THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL POLICES ON ACCESSIBILITY TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: POLICYMAKERS' PERSPECTIVES

Lydia Foong Yoke-Yean[1*], Ng Soo-Boon[2], Wong Poai-Hong[3], Carynne Loh Hui-Shen[4], Nurul Salwana Mohd Multazam Khair[5], Faridah Serajul Haq[6], Mogana Dhamotharan[7], Mazlina Che Mustafa[8]

[1,2,3,4,5,6,7]SEGi University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

[8]National Child Development Research Center & Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

lydiafoong@segi.edu.my[1], ngsooboon@segi.edu.my[2], wongph55@gmail.com[3], carynnelohhs@segi.edu.my[4], nurulsalwanakhair@segi.edu.my[5], mogana@segi.edu.my[6], mogana@segi.edu.my[7], mazlina.cm@fpm.upsi.edu.my[8]

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

All children have the right to a safe and nurturing environment that promotes their holistic development. Accessibility is an important gateway to inclusive education where all children including disadvantaged children such as indigenous children, special needs children and children at risk are given equal access to quality early childhood care and education (ECCE). In ensuring inclusive accessibility to ECCE, many countries including Malaysia have instituted policies in relation to the provision of childcare and preschool education. These policies are expected to make a significant difference to the way practitioners work to achieve the best outcomes. This paper reports on a research study to examine the impact of the existing policies on the accessibility to quality ECCE in Malaysia. As part of a larger research project, this study employs a qualitative methodology that used a purposive sampling method. 54 participants were involved consisting government official and leaders of non-government agencies related to ECCE in Malaysia. A team of researchers conducted individual interviews and focus group interviews for the participants who consented to the research. Data collected were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis method involving three cycles of rigorous analytic coding and review processes. The findings of this study indicated the participants are aware of the accessibility related policies they are directly dealing with, and the major themes expressed were inter-agency cooperation to achieve enrolment target; questioning the status quo of the existing procedures; and challenges in providing support services for children with special needs; and inclusion of children with disabilities. The challenges to accessibility are mostly related to disadvantaged children and weakness in the governance and gaps of implementation. Policy reviews need to be systematized into programme planning to ensure high quality ECCE services are accessible to all children in Malaysia.

Keywords: early childhood care and education, early childhood policy, early childhood quality, policy and practice

INTRODUCTION

Policy is an essential tool in affecting good governance of any organization or agency. It is a statement of intent designed based on a system of principles to guide decisions and to achieve a desirable outcome determined by its stakeholders, often implemented as a procedure, rules, or protocols. An effective policy is usually created with consensus among the stakeholders where vast opinions are solicited (UNESCO, 2004, 2006). A written policy always contains the stated intention of the plans; actions to be taken, an organisational or administrative practice, and an indication of the formal course of action (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2016). National policies are developed in many areas such as health, education, security, business activities, it covers every facet of our life. They are often made by the authorities for the purpose of initiating change to a situation or behavior in the interest of welfare, order, development and prosperity of the nation (Hussein, 2002; Arifin & Othman, 2018).

The public administration system in Malaysia is made up of the federal, state, and local governments. The formulation and governance of national policies lies under the responsibilities of each of the relevant federal ministries. However, all the major policies of the country must finally be approved by the Cabinet. Public servants serve the government of the day, they are instrumental in conducting research, gather stakeholders' opinion and put together the policies as instructed by Cabinet or made suggestions to the Cabinet when necessary. They often have a considerable scope to advise and influence the formulation, interpretation and implementation of the given policy (Arifin & Othman, 2018). After the national policies have been approved by the Cabinet or Parliament, the public servants at various levels are also involved in formulating micro-level regulations and rules to effectively implement the national policies. Thus, public servants are often known also as policymakers. All policymakers have pledged to upkeep the welfare of the citizens, and they are answerable to its stakeholders for accountability's sake. However, even with high aspirations and noble intentions, as the organization/agency advances, the lack of understanding of policies and problems, or gaps during implementation of the policies always occurred (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2016).

