

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION CENTRE REGISTRATION PROCESS: WHAT THE OPERATORS SAY?

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centre registration is an important aspect in promoting quality ECCE. Quality ECCE plays an important role in promoting holistic development for children. In the Malaysian context, ECCE is managed under a dichotomous system which is overseen by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Ministry of Education. The ECCE registration process involves various departments, and hence, the operators need to deal with different authorities in adherence with the rules and regulations set by each authority. The objectives of this study are to explore the perceptions of the ECCE operators on the centre registration process and to investigate the challenges faced by them in the registration process. This study adopted a mixed-method research which involves 127 respondents in the survey and 53 participants in focus group interviews. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using SPSS and NVivo respectively. From the findings, the operators showed high awareness of the registration guidelines and the consequences of non-registration. They also highlighted concerns in terms of the clarity of the policy information for centre registration, as well as challenges faced in the registration process. The quantitative findings were further supported by the qualitative findings, whereby the operators revealed the challenges faced in the complex ECCE centre registration process as well as the inconsistent requirements for registration. Hence, shared responsibility and effective coordination should be further looked at, in the continuous efforts in promoting quality ECCE.

Keywords: issues and challenges, ecce centre registration, ecce operators

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a crucial role in impacting the critical development of children. Quality ECCE promotes the holistic development of a child's physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social development. Much efforts and emphasis have been put by the Malaysian government in prioritising the quality of ECCE (Prime Minister's Department, 2017; Ng, 2010). This has resulted in the mushrooming of ECCE centres in Malaysia, which signifies the increased demand for quality early childhood

care and education (ECCE) services. However, one major concern arising from the mushrooming ECCE centres is, there are still many unregistered childcare centres and preschools are offering their services to meet the needs of the parents. The Senior Minister (Security Cluster), Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob highlighted that there are 7901 registered childcare centres (Povera, 2020). As for the registered preschools, there are 6152 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). The Malaysian Statistics Department reported the number of children is more than the number of childcare centres in Malaysia (Gamuda Berhad, 2020).

It remains unknown on the number of unregistered ECCE centres in Malaysia as they are mostly operating quietly. It is estimated that there might be around 65,000 childcare centres unregistered (Singh, 2018). The government has put much attention and efforts in pushing for more registered ECCE centres in Malaysia. On the other hand, the beleaguered ECCE operators revealed the cumbersome ECCE centre registration processes that they experienced with the relevant authorities. The issue has been around for years until today, which poses challenges to the government to push for more registered ECCE centres.

This study hopes to explore the perceptions of ECCE operators on the centre registration process and to investigate the challenges faced by the ECCE operators in the registration process.

Two Ministries Overseeing Kindergartens and Childcare Centres

Many countries have been practising a dichotomous system in early childhood education including Malaysia. The Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees preschools (for 4-6 years old group) whereas Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) is responsible for childcare centres (for 0-4 years old group). Kindergartens or preschools and childcare centres or nurseries are both overseen by two different ministries in many countries, mainly because the two different age groups (zero to four and four to six) have different learning objectives and goals. In Hong Kong, preschools are under the Education Department, whereas childcare centres are under the Social Welfare Department (Chan et al., 2009). Same goes to Korea and Singapore. In China too, the Ministry of Education is in-charge of kindergartens while the Ministry of Hygiene is in-charge of nurseries (Tsegay et al., 2017). Due to the dichotomous system in ministerial practices, a few issues have been accumulated over time.

Challenging Registration Process for ECCE Centres

In 2010, it was found that many stakeholders complained that they did not receive the right and updated policy information on registration which derives from the ineffective process of policy dissemination (Ng, 2010). A similar issue is also reported on the cumbersome registration process for ECCE centres. The three different ministries and agencies, namely the education department, social welfare department as well as local council, fire department and the health department have different forms to be completed, specific conditions and procedures (Ujang, 2013). Such complicated bureaucracy has posed challenges to the ECCE operators in the process of centre registration. Hence, many operators are reluctant to register their centres (The Sun Daily, 2016).

Measure in Establishing a Coordinated Body

In view of the effort of coordinating and integrating different in-charged ministries into single coordination, different countries have come out with various strategies to curb the problems. Korea has tried to merge both ECEC under the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) and to be taken care by the education-related ministry (Rhee et al., 2008). This move has resulted in more pressure for MEHRD as the department needs to oversee a wider range of age groups from zero to five.

