., 2013). MRRD was identified to have been the pioneer in setting up pre-school education in Malaysia back in 1970s branding it as *Tadika KEMAS* located in rural and suburban area. *Tadika KEMAS* operate in community halls or rented spaces in private properties, housing estates, separate structures set by the MRRD. *Tadika KEMAS* enrolment capacity is between 20 -30 children per classroom. Recognizing the gap, Department of National Unity and Integration (now known as the Ministry of National Unity and Integration - MNUI) subsequently took on the task of establishing preschools for young children in urban areas in response to requests from community leaders known as *Rukun Tetangga* (Ting, 2018). MNUI's preschools were obliged to accept children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in order to foster unity among Malaysia's ethnicities. *Tadika Perpaduan* has about 25-30 children per classroom. The preschools operate in community halls or rented spaces in private properties, separate structures or places provided for free by the local councils. The Ministry of Education was the final ministry to establish preschool education in Malaysia through a pilot project in 1992 as an addition to the primary school system. The project was completed in 2003 nationwide (Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, 2008). The preschools under the Ministry of Education (MoE), operates within the government school compound. the children could be living in urban areas, semi-urban, rural and remote areas, priorities however is given to those children who are from the low income families (Ting, 2018)

Apart from MoE preschools, *Tadika KEMAS* and *Tadika Perpaduan*, there is another public provider of preschool in Malaysia which is the state religious department - *Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri (JAIN)*. Religious department from every state will establish their own preschools that incorporated religious features in their teaching and learning concept. Besides the public preschools, there is also non-governmental agency and private organizations offering preschool education in Malaysia. As at 28th February 2019, there were a total of 25,140 preschools nationwide with 818,447 children aged 5 – 6 enrolled into the preschool education as shown in Table 1 below

Table 1
Preschools in Malaysia

Types of Preschool	Name of Preschool	Agency	Number of Classes	Number of Teachers	Number of Enrolment
Public	<i>Prasekolah, KPM</i>	Ministry of Education	9,465	9,311	205,200
Public	<i>Tadika KEMAS</i>	Department of Community Development, Ministry of Rural & Regional Development	11,082	10,925	215,229
Public	<i>Tadika Perpaduan</i>	Department of National	1,781	3,478	37,964

Types of Preschool	Name of Preschool	Agency	Number of Classes	Number of Teachers	Number of Enrolment
		Unity and Integration, Ministry of National Unity			
Public	<i>Tadika JAIN</i>	State Religious Body	1,705	2,774	31,652
TOTAL PUBLIC PRESCHOOLS			24,213	26,488	490,045
NGO	<i>Tadika ABIM</i>	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)</i>	513	470	7,860
Private	Private Preschools Nationwide	Smart Reader Kids, Little Caliph, Qdees etc	29,558	31,587	320,542
GRAND TOTAL			54,284	58,545	818,447

Source: Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE), 2019

According to the description above, both public and private organisations are involved in the implementation of preschool education in Malaysia. Participation in Malaysia's preschool education system by multiple institutions may increase the risk of agency fragmentation, which may impede the continuity features necessary for children's development in early education. The common goals of preschool education are more difficult to achieve in this environment because they contradict the early education philosophy, which promotes continuity.

Comparison Between Public and Private Preschools in Malaysia

Similarities between Public and Private Preschools in Malaysia

All preschools in Malaysia are required to adhere to the National Standard of Preschool Curriculum as stipulated in the National Education Act 1996, which gives freedom for schools to use either National Language, English, Tamil and Chinese as the medium of instruction (Sahib & Stapa, 2021). According to Mustafa & Azman (2013), the preschools in Malaysia have the following features

- i) One standard curriculum for all preschools, including the private preschools to use as guide in their teaching and learning environment;
- ii) The curriculum emphasize on creating and developing holistic human being for sustainable behaviour;
- iii) All preschools in the country should be certified and licensed by Ministry of Education Malaysia based on the rules and regulations set by the country;
- iv) The age for preschools children are from 4 to 6 years old in the private preschools and 5 to 6 for the public preschools; and
- v) Emphasise quality and safety in the preschool learning environment;

Differences between Public and Private Preschools in Malaysia

Although all preschools must adhere to the National Standard of Preschool Curriculum – *Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan* (KSPK) developed by the Ministry of Education, there are slight differences in terms of content, learning environment, quality of teacher training, and learning facilities between public and private preschools (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). The differences between the public and private preschools in Malaysia is discussed further in Table 2 below;

