Education Matters: A Sustainable Education Framework for Children Living in Residential Care in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Children living in residential care may experience educational vulnerability due to documentation barriers, interrupted schooling, diversity of individual educational needs, insufficient educational support, concerns regarding wellbeing, and difficulties with adulting. The provision of various kinds of educational support in Malaysia occurs through education and child-welfare policies, yet these measures operate within different systems and do not provide the children with a cohesive educational path. Thus, the current conceptual paper analyzes Malaysian policies and educational systems, considers the main barriers of education faced by children in residential care, and develops the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework that represents a sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready education model. Using a conceptual synthesis method, the present study reviews the literature on residential care education, inclusive education, lifelong learning, future-ready education, and transitions to adulthood, as well as relevant Malaysian education and child-welfare systems. Several connected dimensions that affect educational experience are identified, which include access to education, continuity, individual development, inclusion, relationships, wellbeing, empowerment, employability, and transitions to adulthood. In consideration of the results, the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework is offered as a holistic conceptual framework with two connected dimensions of EDUCATION and MATTERS. This framework sees education as a continuous developmental pathway that starts with access and inclusion and proceeds to learning, readiness for the future, and sustainable transition to adulthood. The framework also focuses on cooperation between schools, residential care, governmental organizations, teachers, researchers, and non-governmental organizations. The current paper concludes that the education of children in residential care should go far beyond just access to school and include continuity, inclusion, wellbeing, empowerment, employability, and readiness for lifelong learning. Though the empirical validation of the framework is necessary, it provides conceptual grounds for further research.

Keywords: Education Matters**;** Residential care; Sustainable education; Inclusive education; Future readiness.

INTRODUCTION

Despite international commitments to inclusive and equitable education, educational exclusion continues to affect children experiencing poverty, displacement, disability and other forms of vulnerability (UNICEF, 2024; United Nations, 2015). Education is recognized as a fundamental right and is central to children's development, participation and future opportunities (UNICEF, 2024; United Nations, 2015). However, in Malaysia, vulnerable children such as refugees and stateless children undergo challenges to enrol in formal education due to documentation and legal status problems (UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). As UNICEF Malaysia reported, as of June 2024, around 41,000 refugee children of school age who were recorded with UNHCR in Malaysia were not able to attend formal education, while 34% were involved in informal education through alternative learning centres (UNICEF Malaysia, 2024).Although these figures do not specifically represent children living in residential care, they demonstrate how documentation and legal-status circumstances can contribute to educational exclusion among vulnerable children (UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). Such exclusion is inconsistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015).

Within this broader context, children living in residential care represent an important population whose educational experiences may be shaped by circumstances extending beyond the classroom (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick

et al., 2026). Research indicates that educational experiences in residential care are influenced by relationships with residential staff, teachers and peers, the educational environment, institutional expectations, emotional and behavioural factors, and young people's aspirations (McCormick et al., 2026). These findings suggest that educational outcomes for children in residential care cannot be understood solely through school enrolment or academic attainment but must also be considered in relation to the care and educational environments surrounding the child (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

In Malaysia, residential care operates within the formal child welfare system administered by the Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, JKM). JKM distinguishes registered children's care centres according to the type of care provided, including Harian (day care) and Kediaman (residential care). Its 2021 national statistics recorded 263 registered residential children's care centres across Malaysia, alongside 999 day-care centres. The distribution of residential centres was uneven, with Selangor recording the highest number (76), followed by Perak (42), Johor (27), Negeri Sembilan (20) and Kedah (19). These figures demonstrate the scale of residential children's care within Malaysia and provide an important context for examining the educational pathways of children living in these settings. JKM's current information on Rumah Kanak-Kanak identifies residential institutions as settings providing protection and care for children under relevant provisions of the Child Act 2001 (JKM, 2026). The scale of residential care therefore provides an important Malaysian context for examining how educational opportunities are maintained for children living outside their family homes (JKM, 2026).

