

## THE PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION VERSUS PROBLEMS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the challenges preschool teachers face in the curriculum implementation in Malaysia. In addition, in this study, it was also aimed to find out the underlying reasons of most frequently stated issues of implementation from the teachers' perspectives. This is a qualitative case study design; four preschool teachers chosen through purposive sampling as participants. The data was collected through interviews, teaching observation and document analysis. The interview main data, interview pre and post data will be analyzed by using Nvivo Version 10.0. While content analysis document data and observation note data analyzed using interpretation methods. Cohen Kappa Index and triangulations methods will be used to determine the validity and reliability of research data.

**Key Words:** curriculum, preschool curriculum, curriculum implementation, preschool teachers, problems of preschool teachers.

### INTRODUCTION

Curriculum change can be described as the transformation of the curriculum scheme such as goals and objectives, content, design (Hooper, 1971 as cited in Amimo, 2009) or it could be done in more minor sense by modifying the curriculum such as changing the learning activities and adding one more topic to the curriculum (Shindu & Omulondo, 1998). In fact, as to educate society towards the changes in the world, curriculum change is inevitable (Bondi & Wiles, 1998). For example, Malaysia, as well, went on curriculum change on early childhood education in 2006 to 2009 for the children aged between the 5-6 year olds and 2010 to current for the children aged between the 4-6+ year olds, through curriculum 2010, information and communication technology components added as knowledge in student learning (Sharifah Nor Puteh & Kamarul Azman Abd Salam, 2011).

Curriculum change, however, standing alone is not adequate for providing high quality of education rather there is a need for good implementers of those developed curriculum. In that sense, as teachers are the principal actors who transfer all that theoretical information into real classroom setting, whenever there is an implementation of a new curriculum, the issue of whether preschool teachers are facing problems in the process of implementation or not are triggered.

Teachers have roles in curriculum implementation in addition to other roles such as child guidance and discipline, respecting cultural diversity (McDonnell, 1999), establishing reciprocal relationship with families, (Lundin, 2000), creating a caring community of

learners, teaching to enhance development and learning (Breedekamp & Copple, 1997) in the classroom.

### **Statement of the problem**

Student learning success depends on teachers' knowledge of curriculum. Therefore, knowledge of curriculum is considered important because it emphasizes the specific context of teaching and learning, curriculum implementation and is considered as essential to the knowledge of the teacher (Mariani Md Nor & Mohd Sofian Omar-Fauzee, 2012). However, the issue of curriculum implementation among preschool teachers has been questioned since several decades ago. Four problems had been identified as factors related to the lack of knowledge among preschool teachers about curriculum implementation is lack of training, lack of understanding of the requirements and needs of the curriculum, lack of understanding of the concept of preschool education and lack of motivation.

Lack of training is the factor causing lack of knowledge about implementation curriculum among preschool teachers. For example, training for preschool teachers in Malaysia for the year 2012 is very limited; only 315 teachers were given training while the total number of preschool teachers in Malaysia in 2012 was 8536 people (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). Things certainly have an impact on learning throughout their stay in preschool and aim to prepare pupils for formal education is certainly not achieved (Sharifah Nor Puteh & Aliza Ali, 2011a). Thus, there arises the question of the level of curriculum knowledge and implementation curriculum in preschool classes.

The second factor in relation to this study is that teachers lack an understanding of the needs and requirements of the intended curriculum preschool cause they missed the pedagogical practices that should be practiced in preschool education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012; William Sipin, 2008). Teacher-centered teaching to children participation in learning activities is very limited. Some features or requirements included in the curriculum, such as learning the basic module and the module that connects thematic thinking and learning skills cannot be implemented effectively in teaching and learning process. Effects of the matter, the teacher does not seem to use the approach and techniques as recommended in the preschool education as learning through play approach, integrated approach, the matic approach and so on.

Third factor related PCK among preschool teachers in this study is the lack of knowledge and understanding of the conceptual teaching in the preschool curriculum. Consequently, they do not understand the essence of Development Appropriate Practices (DAP) and teachers do not focus on the goals to be achieved in educating preschoolers. Instead, teachers tend to formal teaching and teachers centered. Effects of long-term thing are to students, which the students will be bored, not interested in going to school and will eventually lead to learning problems.