Putting this measure in Malaysian context, perhaps a coordinated body should take the role to coordinate the registration processes for the different types of ECCE centres. Coordination committee plays a vital role in ensuring smooth governance and monitoring. This could help to alleviate conflicts among different stakeholders, yet it is inevitable that there would be administrative and financial inefficiencies as it might involve a large amount of funding.

Hong Kong has also established the consultative body in order to coordinate and promote integration in the two early childhood settings (Chan et al., 2009). However, the consultative body has failed to function effectively as planned because the consultative body was established without the consultation and solicitation of stakeholders' opinions. Other than setting up a committee, it is also important to devise a legal framework to coordinate ECCE, as what was done by Japan (Rhee et al., 2008).

Hence, this study serves to explore the perceptions of the ECCE operators on the centre registration process and to explore the issues faced by the operators to understand their concerns in ECCE centre registration.

METHODOLOGY

Mixed-method research is adopted in this study involving qualitative and quantitative research. The quantitative method was adopted for this study. The sample size of the respondents is one of the major limitations in this study. The total number of respondents from the quantitative method is 127 people including 11 male respondents (8.7%) and 116 female respondents (91.3%). Most of the operators whose centres are unregistered, are not willing to participate in this study as they are afraid that they will be revealed and checked upon which affects their centre operation. Hence, many operators were not willing to give consent. Some registered centre operators too did not agree to participate in this study as they are afraid of any unforeseen troubles. The survey forms were mailed to all reachable ECCE centres in Malaysia based on the list provided by the Ministry of Education, as well as reaching out to the operators who are members of various ECCE professional bodies. Despite the researchers and research assistants having called and approached centres personally, the total received questionnaires are only 127 questionnaires. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23 software was used to get the descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage) for the quantitative data.

To establish a more in-depth study, the qualitative research was also conducted to collect data from participants' responses and gathering word and image data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Focus group interviews were conducted to further investigate the issues and challenges faced by the ECCE operators in centre registration processes. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively. Thematic analysis is adopted

to analyse the complex registration experiences faced by the ECCE operators in searching for the codes and themes in relation to the issues and challenges faced. NVivo was used for qualitative data analysis in this study.

The Cronbach's Alpha value for the 10 items under "ECCE Centre Registration" component is 0.884. The universal rule of thumb is that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 and above is better. Therefore, in this study, the items are reliable.

To increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, transcribed verbatim was then validated by the interviewers and the assistants who were present during the interview sessions and checked against the field notes. In order to establish validity and reliability of the data, the data was checked by research members on the verbatims and identified themes to ensure consensus was reached.

PARTICIPANTS

In this study, a total of 127 respondents responded for the survey. Table 1 shows the age range of the respondents. Understanding that the samples of the quantitative study are ECCE operators, hence their age range is higher (30.7%). ECCE operators usually play leading roles in operating the centres, hence they need to be mature enough to take on the leadership and management roles. Maturity grows with age, therefore this explains the reason why 30.7% of the respondents are above 51 years old.

Table 1

The Age Range of the Respondents, N=127

Age	Frequency	Percent
Below 21 years old	3	2.4
21-25 years old	5	3.9
26-30 years old	14	11.0
31-35 years old	11	8.7
36-40 years old	20	15.7
41-45 years old	17	13.4
46-50 years old	18	14.2
Above 51 years old	39	30.7
Total	127	100

Table 2 shows the highest qualification in early childhood education possessed by the samples of the quantitative study. 33.9% do not possess any qualification in Early Childhood Education, which has the highest percentage. Referring to Table 1, 30.7% of the ECCE operators are above 51 years old, hence this explains that most likely these operators have been operating the centre for many years and hence, they do not possess at least a Diploma in Early Childhood Education, since it was not mandatory when they first started the centre operation many years back.

Table 2

The Highest Qualification in Early Childhood Education, N=127

The Highest Qualification in Early Childhood Education	Frequency	Percent
No qualification in Early Childhood Education	43	33.9
Certificate	7	5.5
KAAK/KAP	32	25.2
Diploma in Early Childhood Education	30	23.6
Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	12	9.4
Master's degree in Early Childhood Education	3	2.4
Total	127	100

From Table 3, it is reported that 45.7% of the respondents have more than 15 years teaching experiences while 5.5% who have less than one year teaching experience. It shows that most of the operators involved in this study are experienced who have been operating their centres for many years.

