

## **Malaysian Preschool Education**

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### **Introduction**

Education in Malaysia is the responsibility of the Federal Government. To ensure a healthy and peaceful quality of life for the community, The Education Ministry of Malaysia has made education the main agenda in the country's development (Ministry of Education, 1998). Under The Education Ministry, a few steps have been taken. The Education Ministry was split into two sections in 2004; the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. This is to ensure both Ministries are able to do work in a more strategic and efficient way.

In 2004 the Ministry of Education (MOE) commissioned a review called 'The Development of Education'. This review was based on previous the National Education Philosophy and the Education Act 1996. The plan provides preschools, primary schools, secondary and tertiary education with the purpose of creating an integrated, disciplined and educated society (Postiglione, & Tan, 2007). In Malaysia:

Most children between four and six years of age begin their education at preschool set up throughout the country by both government and non-government agencies and the private sector. They enter the primary school at the age of 6+. After completing 6 years at the primary school level they will proceed to lower secondary level for 3 years, followed by 2 years of upper secondary level. Upon completion of upper secondary level, they may proceed to post secondary level consisting of a matriculation program, pre-university (form 6), or college and polytechnics programs. Upon completion of post secondary education, students may proceed to further their education to university; or enter the job market. (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.8)

The next step the MOE took was to establish 'The Education Development Base Plan' on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2007. The plan outlined priorities for the period (2006–2010) specifically focusing on reducing the gap between poverty and quality education in the community in the urban and rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The system of education in Malaysia is centralized and its educational administration structure has four distinct hierarchical levels which are namely, federal, state, district and school. At the MOE decision-making is performed through a committees system (The Education Planning and Research Division serves as the Secretariat). However, 'the ultimate authority on education is Parliament and policy issues that have wider ramifications are referred to the Cabinet before process at the MOE' (Ministry of Education, p.6).

### **Structure and Provision of Malaysian Preschool Education**

Preschool education is viewed as an important experience for each child in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 1998). Thus, the MOE has been proactive in establishing free education for children, especially those in the rural areas. The priority of universal preschool was acknowledged when Council of Ministers' Meeting instructed MOE to implement a Preschool Programme on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1991. The first preschool programme in 1992 comprised 1,131 preschool classes including 26 graduate preschool teachers from Teacher Training Institutes (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Under the Education Act of 1996, preschool education of children of age 5+ had been incorporated within the national system of education (Ministry of Education, 1996). A statement by the MOE that compulsory preschool education may be introduced has been 'warmly welcomed by all those who understand what this could mean for the future education of our children' (Abraham, 2006, p.31). The Prime Minister stated that basic education is fundamental towards 'developing world-class education system' (Ministry of Education, 2006 p.3).

A significant change was made in the preschool education in Malaysia in 2001. The Council of Ministers' Meeting gave its approval for the expansion of MOE's Preschool Programme in term of numbers, and also articulated in the National Preschool Curriculum that learning and teaching would be enacted in a more holistic, interesting and more orderly way.

Preschool education is offered both by government agencies and the private sector. The overall aim of preschool education is to provide a firm foundation for primary school education (Ministry of Education, 1999). The private sector, NGOs, the MOE and other Government agencies including the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development have to abide by the curriculum guidelines set by the

MOE under the Education Act of 1996.

All preschool centres are registered with the MOE. Preschool education is mostly conducted by the private sector in the urban areas and various government agencies. Therefore, the care of preschool aged children comes under the responsibility of a large number of government departments and social agencies.

In relation to the stated priority of 'compulsory education and quality education for all', the Government is successfully opening opportunities for public and private preschools in Malaysia to work together (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.4). On the other hand, the Government's effort in enhancing the status of early education will be implemented among children from poor families or those from distant area.

### **Participation in Preschool Education**

Schooling experience and effective meaningful learning are able to provide children with skills, self confidence and positive attitudes in preparation for formal schooling and lifelong education. Indeed, the government needs to expand the provision of more preschool classes in order for more children to access preschool education. However, expansion of preschool education is a challenge to the MOE. One of the issues identified was that in 2000 '36% of children within aged 5-6 did not have access to preschool'. (Ministry of Education, 2004, P19)

In 2003, when the government implemented the National Preschool Curriculum and made it compulsory in all preschools, the MOE and other relevant ministries also increased access to preschool education. Table 1 show that from 1992 to 2007 the average number of preschool classes, enrolments and the number of preschool teachers have increased. The participation rate this level of education has risen from 1,131 classes in 1992 to 3,287 classes in 2005, increase 2,156 classes (190.6%) (Ministry of Education, 2006, p.20). The MOE in its 5 years education development base plan (2006–2010) has included strategies to increase participation rate in preschool education (Ministry of Education, 2006). As of 2007, there are 5852 public preschool classes providing education to 118,686 children. There are 6846 preschool teachers (Malaysian Education Statistics, 2007).

