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Abstract

The quality of education has always been of public interest globally. Quality education should begin at the entry point of preschool programme. Policy documents chart the policy target and direction for individual country. However, the highlight of preschool quality issues in this form of documents have been minimally assessed. The study aimed at evaluating the emphasis of Malaysia policy documents towards the topic of preschool quality and examining the issue of structural quality elements in these documents. Seven policy documents on education quality in Malaysia, consisting of four macro policy documents and three preschool specific documents were examined. The data were analysed qualitatively by using content analysis. It is found that quality education in general was mentioned repetitively in all four macro policy documents , i.e., Shared Prosperity Vision, 11th and 12th Malaysia Plan, and Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB). However, there were fewer mentions on specific quality of early childhood care and education (ECCE), childcare, and preschool education across these documents, except MEB. Similarly, structural quality was found to be less mentioned than process quality in all three preschool specific documents examined – 1) National Standard Preschool Curriculum, 2) National Standard Preschool Quality, and 3) Guideline on Preschool Management. Thus, future research is worth directed towards examining the policy implementation of structural quality rather than process quality of preschool education, particularly in Malaysia settings.
Keywords: Content Analysis, Malaysia, Policy Documents, Preschool Quality, Structural Quality.

Introduction

In 2016, The United Nations (UN) ratified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to serve as benchmarks for every nation to ensure global prosperity, protection of the planet and eradication of poverty (UN, 2015). Goal Four of the SDGs is *quality education and it ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all*

(UN, 2015). It clearly spells out a unique goal focusing solely on education. This specific goal calls for a quality education; not merely providing access to any education. It is a huge step in ensuring that all children have a quality education, right from preschool programme up to the tertiary level.

The benefits of quality early childhood experiences are indisputable as more studies have demonstrated the positive results of high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) on child outcomes (Duncan and Magnuson, 2013; Bakken et al., 2017). These benefits have recently spurred many countries to prioritise preschool programmes in their national plans and pursue a quality preschool agenda (Duncan et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016). There are, however, important issues emerging as numerous agencies have started to provide preschool education. According to Mustafa at al (2013), the structural quality variation among the preschool providers includes, but not limited to classroom size, teacher-student ratio and teachers' qualification. Besides that, different regulations set by different implementing agencies have also resulted in a vague and unclear guideline on the overall standard quality of public preschool programme (Boon, 2010). Policy documents chart the policy target and direction for individual country. However, the highlights of preschool issues, particularly the quality issue, in this form of documents have been minimally assessed. The objectives of this article are to gain more insight into how policy documents in Malaysia focus on the topics of preschool quality and to examine how the issue of structural quality elements have been elaborated and discussed in these documents. Presently, there is a lack of study done on the representation of preschool quality in Malaysian policy documents.

Literature Review

Defining and measuring the preschool quality is a complex task. There is no single or universal definition of quality as it varies by national and international context. While there is no definite meaning of quality, the concept obviously includes both structural and process elements (Hu et al., 2016). Although consideration to the process factors of what children experience in the preschool settings are essential (Slot et al., 2018), it is equally obvious that the crucial element in terms of achieving quality also relates to what made up the preschool settings, such as class size, adult-child ratio, and teachers' qualification, which is known as structural quality (Hu et al., 2017). Structural variables are precursors to process quality (Hu et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Li et al., 2016; Slot et al., 2018), which in turn is most strongly related to child development, well-being and learning. Therefore, in view of enhancing process quality, the focus should be directed towards improving the structural quality aspects as well.

Studies worldwide revealed that preschool education programmes in many countries were conducted by multiple agencies, which have resulted in quality variations of the service provided. In the United States, for example, preschool programmes are provided at multiple levels of government's involvement (federal, state, and sometimes local) (Hartman et al., 2016). These programmes are largely decentralised, with primary responsibility lying at the state level, rather than federal (Hartman et al., 2016). Each programme is guided by specific goals about service provision and target population. Therefore, programme differences exist in the aspects of programme design, community involvement, human resources, staff training, and quality assurance (Hartman et al., 2016). In Denmark, the preschool programmes provision is put under the obligation of municipalities or the local level. Denmark has 98 municipalities, with each offering different types of preschool programmes (Slot et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018). Though preschools in Denmark are publicly funded; ironically, these

programmes are not even regulated at the state level (Slot et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018). Almost similar to the United States, preschool programmes in Austria are regulated in 9 Austrian federal states. Due to that, there is no uniform level of legislation regarding preschool education in Austria (Smidt, 2018).

