

Enhancing Early Childhood Care and Education Governance for Quality Standards of Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Children are valuable assets for the nations. Global organizations like UNICEF and the OECD highlight the importance of high-quality ECCE, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. In Malaysia, the governance of ECCE is separated into different agencies. This qualitative study applied in-depth interviews with key informants from four leading agencies involved in ECCE governance. The findings show that the legislative framework, historical aspects, and the differences in roles and functions influence the separation of the ECCE governance in Malaysia. Thus, clear standard is needed to enhance the monitoring and assessment of the delivery of ECCE services.

Keywords: ECCE; governance; standard; quality education

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1.0 Introduction

There is a saying that "It takes a village to raise a child." This proverb reflects the collective responsibility of the government, communities, educational institutions, and families in raising children. In the context of the ECCE, the governance structure plays a significant role as it becomes the "village" since it acts as a guide in ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the care and education for young children. Children are seen as a country's greatest resource, representing the future potential and success of the nation. Global entities such as the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have highlighted the importance of high quality care and education for children. This is also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which under Target 4.2, highlight that by 2030, all children, boys and girls, will have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are fully ready for primary school.

The early years of a child's life, particularly from birth to six years old, are a critical period in children growth. Multiple studies consistently indicate that early years are essential for creating a solid basis for cognitive, emotional, and physical development. It is

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crucial to have high quality ECCE since it provides children with a strong foundation which is needed for lifelong learning (Tayler et al., 2016; Duncan et al., 2023). Governments worldwide invest significantly in early childhood care and education (Engel et al., 2015). When nations prioritize the ECCE, they make long-term investments in human capital. In Malaysia, there are two main agencies that are responsible for overseeing and monitoring the two groups of ECCE, which are childcare and preschool services. The Children Development Department under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development is responsible for monitoring for care services for children from birth to age four. Whereas, the Ministry of Education oversees preschool education for children aged four to six. The distinction between these two age groups is mainly from differing perspectives on care and education. For children from newborn to four years old, the focus is mainly on care and welfare services. In contrast, the children aged from four to six years old focus on meeting children's educational needs through preschool programs. Other agencies, such as the Department of National Unity and Integration, the Community Development Department, the private sector, and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also provide childcare and preschool services in Malaysia. This shows that Malaysia's ECCE has a separate or split governance structure since there are multiple agencies that manage ECCE programs.

According to the OECD (2015), countries are currently tending towards an integrated care and education system run by either a single ministry or an independent agency to achieve better governance. This is because the separation of the governance structure resulted in operational and regulatory procedures that were unequal and unclear (Chin et al., 2021). These procedures included funding disparity, non-standardization of staff training and qualification requirements, and poor quality control for kindergartens and childcare centers. For this reason, this paper discussed the justification for the separation of the governance structure of the ECCE in Malaysia. It explores the fundamental causes of the separation of the ECCE and examines the various responsibilities that different organizations play in the supervision of the ECCE.

2.0 Literature Review

According to UNESCO (2022), ECCE refers to the period from newborn to eight years of age. It involves childcare and preschool services provided by the government or private sector. The care services are more concerned with the children's welfare and well-being while the parents are working. Whereas preschool focuses on education, aiming to prepare the children for formal primary school. Governments globally are progressively prioritizing ECCE due to its critical role in establishing the basis for lifetime learning and enhancing the overall quality of life (UNICEF, 2004; Bakken et al., 2017; Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021-2025). As mentioned before, the existing governance structure of the ECCE in Malaysia is separated. This has led to complexity since there are many actors involved in the system.

The United Nations (2000) defines governance as making and implementing decisions. It claims that governance is about recognizing the formal and informal actors participating in the decision-making process and the frameworks that should be used to ensure the efficacy and efficiency of decision delivery. The actors involved include not only the government but also other stakeholders. For example, in the context of the ECCE, the government, educational institutions, community, and parents are the actors involved in the system. In addition, according to Boon (2010), governance is responsible for determining the accountability and duties of every party involved. Each organization founded has its own duties and purposes, and these roles and purposes are connected to other interests as well. In the context of early childhood governance, for instance, there are a number of agencies associated with early childhood, such as the Ministry of Education, the Children Development Department, the Department of National Unity and Integration and the Community Development Department. While all these agencies have different roles and functions, they all have the same goal when it comes to children: to provide the best quality ECCE services. The separation of the governance structure, led to fragmentation of services, variances in procedures, legal requirements, teacher training and qualification, and funding disparity.

Malaysia is not the only country that runs ECCE under two different sets of rules (care and education). In many other countries' ECCE systems, care and education are also handled by different people. For example, according to Silva et al. (2018) France has two ministries in charge of young children: one is for children from birth to age three (Ministry of Economic and Social Nature), and the other is for children from age three to six (Ministry of National Education). On top of that, Hong Kong, Korea, and China have split government systems similar to this one (Tsegay et al., 2017). In contrast, some countries have a unitary system for ECCE, which differs from a split government. In 2015, Italy changed how its ECCE system worked so that the Ministry of Education, University, and Research was in charge of the whole system for children from birth to six years old. Before this, Finland switched to a unitary government in January 2013, and the Ministry of Education and Culture now runs all ECCE programs (Silva et al., 2018).

