A Systematic Literature Review of Structural Quality Policy Implementation in Public Preschools

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ABSTRACT
The benefits of quality early childhood experiences are indisputable as more studies have demonstrated the positive results of high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) on child outcomes. These benefits have recently spurred many countries to prioritise preschool programmes in their national plans and pursue a quality preschool agenda. This systematic literature review (SLR) aimed to analyse the worldwide practice of policy implementation regarding public preschool structural quality and examine the related challenges. This paper was based solely on SLR, where the literature was examined via the Scopus and Web of Science databases and Google Scholar. The review adopted PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the relevant research papers. The SLR revealed that varying service quality was the main theme of global public preschool policy implementation. In many countries in the included articles, the preschool education programmes were conducted by multiple agencies, which resulted in varied quality of the service provided. In this study, the analysis revealed five main themes: wide-ranging policy aims, combined public and private funding, complex governance and management systems with mixed national and state involvement, persistent fragmented structural and organisational aspects between ECCE and primary schooling, and varied ECCE service regulation and quality assurance. Thus, future research is necessary to bridge the knowledge gap to examine policy implementation of structural quality, specifically in individual country settings.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on preschool quality with reference to structural quality.
1. Introduction

The benefits of quality early childhood experiences are indisputable as more studies have demonstrated the positive results of high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) on child outcomes (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Bakken, Brown & Downing, 2017). These benefits have recently spurred many countries to prioritise preschool programmes in their national plans and pursue a quality preschool agenda (Duncan, Magnuson & Murnane, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016).

Structural quality is an alternative approach or view of preschool programme quality to neo-technology (a new technique or technology), specifically when resources are limited. Process quality varies vastly as it is dynamic, whereas structural quality can be conveniently regulated by policy and should be emphasised. Structural quality is correlated with process quality; more importantly, it may also be a precursor to process quality (Hu et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Slot et al., 2018). Thus, structural quality aids the formation of the foundation for process quality, which refers to children's learning experience in the preschool setting and directly affects them, while structural quality involves policy-regulated learning environments and workforce conditions.

There are gaps in Malaysian public education policy implementation. In this study, the main issue addressed is quality discrepancies in preschool programme variation, which stems from multiple policy implementation approaches (Brinkman et al., 2017; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018; Tan, 2017). Second, the authors focused on understanding the challenges in effecting preschool programme structural quality to implement policies. More efforts have been directed towards increasing preschool process quality instead of structural quality; thus, policy implementation of public preschool structural quality has been undermined and neglected.

This systematic literature review (SLR) aimed to analyse the worldwide practice of policy implementation regarding public preschool structural quality and examine the related challenges. The central research question is presented as follows: ‘What are the worldwide challenges in effecting the structural quality of preschool programmes for policy implementation?’ This systematic literature review (SLR) aimed to analyse the worldwide practice of policy implementation regarding public preschool structural quality and examine the related challenges. The central research question is presented as follows: ‘What are the worldwide challenges in effecting the structural quality of preschool programmes for policy implementation?’

2. Methodology

This paper was based solely on SLR, where the literature was examined via the Scopus and Web of Science databases and Google Scholar. The two databases and one search engine were selected for this study based on their credibility as known established sources and reliability related to social science studies.

Scopus and Web of Science are both rigorous databases that encompass the scope of the social sciences, including preschool programme structural quality. The database literature search targeted research articles published from 2010 onwards that described
preschool programme structural quality-related policies. The terms used in the database search were also used in the Google Scholar search.

The search keywords are presented as follows: (a) structural quality, (b) preschool, kindergarten, early childhood care and education, and (c) policies, governance, regulation, rules and legislation. Boolean operators and wild cards were used in the search. The search strings used the Boolean operators ‘AND’ and ‘OR’ whereby ‘AND’ was used to join the main terms and ‘OR’ to include synonyms (Delgado-Rodríguez & Siller-Arenas, 2018). Therefore, an example search string was as follows: (“structural quality”) AND (“preschool” OR “kindergarten” OR “childhood” OR “care” OR “education”) AND (“policy” OR “governance” OR “regulation” OR “rule” OR “legislation”). Figure 1 depicts the flow diagram of the document selection process.

