

Empowering Youth through Agricultural Education: Nurturing Entrepreneurs and Life Skills at Young Age

Irene Jebamalar Thumbarayan, Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin

Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia

Email: aiminasuha@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

Adding agriculture to preschoolers imparts essential life skills and underscores its significance in daily life. Beyond farming knowledge, it nurtures ethical and responsible business practices, which are vital in Malaysia's challenging job market for graduates. In an innovative educational project, school fields became dynamic spaces for preschoolers to explore vegetable cultivation. They gained hands-on experience, learning every aspect of farming, from nurturing plants to harvesting, consuming, and selling their produce. This initiative seamlessly integrated agriculture with entrepreneurship, aligning with Malaysia's goal of a competitive workforce and a robust economy. Recognising the educational importance of entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Education integrated entrepreneurial elements into the curriculum, enhancing this project's approach. In parallel, this project introduced young minds to entrepreneurship within an agricultural context. Preschoolers gained exposure and experience by seeking customers and selling their produce, a valuable lesson that extends beyond profit-making. The involvement of parents and the school community in purchasing the students' produce facilitated practical learning of sales techniques. From April to September 2022, 25 preschoolers collaborated in small groups, mastering planting, harvesting, bundling, and selling vegetables. The project's methodology, which integrated agriculture with entrepreneurship and actively involved parents and the school community, yielded significant positive outcomes in preparing preschoolers for future business ventures while fostering a sense of empowerment and responsibility towards society and the environment. The proceeds reinvested into the venture taught them resourcefulness and money-making strategies. This journey fostered teamwork, patience, and comprehension of real-world supply and demand dynamics, enriching their physical skills, self-esteem, and confidence, and preparing them for future business ventures. Empowering youth through agricultural and entrepreneurial education in their formative years lays a solid foundation for essential business skills and also develops values of social.

Keywords: Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, Skills, Preschoolers, Malaysia

Introduction

Teaching preschool is a transformative profession, fuelled by a genuine passion for shaping young minds and fostering self-awareness. In 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the researcher's participation in the "Go Green Voice of Nation" program led to certificates from both the "World Record" and the "Asia Book of Records," underscoring the importance of sustainable education. Inspired by the researcher's own gardening project, introduced a similar initiative to the researcher's preschool class on April 22, 2022, coinciding with Earth Day (McMillen et al., 2019). This innovative project, supported by school management and parents, integrates agriculture into preschool education, imparting vital life skills and nurturing ethical business values (Dana, 2017). In Malaysia's competitive job market, this approach equips young children with essential skills for a successful future while fostering environmental stewardship (Abu Bakar et al., 2022). The Malaysian National Preschool syllabus (KSPK, 2017) has integrated creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship into its cross-curricular components, recognizing their vital role in equipping individuals with 21st-century skills (Sarah et al., 2020). This inclusion aims to cultivate essential abilities in students, preparing them for both present and future challenges, while also instilling entrepreneurial traits and practices among preschoolers, fostering an entrepreneurial culture within education. These components contribute to the development of a creative and innovative mindset, enabling young learners to translate their ideas into the marketplace as they grow up. In 2020, UNESCO launched the Sustainable Development Goal 4 program under Education 2030, aiming to enhance education for economically disadvantaged families. This initiative promotes the integration of cross-curricular elements, including entrepreneurship, to cultivate entrepreneurial qualities and skills in early childhood for brighter life prospects (Zaini et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the extensive use of gadgets among children in Malaysia is a cause for concern, with 83.2 percent of Internet users falling within the 5 to 17 years age group, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). Considering this, early exposure to agriculture serves as a means to enhance psychomotor skills, hand-eye coordination, and promote a healthier balance between screen time and physical activity, fostering an early interest in science and the environment (Musa et al., 2022). Hence, the objective of this paper is to (i) include entrepreneurial aspects in the learning process so that students can learn about entrepreneurship in the context of agriculture and understand its significance beyond profit-making, emphasizing the value of community well-being and benefits. (ii) Provide hands-on experience in planting, caring for, and harvesting vegetables, as well as selling them to customers. (iii) Promote creativity and innovation through school gardens as experimental spaces.

Methodology

Participatory action research was used in this project as it engaged all stakeholders, including children, in planning, implementing, and reflecting on the project's various phases. The innovative project was carried out over six months, specifically from April to September 2022. It involved the active participation of 25 preschool children, all of whom were approximately 6 years old. The project's methodology was structured into distinct phases, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Six Phase Project Methodology

| No | PHASE | DESCRIPTION |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | Phase 1 (Pedagogical Approach) | The approach taken in this educational endeavour integrates experiential learning or hands-on farming experiences with entrepreneurial components within a preschool compound. |
| 2 | Phase 2 (Initiation and Collaboration) | The initiative commenced with the enthusiastic support of both school management and parents. Together with the assistance of the school gardener, allocated a designated space within the preschool compound for students to engage in planting vegetable seeds on Earth Day. |
| 3 | Phase 3 (Selection of Vegetables) | The students were encouraged to participate actively by planting various vegetable seeds, including green spinach, mustard greens, water spinach, corn, and cucumber. This selection of vegetables not only provided a diverse learning experience but also catered to potential preferences and culinary interests. |
| 4. | Phase 4 (Observation and Integration) | Students enthusiastically participated in the vegetable growth process, closely observing their crops' daily development. This hands-on engagement seamlessly blended into different subject areas such as Science, English, Malay, Moral, and Sivik. |
| 5 | Phase 5 (Harvesting and Culinary Exploration) | The culmination of the project involved harvesting the grown vegetables. Students were given the opportunity to touch, pluck, and collect the vegetables they had cultivated. These harvested vegetables were not only taken home for consumption but were also used for classroom cooking activities. |
| 6 | Phase 6 (Entrepreneurial Component) | Building on the enthusiasm generated by the project, the teacher introduced the idea of selling the vegetables to the students' parents. This entrepreneurial aspect was met with enthusiasm, as students envisioned transforming their classroom into a "pasar" (market). A booth was established within the school premises, allowing parents to purchase the homegrown produce. The students took on a verbal advertising role, highlighting the natural and tasty qualities of their produce, promoting a sense of pride and accomplishment. |