Many difficulties have arisen due to the separation of the ECCE governance system, namely concerning the efficient monitoring and provision of ECCE services. Boon (2010) points out that the implementation and monitoring of the ECCE in Malaysia are poorly governed. For example, it was revealed that over 50% of Johor's childcare providers were not registered with the Department of Social Welfare (The Star, 2022). This occurred due to the laborious and confusing registration process involving numerous authorities, including the Department of Social Welfare, the State Health Department, the Fire and Rescue Department, and the Local Authority (Chin et al., 2021). Furthermore, this is due to non-standardized procedures in terms of operation and regulation since each agency has its own standard operating procedure.

However, even though there is a separation in governance structure, some nations still practice this structure by coordinating all the agencies that are related to the ECCE. France is an excellent example of this. The nation regularly offers high-quality services despite having a separate ECCE system. France's rich legacy with ECCE—one field pioneer—helps explain this accomplishment. Drawing on its long-standing experience in early childhood education, France has constructed a well-coordinated system ensuring that its ECCE services satisfy high requirements (Silva et al., 2018). Furthermore, Singapore's government formed the Early Childhood Development

Agency (ECDA) in 2013 as an autonomous agency to manage the ECCE system. The ECDA reports to the Ministry of Social and Family Development and Ministry of Education (Wu et al., 2021). This initiative aligns with the global trend where many countries have transitioned toward a unitary or integrated ECCE governance structure.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The UiTM Research Ethics Committee has approved this qualitative study (REC/01/2024 (PG/MR/2)), which employs in-depth interviews to investigate the study's objectives through the selected sample comprehensively. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research is an investigative process in which researchers systematically evaluate and interpret social phenomena. According to Ahmad et al. (2021), the use of in-depth interviews in a study can provide a deeper comprehension of the problems. This study employs an inductive approach as it investigates the justification for the separation of the ECCE governance structure in Malaysia. This paper is based on an in-depth interview with a key person from four main agencies related to ECCE governance in Malaysia.

3.2 Informants and Data Collection

This research used purposive sampling for the in-depth interviews. According to Saunders et al. (2019), purposive or judgmental sampling enables the selection of specific cases that are most likely to provide answers to the research questions. According to Campbell et al. (2020), the informants for in-depth interviews are purposefully chosen to develop a deeper understanding of the topic. This study's four key informants were from the Children's Development Department, the Ministry of Education, the Department of National Unity, and the National Integration and Community Development Department. This decision was made since these departments and ministries govern the ECCE services in Malaysia.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Profile of Informants

This paper used purposive sampling for a total of four key informants who were interviewed during the data collection for this study. Table 1 presents specific information for all key informants.

Table 1. Demographic profile of informants

Pseudo	Gender	Years of Experience	Ministry / Department	ECCE Programs
KP1	Female	>5 years	Ministry of Education	Preschool
KP2	Female	>5 years	Children Development Department	Childcare
KP3	Female	>5 years	Department of National Unity and Integration	Childcare & Preschool
KP4	Male	>5 years	Community Development Department	Childcare & Preschool

4.2 Separation of ECCE Governance

During the interview sessions, the key informants were asked about Malaysia's existing ECCE governance structure. The key informants explained the reasons for the separation in the ECCE governance: legislation, history, roles, and functions. The key informants also emphasize the importance of having standards to coordinate despite the separation of governance.

KP3 explained the legislative differences between childcare and preschool, *"We cannot make changes to the division between kindergartens and nurseries because they are governed by the Childcare Act, which clearly states that nurseries are for children aged 0 to 4 years, while kindergartens cater to children aged 5 and 6, under the Ministry of Education."*

This is also supported by KP2 that, *"Nurseries for children under 4 years old fall under the Childcare Act 1984, which is governed by the JKM."*

She further explained that on the reason why the childcare under JPNIN and KEMAS is not under them, *"However, if you've gone to the Ministry of Rural Development, they also have nurseries, such as PERMATA KEMAS, which we recognize as nurseries under the management of a federal agency. These nurseries do not need to be registered under the Childcare Act 1984 because they are already governed by the government structure."*

When discussing the emergence of childcare services, KP2 mentioned, *"We are more commonly known for caregiving because there isn't yet an early childhood curriculum like formal education. So, we are more referred to as providing caregiving and development, where, for example, at the age of one, we only teach how to button a shirt and similar tasks. That's not formal education, just basic skills, which fall under our responsibility."*

Another key informant (KP1) highlighted the different roles among the agencies: *"We need to recognize that children aged 0 to 4 are not yet in the education stage; they are in the caregiving stage. It's only from ages 4 to 6 that we start talking about education. So, the 0 to 6 age range falls under early childhood education. If caregiving were to be included under the Ministry of Education, they would need a structured curriculum. However, caregiving at that level doesn't require a curriculum with assessments and all that. That's why caregiving is placed under the Ministry of Women."*