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement, which involves four steps: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (PRISMA, 2015), was used in this review. Despite the fact that PRISMA is often utilised within medical studies, PRISMA is also employed in various other fields of study, such as study in communication by Chen and Mustafa (2022), study in education by Palanisamy and Abdul Aziz (2021), and study in social science and humanities by Ajan et al. (2021). Use of the PRISMA enables: 1) the definition of clear research questions that enable systematic research, 2) the identification of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 3) the examination of large scientific literature databases in a defined duration (Moher et al., 2009). The PRISMA Statement enabled a rigorous search of the terms (Shaffril et al., 2019) related to preschool programme policy implementation worldwide. Furthermore, the use of PRISMA enabled information coding (Shaffril et al., 2018) of the common challenges regarding the structural quality of preschool programme policy implementation.

The relevant research papers underwent thematic analysis, which refers to the identification of patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is aimed at identifying important or interesting themes or patterns in data and using these themes to address the research or elaborate on an issue. Accordingly, thematic analysis does not merely summarise data; rather, a good thematic analysis interprets and clarifies the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

In this study, the analysis revealed five main themes: wide-ranging policy aims, combined public and private funding, complex governance and management systems with mixed national and state involvement, persistent fragmented structural and organisational aspects between ECCE and primary schooling, and varied ECCE service regulation and quality assurance. Table 1 summarises the articles included in the thematic analysis.
Figure 1: Flow diagram of document selection process

- Records identified through database search (Scopus)
- Records identified through database search (Web of Science)
- Records identified through search engine (Google Scholar)

Records excluded due to published before 2010, published in non-English language and published in the form of proceeding, book chapters, book series, books, and in non-social science fields

Total records after screening (n = 93)

Duplicates records were removed

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 30)

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 14)
Table 1: Main themes that emerged from data analysis: structural quality challenges for policy implementation in public preschools

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3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Public Preschools Policy Implementation Worldwide

The SLR revealed that varying service quality was the main theme of global public preschool policy implementation. In many countries in the included articles, the preschool education programmes were conducted by multiple agencies, which resulted in varied
quality of the service provided. For example, United States preschool programmes are provided at multiple government involvement levels (federal, state, and occasionally local) (Hartman et al., 2016). Furthermore, the programmes are largely decentralised, with the state rather than the federal government shouldering primary responsibility (Hartman et al., 2016). Each programme is guided by specific goals for service provision and the target population. Thus, there are differences in programme design, community involvement, human resources, staff training, and quality assurance (Hartman et al., 2016).

Denmark goes down even further, whereby the preschool programs provision are put under the obligation of municipalities or local level. Denmark has 98 municipalities that each offer different types of preschool programmes (Slot et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018). Although Danish preschools are publicly funded, the programmes are not regulated at the state level (Slot et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018). Similar to the United States, Austrian preschool programmes are regulated by nine federal states. Consequently, Austrian preschool education is not subjected to a uniform level of legislation (Smidt, 2018). Indonesian preschool programmes are quite similar to those of the United States where there are various preschool programmes with different purposes and administrations by multiple ministries (Brinkman et al., 2017). The two main preschools are kindergartens and playgroups under the authority of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Brinkman et al., 2017). Surprisingly, Indonesia was among the countries with a standard national policy on structural quality (Brinkman et al., 2017).

In China, most preschool programmes are funded by the private sector, while public preschools are funded by public agencies (Hu et al., 2016; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Hu et al., 2017). Nevertheless, public preschools in China are of higher quality than private preschools due to their superior policies (Hu et al., 2016; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Hu et al., 2017). Contrastingly, Singaporean preschool programmes are predominantly funded by the private sector, which includes community organisations, religious groups, and social and business entities (Tan, 2017). The Singaporean government only focuses on regulation and assigns the provision of preschool education to the private sector (Tan, 2017).

Malaysian and Chinese preschool education is similar in that both the public and private sectors provide it (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). Malaysian public preschools focus on social obligation functions and are funded by both the federal and state governments (Boon, 2010). Contrarily, private preschools focus on profit-making without neglecting the main objective of providing quality preschool education (Mustafa & Azman, 2013).

Principally, Malaysian state-funded preschools are operated by the state Islamic departments while federally funded preschool programmes are operated by the Ministry of Education (MoE), Department of Community Development, Ministry of Rural Development (KEMAS), and the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister’s Department (JPNIN) (Boon, 2010; Mustafa & Azman, 2013). In the past two decades, preschool institutions, which include state-funded, private, and non-governmental (NGO) centres, have proliferated nationwide (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). Such preschools complement federal government efforts at providing quality education to children aged four to six years, specifically for parents who can afford the service (Mustafa & Azman, 2013).
3.2. Structural Quality Challenges for Public Preschool Policy Implementation