**Table 1. Average Number of Preschool Classes, Children Enrolment and Number of Preschool Teachers from 1992 to 2007**

<b>Item</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>Number of Preschool Classes</b>					
MOE (public)	1,131	1,131	1,053	3,287	5852
other relevant ministries & privates	6,033	8,683	10,884	13,052	-
<b>Children Enrolment</b>					
MOE (public)	26,000	27,883	26,718	93,376	118,686
other relevant ministries & privates	328,813	431,132	777,283	610,714	-
<b>Number of Preschool Teachers</b>					
MOE (public)	1,131	1,131	1,116	4,004	6846
other relevant ministries & privates	10,773	15,188	34,424	30,658	-

Source: Ministry of Education, The Education Development Base Plan, 2006 p.21, and Malaysian Education Statistics, 2007

Participation in education in Malaysia at all levels does not discriminate between genders. Generally, from 1993 to 2003 the composition of males and females children enrolled in public preschool is about the same. (Ministry of Education, 2004) This shows that participation among male and female children in preschool education in Malaysia are equal.

### **Preschool Teachers**

Pre service teacher education for Malaysian preschool is divided into graduate and non graduate teacher training. Virtually all secondary school teachers are university graduates but most preschool and primary school teachers are trained in teacher training colleges under the jurisdiction of the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2004).

The long term plan of the Ministry of Education is to achieve a staffing target of 50% of graduate teachers in preschool and primary schools by 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2001). This entails a daunting figure of 100,000 graduate (preschool and primary school) teachers to be trained in a period of 10 years (Ministry of Education, 2001). Although the TED is involved to a limited extent in graduate teacher training, it is in fact the public Higher Education Institutions that are primarily responsible for graduate pre service and in service teacher education as only universities and University Colleges are empowered to award degrees under Malaysia's Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1971 (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Preschool teachers (not under the MOE teachers) must attend formal training or a special course before they can teach at preschool. Training is conducted at Teacher Training Institutes (TTI) under the MOE or other relevant ministries and government departments. At the end of 2004, the MOE has certificated 178 trainers from the Community Development Division (KEMAS) of the National Unity Development, Malaysia (Myers, 2004). These trainers in turn train other preschool teachers. The government through its agencies also provides trained teachers, teaching-learning materials, and funds to facilitate running of the public preschools.

However, this has resulted in a small percentage of male teachers in preschools. In 2007, for instance, male teachers comprise only 380 teachers (5.87%) and female teachers approximate 6466 teachers (94.13%) (Malaysian Education Statistics, 2007). The continuous drop in the number of male teachers in preschools during the last ten years (1995 – 2005) has intensified efforts to encourage males into the teaching profession (Malaysian Education Statistics, 2007). Indeed, 'public encouragement through the media has been initiated to encourage males to apply for training, but it appears that the effort to recruit more males into the teaching profession would continue to be a challenge to the MOE' (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.25)

The quality of education is also influenced by the teacher-children ratios in preschool. The sub-indices for preschool teacher-children ratio have increased during the period. The government preschool teacher-student ratio was one teacher for every 25 children (Ministry of Education, 2003) while the private preschool teacher-children ratio was one teacher for every 15 to 25 children (depends on certain private preschool policies). However, a teacher

assistant is placed in government preschool classes to assist preschool teachers.

### **Preschool Education Goals and Objectives (Curriculum)**

In preschool education, a teacher has to create suitable activities for children's self development, abilities, talents and children's interests. The suitable activities must have to involve children being active for learning to be more fun, effective and meaningful. All activities have to be planned ahead of time systematically to ensure all children get the same opportunities either as individuals or as a group.

The National Preschool Curriculum states that 'the preschool curriculum promotes the holistic intellectual, languages, social, art and creativity, psychomotor, cognitive and spiritual development of the children' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.5). The objective of preschool curriculum is to reinforce the achievement of 'basic skills such as socialization process and personality development. The basic skills taught at this level are communication, social and other skills (Reading, Writing and Counting) in preparation for primary schooling'. (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.20)

The National Preschool Curriculum lists 4 principles and approaches of preschool teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2003). The principles include the following teaching and learning is holistic, fun in learning, meaningful learning and lifelong learning. The approaches of teaching and learning are 'learning through play, thematic approach, integrated approach and information technology and communication' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.70)

Those four principles and approaches of teaching and learning curriculum provide a framework for informal and flexible education process. The teaching pedagogy follows those principles and approaches. The curriculum used the approach known as 'Developmentally Appropriate Practice' (DAP) (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.5). DAP focuses on using teaching and learning techniques that are 'suitable to age, self development, abilities, talents and the children's interests' (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.5). The curriculum is framed from an outcome-based learning perspective which focuses on what children know, understand, do and practice as an outcome of the teaching and learning process. This means that learning activities have to concentrate to what the children have to achieve.