The fourth issue is lack of support and lack of motivation. For example, male teachers are not interested in teaching preschool classes because of the assumption that teaching preschool class just for female teachers (Rostam Abd. Hamid, 2008). In addition, the imbalance of

infrastructure such as roads, transport services and Internet access, especially for schools located in rural, remote and island, especially for teachers in the countries of Asia. The effect of these issues cause teachers to ignore the needs of the curriculum and its implementation. Consequently, disrupted teaching and learning, their teaching style and disturbing the overall implementation of the curriculum (William Sipin Gusiang, 2008).

This study is be conducted on preschool teachers to find out the phenomenon. This effort will enhance the ability of the teachers teaching and identify any weaknesses or strengths and make improvements in the context of preschool education.

### **Research Objectives**

The main purpose of the study was to explore the problems that preschool teachers face in the implementation of the early childhood curriculum. Another purpose of the study was to detect differences, if any, in problems faced by teachers with respect to their educational level, the department they graduated from, and their years of experience and type of the one schools they are working in. Finally, it was also aimed to identify underlying reasons of highly stated problems by participant teachers.

### **Research Questions**

This study is aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the problems that preschool teachers face in the curriculum implementation?
2. What are the underlying reasons of mostly stated problems from the perspectives of teachers?

### **Significance of the Study**

In general, teachers' capacity to learn and become accustomed to innovations can lead to students' learning and acquaintance with the innovations in classrooms. Teachers can be seen as both the means and ends of reform movements (Cohen & Hill, 2001). There are multiple roles of the early childhood educators and these roles are not exclusive of each other, but are complex, varied and interdependent (Essa, 2003).

To illustrate, knowing how children develop and learn, building family and community relationship, using assessment responsibly, teaching to promote children's learning and becoming a professional in the field are among the roles (Hyson, et al., 2009). According to NAEYC (2001) standards, for serving a good quality of education to children, there is a need to meet those standards. Especially, when the role is related to curriculum implementation, things are getting more challenging and heavier responsibility creates on the shoulders of the early childhood educators. Despite what it is written in the curriculum; practices of teachers and events going on in the classroom settings are being affected by many factors at the same time.

Both the personal and environmental factors (Emine (2010) are affecting the curriculum implementation, which in turn affects the quality of the education aimed to be given via curriculum. To illustrate, the absence of the comprehensive infrastructure is an obstacle preventing good quality servings for children (Azzi-Lessing, 2009) or levels of teachers' qualifications (well preparedness, openness to innovations) affect the quality of classroom environment (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). On the other hand, despite the teacher knows what to do and understands the issues regarding the specific tasks of curriculum and curriculum implementation, still there can be problems faced by preschool teachers. In fact, no matter what factors cause the problems, it is certain that they affect educational environment of the classroom or the way of implementing the good quality of curriculum.

In other words, the teachers' problems and difficulties creates an adverse effect on the quality of the curriculum implementation, there is a need for understanding what possible problems teachers are encountering with and taking necessary precautions to eliminate the effects of those problems on implementation.

In that sense, indentifying preschool teachers' problems faced during the implementation of the curriculum is a necessity because once the problems were detected precisely, it is easier to deal with and find ways to cope with those issues. Therefore, for the specific purpose of the study, a questionnaire was designed to find preschool teachers' problems faced during the curriculum implementation. To sum up, this study aimed to contribute to the literature by analyzing early childhood teachers' problems faced regarding curriculum implementation as well as finding out the reasons for the ones ranked high among the stated problems through interviews with the teachers.

## **Literature Review**

Early childhood has many knowledge bases that are rooted in child development, social work, family relationships, anthropology, as well as health, developmentally appropriate practice and special education (Kendall, 1993). So teachers need to be skilled at many issues which in turn create big responsibility in the shoulders of early childhood educators. In other words, early childhood teachers' roles vary in the classroom.

McDonnell (1999) describes the early childhood teachers' role as having the knowledge of twelve areas; (1) foundations, (2) child development and growth, (3) curriculum, (4) health, safety and nutrition, (5) child observation, record keeping and assessment, (6) creating environments for young children, (7) child guidance and disciplines, (8) cultural diversity, (9) special needs, (10) family and community relationships (11) professionalism and professional development (12) administration and supervision.

