

New Preschool Teachers and Implementation of Inclusive Classes Issues in Malaysia

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DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i10/3419 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i10/3419>

Abstract

This topic introduces the Preschool Education issues from Malaysian's perspectives. Two fundamental issues have been highlighted; new preschool teachers' application of knowledge and skills and inclusive early childhood education for special needs children. Actions taken are discussed in the light of governments' and non-government agencies. The policy for minimum qualification of a diploma for nursery and preschool teachers are driving the early childhood in the private sector to move forward. For the inclusivity of special needs children, the government has taken initiatives to provide accessibility and equity to these children. The implication highlight the need for keeping advocacy efforts intentional and focused by developing strong relationships with early childhood education leaders, partners in federal agencies and government.

Keywords: Preschool, New Teachers, Inclusive Education, Early Childhood, And Education System.

Introduction

Today, responsibilities to issue license for the provision early childhood care and education fall under two ministries, namely, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Ministry of Education (MoE). The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development through the Department of Social Welfare caters for child care or nursery children aged newborn to four years old. Preschool provision for children aged four to six years old comes under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Education.

Besides these two main license issuance government ministries, there are 3rd Ministry which also offers early childhood education and care, namely, the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Department of National Unity and Integration as well as Department of PERMATA under the Prime Minister's Department. Other non-governmental and private agencies as well as religious organizations are also providing early childhood education and care. Therefore, the provision of early childhood education and care are offered by both government ministries and non-government agencies.

New Preschool Teachers' Application of Knowledge and Teaching Skills

Among the issues is the lack of understanding of new preschool teachers who teach children aged five to six years old. New Preschool Teachers (NPT) who have successfully completed the course and placed in selected schools face new challenges inside and outside the classroom environment (Abdul Halim, 2015; Abdul Jalil, 2007). As NPTs, they should undergo a probation period within one to three years in preschool (Ministry of Education, 2010). Although most of the NPTs have a good academic background, they have lack of understanding of the concept and reality of teaching skills (Zakiah, Azlina & Yeo, 2011). Teaching skills of the NPTs involve their ability and efficiency in the process of delivering the teaching techniques in the classroom. Teaching skills involved both academic and co-curricular activities through the strategies, methods and approaches that are appropriate to practise accordingly to the level of children development (Ministry of Education, 2009b).

Implementation Malaysian Teacher Standard (MTS) in 2009 is the latest agenda for MoE to put some general criteria and standards in line with the needs of teachers 'Malaysian Qualifications Framework' (Ministry of Education, 2009a). MTS document is based on the emphasis of the efficiency of teachers through professional development of teachers as practice professionalism, knowledge and understanding, and teaching skills. As contained in MTS, *"This document is provided as a guide and reference for teachers, teacher educators, teacher training institutions and agencies in order to create and preserve quality teachers"* (Ministry of Education, 2009a, S.2). According to the MTS, the planning done by the MOE is an effective step towards the development of a world-class education system.

The main role of NPTs is to build a strong educational foundation among preschool children by providing quality learning process and environment. NPTs are expected to meet the three main aspects of the Malaysian Teacher Standard, value of professional practice in teaching, have a good knowledge and understanding, and have effective pedagogical skills (Ministry of Education, 2009a).

However, stress due to the teaching and workloads at school which faced by NPTs has an impact on their teaching skills in preschool. Mohammed Sani (2007) in his study found that teachers who had graduated from Institute of Teacher Education not only suffering from stress due to school workloads but also experiencing a situation called "culture shock". Culture shock is a drastic change experienced by NPT due to differences in teaching atmosphere within the institute where they were trained and actual teaching environment (Bezzina, 2006; Romano, 2008). According to Siti Saleha and Surayah (2007) "culture shock" has a negative impact on NPTs in implementing effective teaching in the classroom.

Other problems faced by new teachers also involve preparing daily lesson plans which is incomplete (Chong & Cheah, 2009). Unsystematic management of teaching is very much influenced by the situation of teachers who are in the process of learning to teach (Mohammed Sani, 2007). A study done by Cloke, Jane Sharif and Abdul Said (2006) for new teachers find that they prefer to implement daily lesson plan as a daily routine and not as an added value processes.