In the context of Asia, China has the majority of preschool programmes funded by the private sector, while public preschools are funded by a variety of public agencies (Hu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017). However, studies found that public preschools in China are of higher quality than the private ones due to its superior policies (Hu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017). Preschool programmes in Singapore, on the other hand, are funded predominantly by the private sector including community organisations, religious groups, and social and business entities (Tan, 2017). The Singaporean government focuses only on the regulatory role, leaving the provision of preschool education to the private sector (Tan, 2017). Indonesia is quite similar to the United States, whereby it has a variety of preschool programmes with different purposes and are administered by multiple ministries (Brinkman et al., 2017). The two main ones, kindergarten and playgroup, are under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Brinkman et al., 2017). However, interestingly, Indonesia is amongst the countries that have a standard national policy on structural quality (Brinkman et al., 2017).

Preschool education in Malaysia is similar to China, with both public and private sectors providing the service (Mustafa et al., 2013). Public preschools, that mainly focus on social obligation functions, are funded by both federal and state government (Boon, 2010). In contrast, private-run centers are geared towards profit-making orientation without neglecting the main objective of providing quality preschool education (Mustafa at al., 2013). State-funded preschools are run by the State Islamic Religious Department (Boon, 2010; Mustafa et al., 2013), while federal-funded preschool programmes are provided by three different agencies, namely the Ministry of Education (MoE), Department of Community Development, Ministry of Rural Development (the local acronym is KEMAS), and Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister's Department (local acronym is JPNIN) (Boon, 2010; Mustafa at al., 2013). In the last two decades, preschool institutions including those funded by the state as well as private and NGO-run have mushrooming nationwide (Mustafa at al., 2013). Preschools operated by these providers complement the federal government's effort in providing quality education to children aged four to six years old, especially to parents who can afford to pay for the service (Mustafa at al., 2013).

Method

This article examines Malaysia's policy documents related to preschool quality in general, and further investigates specific documents on structural and process quality aspects of preschool programme. A selection of seven policy documents related to the quality of education in Malaysia, ranging from macro perspective right to specific documents highlighting specific elements of preschool quality, were identified based on literature search. These were later confirmed by the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department and Ministry of Education (MoE) officials as well as preschool experts and preschool teachers in Malaysia.

The Shared Prosperity Vision (SPV), a macro-based blueprint of the country's 10-year visions (Ministry of Economic Affairs Malaysia, 2019), formed the basis for the quality settings in this article. The 11th and 12th Malaysia Plan, a comprehensive outline of five-year macro development plan comprising of policies and strategies for the country (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2015 & 2021), were also selected as the guiding documents on the overall

quality of education in Malaysia. The fourth policy document examined in this article was Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB), a broad target document for education sector in Malaysia, ranging from basic preschool programmes to post-secondary education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

As for the three specific preschool policy documents, the selected ones were 1) National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC) or *Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan*, 2) National Standard Preschool Quality (NSPQ) or *Standard Kualiti Prasekolah Kebangsaan*, and 3) Guideline on Preschool Management or *Garis Panduan Pengurusan Prasekolah*. Unlike the macro policy documents that were in English, all of these preschool specific documents were in Bahasa Melayu.

NSPC establishes that all preschools regardless of their types are required to adhere to it (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). It is a tool to unify and standardise programmes run by various providers (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). NSPQ, another focused policy document on preschool programme, is a self-assessment tool designed to measure both the structural as well as process quality of preschool programme (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Similar to NSPC, NSPQ is also imposed for compliance by all the preschool providers (Mustafa at al., 2013). The third policy document, Guideline on Preschool Management, is a very specific guideline on preschool management and is applicable only to preschool programmes under MoE known as *prasekolah* (Boon, 2010; Mustafa et al., 2013). This document is more of a guideline on preschool administration rather than a policy document per se.

There were two separate sets of inclusion criteria applied for the macro policy documents and preschool specific documents. The inclusion criteria that guided the selection process in the macro policy documents were quality education, quality ECCE, quality childcare, and quality preschool. Meanwhile, several inclusion criteria involved in preschool specific documents were in Bahasa Melayu as the examined documents were in that language. Structural quality (*kualiti struktur*) and process quality (*kualiti proses*) were later broken down into details. The operationalised definition of each keyword used for this research is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
The Operationalised Definition of the Keywords.