On the other hand, The National Association for Education of Young Children (2001) identifies the role of the early childhood educator in five areas: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance development and learning, (3) Constructing

appropriate curriculum, (4) assessing children's development and learning (5) Establishing reciprocal relationships with families. Moreover, Lundin (2000) distinguished the role of the early childhood educator within 6 components: (1) understanding needs and capabilities of the children, (2) creating an environment for social and emotional learning (3) accommodating a wide range of abilities, (4) balancing teacher initiated and child initiated activities, (5) assessing how well the curriculum meets children's needs (6) developing strong needs with families. The roles of the early childhood teachers can be expanded more however there is a common point in all explanations that is the teacher's role in curriculum.

Considering the teacher's role in curriculum, there are various factors affecting it. Both the personal and environmental factors are affecting the curriculum implementation in the real classroom settings. To begin with, characteristics of the teacher might be among the factors. As teachers are social beings and as they come from different backgrounds, they bring their past experience into their classroom practice. Accordingly, the personal characteristics have an impact on the implementation of the curriculum (Butera, 2009). To illustrate, teachers characterized as motivated, responsible, organized and open to new learning opportunities were found high curriculum implementers (Butera, 2009) compared to teachers described as unmotivated, not open to changes.

Moreover, the level of support from administrators and colleagues can be explained as one of the factors effecting early childhood teachers' curriculum implementation. Desimone, (2004) insisted on the support from the school principal as a key factor for successful curriculum implementation. In other words, collaborative environment is a necessity. In the study, it was found that collaborative relationship and networking were detected as positive factors increasing the teachers' attitudes and motivation, as well as their teaching Desimone, et al (2004). Teberg (1999) also supported the necessity of administrative support for a successful curriculum implementation by discussing the fact that teachers need more than just knowledge and skills, they need encouragement and assistance to reach the goals defined for their children.

In addition to the factors affecting the curriculum implementation, early childhood teachers are facing with the problems when there is a curriculum reform. In one of the study conducted by Cisneros, Cisneros-Chernour and Moreno (2000), Mexican kindergarten teachers' problems and dilemmas was explored after the K-9 curriculum reform. The new curriculum emphasizes "individualism and assertiveness" which are opposed with the Mexican culture and there was a stress on accountability. Data gathered through a qualitative method by interviews, focus groups, document analysis over 8 weeks of period. First problem was the conflict between the school and home. Parents perceive kindergarten as a playing ground for the children not as a learning place after the curriculum reform so this creates a barrier between the school and home collaboration. Second, there was a lack of continuity and compatibility between kindergarten and some elementary schools. Transition from kindergarten to elementary school becomes a problem because children were expected more passive role when they start to elementary school.

Third, role expectations from teachers by the schools and the Mexican Department of Education were different. While the department let the teachers to be flexible in terms of activities, the school principals wanted them to follow exactly what the manuals and guides tell. Fourth was the lack of resources. Teachers, especially when working in rural areas developed low expectations for children because of the scarce resources. In that sense, teacher explained that this curriculum does not pay attention to regional differences. Final problem was the immigration and migration issues.

Teachers were having difficulty when dealing with children with limited Spanish and do not know how to include those children into the classroom activities. In another study, Wai-Yum (2003) tried to find out the problems of early childhood teachers experienced in the process of top-down curriculum reform at a local kindergarten in Hong Kong. The purpose of the study was to reveal the lived experience of the real people in real context. The qualitative method was used through individual and focus-group interviews.

At the end of the study, teachers explained four major difficulties regarding the new curriculum reform. The first problem was that teachers had to fulfill too many tasks by the implementation of the curriculum however they do not have had equate time to finish those and they became overburdened by the heavy – workload. Second was the frequent supervision and intervention of the principal into the classroom teaching so teachers felt that the principals do not trust and these lead teachers to lose confidence in their teaching. Third problem was the lack of getting answers from principals regarding the new curriculum reform. Teachers added that despite the expectation was high from the teachers; it was surprising to see that the administrators do not know much about the things about to implement. Finally, teachers were having the problem of lack of support and encouragement from the administrators and parents. There is a need for collaboration among the teachers, principals and parents for the proper implementation of the new curriculum.