Table 2

Comparison Between Public and Private Preschools in Malaysia

Items Discussed	Public Preschools	Private Preschools
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal fee charge ranging from RM0 – RM25 per month; • All expenses for the preschool children are provided for including meals and learning materials; and • Parents are encouraged to contribute minimal fee of RM25 monthly for miscellaneous expenses (e.g. boxes of tissues for classroom usage etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fee is more expensive ranging from RM350 to more than RM1,000 per month • Fee includes learning materials and meals. • Most private preschools offer extra classes including reading, music class, drama class and etcetera.
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public preschools are implemented by Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (Tadika KEMAS), Ministry of Unity and Integration (Tadika Perpaduan) and state Religious Body; • Preschool education accessibility is best indicated by the number classes offered and the number of enrolment of children into the preschools; • As at 28th February 2019, a total of 24,213 preschool classes were offered by the public preschools with 490,045 children enrolment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As at 31st February 2019, there were a total of 29,558 private preschools classes offered registered with 320,542 children enrolled.
Quality	Teachers' Qualification: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum qualification is Diploma in Early Childhood Education (ECCE); • Mostly trained locally 	Teachers' Qualification: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum qualification is Diploma in Early Childhood Education.

Items Discussed	Public Preschools	Private Preschools
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many have degree in non-related ECCE field • Regular training (minimum of 5 days / year) <p>Class Size (Teacher to student ratio):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MoE Preschool 1: 20 - 25 • Tadika KEMAS 1: 20 - 25 • Tadika Perpaduan – 1: 20 - 25 • 1 teacher’s assistant for every class <p>Facilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built by the government. • Within the public primary school compounds, community hall / building • Shared resources. • Within the community hall/building of that particular area of community. • Located on the ground in an open area where children get to go out and play. • Playgrounds available within the school compounds <p>Teaching and Learning Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher centred learning • Specific / standard activity book outlined and provided by the related ministries • emphasize on social and emotional development. • content is centrally controlled by the related ministries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some have Master’s Degree in related field trained locally and even overseas. <p>Class Size (Teacher to student ratio):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: 15 - 20 <p>Facilities;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rented space in a building. • Located on the ground /first floor • Small indoor play area for children due to the limited space. <p>Teaching and Learning Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized on cognitive development. • Flexible to adjust their methods of delivery • Teacher’s own creativity • Focus on children’s potential • Enrich their contents and programs (e.g. drama class, martial arts class or even ballet and modern dance) • Able to establish their own set of regulations to suit their own mission and vision.
Safety	<p>Location:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single story building 	<p>Location:</p>

Items Discussed	Public Preschools	Private Preschools
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large area for children to move and play around. • Easy for teachers to evacuate the children should there be any emergency like fire. <p>Class Size:</p> <p>The large number of students impose risks of safety should there be any emergency situation because evacuating children during emergency requires more effort. One teacher may have difficulty to ensure every children's safety during emergency and many children may cause delay in evacuation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within a building, either rented or owned by the principal/owner of the preschool. • Many are found located at first floor of a shop lots building. • The children enjoyed indoor play area with minimal space. <p>Class Size:</p> <p>The ratio of teacher to students in private preschool is 1 to 15 – 20 children. This small number makes it more manageable for the teachers in case of emergency.</p>

Features of Education for Sustainable Development within the Preschool Education System in Malaysia

The importance of young children and pre-school education has been specifically highlighted in SDG 4.2 which call all UN Members to provide "Equal access to quality pre-primary education" (*THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*, n.d.). The statement further reiterates that by 2020, all committed countries need to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. Tagged along under the same theme is SDG 4.7 which specified Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as the way forward towards achieving Agenda 2030. The goal further emphasise that all learners should gain the knowledge and skills necessary to support sustainable growth by 2030 which include education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms that all children are entitled to education (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, n.d.) and Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainable development promoting basic primary education with the recognition of early childhood as the foundations for inculcating fundamental attitudes and values that support the development of sustainable society (Hedefalk et al., 2015). As stated by many studies, preschool education attempts to foster children's developmental learning and growth in their cognitive, emotional, physical, and social abilities, all of which are critical for their preparedness for primary school (Barnett & Nores, 2012).

Accessibility and Affordability

Previous studies have emphasised the significance of early access to education in light of the objectives and principles of sustainable development. Based on the data gathered, the Malaysian government has made a great effort in ensuring that preschool institution is accessible and available nationwide regardless of the location. The government of Malaysia through the three ministries have divided the function to implement preschool education in rural, urban and sub urban areas. This effort ensures that all children in the country have access to preschool education. Apart from that, the fee for public preschool education is also very low (RM0 – RM25 per month only). Charging low fee is considered as one of the effort to make the preschool education accessible and affordable especially for the children from the low income households. As for the parents who can afford to pay for their children's education, their option are kept open with various types of preschools available in the private institutions.