Keyword	Explanation
Quality education	Quality education in general
Quality ECCE	Covers specifically on the quality of early childhood care and education
Quality childcare	Focuses on the quality of childcare only
Quality preschool	Exclusively concentrates on the quality of preschool. Preschool quality is categorised into two: structural and process quality
Structural quality (*kualiti strukur*) - Teachers (*guru*) - Student management assistant (*Pembantu pengurusan murid*) - Administrator (*pentadbir*) - Class area (r*uang kelas*) - Surrounding (*persekitaran*)	Refers to the factors that could be regulated or controlled by policies set by the relevant government agencies, such as teachers and staff, school area and surrounding as well as furniture and equipment

- Furniture (*perabot*) - Equipment (*Peralatan/ kelengkapan*)	
<u>Process quality (*kualiti proses*)</u> - Teaching and learning material (*bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran*) - Curriculum (*kurikulum*) - Interaction (*interaksi*)	Directly shapes the educational experiences of children while in schools. It also refers to the interactive activities that children experience in classrooms such as management of learning materials based on curriculum as well as in-class interactions

The data were analysed qualitatively by using content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful materials) to the context of their use (Krippendorf, 2004). It is a method used to describe written, verbal or graphic communications, and later develop a quantitative description from a qualitative one. Specifically, this paper employed a summative content analysis method, whereby the main goal was to discover underlying meaning of data by quantifying words.

The data analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis and the NVivo software version 13 was employed to assist the data management. Thematic analysis involved few steps (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis began with searching for occurrences of the identified keywords. The find function of the PDF documents was utilised to search for the occurrences of keywords. To verify the number of occurrence of keywords, the text search function in NVivo 13 was also employed. Keyword frequency counted for each identified term was later calculated. Counting was used to identify patterns in the data and to contextualise the codes. The occurrence of keywords indicates how often the keywords were mentioned across the policy documents examined. Data occurrence provides insight into the significance of specific keywords. Therefore, the higher the occurrence of the keywords, the higher the level of interest in or discussion of that keywords across the documents.

Later, the analysis of patterns led to an interpretation of the contextual meaning of specific terms or content. Open coding process was employed to identify the relevance and meaning of related keywords. Such process allowed the authors to become familiar with the data through thorough reading and re-reading of the documents. This process was followed by coding text relating to the keywords by highlighting visible or underlying phrases or segments of data. It was later reviewed and refined to represent ideas and patterns of meaning. At the final stage of coding, a main theme and its sub themes were formed to represent the main ideas and contextual meanings of the data.

Results and Discussion
The seven policy documents were examined to explore the national emphasis on quality education, particularly preschool education; whether issues of structural quality elements in preschool programme were being elaborated and discussed thoroughly. Table 2 and 3 summarise the findings according to macro policy documents and preschool specific documents, respectively.

Macro Policy Documents
It is found that quality education, in general, was mentioned in all four macro policy documents, i.e., SPV, 11th and 12th Malaysia Plan as well as MEB. Five mentions of quality education were found in SPV, 18 mentions in the 11th Malaysia Plan, 40 mentions in the 12th Malaysia Plan, and 38 mentions in MEB.

However, there were fewer mentions on the specific quality of ECCE, childcare, and preschool education than education in general across four macro policy documents examined, except MEB. Four mentions of ECCE found in the 11th Malaysia Plan and increased to seven in the 12th Malaysia Plan, with the most mentions of 13 found in MEB. As for the quality of childcare, all the macro policy documents did mention about it, with the most mentions of 13 found in the 11th Malaysia Plan, followed by 11 mentions in MEB, 6 in the 12th Malaysia Plan dan 2 mentions in SPV. 16 mentions of quality preschool were found in 11th and 12th Malaysia Plan each and the most 122 mentions were found in MEB. No specific mention of quality ECCE was found in SPV though; it only touched on the quality of education in general. SPV also did not mention anything about the quality of preschool programme.

Majority of the quality preschool mentions (79%) were found in MEB. Of the total quality mentioned in the 11th Malaysia Plan, only 31% was related to the quality of preschool. While the 12th Malaysia Plan reported a slightly lower percentage of preschool quality mentions, that is 23% of the total of 69 quality mentions. Details of the keyword mentions found in the macro policy documents are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2
Analysis of the Four Macro Policy Documents Based on Keyword.

Keyword	Shared Prosperity Vision	11th Malaysia Plan	12th Malaysia Plan	Malaysia Education Blueprint
Quality education	5 mentions	18 mentions	40 mentions	38 mentions
Quality ECCE	-	4 mentions	7 mentions	13 mentions
Quality childcare	2 mentions	13 mentions	6 mentions	11 mentions
Quality preschool	-	16 mentions	16 mentions	122 mentions

In 11th Malaysia Plan, the needs for physical and digital infrastructure as well as facilities were specifically mentioned as the crucial structural requirement for preschool programme, apart from the teachers' quality. Though these two elements were highlighted as the requirement, they were also listed as the challenging factors in implementing standard structural quality of preschool programme. Location variation was also listed as another challenge in implementing standard structural quality. The 11th Malaysia Plan suggested improving the quality of teachers through training as well as improving access of vulnerable groups to quality ECCE programme. This is in line with what was highlighted by Smidt (2018) in the case of Austria that needs academic training for preschool teachers besides the need for ECCE research infrastructure establishment. His proposition was supported by Tan (2017) who emphasises on the need of uplifting teachers, centers, and programmes, apart from enhancing the affordability and accessibility of preschool education in Singapore.

