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The Imperative of Professional Development for Quality Early Childhood Education in Malaysia's Private Kindergartens

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Abstract: This study explores the imperative for professional development among private kindergarten teachers in Malaysia to enhance the quality of early childhood education (ECE). While national policies emphasize the need for highly qualified educators, a significant gap persists, with many teachers in the private sector lacking specific ECE qualifications and experience. This research aimed to identify the professional development required by these teachers and to investigate the importance of such training for improving teaching quality. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with four experienced female teachers from two private kindergartens. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with a minimum of five years of teaching experience as the core criterion. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that despite their passion and extensive experience, most participants entered the ECE field from diverse, non-ECE academic backgrounds, underscoring a critical need for targeted professional development. Teachers unanimously recognized the importance of continuous learning, valuing a blend of formal training, such as workshops on curriculum, pedagogy, and safety, and informal, on-the-job mentorship. Professional development was deemed essential for updating skills, adapting teaching methods, and effectively managing classrooms. The study concludes that systematic, comprehensive, and tailored ECE-specific professional development is vital to address the varied qualifications of educators. It is recommended that kindergartens and policymakers foster a culture of continuous learning by implementing flexible training programs that include practical skills, mentorship, and critical areas like child safety, ultimately elevating the standard of ECE in Malaysia.

Keywords: Professional Development, Early Childhood, Private Kindergartens, Malaysia Context

1. Introduction

The landscape of Malaysian education is undergoing a significant paradigm shift, with a heightened focus on the foundational stages of learning. Early childhood education (ECE) is increasingly recognized for its critical role in the holistic development of children, shaping their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional trajectories (Singh & Ngadni, 2023). This has cast a spotlight on the professional calibre of kindergarten teachers, who are instrumental in cultivating high-quality teaching and learning experiences (Wardoyo & Heriani, 2017). The transformation is underscored by national policies such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 and the National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC), which necessitate a cadre of highly professional teachers whose pedagogical approaches align with contemporary educational standards. Consequently, the paradigm of professional development for kindergarten teachers is moving away from a perfunctory requirement towards a fundamental pillar for enhancing educational quality and fostering a positive and effective learning environment (Agustina et al., 2021).

Despite this national impetus, a significant research problem persists within the private ECE sector in Malaysia. A substantial number of private kindergarten teachers lack the requisite professional qualifications and experience, which compromises the quality of teaching and learning (Masnan et al., 2021). Research has highlighted that a large cohort of preschool teachers in the private sector are young, inexperienced, and do not possess the minimum professional qualification of a Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This is substantiated by a 2017 report for the MEB, which indicated that only 44.4 percent of preschool teachers held professional qualifications, leaving a significant

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55.6 percent with less than adequate credentials. This dearth of qualified educators presents a considerable challenge, as teachers with appropriate qualifications and experience who actively engage in ongoing professional development are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the teaching and learning process. The continued reliance on traditional, less innovative teaching methods, which fail to captivate young learners, is another pressing issue linked to the professional development and capabilities of teachers.

This study is guided by two primary research objectives. The first is to determine the specific professional development required by private kindergarten teachers (RO1). The second is to investigate the importance of this professional development for improving the quality of teaching in private kindergartens (RO2). By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to understand the nuances of professional development and its impact on the quality of early childhood education. The current scientific debate on ECE underscores a global consensus on the necessity of robust professional development for teachers. A comparative analysis with international best practices reveals a potential gap in the Malaysian private ECE sector. For instance, in Finland, a nation lauded for its exceptional ECE system, there is a strong emphasis on play-based learning, an individualized approach, and nature-based education, all facilitated by highly trained teachers who are obligated to participate in continuous professional development. The Finnish model prioritizes the development of social skills and fosters strong parental involvement, with teachers seen as key to the delivery of the curriculum (Heikka et al., 2021).

Similarly, Australia's national framework emphasizes intentional teaching strategies, reflective practice, and a curriculum that is co-constructed with children. The Australian approach values ongoing learning and cultural competence for educators (Pölzl-Stefanec, 2021). In Singapore, the government actively supports the professional development of ECE educators through initiatives like the Skills Framework for Early Childhood, which outlines clear career pathways and the necessary skills and competencies. Singaporean policy also recognizes the importance of educators' well-being, designating specific development days for training and curriculum planning (Tan et al., 2022).