For children living in residential care, educational vulnerability may extend beyond the initial question of school enrolment (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). Where documentation or legal-status barriers prevent access to formal education, children may be excluded from recognized educational pathways and may consequently depend on alternative forms of learning provision (UNICEF Malaysia, 2024). The availability of alternative educational support may also depend on the resources and capacity of the residential setting, although the extent of this issue among Malaysian residential childcare requires further empirical investigation. This is particularly important because children living in residential care are not a homogeneous group and may have different educational, developmental and support needs (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

In the education system of Malaysia, children with special educational needs receive different forms of educational provision such as Special Education Schools, Integrated Special Education Programs, and Inclusive Education Programs (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2026). In addition, the policy of Malaysia regarding special education pays attention to the appropriate access to education, early intervention, vocational training, services, and the ability to develop potential of these children (MOE, 2026). However, children in residential care who have unidentified or unsupported learning and developmental needs may require additional coordination between residential caregivers, schools and relevant educational or support services, highlighting the importance of continuity and individualized educational planning (MOE, 2026; McCormick et al., 2026).

Continuous provision of educational assistance has become evident especially as children approach adulthood and get ready to transition from residential care (McCormick et al., 2026). In Malaysia, a child is a person below 18 years old based on the Child Act 2001. The placements made by the JKM can either be terminated upon expiry of the period of placement or after the child attains the age of 18 years, depending on the rationale behind the placement (JKM, 2025, 2026). As such, preparation for adulthood should include not only academic success but also the development of skills and employability as well as societal integration abilities (MOE, 2026; United Nations, 2015). Transitioning from residential care into adult life will become difficult if young people leave residential care lacking access to educational, job and socialization opportunities (McCormick et al., 2026). Indeed, it is possible that some young adults remain associated with the residential settings due to familiarity, accommodation or employment options. This situation should, however, be evidenced and not presumed as a general characteristic of the Malaysian care leavers.

Taken together, existing evidence indicates that education for children in residential care requires attention to access, continuity, educational support, relationships, individual needs, wellbeing and preparation for future transitions (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). However, the available literature does not provide a Malaysia-specific conceptual model that integrates these dimensions into a continuous educational pathway extending from access to preparation for life beyond residential care. This conceptual gap provides a basis for considering education not as an isolated school-based intervention, but as a sustained developmental pathway encompassing educational participation, inclusion, individual development, wellbeing, employability and transition (United Nations, 2015; MOE, 2026).

In response to these identified gaps, this conceptual paper introduces the **EDUCATION MATTERS Framework**: A Sustainable Education Model for Children Living in Residential Care in Malaysia. The framework conceptualizes education as a lifelong developmental process that relates to educational access, continuity, inclusion, development,

wellbeing, empowerment, employability, transition, and future readiness (United Nations, 2015; MOE, 2026). While the traditional approach to education has always been related to children being able to access schools, this framework investigates how education can be made sustainable so that children will be able to grow, become independent, participate and learn throughout their lives (United Nations, 2015). The conceptual paper specifically seeks to:

1. Examine Malaysian policies, educational mechanisms and identify key educational barriers affecting children living in residential care.
2. Explore the essential dimensions of sustainable, inclusive and future-ready education relevant to children living in residential care.
3. Propose the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework and discuss its potential implications for strengthening sustainable educational pathways for children living in residential care in Malaysia.

Conceptualizing Sustainable Education

Sustainable education in this paper refers to an educational approach that supports continuous learning, inclusion, individual development, wellbeing and preparation for future participation in society, rather than focusing solely on access or immediate academic attainment. This conceptualization consists of the broader emphasis on lifelong learning and inclusive education within SDG 4 (United Nations, 2015).

