

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA: EARLY RECOGNITION AND WAY FORWARD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education (ECCE), according to UNESCO covers the period from birth to eight years of age old (UNESCO, 2021). During this period, the brain development of children is at its peak and is highly influenced by their surrounding environment. According to the Sustainable Development Goals blueprint by the United Nations, section 4.2 of the fourth goal aims by 2030 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. The ECCE system in Malaysia is categorized into two age groups, which are 0-4 years old and 4-6 years old (Chiam, 2008). The first group is referring to early childhood care programs that are monitored by the Department of Social Welfare under the supervision of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. On the other hand, the second group that is referring to early childhood education programs is monitored by several agencies or ministries such as the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister Department, and Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. This paper aims to discuss the ECCE development in Malaysia through evaluating The Five-Year Malaysia Plans. Subsequently, this paper argues for five phases of ECCE evolution and development in Malaysia from the 1980s until recently.

2. FIVE MAIN PHASES OF THE ECCE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Phase 1: Early Recognition of ECCE in Malaysia

The first phase of the ECCE in Malaysia can be seen from the year the 1980s onwards. The government effort before the 1980s was to reduce the gaps between different races, urban and rural also rich and poor. Thus, the development of education focused on the curriculum for primary and secondary education and the integration of the education system into the national education system. Only during the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981 to 1985), the government started to recognize the ECCE program in Malaysia. During this period, there was an increase in demand for the daycare service due to the increase of women in the workforce. However, the childcare services were insufficient to fulfill the increased demand, which led to many complaints about the poor quality and negligence in childcare centers (Chiam, 2008). Therefore, the Ministry of Social Welfare Service conducted a survey in 1983 which was funded by UNICEF to provide an overview of the service, assess standards of care, and make policy recommendations to improve the quality of childcare in the country. The findings of this survey found that the quality of the early childcare services in Malaysia was considered weak as there were no pre-established standards and guidelines on managing the childcare centers. The government of Malaysia then passed the Child Care Centre Act 1984 to provide the minimum standards on rules and regulations in operating a childcare center.

2.2 Phase 2: The Implementation of Early Childhood Education in School

The second phase took place from 1986 until 2000, which was under the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990) until the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000). On the Fifth Malaysian Plan, the government started to acknowledge the importance of preschool education especially in terms of developing mental capability and promoting social interaction among children. During that time, preschool education was not yet formalized under Education Act, but the government planned to establish a guideline on preschool curriculum. The MoE was responsible for preparing the curriculum guideline and registration of preschool centers.

Five years forward, under Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995), there was an increase in the enrolment of preschool education as the government started to expand preschool education programs so that more children get access to education. In 1992, the MoE formed a pilot project for the public preschool known in Bahasa Malaysia as '*Pra-Sekolah*'. This program is an added program to the existing primary school where the students of age 5 and 6 years old will go through this program before entering primary school. Moving forward, in the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), the government's objective was to continually increase the enrolment rate for preschool education. During this period, there was an expansion of physical facilities for preschool education. The year 1996 embarked on a new history in early childhood education when the government had finally formalized preschool education under Education Act 1996. The awareness campaign helped parents to understand the importance of preschool education. The private sectors including NGOs also encouraged more establishment of preschool centers to fulfill the parent's demand especially, in rural areas.

2.3 Phase 3: The Emphasis on Quality Care and Education to Enhance Early Childhood Experience

The third phase was the most intensive period in terms of ECCE development in Malaysia. This phase took place under the Eight and Ninth Malaysia Plan from the year 2001 until 2010. During this time, the government started to emphasize the quality ECCE program in Malaysia. The government produced a national curriculum for preschool education which was being implemented and used by all preschool centers to ensure standardization and quality education. This curriculum replaced the previous preschool curriculum guideline which had been used since 1995. The implementation of the National Preschool Curriculum took place in 2007 during the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010). During this period, there was a new significant addition to the program where the government introduced an early childhood development program for children aged four and below. Childcare center in Malaysia is seen as an important service needed for working mothers since the numbers of women's employment rise from time to time. Hence, the first amendment was made to the Child Care Centre Act in the year of 2007. After more than 20 years, the government made a new amendment to the rules and regulations of services for the childcare center. The amendments in 2007; Child Care Centre Act 1984 Amendment – Act 1285/2007 focused more on the management of the childcare center. The same year also marked the important development of childcare services in Malaysia where the '*Program Permata*' was introduced. This program was founded by Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, the wife of Dato Seri Najib Razak, who was the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia. The idea to set up this program came in February 2006, when she visited The Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in Corby, England. This centre offers premium education and care for children and their families which include information and support services for parents (Pengreen Children's Centre, 2021). Permata Council was

established to monitor the Permata Negara Child Center in 2007. As in the plan, this council is responsible to develop modules and training for early childhood care and education adapting to the Pen Green curriculum.

2.4 Phase 4: Enhancing ECCE program in Malaysia

The next phase took place under the Tenth and Eleventh Malaysia Plan which happened from 2011 until 2020. In 2013, the government implemented a new module named '*Kursus Asuhan Permata*' which was developed by the Permata Council. This module replaced the training module '*Kursus Asas Asuhan Kanak-Kanak (KAAK)*' which had been used since the 1980s. According to the Child Care Center Regulations (2012) every childcare provider, supervisor and educator must fulfill the training module within the 12-month workday. The training module comprises 144 hours of classes and practicals. As of 2021, the module has been used widely in every childcare center in Malaysia. In the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), the government aimed to enhance the quality ECCE system as it plays a significant role in lifelong learning. These aims were achieved by improving the quality of teachers and caregivers through specific training as well as imposing a minimum academic requirement which is diploma level for all teachers in public preschool.

2.5 Phase 5: ECCE in Malaysia: Way forward

The fifth phase discusses the latest Malaysia Plan which is from 2021 to 2025. There are three main dimensions and one of them is the social re-engineering dimension, where the government aims to focus on ECCE. This is the first time where the government focuses on the ECCE agenda alone without combining it under the education agenda. Previously, the early childhood agenda is a sub-agenda from the education dimension. By looking at this, it can be expected that there will be a significant development and a comprehend policy will be enacted to improve the quality of the ECCE program in Malaysia. Various aspects such as governance, enforcement, implementation, and management of the ECCE program also need to be considered by the government to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of the program. The integration between each ministry related to ECCE also is one of the improvements that are looking forward to seeing in the near time.

3. CONCLUSION

ECCE gives benefits to the children especially in terms of the child's brain development. Many countries, particularly developed countries have focused on the enhancement of quality ECCE. This paper describes five phases of ECCE evolution and development emphasized in the national agenda, Malaysia Five Years Plan. Subsequently, this paper suggests for the government of Malaysia to focus more on the quality aspect of ECCE and the latest Malaysia Plan will bring the new hope of improvement especially in terms of governance of the programs.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to also wish special thanks to the members of Graduate Researchers in Print (GRiP) for their encouragement, support, and idea in completing this paper.

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