In the United Kingdom, the Department for an expert and connected ECE workforce that shares evidence-based practices. The 'Teachers' Standards (Early Years)' outline specific competencies, including setting high expectations, promoting good progress, and demonstrating strong knowledge of early learning (Carroll-Meehan, 2021). In the United States, effective professional development for teachers is characterized by focused content, collaboration, models of effective practice, coaching, feedback, and sustained duration. While Japan's approach to ECE emphasizes character education, independence, and cooperation, it is deeply embedded in daily routines and practices rather than formal instruction, with teachers acting as observers and facilitators (Collinson & Ono, 2001).

This international comparison highlights a potential gap between the current state of professional development in Malaysia's private kindergartens and the comprehensive, well-supported systems in these other nations. While Malaysia has set a goal for all preschool teachers to have a diploma in ECE, the challenge lies in the implementation and the quality of ongoing professional development. This research, therefore, aims to fill a critical void by providing an in-depth analysis of the professional development needs of private kindergarten teachers in Malaysia and the subsequent impact on teaching quality (Imron et al., 2020). The findings of this study will contribute valuable insights for educators, school administrators, and policymakers to strengthen the professional identity and competence of ECE teachers, ultimately enhancing the quality of early childhood education in the nation. This will not only elevate the standard of teaching but also ensure that young learners in Malaysia receive the best possible start to their educational journey.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design to conduct an in-depth exploration of teacher professional development in private kindergartens. A qualitative approach is exceptionally suited for this research as it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives, experiences, and the nuanced details of the subject matter. The design is intended to be exploratory, aiming to generate rich, detailed insights into the professional development requirements and the perceived importance of such initiatives among educators in the field (Muzari et al., 2022). This method allows for a thorough investigation of the research questions by focusing on the lived experiences of the teachers. The overall objective of the research design is to ensure that the chosen procedures align with the research aims and facilitate the appropriate analysis of the collected data.

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was the semi-structured interview. This instrument was chosen for its ability to combine the strengths of both structured and unstructured interview formats. While a predetermined set of core questions provided a consistent framework for the interviews, the semi-structured format offered the flexibility to diverge and ask probing questions for clarification or to explore emergent topics in greater detail. This adaptability is particularly valuable in qualitative research, as it allows for a more fluid and comprehensive dialogue, enabling respondents to articulate their thoughts in their own words and share unexpected perspectives.

Questions were designed to elicit information about the teachers' educational backgrounds, motivations, classroom strategies, evaluation methods, and experiences with staff development programs and teaching resources. The interview protocol was structured around the study's two main research questions:

1) RQ 1: What are the professional development required by private kindergarten teacher?
2) RQ 2: What are the importance of professional development for improving quality of teaching in private kindergarten?

The participants for this study were four female kindergarten teachers selected from two private kindergartens in Ara Damansara: Genius Aulad and Tree Dolphin. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants. This non-probability sampling method involves the intentional selection of individuals who possess the specific attributes, knowledge, or experiences essential to the study's objectives. This approach strengthens the study's integrity by ensuring the sample aligns directly with the research aims. The primary criterion for inclusion was that each teacher must have a minimum of five years of experience in early childhood education. This criterion was established to ensure participants could provide rich, experience-based insights into professional development and teaching quality. The participants possessed diverse educational backgrounds and extensive experience, as detailed below:

1) Respondent 1 (R1): A teacher at Genius Aulad with 9 years of experience and a Bachelor's degree in Science (Remote Sensing).
2) Respondent 2 (R2): A teacher at Genius Aulad with 9 years of experience and a Diploma in Marketing.
3) Respondent 3 (R3): A teacher at Tree Dolphin with 18 years of experience and a Master's degree in Education.
4) Respondent 4 (R4): A teacher at Tree Dolphin with 5 years of experience and a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education.

Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, the collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within qualitative data. This approach is highly effective for understanding the collective experiences and perspectives of a group of participants. The analysis followed a structured process to ensure rigor and validity. First, the audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read and re-read multiple times to achieve deep familiarization with the data. During this process, initial codes were generated by identifying significant statements and recurring ideas relevant to the research questions. These codes were then collated and organized to identify broader patterns and potential themes. The identified themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the participants' experiences regarding the requirements and importance of professional development. This systematic process allowed for the transformation of detailed qualitative data into concise and meaningful themes that directly address the research objectives of the study.

3. Results

This chapter presents the findings derived from the qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a comprehensive discussion. The results are organized around the demographic profile of the participants and the key themes that emerged in relation to the research questions. The discussion interprets these findings, correlates them with the introductory context and existing literature, and explores their implications for enhancing the quality of teaching in private kindergartens through effective professional development.

3.1 Respondent Demographic

The study involved four female kindergarten teachers from two private kindergartens in Ara Damansara. Table 1 provides a consolidated overview of their demographic characteristics, highlighting their age, years of work experience, and educational qualifications.

Table 1: Respondent Demographic

Respondent ID	Kindergarten	Age (Years)	Work Experience (Years)	Highest Qualification	Field of Study
GA1	Genius Aulad	42	9	Bachelor's Degree	Science (Remote Sensing)
GA2	Genius Aulad	42	9	Diploma	Marketing
TD3	Tree Dolphin	40	18	Master's Degree	Education (Major not specified)
TD4	Tree Dolphin	29	5	Bachelor's Degree	Early Childhood Education

The participants' ages ranged from 29 to 42 years, with a majority (75%) falling within the 36-45 age bracket. Their teaching experience in the early childhood sector varied considerably, from 5 to 18 years, with two participants (GA1 and GA2) having 9 years of experience each. A significant observation from the demographic data is the diversity in educational backgrounds. While all participants possessed post-secondary qualifications, only one (TD4) held a specific degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The other participants had qualifications in fields such as Science (Remote Sensing), Marketing, and a general Master's in Education. This highlights a potential area for targeted professional development, as teachers may enter the ECE field without specialized foundational training.

3.2 Objective 1: to Determine Professional Development Required by Private Kindergarten Teacher

Participants identified several crucial areas for professional development, stemming from their diverse backgrounds and experiences in the kindergarten curriculum. Key themes emerged regarding essential teacher attributes, the role of qualifications and experience, and effective teaching and learning processes.

Passion and Intrinsic Motivation: A strong recurring theme was the importance of passion for teaching young children. Respondents GA2 and TD3 explicitly linked their career choices and longevity to a genuine love for educating children. TD3 contrasted teaching with corporate roles, emphasizing the joy derived from creative teaching. GA1 expressed a desire to nurture children as a parent would, aiming for both academic and religious grounding. TD4 highlighted the joy of communication and building relationships with young learners.

Qualifications and Experience: The role of formal qualifications elicited mixed but insightful views. TD3 and TD4, with backgrounds in Education and ECE respectively, emphasized the value of theoretical knowledge and understanding of child development gained through formal study. TD4 felt her ECE background provided a strong foundation. Conversely, GA1 and GA2, despite lacking initial ECE-specific qualifications, highlighted the development of professionalism through extensive experience and on-the-job learning. GA1, a principal and teacher, emphasized that skills could be acquired through training and mentorship, even with a non-education background. GA2 noted that experience helped in understanding children's behavior and classroom management.

Pedagogical Strategies and Classroom Management: Participants described various teaching approaches. GA1 and GA2, from Genius Aulad, mentioned following lesson plan guidelines from their headquarters but also incorporating their creativity. Techniques included using attention grabbers, recapping lessons, one-on-one guidance (GA1), and strategic seating arrangements based on understanding levels (GA2). TD3 and TD4, from Tree Dolphin, highlighted the use of music and songs to engage children, followed by activities like storytelling, brainstorming, and hands-on tasks. Both emphasized the importance of observing children's understanding and progress.