This also aligns with KEMAS, as their main focus is on children in rural areas. As KP4 stated, *“When it comes to early childhood education, we have programs in KEMAS aimed at kids, especially in rural areas. The idea is pretty much the same—it’s all about helping children in those places. We provide early education by setting up classes that we develop in these rural areas.”*

He further explained, *“So, that’s how we can help children in rural areas. We want to ensure that kids in rural settings have similar opportunities as those in urban areas. The goal is to expose them to education early on so they’re not just starting school in Grade 1. That’s the purpose of implementing early childhood education through various agencies like KEMAS.”*

This focus is similarly reflected in the JPNIN approach. When asked about their focus and function, KP3 answered, *“We focus more on suburban and rural areas, as well as the diversity of ethnic groups.”*

During the interview, the key informants also highlighted the importance of having a standard for coordination despite having the separation of the governance approach.

“There can be multiple implementing agencies involved[...]. However, it is crucial to have appropriate standards..”(KP1)

When asked about the aspect that needs to be included under this standard, she replied, *“Standards should be established regarding teacher qualifications, the curriculum, and the support provided.”* (KP1)

She also agrees that there is a lack of monitoring due to the separation of the governance, *“Right, so when it comes to the curriculum, there’s no problem with the main one, but there are some extra curriculums being used. No one is really supervising those.”*(KP1)

This also aligns with KP2’s view, as she stated, *“So far, we have a special committee chaired by the Minister of Education, along with the YB from our ministry.”*

“We cannot eliminate KEMAS and JPNIN, but without proper monitoring, their standards may become inconsistent.” (KP2)

KP3 also emphasized the need for coordination, *“One of the weaknesses I observe in various agencies is the lack of coordination. A simple example is in the implementation of the curriculum.”*

“That’s just one aspect of the curriculum. Additionally, there is a lack of alignment in terms of funding, with some agencies receiving allocations quickly while others experience delays. For instance, the Ministry of Education receives its funding for meals faster due to significant increases, while we, from other agencies, often receive our allocations later.”

5.0 Discussion

The in-depth interview with key informants gave an understanding of Malaysia’s separation of the ECCE governance. The first reason for the separation is because of the legislation. This is because there is a stipulation in the law that the Childcare Act 1984 caters to the age of birth to four years old, while the Education Act 1996 includes preschool education, which starts from four years old and continues until six years old. Each Act is also designated to specific governing bodies, which include the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), which governs the Childcare Act 1984, and the Ministry of Education, which regulates the Education Act 1996. Thus, to reform ECCE governance, the legislation must be amended by revising the Childcare Act 1984 and the Education Act 1996 to create a new framework that governs ECCE from birth to six years old. This requires a cooperative effort between all agencies related to Malaysia’s ECCE.

Secondly, the separation of the ECCE governance is also due to the history of establishing the ECCE programs themselves. As mentioned by the key informants, childcare is commonly referred to as caregiving, where they offer daycare services for the child while the parents are working. According to Chiam (2008), childcare services were founded in the late 1970s, when there was an increase in demand by working mothers. Thus, the care service is usually seen as an informal education program that cares for the children’s well-being without having any formal curriculum or assessment. It is different from preschool, according to Kamerman (2007), where the program is first provided by the Ministry of Education to enhance the children’s development and to ensure that the child is ready before they go to formal primary school. Thus, it can be seen that there has already been a distinction between the roles and functions of care and education a very long time ago.

Not only that, the separation of governance is also due to the role and function of different government agencies. As mentioned by the key informants, each agency has different roles and functions. For example, the Community Development Department’s (KEMAS) primary focus was providing ECCE services to rural children to ensure they would be included like other children, especially from the urban areas. On top of that, KEMAS was also the first agency to provide ECCE services at the beginning of the 1970s (Boon, 2010). This is also the same with the Department of National Unity and National Integration (JPNIN), where unity is the main objective in their ECCE programs. Due to this, it can be seen that every agency has its function and goals regarding ECCE programs. These functions complement each other so that no children will be left behind.

Despite the reasons for the separation, there is a need for standards for better coordination. The ECCE structure is complex since multiple agencies serve the programs. This led to unclear procedure and regulation requirements, unstandardized curriculum implementation, fragmentation of services, and issues in teachers’ training and qualifications (Chin et al., 2021). Good coordination is necessary to monitor and assess the quality of the ECCE services (Megalonidou, 2020).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the complexity of the ECCE governance structure in Malaysia is due to the separation of the agencies that govern the ECCE. An in-depth interview was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of Malaysia’s existing ECCE governance structure. The separation is due to the agencies’ legislation, roles, and functions. Thus, there is a need to have a clear standard to standardize all the ECCE programs. This requires a good coordination governance structure to ensure that all agencies can collaborate to provide high-quality ECCE in Malaysia.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper advances the field of ECCE by addressing ECCE governance through in-depth interviews with four leading agencies that govern the ECCE in Malaysia. Our findings demonstrate that the main factors that influence the separation are the legislative and historical influence and each agency's different roles and responsibilities. This research provides an understanding of the complexity of the existing ECCE governance and highlights the need for standardization to coordinate the agencies.

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