Brain research studies have informed that the child's brain during the period of 0-6 years old actively receive information from its environment laying the neural foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health in life. The care and education for the young children at this stage is more than a preparatory stage assisting the child's transition to formal schooling and future cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. This realization has prompted countries to develop policies towards providing quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) to its citizen. In a nutshell, a national Early Childhood Care and Education policy embodies a country's commitment to provide quality care and education to the young children (UNESCO, 2004, 2006).

Literature Review

Malaysia has included early childhood care and education as one of the key indicators of a nation's growth and progress, in tandem with the global indicators put in place by international bodies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD. Accessibility is defined as the opportunity given for all young children to quality care and education, it is often measured through percentage of enrolment or gross and net enrolment ratio (GER and NER). Accessibility is a good indicator of quality education. It is also an important gateway to

inclusive education where disadvantaged children such as minority children, special needs children, street children, children at risk are given equal access to this quality care and education (UNESCO, 2014). The UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2015 to 2030) has established that inclusive and equitable quality education should promote lifelong learning opportunities for all children regardless of their background and ability. Through which, quality policy of early childhood education should ensure that "all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 38). In ensuring inclusive accessibility to ECCE, countries have come up with policies relating to provision of childcare and preschool education. In Malaysia, these inclusive accessibility policies have been instituted for decades, though much progress have been made, gaps appear to still exist (Curriculum Development Center Malaysia, 2008).

It can be argued that policies on the provision, regulations and monitoring of early childhood services affect accessibility. An early childhood system that operates on market principles, even when accompanied by subsidies or voucher system for low-income families, are less effective in attracting poorer families. Also, when fees for private childcare centres and preschools are raised, accessibility and affordability become more problematic for middle- and low-income families (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Cameron & Moss, 2020).

Accessibility to Preschool Education in Malaysia

According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, preschool enrolment of children aged 4+ to 5+ had an impressive growth from 67% in 2009 to 77% in 2011; and the Ministry of Education (MOE) figures showed enrolment in 2018 at 85.35% and private preschools covers 53.2% of them. In 2018, the enrolment of the 5+ children is at 90.82% of the total population of the 5+ children in Malaysia (MOE, 2019). To date, the government has not met the target of 100% enrolment by 2020. The government has provided a number of subsidies and grants for disadvantaged and low income families to attend childcare centers and preschools (Curriculum Development Division, 2008). However, there are still children not enrolled in childcare centers and preschools or have limited access to quality ECCE services. Children with special needs, children of the indigenous people, hardcore poor, plantation migrant workers and undocumented people, refugees or asylum seekers', as well as parents who are in the centres of detention, for instance, are those that generally do not have access to quality preschool education (Suhakam, 2013). It is critical that policies must be in place to handle related operational issues in relation to accessibility across various Ministries and Departments.

Theoretical Framework for Research on Quality Policy Evaluation

Accessibility is one of the key indicators in a number of quality ECCE policy frameworks that are frequently mentioned and referred by countries and international agencies. A brief description will be given to three of them which are the 3A2S Framework, OECD levers of quality ECCE policies and the Southeast Asian Framework for Quality Standards. These frameworks were referred to in the planning of the research study presented in this paper.

A '3A2S' framework was developed by Li et al. (2014) based on the Asian context. They suggested that the evaluation of early childhood education policies in Asia should focus

on accessibility, affordability, accountability, sustainability and social justice (Li & Wang, 2014; Li et al., 2014; Li et al., 2010). Accessibility is defined as the admission of every preschool aged child into early childhood centres; affordability as in easily affordable fee of the family's chosen ECE centre, with some subsidies offered to families in need; and accountability, is about having the policy accountable to the government for improving quality. Sustainability is deemed critical for appropriate ECE policy to be well calculated and sustainable for the years to come; and social justice refers to the rights of the child, as every child should have equal access to and fair treatment of ECE, without gender, race, religion, belief, social class and socio-economic discrimination.