3.3 Objective 2: To Investigate the Importance of Professional Development for Improving Quality of Teaching in Private Kindergarten

Participants unanimously acknowledged the importance of professional development for enhancing teaching quality. The data revealed specific types of training valued and the perceived impact of such development. Skills Enhancement and Training Programs: Respondents identified various forms of professional development. GA1 mentioned in-house training, principal-led skill enhancement workshops, and annual HQ training. GA2 highlighted subject-specific training (English, Math, Science) provided by the HQ, especially for new teachers, and additional external training like drama classes. TD3 emphasized the utility of on-the-job training for new teachers without ECE qualifications, focusing on learning through play, with the principal often acting as a mentor. TD4 mentioned specific programs like "Mikids" for learning about workbooks and mandatory workshops on children's activities, syllabus updates, and safety training like CPR.

Impact on Teaching Quality and Adaptability: Professional development was seen as crucial for keeping teachers updated. GA2 noted that annual HQ training helped experienced teachers learn new syllabus chapters. TD4 recognized that professional development improved her understanding and curriculum knowledge. The ability to adapt teaching methods and effectively manage the classroom was linked to ongoing learning and skill development. Meeting Diverse Needs and Expectations: Professional development was also seen as a way to improve communication with parents and understand their expectations (GA2). TD4's mention of CPR training highlights the importance of development beyond purely academic aspects, encompassing child safety and well-being. The selection criteria mentioned by GA1 and GA2 (good Quran recitation, English fluency, love for children) also suggest that professional development could address these specific competencies.

4. Discussion

The findings resonate strongly with the issues highlighted in the introduction. The demographic data, revealing that only one of the four experienced teachers held a specific ECE degree, directly supports the concern raised about private kindergarten teachers potentially lacking specialized qualifications (Zainudin & Bakar, 2023). This underscores the critical need for targeted professional development to bridge potential knowledge and skill gaps, particularly for those transitioning from other fields.

The emphasis on passion and intrinsic motivation as a driving force for teachers aligns with the understanding that effective ECE requires more than just academic knowledge; it demands dedication and a genuine interest in child development. However, passion alone, as indicated by the varied backgrounds, may not be sufficient to ensure high-quality teaching without structured professional development. The participants' acknowledgment of the importance of various training programs—from curriculum-specific workshops to pedagogical strategies and safety training—directly addresses the research objectives. It confirms that teachers recognize the value of continuous learning in improving their teaching quality. This aligns with the introductory statement that professional development is a "guided process of teaching and learning that is interactive and intended to help teachers gain professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes

and apply this knowledge in their practice" (Akanzire & Abroampa, 2023). The findings demonstrate that both formal qualifications and ongoing, experience-based learning contribute to a teacher's professional identity and competence.

The results of this study carry several important implications for the ECE sector in Malaysia, particularly for private kindergartens: 1) Tailored Professional Development: The diverse educational backgrounds of teachers necessitate flexible and tailored professional development programs. "One-size-fits-all" approaches may not be effective. Programs should cater to those with ECE qualifications seeking advanced skills and those from other fields needing foundational ECE knowledge and pedagogy; 2) Emphasis on Practical Skills and Mentorship: The value placed on on-the-job training and mentorship, as highlighted by TD3, suggests that practical, school-based professional development models can be highly effective. Pairing experienced teachers with those newer to the field or those without ECE backgrounds can facilitate knowledge transfer and skill acquisition; 3) Recognition of Diverse Pathways to Professionalism: While formal ECE qualifications are desirable, the study indicates that experience and continuous learning can also cultivate professionalism. Policies and support systems should acknowledge and support these diverse pathways, perhaps through recognition of prior learning or competency-based training modules; 4) Beyond Academic Content: Professional development should not be limited to academic subjects and teaching methodologies. As indicated by TD4's comment on CPR training, areas like child safety, health, socio-emotional development, and effective communication with parents are also critical components of a teacher's professional toolkit; and 5) Role of Kindergarten Management/Leadership: The responses suggest that principals and kindergarten headquarters (like Genius Aulad HQ) play a significant role in providing and mandating training. Their commitment to fostering a culture of continuous professional development is crucial.