Quality

Preschool education quality has a substantial impact on academic and social development. The government of Malaysia also went to a great length in ensuring quality within the preschool education. Although quality is very subjective, there are several indicators that we could use to indicate the level of quality in preschool education including teachers' qualification, teacher to student ratio, facilities and teaching and learning approach.

Teachers' Qualification

The Ministry of Education have set that by 2020, all preschool teachers whether public or private must possess Diploma in Early Childhood Education as their minimum qualification. Therefore, those with lower qualification were urged to upgrade themselves before the year 2020.

Based on the data collected, most teachers in public preschools have Diploma in Early Childhood Education. This is due to the policy decision made by the Ministry of Education to upgrade the public preschool teachers qualification from SPM/STPM to at least having a Diploma in ECCE. This is one of the effort from the Ministry to increase quality in public preschool education system. As for the private preschools, they have started to employ teachers with minimum qualification of Diploma in ECCE. This is how they pitch quality preschool education to parents and it also became one of the very significant factor in their fee structure.

Class Size

The teacher to student ratio in private preschools is 1 teacher to 15 students. The number is relatively smaller when compared to the ratio in public preschools. This ratio allows teacher to manage the class effectively and have the ability to control the class. That way, the process of teaching and learning will be carried out more effectively.

Facilities

Most facilities for public preschools are built by the government. The MoE preschools for example are implemented within the public primary school compounds where the facilities and resources are shared. As for KEMAS preschools, the classroom are normally identified by the related ministry (either built or rented). Tadika KEMAS and Tadika Perpaduan normally establish their preschools classroom within the community hall/building of that

particular area of community. The classrooms are normally located on the ground in an open area where children get to go out and play. There are also playgrounds available within the school compounds

Even though the majority of private preschools are located in a closed space / rented space in a building, their facilities are better to public preschools because they have the purchasing power with very less bureaucracy. Public preschool children, on the other hand, have more space to jump and play than private preschool children, but private preschool students have a much better experience with science and technology than public preschool children.

Teaching and Learning Approach

Private preschool education systems place a greater emphasis on the child's potential, and teaching and learning methods are geared for the child's own experience. This strategy corresponds to children's innate curiosity. This strategy is deemed to be more appropriate for children's development and in harmony with the principles for sustainable development. Even though they must follow the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPK), the teaching style at private preschools is more focused on cognitive development, therefore they have more freedom to adapt their methods of delivery based on children's potential as long as the fundamental objectives are met. Private preschools can also enhance their programmes and contents, including drama classes, martial arts classes, or even ballet and modern dance, because they do not have budget constraints; all will be charged to consenting parents. This will provide more opportunities and experience for the children to realise their full potential.

The Impact of Covid-19 Preschool Children in Malaysia

When the Covid-19 pandemic hits the world, many sectors were affected including education. Classes need to be switched to online learning. Preschool teachers are required to plan and conduct virtual sessions using tools like Zoom. This gives preschools a way to keep on learning while maintaining a good rapport between teachers and students. However, the teaching and learning process is not so straightforward. Hands-on learning and face-to-face interaction are essential components of preschool curricula. As a result, parental involvement in lessons was usually required. Many preschools provided learning materials to parents, along with teaching instructions, to ensure that the learning process continues even when there was no physical classes held. To keep track of their children's progress, parents would send teachers videos or photographs of them participating in activities. The learning process for preschool children during pandemic ultimately depends on their parents' engagement with the preschool activities provided by the teachers.

Conclusion

Preschools, both public and private, generate and create a better learning experience for children before they begin formal / primary education. Private and public preschools focus on instilling values and norms in children so that they can interact well and be accepted in society. Preschools in Malaysia are designed in accordance with UNICEF principles, which call for early childhood education to establish an optimum environment for children's cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor domains. According to the preceding research, children who attend preschool education in both the private and public sectors are more competent than those who are not exposed to school life.

From the preceding literature, children attending preschool education in private and public sectors are more competent than those who do not get exposure to school life. There is, nevertheless, a quality difference between public and private preschools in terms of teacher-to-student ratio, learning resources, and teaching approach. Private preschools provide substantial and diversified teaching and learning resources. Preschools with adequate teaching and learning facilities produce more sustainable children since they are exposed to a wide range of experiences while in kindergarten.

In general, public preschools provide more access to preschool education, but private preschools have been observed to provide better quality for children whose families are financially empowered. This is because they are profit-making organisations with less bureaucracy and the ability to provide better amenities with reasonable fees and charges.

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