New Preschool Teachers' Role in the 21st Century

In Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), which was launched in 2013, the MoE in the process to provide an instrument that contains standard in efficiency of the teaching profession within their services. The efficiency of the teaching profession includes four aspects such as teaching and learning, professional values, activities outside the classroom, and professional contributions. Based on the instrument's efficiency of the teaching profession, 60 percent of teacher evaluation score is based on the effectiveness of their teaching. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the teaching profession is determined by two aspects, namely the observation of teachers in the classroom and student achievement in classes taught. The objective of this evaluation is to establish a more consistent approach and objectives across all ratings and foster a culture of outstanding performance in school (Ministry of Education, 2012)

The NPTs should engage with professional development programmes such as teaching preparation program to increase the level of knowledge and teaching skills up to date and more attractive (Ministry of Education, 2010; Mohd Mortadza, 2005). Most professional programmes organised by the government are more focused in terms of content knowledge of child development, observation skills, the selection of extracurricular activities that are appropriate, acceptance of conformity guidance procedures and nurturing relationships between parents and teachers. Thus, through professional development program, more opportunities can be obtained by NTPs to identify the level of pedagogical practices that can serve as a useful guide when they teach in preschool.

While most countries have adopted a centralized education system, the pattern of teacher education in Malaysia is more similar to the development of the National Education system that is formed from the socio-economic and political influence (Salehudin & Mahadi, 2005). The development of national education was changing very fast and continuous, especially involving methods and teacher training activities, the training period, as well as teaching content (Salleh, 2003). Most teacher education programmes in Malaysia are based on the latest educational models that involve the exercise of professional development. In addition, the focus of the teacher education program that has been practiced in the Teachers Training Institute and the Institute of Higher Education (IHE) involves teaching generic skills needs such as preparation of lesson plans, classroom management skills, building techniques and methods of assessment questions (Shahril, 2004).

As NTPs, they need to achieve their goals and learning objectives set by the standard requirements of teachers Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2009a). New preschool teachers need to be monitored on the application of content and pedagogical knowledge and skills to ensure that they can maintain the best pedagogical practices. Therefore, by monitoring the effectiveness of the pedagogical practices of preschool teachers can be identified through the process of teaching and learning, the implementation of school policies, class control and discipline (Hellsten, Prytula & Ebanks 2009).

Effective teaching skills of new preschool teachers reflect their profession as a teacher (Abdul Halim, 2015). Effective pedagogical practices should be encouraged in every preschool teacher regardless of whether the new teacher or a senior teacher. Professional teacher enhancement programmes also need to be increased in order to provide opportunities for NTPs

to enhance their knowledge and skills particularly in the best pedagogical practices. Early childhood teacher education can be improved in accordance to the aims and philosophy of education in the country.

Minister of Education highlights that teachers working in childcare and preschool centres will have to possess at least a diploma qualification from 2020. He said the regulations would involve all childcare and pre-school centres under the government and private agencies. So far the regulations had been enforced at preschools under the Ministry of Education and other agencies such as the Community Development Department (KEMAS) and National Integration and Unity Department (PERPADUAN).

Inclusive Education

Another issue that is closely related to early childhood education is the inclusive education. Malaysia education system is highly centralized through the development of government and private schools. The identity of Government school is moving along the period of Malaysia economy and politics development (Wah, 2010). As a multiracial country which the majority of ethnic come from Malay, Chinese and Indians, therefore variety of the school options is followed by these races. As Black-Hawkins (2010) points out that awareness of social, economic and political circumstances changes in recent years on discussing the policies of a student with 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN). In Malaysia, like other countries, emphasises SEN to be integrated into the mainstream education.

Historically, students with special educational needs are mostly in the separate special schools (Sukumaran, 2014). Since 1981, the Ministry of Education has followed the 'Least Restrictive Environment' (LRE) policy (Haniz Ibrahim, 2007). The LRE is referring to the location and condition of the special education classes in the integrated classroom in the public school. The aims are mainly to utilise the opportunities for social integration between the students with special educational needs and their typically developing peers as many school activities as possible (Ministry of Education, 2004). The existence of the classroom could allow the placement of the student with special educational needs into regular educational settings. At the beginning of their implementation, however, many of the special needs classrooms were located at the far end of the building due to lack of classrooms in the mainstream schools (Ministry of Education, 2009b). As noted above, the state's education is facing difficulty in opening more classes in the favoured by the parents to near with their home and workplace. As a result, there are some schools just turn the stores into special classrooms as high demand from the parents for education for the student with special educational needs.

Policies and Legislation of Inclusive Education in Malaysia

In planning for the better quality special education program, Malaysia has taken the alternative to follow the global development and copy the trend by trying to the best within the international declaration. For example is the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (United Nation, 2008). Therefore, on the National initiatives, several strategic plans, education blueprints and the draft of inclusive education guidelines have been published by Ministry of Education.

Interim Strategic Plan Malaysia (2011-2020) claimed in the document on chapter 12 that inclusive education being a main focus of ministry to assure the participation of the student with disabilities in the regular education (Ministry of Education, 2012). The paper emphasises several strategic plans need to consider on implementing the successful educational inclusion. The document listed the strategies to achieve the aims as namely; (a) identify and register the students with disabilities into National Education System; (b) increase level of participants of the student with disabilities in the inclusive schools; (c) accelerate capability of achievement of the students with disabilities towards their meaningful life; (d) enhance the teachers' competency on special education within the standard rules, and (e) broaden alternative education for abandon children.