OECD (2012) through its publication 'Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care' has identified five levers of key policies that promote quality in ECCE. These levers are firstly setting out quality goals and regulations along with public funding and regulation to achieve the goals such as the recruitment of highly professional staff, investment in ECCE. Secondly, designing and implementing curriculum and standards through a regulatory framework. Thirdly, professionalising the ECCE workforce through improving qualifications, training and working conditions. Fourthly, engaging families and communities and requesting for a parental component in ECCE services. Lastly, advancing efforts in data collection, research and monitoring and raising standards (Britto & Kagan, 2010).

Southeast Asian (SEA) countries collaborated in an ECCE project to design the Southeast Asian Quality Standards on ECCE Programmes in 2011 (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2011). A comparison study was undertaken where policies in the SEA countries were tabulated and analysed to enhance accessibility to quality ECCE. ECCE programme quality standards was subsequently developed which entails learning framework and competencies, specification of physical facilities and resources, qualification standards for ECCE leaders and teachers, conducive working condition, systematic professional development, monitoring and evaluation instrument, and national standards for ECCE management.

In any policy framework, it is necessary to be cognizant of the actors and organizations that are part of the institutions within the structure and behavioural standards such as values, standards, rules and procedures required in the established paths. As suggested by the Path Dependency Theory, once policies and systems become socially and culturally accepted as a norm in the chosen path, it is difficult to change them. They are reinforced over time. Reversing the past institutional choices (exit option) is expensive affair as it involves re-investment, un-learning and re-learning, and new ways of coordination. that the institution of national policies is influenced by structural variables that involve the interplay between ideas, interests and powers (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009; Trouve et al., 2010).

For effective implementation and monitoring of accessibility related policy implementation, a good level of policy literacy amongst policymakers that entails critical analysis of the policies itself and an understanding of the impact of the policies on stakeholders is expected (Simpson & Conner, 2015). Policy literacy is defined as an individual's ability to identify and understand a policy based on given policy information and knowledge that can be measured. The level of policy literacy determines the level of acceptance for the policy, which will impact the achievement of the policy objectives (Jung, 2008). Policy literacy among policy makers have not been researched on widely. In carrying out the task as policymakers, they do have to "ensure that, if regulation is used, the economic,

social and environmental benefits justify the costs, distributional effects are considered and the net benefits are maximized" (OECD, 2012, p. 6). As custodian of the national policies, policy makers need policies documents with the prescribed intent designed, operational statements of values, and implementation regulations made in the context of human societies, taking into account the constraints of human nature, values, and the political reality (Kogan, 1975) as well as clear redistribution of socioeconomic burdens and advantages that should benefit the society (Essama-Nssah & Lambert, 2012). It should represent a conscious attempt to solve a national problem, to achieve specific ends, or a response to political pressures in democratic societies (Ho, 2000). Without these features, policy makers will face problem in the implementing and monitoring the implementation of these policies, at the same time, policymakers may not know if they have been successful in the implementation process without these features in place (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2016). The challenge of national policies is often due to it being portrayed and visualized as 'one size fits all', thus generating arguments over the relevancy to each group of its citizens. In principle, policies need to answer to the needs of the stakeholders and made relevant to their circumstances (Arifin & Othman, 2018). When this is not happening, gaps in implementation of policies emerged and widens. These gaps will result in the deviation of the original intentions of the policies, therefore policies need to be reassessed, reviewed and further improved from time to time. Planned regular research studies on policy implementation is a necessary process for good governance in an organization including a country.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This paper focuses on three research questions which are RQ1: To what extent do the existing policies fulfil its purpose of increasing accessibility to ECCE services? RQ2: To what extent do the existing procedures in place impact, impede and support accessibility to ECCE in Malaysia? RQ3: What are the challenges for implementing accessibility related ECCE policies in Malaysia?

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the qualitative component of this study that was conducted through in-depth interview, individual and focus group discussion to elicit in depth information that answers the research questions. The focus group methodology was deployed as a useful strategy to allow for a group to gather and discuss a focused issue of concern (Liamputtong, 2011). Participants of the interviews were leaders and officials from government and non-government agencies who are directors, head of departments or presidents of departments or organisations. This kind of interview was referred to as 'elite interviews' (Logan et al., 2014; Bose, 2008) as the interviewees are those in close proximity to power or policymaking. These high-profile personnel are envisaged to have access to 'specialised knowledge and power, and provide valuable policy information' (Logan et al., 2014, p 712).