Establishing a standard for preschool programme structural quality is a constant challenge. The SLR identified five main themes that form barriers to structural quality policy implementation that have also been discussed globally. The main themes were wide-ranging policy aims, combined public and private funding, complex governance and management system with mixed national and state involvement, persistent fragmented structural and organisational aspects between ECCE and primary schooling, and varied ECCE services regulation and quality assurance. Table 1 summarises the articles included in the thematic analysis and the themes are presented and discussed as follows:

3.2.1. Wide-ranging Policy Aims

The ECCE policies and systems vary widely globally and were established to fulfil different and varied aims (Boon, 2010; Mustafa & Azman, 2013). In some countries, the main objective is to ensure school readiness and support children’s well-being, healthy socioemotional development, and sense of citizenship (Hartman et al., 2016) while in others it is to facilitate working parents or cultivate cultural values and community integration (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Bakken, Brown & Downing, 2017). This implies that ECCE policies were established to meet a range of social, economic, educational, and political needs in each country. With these differing goals, the early childhood system may focus on achieving different outcomes for children. It is common for ECCE to have multiple policy aims as it reveals the potential value and impact of quality, but the aims might occasionally be competing or conflicting.

3.2.2. Combined Public and Private Sectors

Typically, ECCE programme funding involves combined public and private sector efforts (Hu et al., 2016; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Hu et al., 2017). Thus, the mixed funding affects the accessibility, sustainability, and viability of the sector. Securing adequate funding for a high-quality yet affordable and accessible ECCE system is challenging. Furthermore, the existence of multiple organisations complicates the funding mechanism as there is typically a mix of private, voluntary, and public ECCE providers (Boon, 2010; Brinkman et al., 2017; Mustafa & Azman, 2013). This situation often leads to a wide array of provider types and service delivery models with different staffing, curricula, and regulatory requirements. Although this scenario provides parents with alternatives and options, it can also lead to variation in provision and quality for the children.

3.2.3. Complex Governance and Management System

In most countries, preschool programme governance and management systems are complex, and responsibilities are distributed between different levels in the system (Slot et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018). Globally, the ECCE system is managed by mixed national and regional or local governments and between a range of national agencies or ministries (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Li, Yang & Chen, 2016; Brinkman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018). This not only presents challenges to ensuring effective communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and effective coordination and integration but is essential for ensuring the governance and management systems that support the development of a coherent ECCE system (Boon, 2010). The mixed governance also implies the need for collaboration between different agencies (Boon, 2010).
3.2.4. Persistent Fragmented Structural and Organizational Aspects Between ECCE and Primary Schooling

The persistent fragmented structural and organisational aspects between ECCE and primary schooling suggest the absence of systemic coherence within ECCE and between ECCE and primary schooling (Hartman et al., 2016). The ECCE programmes among the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries featured an equal ratio of unitary and split systems (Duncan et al., 2016). This ratio implicitly implied that although some countries were progressing towards a more coherent and integrated ECCE system, there remained countries with split ECCE provision settings.

Globally, national governance increases as programme provision progresses towards the pre-primary year and transition to the schooling system (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018) and very few countries have secured complete structural and systemic integration of ECCE with later phases of education (Hartman et al., 2016). This implies that ECCE has become an established government responsibility to integrate all education levels (Brinkman et al., 2017).

3.2.5. Varied ECCE Service Regulation and Quality Assurance

The ECCE service regulation and quality assurance are utilised differentially to verify the standard of an improved and comprehensive quality assurance system. Typically, governments aim to deliver high-quality ECCE and recognise the need for greater regulation to achieve high-quality ECCE (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Brinkman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018). Most countries manage their ECCE services and regulatory obligations are distributed among national and local agencies (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Brinkman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018), which demonstrates the need to guarantee that all ECCE services satisfy the provision of minimum standards.

Some countries manage better ECCE programme and some service delivery aspects are more controlled than others, with the most regulated aspects being health and safety in service delivery, and securing child protection (Slot et al., 2015; Hartman et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Brinkman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017; Slot et al., 2018; Smidt, 2018). This service delivery variation suggested that the accreditation mechanism is underutilised as compared to inspection regarding quality assurance. Nevertheless, accreditation and inspection are complementary mechanisms in most countries.

4. Conclusion

Most countries had similar variations in preschool quality due to multiple policy implementation approaches. Moreover, policymaking should emphasise the multiple challenges that hindered the embrace of new approaches or views regarding the establishment of a standard structural quality for preschool programme in most countries. Thus, future research is necessary to bridge the knowledge gap to examine policy implementation of structural quality, specifically in individual country settings.
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Conflict of Interests

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