The findings of this study align with several current issues and research trends in early childhood education. The challenge of ensuring qualified ECE teachers, as highlighted in the introduction and supported by the participant demographics, is a global concern. Many countries are grappling with how to upskill their ECE workforce to meet rising quality standards. The Malaysian government's aim to have all preschool teachers possess a Diploma in ECE by 2020 (as mentioned in the literature review section of the provided document) reflects this concern. However, the findings suggest that achieving this goal requires not only an increase in pre-service qualifications but also robust in-service professional development, especially for those already in the field with different academic backgrounds. Zakaria, Nor and Alias (2021) has also emphasized that supporting teachers and improving basic education outcomes are fundamental for Malaysia's long-term growth.

The emphasis on passion and intrinsic motivation found in this study is consistent with literature that highlights the importance of teacher disposition in ECE (Masnan et al., 2021). However, this passion needs to be complemented by pedagogical knowledge and skills, which professional development can provide. Comparing these findings with international best practices, several parallels and areas for potential enhancement emerge. The Finnish model's emphasis on highly trained teachers and continuous professional development (Eurydice, 2024) resonates with the participants' acknowledgment of the importance of training. However, the structured, research-based approach to ECE in Finland, including play-based and nature-based learning, suggests areas where Malaysian private kindergartens could further develop their professional development offerings. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework's focus on reflective practice and intentional teaching aligns with the participants' descriptions of adapting teaching methods and observing student progress. Structured support for reflective practice could be a valuable addition to professional development in Malaysia.

Singapore's Skills Framework for Early Childhood provides a clear roadmap for career progression and skill development, a model that could inform the structuring of professional development pathways in Malaysia. The designation of "Development Days" for educators in Singapore (MSF, 2023) also underscores a commitment to ongoing learning that could be emulated. United Kingdom & United States: The focus on specific competencies, evidence-based practices, coaching, and sustained professional development, as highlighted in the UK and US contexts, provides a framework for designing effective training programs. The need for training in classroom management and instructional delivery, as identified by the Wing Institute, is implicitly supported by the Malaysian teachers' descriptions of their teaching processes.

The finding that some teachers enter the ECE field without specific ECE qualifications is not unique to Malaysia. However, the study highlights the critical role that private kindergartens and their leadership play in providing or facilitating the necessary professional development to ensure quality teaching. The participants' experiences suggest a blend of formal training (workshops, courses) and informal learning (on-the-job training, mentorship) is occurring. Strengthening and standardizing these opportunities, while ensuring they are grounded in ECE best practices, is crucial for improving the overall quality of private kindergarten education in Malaysia. The challenge identified by Rucker et al. (2023) regarding a large number of private preschool teachers lacking minimum professional qualifications remains pertinent, and this study's findings offer insights into the types of professional development that experienced, albeit sometimes differently qualified, teachers find valuable.

In conclusion, the findings underscore a complex interplay between formal qualifications, practical experience, intrinsic motivation, and structured professional development in shaping the quality of teaching in private kindergartens. While teachers demonstrate a commitment to their roles and recognize the value of ongoing learning, there is a clear need

for more systematic, comprehensive, and ECE-specific professional development opportunities to address the diverse backgrounds of educators and elevate the overall standard of early childhood education in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that private kindergarten teachers in Malaysia, while often possessing significant experience and passion, exhibit diverse educational backgrounds, with many lacking specific Early Childhood Education (ECE) qualifications. Teachers recognize the critical importance of continuous professional development, valuing training in pedagogical strategies, classroom management, curriculum knowledge, and safety. A blend of formal training, such as workshops, and informal learning, including on-the-job guidance and mentorship, proves beneficial. Consequently, a clear need exists for systematic, comprehensive, and ECE-specific professional development opportunities to address these varied backgrounds and enhance teaching quality, ultimately supporting the holistic development of young learners as envisioned by national educational goals. To elevate the quality of teaching in private kindergartens, this research recommends the implementation of tailored professional development programs that cater to the diverse entry qualifications and ongoing needs of educators. Kindergartens and regulatory bodies should promote practical, school-based training models, incorporate robust mentorship systems and recognizing varied pathways to professionalism. Furthermore, professional development initiatives must broaden their scope beyond academic content to include crucial areas like child safety, socio-emotional development, and effective parent communication. Kindergarten leadership should actively cultivate a culture of continuous learning, ensuring that investment in teacher growth becomes a cornerstone of quality ECE provision in Malaysia.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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