Table 3

The Total Years of Teaching, N=127

The Total Years of Teaching	Frequency	Percent
Less than one year	7	5.5
1-3 years	12	9.4
4-6 years	10	7.9
7-9 years	8	6.3
10-15 years	32	25.2
More than 15 years	58	45.7
Total	127	100

The focus group participants were selected from a large early childhood education and care providers' database that was available at the National Child Development and Research Centre (NCDRC). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the sample of childcare providers and preschool operators selected could provide an in-depth understanding of issues involved in ECE (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). There were 53 participants from the focus groups, who are the operators from different states in Malaysia such as Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Penang, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca, Johore, Sabah and Sarawak. The participants consist of different age groups ranging from 25 to 62 years old, qualifications ranging from SPM to Master's degree as well as different years of teaching experience in ECCE field ranging from 1 to 38 years.

RESULTS

Operators' Awareness of ECCE Centre Registration Process

Table 4 highlights the operators' awareness of the ECCE centre registration process. The ECCE operators show high awareness of the consequences of not registering their centres with $M = 4.37$ (0.69). They also show good awareness of the guidelines for setting up ECCE centres with $M = 4.20$ (0.72).

Table 4

Operators' Awareness on ECCE Centre Registration, N=127.

The Awareness on ECCE Centre Registration	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am aware of the consequences of not registering my ECCE centre.	4.37	0.69
I am aware of the guidelines for setting up an ECCE centre.	4.20	0.72

Operators' Perceptions on the ECCE Centre Registration Process

Table 5 points out that the ECCE operators find that the guidelines are somehow helpful with $M = 4.04$ (0.71). The data also shows that they do face difficulties in meeting the requirements of ECCE centre registration, especially in adhering to the ECCE policies and legislation from various agencies, with $M = 3.32$ (0.99), which is the lowest. In terms of the helpfulness of the various departments and agencies in resolving their difficulties faced in ECCE centre registration, it shows an average perception with $M = 3.51$ (1.01).

Table 5

Operators' Perceptions on the ECCE Centre Registration Process, N=127.

Operators' Perceptions on the ECCE Centre Registration Process	Mean	Std. Deviation
The guidelines for setting up a childcare centre were found to be helpful during the registration of my childcare centre.	4.04	0.71
The various departments and agencies have been helpful in resolving the difficulties operators faced in centre registration.	3.51	1.01
We do not face difficulties in meeting the licensing requirements of the ECCE policies and legislation from various agencies.	3.32	0.99

Operators' Perceptions on the Clarity of the Registration Requirements

Generally the ECCE operators have average perceptions on the clarity of the registration requirements. They have highlighted their concerns in terms of the clarity of the policies for licensing and centre registration procedures, building planning approval process, as well as the availability of the information on centre registration.

Table 6

Operators' Perceptions on the Clarity of the Registration Requirements, N=127

Operators' Perceptions on the Clarity of the Registration Requirements	Mean	Std. Deviation
The policy documents make clear the requirements for ECCE centre operators on the business premise license.	3.77	0.81
The policy documents make clear the requirements for childcare providers and preschool operators on submission of documents for centre registration.	3.73	0.81
The policy documents make clear the requirements for ECCE centre operators on the centre registration at the Ministry of Education (MOE) or Department of Social Welfare (JKM).	3.72	0.76
The information for the application of registering ECCE centres is easily available.	3.72	0.85
The policy documents make clear the requirements for ECCE centre operators on the building planning approval.	3.53	0.85

Complex ECCE Centre Registration Process

Through the focus-group interview sessions, many ECCE operators claimed that the licensing procedure is time-consuming and complicated. Some also commented that it is tedious to approach different departments at different locations, which are challenging especially, when they need to oversee their centre during operation hours. This increases the challenges faced by operators in the centre registration procedures. They felt the whole registration process was difficult for them. An operator highlighted the following excerpt:

“They have so many departments we need to go to, we need to submit these to different departments, so there are so many...”

Inconsistent Requirements for ECCE Centre Registration

The operators found themselves caught in a dilemma when different officers were requesting for “additional” documents and procedures, despite them following the basic guidelines given. The different officers handling the registration processes often have different requirements and sometimes, when the operators have prepared the necessary documents requested by the first officer, the second officer will then take over the process, and further request for other documents, which was not told in the first place. This confuses the operators and hence delays the registration process further. The following excerpt was highlighted by an operator.

“Many different people from different departments came. And I think they didn't know what one person did and what another person did.”