In addition to the positive sides of the curriculum, school principals described the problems of the new curriculum implementation as the lack of information regarding the new curriculum among early childhood teachers. They also added the physical environment deficiencies as the hurdles confronted during implementation. Early childhood teachers on the other hand, distinguished their problems regarding the curriculum. First, they stated the physical environment deficiencies, which prevent proper implementation of the new curriculum. Then, they added their lack of knowledge about understanding the new curriculum as whole. Third was related with the parent involvement that is early childhood teachers claimed that home-visits were difficult to make. Teachers also added that it was difficult to find the necessary documents such as development control list, objective evaluation form, teacher self-evaluation form etc.

Regarding the objectives, it was found that teachers did not have difficulties both on deciding the objectives to choose for an activity and choosing objectives from all areas of development appropriate for the age group of the children. Teachers, in terms of education and planning, proposed that there was a need for guidance regarding which methods to use, what kinds of

technological materials to be included in the daily plans. In addition, teachers elaborated that the examples of Science and nature activities, music activities and reading- writing activities should be included in the curriculum. The type of activities was needed regarding parent involvement, on the other hand, were not described clearly according to the views of the teachers. They added that parent involvement should consider involvement of both fathers' and mothers' education.

Finally, teachers found evaluation forms designed for evaluating children inadequate. They suggested that there should be more examples of evaluation forms to understand whole progress of the children. In other words, observation forms designed for children were not adequate so other evaluation techniques should be included in the curriculum.

In conclusion, various studies have been conducted focusing on the problems of preschool teachers regarding the curriculum implementation. In order to achieve the high quality standards in early childhood education, problems of preschool teachers should continue to be analyzed well and realistic practical solutions should also be offered to increase effectiveness in curriculum implementation. In this context the present study is expected to make a contribution to the literature by analyzing the problems of teachers in detail and taking the ideas of preschool teachers regarding the possible solutions.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative case study design; four preschool teachers were be chosen through purposive sampling as participants. The data was be collected through interviews, teaching observation and document analysis for six (6) months.

The main interview was be held twice, pre and post-teaching interviews. The first interview was to inquire the background information of the participants and their understanding of the curriculum content. The second interview however was to get the response of the participants towards questions regarding the critical incidents. All the critical incidents were based on issues or real episodes of occurrences during the teaching and learning processes. Pre and post-teaching interview will be held to obtain more information about content knowledge, pedagogy and technology transformation regarding a lesson through observation. Audio recording will be used during the interviews and note taking along with audio recording will be used during the observation of the teaching lesson. The visual or video recording, for the two observations will be recorded at the end of the lesson for each of the participants.

Observations of teaching is conducted to explore the understanding and transformation of content knowledge, pedagogical and technological participants through lesson plan and how participants implemed them during the teaching learning process. Through the first phase of all analysis, the data including the data from audio and visual recording will be transcribed. The interview main data, interview pre and post data were analyzed by using Nvivo Version 10.0. While content analysis document data and observation note data were be analyzed using

interpretation methods. Cohen Kappa Index and triangulations methods were used to determine the validity and reliability of research data.

## **Findings**

### **Problems that preschool teachers face in the curriculum implementation**

#### **Literacy and Numeracy**

The goal of the National Preschool Standard Curriculum of Malaysia is to produce children who can master the skills of reading, thinking, writing and reasoning to prepare them for primary school. Through interviews with the participants, it was found that they were not pressed for curriculum goals, because they thought the curriculum does not force preschoolers to master the skill set but when the child is ready and the implementation of teaching and learning is based on the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) as recommended. However, participants stressed that the demand by schools, District Education Office (DEO) and parents requiring children should master the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. More pressure is coming from DEO when they have a program for preschool children to avoid becoming part of the LINUS program (Literacy and Numeracy Screening) when they are in elementary school. Therefore, teaching and learning carried out in preschool classes were found to be more teacher-centered. The proposed approach to teaching in preschool education, such as learning through play, teaching projects and so on, are not implemented and set aside.

