

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION EDUCATORS' COMPETENCY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** Teacher competency is crucial in ensuring the quality of early childhood education (ECE). This qualitative study was conducted to explore the competency among ECE educators in Malaysia. Seven ECE experts, seven government officers, and 12 operators have been interviewed in this study. Data analysis produced five themes; four of them supported the literature review, namely knowledge, skills, experience, and personality, while one additional theme was related to creativity. All themes were found to be important in improving the competency of ECCE in Malaysia. Implications in light of these findings were discussed.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education (ECE), teacher competency, qualitative study

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the earliest stage involving children from birth to six years old[1]. ECE in Malaysia encompasses two levels based on the age of children, known as the Child Care Center (TASKA) and Child Education Centre (TADIK). TASKA is aimed to provide care for children under the age of four years old, while TADIK aims to provide an early experience of growth, development, and learning for four to six-year-old children[1].

Since ECE is one of the important aspects that ensures the development of the country[2], emphasis should be given to the production of competent teachers. This is in line with the National Preschool Quality Standard (SKPK) which emphasizes the need for competent teachers to ensure the quality of every aspect related to the management preschool children in and out of the classroom[3]. Based on the literature review, competency of ECE educators consists of four main components, namely knowledge[4,-8], skills [6-12], experience[13-16], and personality[5,6,12,17-20].

In terms of knowledge, the literature review found that children's learning process became more effective when they are taught by teachers who have an academic qualification in ECE[4,7,8]. In terms of skills, the literature review revealed that there are various skills needed by ECE educators, which include leadership skills[9], pedagogical skills[10], and communication skills[11]. In terms of experience, the experiences of ECE educators is found to play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of children's learning[13-16]. This is in line with the standards of SKPK which emphasizes the commitment of teachers who are experienced in the management of preschool children[2]. In terms of personality, it has been found that the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process in the classroom is influenced by the personality of a teacher[17]. In this regard, ECE educators are needed to have certain attributes such as sense of endurance [12], friendly[18], and patient[19,20]. All aspects of the competency need to be addressed to ensure children's holistic development[4].

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed individual interviews and focus group discussions as data collection methods. Seven ECE experts,

seven government officers, and 12 TASKA and TADIK operators took part in this study. Specifically, all ECE experts involved in individual interviews, while all government officers and operators involved in focus group discussions. All interview sessions and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data were analyzed manually by coding the responses provided by the participants according to the components of ECE teacher competencies suggested by the literature.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data revealed that there are four components of ECCE teacher competencies which are in line with the literature review. In terms of knowledge, responses given by the participants showed that ECE educators need to possess knowledge related to early childhood and care education in order to improve the quality of ECCE. Specifically, the obtained responses yielded that ECE educators' knowledge can be gained in two ways, namely academic qualification and the involvement in professional development programs. In terms of academic qualification, the participants stressed the importance of teachers to have academic qualification such as diploma and a bachelor degree in ECCE as the criteria to work in TASKA and TADIK. The examples of responses provided by the participants are as follows:

"... if teachers have diploma... they will perform better in TASKA and TADIK" (O1)

"... in terms of teachers, we will choose those who have bachelor degree in early childhood and care education..." (G7)

"...we need to provide in house training in order to upgrade teachers' knowledge from time to time." (E3)

"... we need to conduct workshops or courses that can improve the capability of the teachers..." (G4)

In terms of skills, the obtained responses yielded that teachers need to develop various skills in relation to children's learning. Such skills include pedagogical skills, communication skills, and language skills. The examples of responses provided by the participants are as follows:

"... we would like to see in terms of their skills... those skills are related to their pedagogical practices" (P7)

"... in terms of skill...it includes communication skills... they can't teach like a professor...they need to know the nature of four to six-year-old children...they have to know how to communicate with the children" (O6)

"... but actually, preschool teachers need to have English skills" (P4)

In terms of experience, analysis of the data revealed that ECE educators need to have experience in ensuring the successful implementation of the curriculum and children's learning activities. Besides, ECE educators' experience is also vital in managing the children. In addition, the obtained responses also indicated that the performance of experienced teachers is better than those teachers with an academic qualification. The examples of responses provided by the participants are as follows:

"...I need to deal with those teachers with ten to fifteen years of experience...they applied the theories that we mention...based on their experience of handling the children every day...they read the module and they tried it on the next day" (P1)