Interview protocols were jointly developed by the research team members. They consisted of semi-structured questions and open-ended questions. Data collection was carried out over 36 months from January 2016 to December 2018. This paper reports the findings from 13 individual interviews and 14 focus group interviews involving 54 participants who consented to participate in the study. Invitations to the interview were sent to all the relevant Malaysian ECCE policymakers from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural and

Regional Development (MRRD), Department of National Unity and Integration (DNUI), Ministry of Woman, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) at the federal, state and district levels, as well as prominent NGOs in ECCE. The researchers contacted the participants individually to arrange for a time convenient for the interviews to be held. The average individual interview session was 60 minutes and an average focus group interview was 90 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The data successfully revealed the voices of the participants and the complexity of the matter at hand, the purpose of qualitative research in exploring the views and perceptions of stakeholders has largely been fulfilled. Details of the demographics of participants in interview is shown in Table 1.

Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis was used in data analysis of the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are five steps involved which are: (1) Becoming familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Refining; and (5) Defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (version 11) was used to organise the data, analytic memos and codes were developed. The research team also conducted an inter-group and intra-group review to the identified themes ensuring a consensus was reached.

Table 1
Interview Participants' Demographics

Criteria	Number	Percentage (%)
Age		
40 years old and below:	13	24
41-50 years old:	17	31.5
Above 50 years old:	20	37
Missing	4	7.4
Level		
Federal:	16	29.6
State:	37	68.5
Position		
Director/Head:	19	35
Senior Officer:	14	26
Official of organisation:	21	39
Work experience		
15 years and above:	26	48
10-14 years:	8	14.8
1-9 years:	14	26
Missing data:	6	11.1
Public/NGO		
Public:	43	79.6
NGO:	11	20.4

FINDINGS

Findings from the individual and focus group interviews in this study indicated that accessibility to ECCE is a major concern amongst the participants. The major themes expressed were inter-agency cooperation to achieve enrolment target; questioning the status quo of the existing procedures; providing support services for children with special needs; and inclusion of children with disabilities.

Inter-agency Cooperation to Achieve Enrolment Target

All the policymakers and NGOs interviewed were clear on enrolment target or key performance indicator (KPI) set by the government. There were many attempts made to achieve the target set for enrolment for both childcare and preschool. For childcare enrolment target, one participant indicated that Malaysia has yet to achieve the KPI set, which was 25% by the year 2020, as lamented by this senior official, PM043 in the excerpt below:

> *Childcare enrolment last year was 6 percent… 6 percent is so far from our 25 percent targeted by 2020* (Policymakers-Government-IINT043).

However, PM043 related that preschool enrolment is closer to the 97% target set by the government as there is a concerted effort by the government and the private sector to increase preschool enrolment, and an instrument for assessment of the quality of preschool programmes has been developed. As expressed in the excerpt below:

> *The enrolment target for preschool … okay at the moment, uh we are working with uh ECCE [Council] on increasing enrolment ah you know because our target by 2020 is to have universal enrolment, right? But I think now it is hovering around 87 percent, and it's been stagnant actually the last few years...I think preschool is on the right track la, in the sense that I think the collaboration of government... the uh MOE and the private sector is close* (Policymakers-Government-IINT043).

However, several NGO officials have lamented that in some rural areas, there are still children who are not attending preschool. The officials reiterated that the awareness on the importance of preschool education amongst the parents in some rural areas is still relatively low. Some of these children who are from the lower socio-economic group do not enjoy the same opportunities for quality preschool education as those in the urban areas. That is the reason why some policymakers make a concerted effort to encourage children to attend preschools regardless of the agency they work for, even though every agency has an enrolment target to meet. However, the current 87% national preschool enrolment stated by IINT043 is an indication that preschool enrolment in rural has largely increased.