#### **Teaching and learning approach**

The activities of teaching and learning through the study found preschool teachers using traditional approaches, teacher-centered approach. The participants believe this approach is most appropriate to reinforce pupils' understanding of memory and a skill, especially literacy and numeracy skills. The study also found that participants often use coercive techniques, drill and memorization of teaching to give encouragement to a skill and knowledge. Participants believe that this approach meets the demand of schools, DEO and parents requiring children to master reading, writing and arithmetic. The findings show that preschool teachers did not only not practice the art of teaching and learning approaches such as teaching and learning of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). They also did not adopt the proposed approach to teaching in preschool education.

#### **English competency**

The study also found that the participants did not implement the teaching and learning of English, among preschool curriculum implementation problems by the teacher. The main reason given by the participants was not to perform activities of teaching and learning English because they are not proficient in English. In addition, the participants indicated that children were not interested in English because they were less familiar with English. This problem causes the class to be passive and teaching and learning was not fun for the children.

## **ICT skills**

There is added value in the curriculum of the National Preschool Curriculum Standards of Malaysia 2010 is based on the teaching and learning of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The study found that the participants knew about the importance of using technology in the teaching and learning process and were ready to implement at the teaching and learning using ICT. However, study participants did not implement at the teaching and learning using technology such as computers and other technological equipment because of limited knowledge about the integration of technology in teaching and learning. Most of the technological equipment supplied in 2006, 2007 and 2008, such as computer hardware, tv, DVD player and so on have been damaged and no repair. Facilities and resources ICT such as internet access and Wi-Fi also unavailable. In addition, power outage is among the participants' constraints in implementing ICT based on teaching and learning.

## **Underlying reasons of mostly stated problems from the perspectives of teachers**

### **Training**

Less of training on the curriculum was under lying reason for the failure of preschool teachers to implement the curriculum The study participants also noted, that the exposure to National Preschool Curriculum Standards of Malaysia was held only once, in 2009 before the curriculum was implemented in 2010. The participants also admitted that they were of lack knowledge about the contents of the National Preschool Curriculum Standards of Malaysia. Some participants were still using national preschool curriculum published in 2006. The participants also argued, that less there were many problems faced in implementing the preschool curriculum, such as teaching and learning of English, teaching and learning approaches proposed, teaching approaches and ICT learning and so on.

### **ICT facilities**

Less ICT facilities such as technological equipment and technological resources causes and problems of preschool teachers do not practice approaches ICT-based teaching and learning. Technological equipment supplied in 2006, 2007 and 2008, such as computer hardware, tv, DVD player and so on have been damaged and norepair is performed. Ease of ICT resources such as Internet access and wifi is also not supplied, the schools had Internet access and wifi did not cooperate even preschool teachers have made an application to get the facility in their classes.

### **Implementation monitoring**

According to the participants there was lack of monitoring of the authorities on preschool curriculum implementation. This led to implementation of teaching and learning is not in line with the curriculum and is not consistent among the preschool classes with other classes. Lack of monitoring of preschool classes operating result could not be implemented smoothly and effectively as there is a lack of equipment and

Of knowledge about curriculum among study participants. Problems facilities available in preschool classes also can not be addressed and managed, the implementation of teaching and learning is disrupted, such as electrical interference that often occurs in school.

### **Lack of support**

According to the participants, the problems in the implementation of the preschool curriculum is the lack of support from the administration whether the school administrator or the DEO. Lack of support was not only in terms of motivation for teachers but also in terms of needs, such as complaints about a faulty equipment such as computer hardware, had been neglected by the school administrator or the DEO. Even administrators and DEO also did not understand the course cv of the operation of the preschool class as it should, for example DEO provide literacy and numeracy tests related to preschool children to prevent them from being involved in the LINUS program in primary school. This puts pressure on children, teachers and schools.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study aimed to investigate the problems faced by the preschool teachers during curriculum implementation. This study focused on many aspects of the problems which the preschool teachers faced during curriculum implementation.

The importance of preschool education should not have disputed, preschool education to high impact on the achievement of a child's development physically, mentally, emotionally and socially satisfying. Some of the issues in preschool education including curriculum implementation problems is related to the factors that come from the teachers themselves, the environment and facilities as discussed.

Therefore, stakeholders should play their role more effectively to ensure that there should be uniformity in terms of management, monitoring, curriculum must be followed and the preparation of teachers who are trained for all preschool classes either government or private preschools

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