Sustainable education focuses on developing sustainable instructional spending as opposed to brief-term instructional assistance presentations. UNESCO's work on education for sustainable development emphasizes the development of understanding, talents, values, attitudes and behaviours that enable innovators to contribute meaningfully to society (UNESCO, 2020). For children in residential care, education should be viewed as a continuous and adaptable process that responds to their changing identities, developmental needs, and educational circumstances. This approach emphasizes the importance of establishing a strong educational foundation that can support children as they progress through different stages of life.

Lifelong learning provides the framework for understanding education as a process that extends across the whole lifespan and occurs through formal, non-formal and informal learning in different settings (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024). This is particularly relevant to residential care since a child's educational pathways may involve adjustments to colleges, caregivers, placements or other opportunities that impact learning continuity (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). Consequently, lifelong expertise encourages the development of capabilities that can equally facilitate training, vocational expertise, employment and continued non-public development beyond compulsory education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024).

Inclusive education focuses on ensuring that learners can participate meaningfully in education by identifying and removing barriers that affect access, participation and achievement (UNESCO, 2026). Therefore, UNESCO has emphasized that inclusion requires training systems to respond to the characteristics, talents and desires of diverse learners, rather than see inexperienced individuals develop into structures that exclude them (UNESCO, 2026). For children in residential care, this means that educational disadvantage may additionally arise from their circumstances and individual learning needs, which includes the consequences of relationships, institutional conditions, and limited educational support (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). Consequently, inclusion within EDUCATION MATTERS includes meaningful participation, ownership, appropriate assistance, and equal opportunities for learning and extension.

Future-ready education focuses on helping learners develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and agency needed to navigate an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world (OECD, 2019, 2025). The OECD Learning Compass 2030, developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) under its Future of Education and Skills 2030 Project, provides a vision of the competencies students need to thrive in uncertain future contexts. The framework emphasizes student agency and the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable learners to navigate unfamiliar situations, make responsible decisions, and shape their own futures (OECD, 2019, 2025). It further highlights the importance of well-being and transformative competencies, including the ability to create new value, reconcile tensions and dilemmas, and take responsibility for personal and societal outcomes. For children living in residential care, future readiness therefore concerns the extent to which education equips them with essential competencies related to academic achievement, employability, decision-making, self-management, resilience, and independent living. Within the EDUCATION MATTERS framework, future-ready education represents the long-

term goal of the educational journey, preparing children not only for their next stage of education but also for a successful transition into adulthood and life beyond residential care.

Integration of the four concepts provides complementary foundations to the EDUCATION MATTERS framework. Sustainable schooling establishes the need for educational assistance to be of lasting value; ensures lifelong learning that maintains knowledge acquisition at specific stages and settings; Inclusive training ensures that character limitations and differences are recognized; and destiny-ready schooling characterizes the competencies needed to participate in a developed society (UNESCO, 2024, 2026; OECD, 2019, 2025). Together, these approaches support a shift towards recognizing education as a fundamental right and establishing residential care as a continuous, inclusive, and future-oriented educational pathway that equips young people with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed for successful transitions into adulthood (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). The integration of these concepts forms the conceptual foundation of EDUCATION MATTERS and informs its emphasis on access, continuity, inclusion, development, wellbeing, empowerment, employability, transition and future readiness.

Children in Residential Care and Educational Vulnerability

Children living in residential care may experience educational barriers related to school access, continuity, individual needs, relationships and preparation for adulthood (McCormick et al., 2026). These interconnected factors support the need to view education as part of the child's overall care and development rather than as a separate school-based issue (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

Residential Care and Educational Vulnerability provides protection and alternative care for children who cannot remain safe within their family environments (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat [JKM], 2026). However, the residential environment can also have an impact on children's academic experiences and destiny opportunities (McCormick et al., 2026). Recent evidence identifies workforce engagement, academic mentorship, relationships, and youth aspirations as important influences of schooling in residential care (McCormick et al., 2026). Therefore, residential care should be considered a part of the child's instructional environment.