As a continuation of the 11th Malaysia Plan, 12th Malaysia Plan later, specifically highlighted the need for teachers' quality and facilities requirements. Meanwhile accessibility and affordability were listed as the challenging factors in implementing standard structural

quality, apart from the provision of facilities, where found lacking. Overlapping functions among agencies was also an issue that could lead to quality discrepancies. A similar situation was observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina whereby the decentralised management and fragmented administration of preschool education system has resulted in quality issue (Camović & Bećirović-Karabegović, 2022). The 12th Malaysia Plan recommended the need for subsidising the poor to provide affordable childcare education. It also touched on upgrading the quality of teachers and enhancing quality assurance through training of the quality inspectorate team. Coming from the policy implementation perspective, similar suggestions were highlighted by Boon (2010) to ensure successful implementation of preschool policies, ranging from effective dissemination of policies, and maintaining a sustainable monitoring mechanism to coordination and integration aspects.

Similarly, MEB highlighted the need for not only infrastructure, but also facilities, optimum class size, information and communication technology (ICT) elements as well as teachers as structural quality requirements for preschool programme. Meanwhile, the imposition of national quality standard and minimum teachers' qualification were listed as part of the challenges in implementing standard structural quality nationwide. MEB proposed the need for regular inspection and accreditation apart from strengthening the funding element and enhancing teachers' quality. Typically, governments aim to deliver high-quality ECCE and recognise the need for greater regulation to achieve high-quality ECCE (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Brinkman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018). Turkey in particular, according to Kaçan et al (2021) is focusing on the quality, scope and accessibility of ECCE and is planning to impose ECCE as mandatory education for five year old children. Majzub (2013) summed up on the pertinent issues on preschool education that encompassed not only curriculum and teachers' training, but also equity and accessibility as well as assessment and monitoring of preschool centers.

Preschool Specific Documents

Similar to the case of preschool programme as compared to education in general, structural quality was found to be less mentioned than process quality in all three preschool specific documents examined, namely NSPC, NSPQ and Guideline on Preschool Management.

At the first glance, process quality had a higher number of mentions as compared to structural quality even though the keywords employed were fewer. Teaching and learning material (*bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran*) represented the largest mentions across the three preschool specific documents examined (219 mentions in NSPC, 76 mentions in NSPQ, and 97 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management) followed by curriculum (*kurikulum*) (44 mentions in NSPC, 19 mentions in NSPQ, and 31 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management) and interaction (*interaksi*) (22 mentions in NSPC, 13 mentions in NSPQ, and 2 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management). Teaching and learning material (*bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran*) accounted for 42% of the total 935 keywords mentioned across the three preschool specific documents examined. Despite the highest mentions of teaching and learning material (*bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran*), the process quality aspect in NSPC was explicitly focused on curriculum element.

As for structural quality, the highest mentioned keyword were teacher (*guru*) (47 mentions in NSPC, 128 mentions in NSPQ, and 41 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management), followed by class area (*ruang kelas)* (23 mentions in NSPC, 26 mentions in NSPQ, and 19 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management), and equipment (*peralatan*) (7 mentions in NSPC, 21 mentions in NSPQ, and 26 mentions in Guideline on Preschool Management). The

least mentions keyword was another translation of equipment (*kelengkapan*), where only a single mention was found in both NSPC and NSPQ and twice mentioned in Guideline on Preschool Management. None of the student management assistant (*pembantu pengurusan murid*) keyword was found in NSPC while none of the administrator (*pentadbir*) keyword was found in NSPQ.

Explaining further on the structural quality, the teacher (*guru*) keyword (60%) was majorly found mentioned in NSPQ. The keyword teacher (*guru*) also made up more than half (52%) of the total 412 mentions under the structural quality keyword category. Nearly half of the mentions (48%) on equipment (*peralatan*) were found in the Guideline on Preschool Management, while about 38% of mentions on class area (*ruang kelas*) were found in NSPQ. Details of the keyword mentions found in the preschool specific documents are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3
Analysis of the Three Preschool Specific Documents Based on Keyword.