Other operators too revealed that there was no common understanding among the officers on the same policy or rules and regulations set by the government. They work in isolation. Different officers would be saying different things and operators were required to change every time they met with different officers. The operators expressed their frustration when dealing with different officers. To make it worse, they have to deal with new officers which may lead to a new set of requirements. Besides, an operator expressed her negative experience when dealing with government officers which involved bribery.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Most of the ECCE operators show high awareness of the guidelines for centre registration and the consequences of not getting registered. Under the Childcare Centre Act 1984, it is mandatory to register the childcare centre with the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. The operators can be fined up to RM10,000 or jailed up to two years, or both, if their centres are found to be unregistered (The Star, 2019). Under the Education Act 1996, failure to register a preschool can be fined up to RM30,000 and jailed up to two years, or both (The Sun Daily, 2016). With the stringent laws set, most of the operators in this study are aware of the consequences of not registering their centres. Yet, there are still some operators who do not register their centres, which shows that they are not complying to the rules and regulations in ECCE centre registration.

This leads to further finding out the reasons for the non-compliance in centre registration. As highlighted in the data. The operators find challenges in the centre registration process. They found that the officers in various were not helpful and the policy guidelines were not useful in guiding them in the registration processes. The finding of another study ten years ago is identical to the finding of this study. The issue on the ineffective process of policy dissemination was highlighted in 2010 (Ng, 2010). The crux of the problem signifies that the problems of ECCE policy implementation remain stagnant for ten years until today (2020). If no pragmatic action is going to take place now, the same issue will continue for another cycle, another ten years perhaps. In achieving the aspiration highlighted in Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 in ensuring improvements in student outcomes, effective policy implementation and dissemination are essential (The HEAD Foundation, 2019).

The similar issue was highlighted by the operators through interviews on the inconsistent requirements for centre registration. Many operators lamented that getting the regulatory information from the government agencies is tedious and time-consuming (Malaysia Productivity Corporation, 2016). The operators felt that they faced challenges in obtaining approvals from the various agencies such as the education department, social welfare department as well as local council, fire department and the health department. They were often rejected by various departments in the process of registration. They feel frustrated when they are being directed to different departments on simple registration matters. Different officers comment differently on the same question, making the operators confused over the procedures, thus prolonging the registration process. This further conforms to the challenges mentioned by Tan (2017) and Zoharah et al. (2007) on the unevenness in operational and regulatory procedures and the time-consuming procedures needed in registering and renewing the license.

One major problem faced by the operators is the non-standardised registration procedure. ECCE policies have outlined the right procedures with regards to ECCE centre registration, which are meant to be adhered to and followed. However, the crux of the problem is that it is not standardised across different state government departments since the registration involves several departments. When the authorities are decentralised to states, each state decides its own additional registration requirements within the policies. This confuses the operators as they think that they have followed all the basic registration requirements, but when they approach the state officers, they have other requirements. The operators then must return and prepare the additional documentation. When they approach the same department again, another officer would say otherwise and the cycle goes on. This reflects the inconsistency in registration procedures.

There is a lack of horizontal integration between different ministries and departments which tend to act in isolation and eventually create more confusion to the operators and the public on the requirements of quality childcare centres in Malaysia (Nyland & Ng, 2015). Plausibly, the government is pushing for more registered ECCE centres in Malaysia to supervise the quality of those centres, ensuring safety of the children between 0-6 years old. However, in view that most operators wish their centres to be registered with the respective ministries, yet due to the non sequitur amongst the government officers which causes confusion, the operators opt for not registering their ECCE centres. Hence, current policies related to ECCE registration are hindering operators to get their centres to be registered. This probably explains the mushrooming of unregistered centres operating in this country to avoid the challenges in dealing with the governmental offices.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the litany of challenges faced by ECCE operators, different strategies and actions are required to push for quality ECCE. Moving forward to quality ECCE should be a collective effort by different stakeholders. The biggest challenge for operators in running ECCE centres is the dislocation of the system which causes hassle. In view of this major problem, it is recommended that one body should be proposed to oversee both childcare and education services.

Shared responsibility is essential in achieving quality ECCE in Malaysia. Different stakeholders should collaborate and cooperate in various aspects in ensuring the wellbeing of the children are well taken care of. It is not easy to have a shift in ECCE, however, with a collaborative effort and increasing awareness of different stakeholders, we can achieve quality ECCE.

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