All the participants interviewed were very aware of the policy set by the government to increase preschool enrolment and they work cooperatively with other agencies to achieve the yearly target set for their agency. Some participants expressed that they acted beyond the jurisdiction of their agency's boundary to ensure all children have access to preschool education. For instance, when their own agency could not cater to the needs of the children, some had referred those children to other agencies so that no child is left behind. Also, where there is an area with no venue for a preschool building, they have proposed for the setting up

of preschool in places that are available to them such as community hall. As what PM004 stated below:

> *Ya, the target is every child counts. That means we try to ...like in each village that we work with, we ...like to encourage... if we don't have a community learning centre or an early childhood centre, we try to encourage parents to send it to the nearest primary school if they have a MOE "preschool" there or if they have KEMAS or preschool started by "Welfare Department". There are a few National Unity Department preschools, but if really that facility is very far ...ahh... so we try to talk to the parents to the community if they can organize themselves and start a school ...like not necessary they have a building first, but if they can start at the "balai raya" (hall) first and then slowly... ahh have their own building so that at least those children even 3 or 4 but every day they have some learning so that when they go to primary 1, at least they can read and write the basic things* (PM-NGO-IINT004-03082016).

Questioning the Status Quo of the Existing Procedures

The findings also revealed that although the participants were familiar with the objectives of the policies and supported it, they related some gaps that require intervention by the officials in the respective agencies. In some cases, it could mean doing something different to fix a problem, or to a certain extent questioning the status quo of the existing procedure to ensure all children can have access to ECCE. Some policymakers related instances where they chose to ignore the procedures due to compassion. For instance, when there is a high demand for preschools in the community they work in, they allowed school and classes to take in more students although it has exceeded the teacher-child ratio as determined by the policy document as expressed below by some of the participants:

> *The problem is because we do not have enough teachers, for admission we take in first to accommodate [the enrolment needs]....parents sometimes said other places nearby also cannot take the child in...thus we have no other choice but to take in because we do not want them to dropped out [of school]* (PM-Government- GI037-18012018).

In some interior areas, they have to enroll the children even though they have to go against the teacher-child ratio policy, or teachers working additional shifts, as expressed below

> *Sometimes our kindergarten only has 5 children, but we need 10 to start the class, but because in this place there is only this kindergarten where the children can receive early childhood education, we have no choice but to start the class, although it increases our operating cost higher than what we receive. For the sake of education, we have to start the class...private [preschool]is too expensive, parents cannot afford* (PM-Government-IINT009-190617).

Some teachers have been accepting children with special needs even though this was out of the policy of the centre for admission of children with special needs at the time of the interview, as mentioned by PM009:

> *Sometimes it is a dilemma for the teachers. Sometimes there are teachers who are willing, they will take in (special needs children). Some teachers will talk to the parents and parents accept the condition. Now it all depends on the teachers. Sometimes in the interior, we know these children are blind or cannot hear* (PM-Government-IINT009-190617).

The role of the policymakers is to facilitate childcare operators with their centre registration. When processing the registration of childcare centres, the participant mentioned having to "close one eye" on the requirements such as having a registered childcare provider, ratio of childcare provider and children, qualification, and assessment, etc. As welfare officer, they had to balance between the best interest of the child and the 'welfare mind-set' where the officers are likely to sympathize with the operator or the care provider. They find it difficult to enforce the rules because of their welfare mindset such as in the case of having to close down a centre, a state welfare officer (PM010) commented that:

> *When we wanted to approve [centre registration] our district officer went to see on the ground, all ok. Good! All ok. But when we went another time, he was caught red handed. The reason was alright as he was handling it alone, was correct… pitiful…we are welfare hearted. So what to do?* (POLICYMAKERS-GOVERNMENT-INT037-19012017)

At times, officers rationalise and sympathise with the operators in the rural areas in order not to disrupt the services provided to children, as mentioned below by PM010.

> *Many times I try to put myself in their shoes. I understood their problem… Tapi when it comes to our main principle is for the best interest of …the children* (POLICYMAKERS-GOVERNMENT-FGINT037-19012017).