School Access and Documentation is the foundation of educational participation, but access alone does not guarantee meaningful learning or inclusion (UNESCO, 2026). In Malaysia, UNICEF identifies lack of documentation, disability and other forms of marginalization as barriers to education, noting that children without birth certificates may face difficulties enrolling in national schools (UNICEF Malaysia, 2026). Birth registration is also closely connected to children's legal identity and access to rights and services (UNICEF Malaysia, 2023). For children in residential care, documentation should therefore be recognized as a potential barrier to educational access and continuity rather than assumed to affect all children in care.

Educational Continuity is important because changes in residential placement or school can disrupt learning, relationships and support (McCormick et al., 2026). Research also identifies coordination between residential settings and schools as important for positive educational experiences (McCormick et al., 2026). Continuity therefore means more than remaining enrolled; it requires learning progress, educational information and appropriate support to follow the child when circumstances change (McCormick et al., 2026). This provides the basis for the Continuity of Education dimension of EDUCATION MATTERS.

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, children with disabilities may be overrepresented in residential care and can experience multiple and interconnected risks (Alves et al., 2025). Research also highlights the need for residential-care practices to respond to their individual developmental and support needs (Alves et al., 2025). Inclusive education therefore requires barriers to participation to be identified and addressed rather than expecting children to adapt to existing educational structures (UNESCO, 2026). Within EDUCATION MATTERS, this supports "Development & Individual Needs", "Universal & Inclusive Learning" and "Tailored Support".

Caregiver and Residential Staff Involvement play an important role in supporting children's educational experiences (McCormick et al., 2026). Positive staff involvement, encouragement and coordination with schools can support children's educational engagement and progress (McCormick et al., 2026). Residential caregivers should therefore be viewed as educational partners who can support communication, monitoring and advocacy alongside daily care (McCormick et al., 2026). This supports the emphasis on relationships, advocacy and shared responsibility within EDUCATION MATTERS.

Transition to Adulthood, educational support should also prepare young people for life beyond residential care because care leavers may experience poorer education, employment, housing and economic outcomes than their peers (Mann-

Feder et al., 2024). Evidence also suggests that interventions supporting care leavers can improve outcomes, although the overall evidence base remains limited (Mann-Feder et al., 2024). Education should therefore include preparation for further learning, employment, life skills, decision-making and independent living (OECD, 2019; McCormick et al., 2026). These findings highlight the need for education that prepares children for adulthood by strengthening their opportunities, employability, empowerment and digital readiness within the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework.

Educational vulnerability among children in residential care is multidimensional, involving access, continuity, individual needs, relationships and preparation for adulthood (McCormick et al., 2026). These challenges support a shift from viewing education simply as school access towards understanding it as a continuous pathway linking access, inclusion, development, wellbeing, employability and transition (McCormick et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2026). This perspective provides the foundation for the proposed EDUCATION MATTERS Framework.

Malaysian Policy and Education Landscape

Malaysia has established education and welfare mechanisms to support children's schooling, including compulsory education, financial assistance, special education and alternative educational pathways for vulnerable children (KPM, 2026; JKM, 2025). However, these supports are administered through different systems, highlighting the need for stronger coordination for children living in residential care. The Education Act 1996 (Act 550) provides the main legislative foundation for Malaysia's education system, while the Education (Amendment) Act 2025 (Act A1770) provides for compulsory secondary education for Malaysian citizen children residing in Malaysia, subject to its commencement by the Minister (Education Act 1996; Education (Amendment) Act 2025). This strengthens the expectation of continued schooling beyond primary education, but enrolment alone does not ensure continuity, inclusion or appropriate educational support. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) provides educational support, specialised schooling, and financial assistance through programmes such as the Kumpulan Wang Amanah Pelajar Miskin (KWAPM), Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT), Bantuan Awal Persekolahan (BAP), and Elaun Murid Berkeperluan Pendidikan Khas (EMBPK) (KPM, 2026). JKM enhances those services through child protection, residential care and welfare assistance to Bantuan kanak-kanak and training assistance for former citizens of welfare agencies (JKM, 2025). These roles demonstrate that children's educational needs may also require collaboration between school and welfare structures.