## Operation of Preschools

The public preschools are fully funded by the government. The government pays for all expenses including teacher salaries, capital costs equipment, and food subsidies. For capital cost equipment, each child is granted with RM100 per person and overall cost are RM2500 each class per year (RM100 x 25 children x 1 class). For food subsidies, each child are subsidised with RM1.50 and overall cost is RM300 per person per year (RM1.50 x 1 child x 200 days) (Ministry of Education, 2003).

In private preschools, parents pay fees and other expenses are borne by the operator or caregiver. Some preschools are open in sessions which are morning sessions or afternoon sessions. This is to ensure that the teaching quality is maintained and the number of children per teacher is appropriate. An example of a formal teaching and learning timetable in a public preschool not less than 3 hours a day for 5 days a week is as below (Ministry of Education, 2003).

TIME	7.30 – 8.10	8.10 – 9.50 (Individual activity)	9.50 – 10.30	10.30 – 11.30 (Group activity and reflexion)	11.30 – 1.30 (Teachers activity after teaching hour)
MONDAY	*R	Malay Language	*R	Cognitive & Creativity and Aesthetic	PNP discussion between teachers.
TUESDAY	OU	Islamic or Moral Education	E	Malay Language & Creativity and Aesthetic	Reports or evaluation class equipment
WEDNESDAY	T	English Language	L	Malay Language & Cognitive	Sports or Clubs activity (after school)
THURSDAY	I	Physical and movement & Cognitive	A	English Language	Children's achievement report.
FRIDAY	NE	Cognitive & Creativity and Aesthetic	X	Islamic or Moral Education	Lesson plan for the next week

\* ROUTINE – indoor activities, tea time, refresh, sing anthem song, and circle time.  
RELAX – breakfast, outdoor activity and relax.

Source: Ministry of Education, 2003.

Children in government aided preschools follow a common national curriculum taught in Malay Language from the preschool level onwards (Ministry of Education, 2003). The private preschools that are using English in teaching and learning as the main language must teach Malay Language as a subject for at least two hours a week. The main focus that the MOE has suggested is outline below:

Item	Term	Time estimated
1.	Malay Language to be taught in preschools are not using Malay as the main language.	At least two hours a week.
2.	English to be taught in preschools are not using English as the main language.	At least one hour a week.
3.	Islamic Education for muslim children only and Moral Education for non-muslim children.	At least two hours a week.

Source: Ministry of Education, the National Preschool Curriculum, 2003, p.74

Even though teachers have to teach according to the National Preschool Curriculum 2003, they are still able to be flexible in their teaching methods. This enable teacher to make changes according to the situations, locations or occasions such as the Independent Day and the Raya Day ceremony. The teaching can also be thematic. Even though it is flexible, the teaching has to compromise the 6 components of teaching that was outlined by MOE (Ministry of Education, 2003). The teachers also have to involve themselves in curriculum activities such as sports and clubs and also be a committee member in any of the school's programmes. Usually these programmes are done during the school hours, and the role of a teacher is taken over by the teacher's assistant. This assistant can also be the cook. If another teacher is needed, the principal of the school will find a suitable replacement.

Children in preschool do not have to undergo individual and written exams. Usually the development and achievement evaluations are done in class by observing the children. The observations are based on behaviour, interaction, conversation and the children's work. Every teacher has to evaluate children's achievement continuously and their development in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Ministry of Education, 2003). This is because evaluation is a part of the teaching and learning process. All information gathered is kept safe in a portfolio that contains the child's personal records, development records and work done in class.



Involvement from parents, guardians and the community is encouraged because this is an important element in the implementation of a preschool curriculum (Myers, 2004). Teachers, parents, guardians and the community have to work together in supporting the continuous achievement and development of a more responsible and good citizen in the future (Ministry of Education, 2003). Activities such as cleaning the school, children's concert or shows, canteen day, and charity work give the opportunities for parents to get to know their children better in the preschool environment. Usually such activities are done on Saturdays to give working parents a chance to participate.

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