Providing Support Services for Children with Special Needs

The policy makers who are involved in the design and implementation of policies for preschool children with special needs at the ministry and state education departments expressed confidence that they provide adequate support services to preschools. However, it will not be feasible for them to cater to the needs of all the preschools, so they conduct regular visits to the preschools to determine the types of support services required, as mentioned by PM049:

> *We will visit and we will see what's happening, what other things that we need to upgrade, how can we upgrade it, according to whatever we have, you know, we can't be saying that schools want this and that and saying yes we can provide it* (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT010-03072018).

The interview findings also indicate that policymakers view early intervention programs as important in circumventing the adverse effects of a disability. For instance, a policymaker in the Special Education Unit felt strongly that early intervention could potentially help the child's learning at the primary school:

We have early intervention then maybe we can solve that problem earlier not only at the age of six years then only we see you know, um you know sometimes they go to school after the age of let's say four… what happened between that 2 to 4 years (Mmm) So a lot have to be done, so when we intervene earlier, you know, they will be err better off when they go to schools (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT010-03072018).

In addition, the teachers are supported by the Curriculum Development Centre of the Ministry of Education that is responsible for providing appropriate support services to preschool teachers to meet the needs of children with disabilities. The Special Education Unit is responsible for reviewing and modifying the curriculum contents according to the needs of the children of children with special needs as mentioned by PM049:

Currently it should be okay because, and the curriculum is done by the other curriculum department, Mmm… but we from time to time, we review. Yes, we do review. We do have a team Mmm… to see how they implement in school, and they will come out with suggestion. (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT010-03072018)

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

The government (at the time of the interview) was concerned with the issues of accessibility for children with disability in the pre-schools and had set a target that all schools to be equipped with ramps, parking spaces, accessible toilets and disable-friendly buildings by 2020. The Special Education Unit was tasked to supervise the construction of more disable-friendly classrooms to facilitate the ease of mobility for children with disabilities. The policymakers had to ensure that the schools meet the requirements for a more inclusive environment very quickly, and one PM049 made the following statement:

All schools who have children with disabilities to have 4 important things - the ramp, the parking lot for disabled, the railing, and also the toilet for the disabled." You know, so . . . I said "ok, we will discuss this together with my (short laughter) division and make sure that schools will have this at least 4 umm areas of um for the, the disabled" so . . . and finally the last meeting he [Minister of Education]said "Now I want all schools, not only schools who have children with disabled to have this four accessibility…Mm… For the children." So we are now working hard to get, to make sure that we got this err accessibility for our schools by end of the year (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT010-03072018).

Undeniably, to provide the necessary resources and equipment for children with special needs, funding is an important consideration in ECSE programs. Since the equipment is expensive, the Special Education Unit had to find corporate or NGO sponsorships to purchase the equipment through corporate CSR programmes, as expressed by PM050;

We don't have funding for that but we work together with the umm… NGOs for CSR, you know with the banks, with whoever that wanted to err… give CSR to the school, so . . . like for example we have RHB giving this four accessibility to…I think about 5 of our schools Umm… So we are now working out, together with our umm… other agencies for their CSR (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT011-11072018)

For the successful implementation of the inclusive education policy, it is of paramount importance that preschool teachers and parents favor the policy on inclusion of children with disabilities in the current ECSE programs. Many policymakers have made attempts to support the awareness for inclusion through workshops held in the schools. Public awareness and advocacy are pertinent for the successful implementation on inclusive ECSE programs. Policymakers were found to be supportive for disability awareness campaigns in schools, as mentioned byPM050:

Ya ya we do have that [inclusion awareness campaigns], as I said earlier, we do have awareness programmes, Mm… mm… we do have bengkel (workshops) in school, workshop in schools. We do involve these people (SENPOLICYMAKERS-IINT011-11072018).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In answering the research questions in relation to accessibility to quality ECCE services, the discussion is organized under three main sections: Awareness and Support of the Existing ECCE Policies, Gap in Implementing Quality ECCE in Malaysia, and Challenges in Implementing Accessibility related ECCE Policies in Malaysia.