Alternative and Inclusive Education Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih (SBJK) gives an alternative educational path to wide-open corporations, including children outside of identity documents and orphans living in registered childcare centers (KPM, 2026). Malaysia additionally provides special schooling and financial assistance to eligible students with unique instructional needs through mechanisms that include EMBPK (KPM, 2026). These provisions demonstrate current coverage responses to educational impairment, but they deal with specific needs rather than providing one unified path throughout a child's instructional journey. Malaysia has several policies and programmes that support children's access to education, but having these provisions in place does not necessarily mean that children in residential care experience them consistently. The key issue highlighted by the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework is therefore the possible gap between policy provision, access, implementation and continuity of support. Overall, Malaysia has significant coverage mechanisms masking the right to school access, financial aid, special school education, documentation and child welfare (KPM, 2026; JKM, 2025). However, those mechanisms operate across different institutions and eligibility requirements, which could additionally be important to coordinate for children whose academic care desires overlap. The EDUCATION MATTERS framework therefore seeks to connect those existing supports in a toddler-centred way that addresses the right to access, continuity, inclusion, growth, wellbeing, empowerment, employability, transition and future readiness. Therefore, the policy issue identified by EDUCATION MATTERS can be understood as a coordination and continuity challenge rather than simply a lack of policy. Future research should examine how existing mechanisms reach children in residential care, where referral or implementation difficulties occur, and how education and welfare services can work together more effectively.

Conceptual Gap

Existing research demonstrates that the educational experiences of children in residential care are influenced by multiple interacting factors, including school functioning, residential environments, relationships, educational support and individual circumstances (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). Evidence on young people transitioning from out-of-home care further demonstrates that educational, employment, psychosocial and other life outcomes are closely connected during the transition to adulthood (Taylor et al., 2024).

However, limited conceptual work has brought these dimensions together into a single educational pathway specifically focused on children living in residential care. The gap is therefore one of integration, existing evidence provides

important insights into individual dimensions of educational vulnerability and transition, but does not sufficiently connect them into a coherent, sustainable and future-oriented education model within the Malaysian context. The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework responds to this gap by integrating educational access, continuity, inclusion, development, wellbeing, transition, employability and future readiness within a child-centred framework.

The Education Matters Framework

The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework is a proposed conceptual model for strengthening sustainable educational pathways for children living in residential care in Malaysia. It integrates access, inclusion, continuity, individual development, future readiness, employability and wellbeing to support children's educational and life outcomes beyond residential care.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework for Sustainable Educational Support for Children Living in Residential Care in Malaysia

Dimensions of The Education Matters Framework

The **EDUCATION MATTERS Framework** is proposed as an integrated model for sustainable education among children living in residential care in Malaysia. It views education as a continuous pathway that connects access, inclusion, development, wellbeing and preparation for adulthood (UNESCO, 2024; McCormick et al., 2026). The framework brings together evidence showing that educational experiences in residential care are influenced by educational support, relationships, care environments, individual needs and young people's aspirations (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). It therefore moves beyond school access towards a broader and more sustainable educational pathway.

The EDUCATION Dimension represents the core educational pathway of the framework. It focuses on ensuring that children in residential care can access education, receive appropriate and inclusive support, maintain continuity, develop relevant skills, and prepare for further education, employment and adulthood**.** Together, the nine constructs provide the educational foundation that the MATTERS dimension helps make meaningful and sustainable.