The National Strategic Plan is shown through a national commitment to international engagement The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nation, 1990) which highlighted in the article 28 (1) that all children have the right to receive a free formal education particularly in the primary level of education. In the light of this, Article 23 from the same document also made an excellent suggestion that all children with disabilities are need of special care, attention and support. Therefore, governments need to provide assistance for the disabled child and family to ensure access to education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities (Armstrong, 2014) especially since in the early childhood education stage. Inclusive education introduced through some policy developments in Malaysia over the last 15 years but there is little research investigating the extent and nature of inclusive education for pre-schoolers with special educational needs.

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the Preschool

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Malaysia is based on the notion of every child's right to quality care and achieve a holistic development on physical, emotional, social, cognitive and health during the early years of life. ECCE allocated for children aged 4-6 years, and childcare centres for younger children aged 0-4 years. Reflected from The National Education Act of 1996 (Act 550), preschool education has been formally acceptance as part of the national school system. Therefore, the National Standard Preschool Curriculum was put in place, and quality standards were formulated; to assure an international norm on the ECCE education.

Further, even though primary and secondary school education for students with SEN has been available in government schools for more than two decades now, this has not been the case for preschool education. Before 2003, the government had been providing early intervention programmes through the collaboration of the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, as well as supporting early intervention efforts of Non-Governmental Organisations (Ministry of Education, 2008).

As noted above, The Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for the education of children with disabilities. However, children with severe disabilities are taken care by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development for their education, care, and support system. Since the year 2000, the MoE provides preschool education for students with special education needs in Special Education Primary Schools, and Special Integrated Programmes had

set up in mainstream primary schools. The MoE also plan and implement the intervention programmes for the 4 to 6 age group have been in operation since the year 2000. These programmes were initially conducted without any allocation or training for the preschool teachers.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education directed special educational services for preschool-aged children with SEN began with the opening of 28 special education preschools for children with hearing and vision impairments nationwide (Curriculum Development Centre, 2007). These schools received allocations after the conversion process in 2004. Among the 28 schools, 22 are for the hearing impaired, five for visually impaired and one for children with learning disability

In comparing the inclusive education implementation of a student of the visual or hearing impairment, as stated by Lee and Low (2013), students with learning disabilities are not yet making significant progress with inclusion. For example, Wah's (2010) study showed a majority of students with learning disabilities are placed in special education classes in mainstream school (also known as integrated programs) not in inclusive education in regular classes with non-disabled peers. Most studies of Malaysian inclusive education have revealed that the national special education system is still lacking a formal support system in enhancing participation of students with learning disabilities in inclusive education programs (Manisah, Ramlee, & Zalizan, 2006; Zalizan, 2000, cited in Lee & Low, 2013).

After the conversion on 2004, teachers with special needs education background were posted to these schools and other teachers without special needs education background were trained. Grants were allocated to these schools similar to other Government preschools. There are also special grants given to NGOs and private centres to help run special programmes for children. Since 2013, the MoE provides a one-off grant of RM20,000. for the setting up of private preschool or child care centres for children with special needs. For children from the low-income group, MoE pays their monthly fee. The Special Education One Stop Centres were launched in 2007 with the opening of eight such centres. The main objective of these centres is to provide free services for children with special needs and their parents, regarding early intervention, rehabilitation and other services. As of 2014, 26 centres are available throughout the country.

In another example of education for student with special educational needs, The PERMATA program that is under Prime Minister Department has plans to further extend its services by introducing a special programme for children with autism called *PERMATA Kurnia*. This program embarks in 2015 which aims to enhance awareness on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and it provides early intervention programmes to help children with ASD which between the ages between two to six, and help them to develop to their full potential, and prepare them for mainstream primary school education.

Conclusion

Actions taken by Malaysian government and non-government agencies can be adapted and adopted by the neighbouring countries in order to enhance the quality of preschool education. The policy makers and practitioners as well as early childhood experts at all community levels should collaborate to address the fundamental issues mentioned in this issue. While this article is not conclusive in exploring the early childhood teacher education in Malaysian context, it does offer helpful insights for teachers who work with children who are linguistically and culturally diverse in the complex terrain of contemporary preschool education.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to a co-authors, Dr Mazlina Che Mustafa and Mr. Hasrul Hosshan on the willingness to cooperate in the search for quality and relevant information in writing this article. All the information can be provided to guide efforts to enhance preschool education to children across the country.

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