Keyword category	Keyword	NSPC	NSPQ	Guideline on Preschool Management
Structural quality (*kualiti strukur*)	Teachers (*guru*)	47 mentions	128 mentions	41 mentions
	Student management assistant (*pembantu pengurusan murid*)	-	2 mentions	14 mentions
	Administrator (*pentadbir*)	2 mentions	-	12 mentions
	Class area (*ruang kelas*)	23 mentions	26 mentions	19 mentions
	Surrounding (*persekitaran*)	25 mentions	7 mentions	2 mentions
	Furniture (*perabot*)	2 mentions	3 mentions	Single mention
	Equipment (*peralatan*)	7 mentions	21 mentions	26 mentions
	Equipment (*kelengkapan*)	Single mention	Single mention	2 mentions
Process quality (*kualiti proses*)	Teaching and learning material (*bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran*)	219 mentions	76 mentions	97 mentions
	Curriculum (*kurikulum*)	44 mentions	19 mentions	31 mentions
	Interaction (*interaksi*)	22 mentions	13 mentions	2 mentions

Being a process-quality-based document in nature, NSPC had a very limited discussion on structural quality. It only touched three structural quality aspects, namely, equipment, furniture and area, safety and health, and layout for the learning area. No further discussion on the structural quality implementation and recommendation was found in NSPC though. NSPC focused purely on the curriculum aspects of preschool programme (Boon, 2010; Mustafa at al., 2013), which concentrated on one element of preschool quality, that is process quality.

As for NSPQ, the document touched on five dimensions, namely governance, teachers and teacher assistants, curriculum, preschool-parental interactions as well as health, nutrition, and safety (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Three out of the five dimensions highlighted the structural requirement; namely, governance quality, teachers' and teacher assistants' quality as well as health, nutrition and safety quality. NSPQ highlighted the two types of indicators – objective and subjective indicators as part of the challenges in implementing standard structural quality. Though objective indicators are more of a direct assessment, subjective indicators, on the other hand, do require some observation before they can be completed by preschool teachers. This might be the case in Slovenia as highlighted by Umek (2014) that needs a definition of national preschool quality standards at the legislative levels as well as the development of quality assessment procedures, both at self and external evaluation levels. NSPQ lastly affirmed the suggestion on the imposition of NSPQ in all preschool providers.

Finally, the Guideline on Preschool Management highlighted the need for eight interrelated structural quality requirements. To name a few, preschool operation, management and administration, teachers and teacher assistants, asset management as well as safety and hygiene. This has been highlighted by Kamaruddin et al. (2017), who stressed the need to reflect and improve preschool management, apart from the need for higher teachers' quality. NSPQ was also discussed at length in the guideline. The guideline discussed several challenges. Amongst them were the management of various preschool types, the selection criteria for teacher assistants and students' eligibility to join *prasekolah*. Procurement, management and maintenance of infrastructure and facilities of preschool were also discussed at length in the guideline. Similar to NSPQ, the guideline suggested the imposition of NSPQ, which would only be applicable to *prasekolah* programme under MoE as the document is meant for that particular category of preschool.

Conclusions

The quality of preschool is not being given equal emphasis as education in general across majority of the documents examined. Therefore, the government should not only focus on quality education in general but could specifically focus on preschool programme as the entry point for education. Similarly, structural quality is being given less focus as compared to process quality. NSPC, a specific policy document on process quality, is available for public reference, but no policy document on structural quality has been found in existence thus far. Since this is the case, process quality aspects are imposed on all preschool providers, while the one structural quality policy document available, that is Guideline on Preschool Management, is only meant for preschool programme under MoE known as *prasekolah*. Should this continue to be the case, whereby structural quality elements are not strategically and systematically highlighted in the policy documents, it would perhaps result in the persistence of quality variation among preschool providers and widen the gap of quality.

Therefore, in view of enhancing process quality, the focus should be directed towards improving the structural quality aspects as well.

Finally, two main limitations of study were found. First, this article was based on a combination of English and Bahasa Melayu documents, whereby the macro policy documents were in English while the preschool specific documents were in Bahasa Melayu. Thus, there might be concerns that the keywords selected in Bahasa Melayu might have different connotations and understandings among the preschool experts. Second, the study was not aimed to really measure the level of preschool quality. Therefore, for future research, it is proposed to perhaps incorporate the English version of preschool specific documents and supplement with in-depth interviews with the relevant preschool stakeholders as another data collection method to gauge the similarity and differences they have towards the issues examined.

Acknowledgement

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