".... in terms of overall activities... experienced teachers are better...they are better from us in terms of the implementation of the activities...their experience with the children they can conduct the activities with the children spontaneously... because they have many experiences" (PK3)

"... experience also play an important role... the experience teaches them how to handle the kids" (O7)

"... sometimes it is from the experience. I think experienced teachers perform better than those teachers with academic qualification..." (O11)

In terms of personality, responses given by the participants indicated that ECE educators need to possess certain attributes such as loving, patient, caring, committed, and honesty. In addition, ECE educators also need to possess motherhood qualities. Besides, they also need to have an interest in children. The examples of responses provided by the participants are as follows:

"... we will look for the criteria such as loving during the interview..." (PK3)

"... then they have to have a high level of patience..." (O5)

"... because I want those who work with the children are those who care for them..." (O8)

"... another criterion is work commitment" (P3)

"... the most important thing is teachers have to be honest when teaching...if they are honest children will learn better..." (O3)

"... teachers need to possess motherhood qualities" (O2)

"...teachers need to have the interest towards children..." (P3)

Apart from those four components of competency, one additional theme emerged about the importance of teacher creativity. Specifically, the obtained responses indicated that ECE educators need to be creative in terms of the learning material that will be used in the classroom. The responses of the participants regarding the teacher's creativity are as follows:

"...teachers must be creative... they need to be creative in terms of the use and preparation of the learning material..."

they must be creative, otherwise, they will teach alone in front of the classroom while the children disappear" (O6)

"... teachers need to be creative in terms of the preparation of the learning material in order to ensure the achievement of learning objectives." (P1)

This study was conducted to explore the competency of ECE educators from the perspectives of ECE experts, government officers, and operators. Analysis of data indicated that ECE educators' competency includes four components. First, ECE educators need to possess knowledge related to ECCE in order to improve children's learning. This finding is in line with previous studies which found the importance teachers' knowledge due to its vital role in influencing the effectiveness of teaching and learning process[4,8]. It is also supported by the previous study which found that the quality of children's learning greatly depends on the knowledge possessed by the teachers[14]. This finding can be justified by considering the nature of childhood development, whereby there are various developmental aspects that need to be emphasized simultaneously when dealing with children. Such aspects include physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Thus, it is important to have teachers who are knowledgeable in all those aspects in order to ensure children's holistic development.

Second, ECE educators need to develop various skills related to pedagogy, communication, and language. This finding is in line with the previous studies which found the importance of skillful ECE educators in ensuring the successful implementation of children learning activities [10,11]. This finding can be justified by taking into account the importance of teachers' skills in improving children's learning. For instance, the previous study found that the skills possessed by ECE educators influence the effectiveness of a learning approach that is used in the classroom[10]. Besides, it is also found that teachers who communicate clearly with the children were successful in encouraging children to manage their play[11].

Third, ECE educators need to have experience in order to be competent. This finding is in line with the previous studies which found the crucial role played by experience when dealing with children[13,15,16]. This finding can be justified by considering the importance of experience in providing teachers with real-life contexts in which they need to apply various strategies to overcome certain situations. Through such contexts, teachers become more skillful and confident in dealing with children since the application of such strategies is done every day. This notion is supported by the previous study who found that experienced teachers have high self-efficacy in terms of classroom management[13].

Fourth, ECE educators need to possess a good personality which includes attributes such as loving, patient, caring, committed, and honesty, motherhood qualities, as well as having the interest towards children. This finding can be justified by taking into consideration the importance of teachers' personality in influencing children development. For instance, it was found that a positive correlation exists between preschool teachers' perceived resilience and their readiness in developing resilience among children[12]. Apart

from that, this finding can also be justified by considering the importance of teachers' personality in influencing their confidence in managing the children since teachers' personality has been found to become a predictor of classroom management self-efficacy[13]. In this regard, teachers who possess positive attributes were found to be more confident in managing the classroom.

Apart from that, it was found that teachers' creativity is also important in order to improve the competency of ECE educators. Based on the analysis, teachers are needed to be creative in the preparation and utilization of children's learning materials. This finding can be justified by considering the importance of using creative learning material in order to maintain children's learning engagement. In this regard, teachers need to think creatively in the selection of the learning materials in order to ensure that the learning materials can attract the interest of the children as one way to improve children's learning.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that ECE educators put a considerable effort to equip themselves with knowledge, skills, experience, positive dispositions, and creativity since all of those aspects have been proven to be important in improving their competency as ECE educators, which eventually support the provision of quality ECCE in Malaysia.

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