Awareness and Support of the Existing ECCE Policies

Policies related to ECCE services in Malaysia were presented to the participants of this study prior to the interview. The interview data indicated that the policymakers are aware of, supportive of and act with regards to these ECCE policies as indicated in the theme emerged from the study: 'inter-agency cooperation to achieve enrolment target'. This is essential for effective implementation and monitoring of policy implementation (Simpson & Conner, 2011). Participants are working collaboratively with relevant agencies in fulfilling the national agenda of ECCE enrolment. The enrolment target set by the government has succeeded in creating the focus of collaboration. This awareness, support and inter-agencies collaboration has to a large extent resulted in the increasing enrolment rate in preschools in Malaysia (MoE, 2008, 2015).

Gap in Implementing Quality ECCE in Malaysia

However, although the government of Malaysia has instituted many national, state and district level initiatives and policies that are targeted to increase access and participation of ECCE in Malaysia, participants of this study revealed many instances of gaps at the implementation level. This is specifically revealed through the theme of 'questioning the

status quo of the existing procedures. Though the current systems and processes are in place, there are pockets of loopholes, inconsistencies and regulations that inhibit accessibility of ECCE. This scenario is not limited to but is especially true for the underprivileged children with special needs, and to some extent the disadvantaged children in the rural area, as reiterated in the samples of quotes provided in this paper. Similarly, the same gap was also highlighted in the UNICEF and UNESCO initiated ECCE Policy Implementation Review conducted between 2006 to 2007 (Ng, 2010; CDD 2008). These gaps need to be addressed, the line of authority need to be established for the policymakers to bring these gaps and issues up to the higher authority for possible changes with the bigger picture of national good in mind. If there is a need for more concerted and comprehensive effort to review existing macro level national policies then it ought to be done urgently, otherwise the progress to achieve universal ECCE enrolment would not be achieved.

Challenges in Implementing Accessibility related ECCE Policies in Malaysia

Two themes that emerged from the qualitative data: 'providing support services for children with special needs' and 'inclusion of children with disabilities' have indicated the challenges to the implementation of accessible ECCE services. Participants urged for more focused attention to children who have disability, or those living in disadvantaged areas to ensure service accessibility. Considering that these outcomes are driven by historical institutionalism and the extent to which path dependency processes has influenced the direction of ECCE policy development (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009; Trouve et al., 2010), where necessary, policymakers may need to think out of the box, and break through from the path dependency processes. For inclusive education to be successful, children who are included in the mainstream ECCE need further support services such as programs that empower teachers and parents in handling children with disability in the classrooms. Although the idea of a general regulatory policy framework (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014) could address comprehensively the issues of availability (accessibility), entitlement and the cost of ECCE provision to reduce inequality in ECCE participation, however, language barriers, bureaucratic procedures, priorities set by the government may also deter accessibility of ECCE to the disadvantaged children. In trying to reach these group of children, a more innovative approach might be necessary, such as flexible opening hours and convenient locations (Ünver et al., 2018). Similarly, this may ring true for the participation of disadvantaged children in ECCE that the government of Malaysia has achieved little success in.

CONCLUSION

As Malaysia progresses from being a developing to a developed country, there is a pressing need to deal with issues on accessibility. The objective of this study is to explore if the existing accessibility related ECCE policies have fulfilled its purpose, as well as the current gap and challenges faced by policymakers. In effect much has been achieved in term of accessibility in ECCE with near-universal enrolment for the 5+ years old in preschool (90.82%). This however is not true for childcare and disadvantaged children. The findings indicated the awareness of the need for accessible ECCE and support given by the policymakers. However, gaps and challenges still remain and this gap has to be closed. There is a need to breakthrough from the historical path that the institutions have been dependent upon, and make way for more innovative intervention strategies if Malaysia is set to achieve

the target of universal enrolment for preschool education and higher enrolment for childcare in the near future. Policymakers need to focus on steps to ensure accessibility of ECCE services which is the right of all children including those from the disadvantaged families. The actors of the policies are responsible for the desirable outcomes determined by its stakeholders. The gaps and issues identified should be brought up to the higher authority more effectively for possible macro level changes for the good of the nation. Furthermore, policy reviews need to be systematized into programme planning to ensure quality ECCE is accessible to all children in Malaysia.

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