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to the structured phases outlined in Table 1, data collection and analysis methods were employed to ensure the project's efficacy and to glean insights into its impact on the participating preschoolers. Data collection methods included observations and interviews with both the children and other stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and school administrators. Observations were conducted throughout the project to document the children's engagement, behaviours, and interactions during various activities, including planting, tending to the garden, harvesting, and selling vegetables. Interviews were conducted with the preschoolers to gather their perspectives, experiences, and learnings from participating in the project. These interviews aimed to uncover the children's

perceptions of agriculture, entrepreneurship, and their overall educational experience. Additionally, discussions were conducted with teachers, parents, and school administrators to gather their feedback, observations, and insights on the project's implementation, effectiveness, and any challenges encountered.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from observations and interviews. Themes related to children's learning experiences, attitudes towards agriculture and entrepreneurship, as well as the project's impact on their personal development and educational outcomes, were identified and analyzed. Sales figures and attendance records were also analyzed to assess the project's tangible outcomes and achievements. The participatory action research approach combined with data collection and analysis methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the project's implementation process, outcomes, and implications for preschool education, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development.

Discussion

This innovative and compelling educational initiative which integrates farming, entrepreneurial components, and community engagement into a preschool setting, provides children with valuable educational experiences that they can apply as they grow into young adults. By incorporating farming and entrepreneurial activities into various subjects, enriches the learning experience and equips young learners with essential life skills. This approach fosters practical knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving, and resource management while preparing them for the future job market, where adaptability and an entrepreneurial mindset are highly valued. It ensures that preschoolers don't just memorize facts but actively apply their knowledge, creating a well-rounded education that empowers them for success in an ever-changing world. (Lin, 2021) Incorporating hands-on activities such as planting seeds, monitoring plant growth, and participating in harvests within this project has been shown to foster valuable skills in children. These experiences bring a sense of responsibility, teamwork, and patience from a young age. (Casey, 2019) As these children mature into adults, these skills will continue to serve them well in both their personal and professional lives, enabling them to excel and adapt to various challenges they may encounter along the way. Additionally, the students were actively involved in the entrepreneurial aspect, including setting up a booth, selling vegetables, and engaging in verbal advertising. This level of engagement aligns with constructivist learning theories, emphasizing active learning and student agency (Leuchter, 2020). The introduction of selling vegetables to parents fostered an entrepreneurial mindset among the young learners. This aspect of the initiative encouraged them to think creatively, develop marketing skills, and understand basic economic principles. According to Panjeti-Madan (2023), in today's tech-savvy world, where gadgets often dominate children's attention, encouraging them to spend more time in practical activities like farming helps strike a healthy balance. The enhancement of hand-eye coordination, a valuable skill, is a direct outcome of their active involvement in agriculture. This multifaceted approach exemplifies the empowerment of youth through agricultural education. The innovative project gained widespread attention when they were shared on the school's Facebook page, subsequently becoming a focal point across various social media platforms. This unexpected surge in visibility, with the Facebook post reaching over 700,000 people, led to a significant outpouring of support and feedback from the online community. Netizens expressed the view that such activities should be considered fundamental life skills and highlighted the potential long-term benefits of exposing children to entrepreneurship opportunities. The enthusiastic response

and encouragement from the public served as a source of great satisfaction for an educator. Beyond this unexpected online engagement, the initiative garnered media attention, with RTM and Radio-Contynews journalists approaching the school administration to cover this program on television and radio. Interviews were conducted with the school headmaster, the participating children, and myself, resulting in the coverage being broadcast on prominent news channels, including "Berita Perdana TV1" and "Tamil News TV2." This unforeseen level of recognition underscored the significance of integrating practical agriculture and entrepreneurial experiences into early education.

In summary, this educational initiative combines farming, entrepreneurship, and community engagement in preschool, offering hands-on experiences that shape children into capable youngsters. Through this approach, they learn critical life skills like problem-solving and teamwork, preparing them for the future. Active involvement in farming instills responsibility and patience, while entrepreneurship fosters creativity and understanding of economic principles. Balancing practical activities like farming in today's tech-driven world enhances hand-eye coordination and provides a break from screen time. The project's unexpected online and media attention highlights the growing recognition of such initiatives in early education, emphasizing their long-term benefits for children and society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project seamlessly integrates agriculture, entrepreneurship, and community engagement in early childhood education, fostering responsibility, creativity, and personal growth among participants. The overwhelming public and media support underscores its educational significance and potential for broader implementation. Moving forward, expanding such programs is recommended to provide more youth with a holistic education, preparing them for an evolving world and nurturing a generation ready to tackle future challenges and seize opportunities. Further research into the long-term effects and scalability of similar initiatives would be valuable for informing future implementation strategies and maximizing their impact on youth development and education. Starting early in implementing such initiatives is crucial, as the saying goes, "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," emphasizing the importance of early childhood education in shaping lifelong values and skills.

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