Table 1: Nine Dimensions of Sustainable Education within the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework

Construct	Simple meaning	Supporting evidence
E – Educational Access	Ensuring children can enter and participate in appropriate education.	Educational pathways in residential care are affected by child, care, school and structural factors (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

D – Development & Individual Needs	Responding to each child's learning and developmental needs.	Research highlights individual characteristics and the need to recognise children's educational needs (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2020).
U – Universal & Inclusive Learning	Creating learning opportunities that include different abilities and needs.	Inclusive education requires barriers to learning and participation to be addressed (UNESCO, 2024), while research highlights the importance of appropriate educational support for children in care (McCormick et al., 2026).
C – Continuity of Education	Maintaining learning and support when children's circumstances change.	Stable schools and relationships are important, while school changes can disrupt learning and wellbeing (Townsend et al., 2020).
A – Alternative & Flexible Pathways	Providing suitable academic, vocational and other learning routes.	Evidence on care leavers highlights the importance of education and economic pathways during transition to adulthood (Taylor et al., 2024).
T – Transition to Adulthood	Preparing children for further education, work and independent living.	Young people leaving care experience interconnected education, employment, housing and psychosocial outcomes (Taylor et al., 2024).
I – Innovation & Digital Readiness	Developing digital skills and the ability to adapt to future changes.	OECD emphasises knowledge, skills, attitudes and values for navigating future change and recognises technology as a tool for learner-specific support (OECD, 2024).
O – Opportunities & Employability	Connecting education with skills, careers and employment opportunities.	Research on care leavers shows the importance of education and economic outcomes, while OECD highlights the need for adaptable skills in changing labor markets (Taylor et al., 2024; OECD, 2024).
N – Nurturing Wellbeing	Supporting emotional, social and psychological wellbeing alongside learning.	Educational experiences in care are influenced by emotional, behavioural and relational factors, including relationships with staff, teachers and peers (McCormick et al., 2026; Townsend et al., 2020).

Note. The nine dimensions were developed through a conceptual synthesis of literature on education in residential care, inclusive education, lifelong learning, future-ready education and transition to adulthood

Based on the nine dimensions presented in Table 1, education is positioned as more than school attendance, connecting learning with development, wellbeing, opportunity and preparation for life beyond residential care (McCormick et al., 2026; Taylor et al., 2024). **The MATTERS Dimension** represents the conditions that help children participate meaningfully in education and sustain its benefits over time. It complements the EDUCATION dimension by focusing on the support, relationships, agency and opportunities that enable children to benefit from education (McCormick et al., 2026; Taylor et al., 2024).

Table 2. Seven Dimensions of Enabling and Sustainable Support within the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework

Construct	Key Focus	Supporting Evidence
M – Meaningful Learning	Connecting learning with children's needs, interests and aspirations.	Children's educational experiences are influenced by individual needs, relationships and aspirations (Townsend et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2026).
A – Accessibility & Advocacy	Removing barriers and supporting children's educational rights.	Educational outcomes are influenced by structural, institutional and educational barriers (McCormick et al., 2026).
T – Tailored Support	Providing support suited to individual learning and developmental needs.	Research highlights the importance of appropriate educational support and responses to individual needs (McCormick et al., 2026; Alves et al., 2025).
T – Technology & Transformation	Using technology to expand and personalise learning opportunities.	Technology can support learner-specific needs and expand access to learning when implemented appropriately (OECD, 2024).
E – Empowerment	Building children's agency, confidence and participation in educational decisions.	Young people's aspirations and participation are important to positive educational experiences and transitions from care (McCormick et al., 2026; Taylor et al., 2024).
R – Resilience & Relationships	Building supportive relationships with caregivers, teachers, peers and mentors.	Relationships with residential staff, teachers and peers are important influences on educational experiences (McCormick et al., 2026; Townsend et al., 2020).

S – Sustainability	Maintaining educational benefits through further learning and life beyond care.	Care-leaver research highlights the importance of continued support across education, employment, wellbeing and independent living (Taylor et al., 2024).

Note. The seven MATTERS constructs were developed through a conceptual synthesis of literature on residential care education, inclusive learning, digital education and transition to adulthood.

Together, the MATTERS dimensions describe the conditions that enable the EDUCATION dimensions to become meaningful and sustainable, linking educational participation with individual support, relationships, agency, opportunity and longer-term development (McCormick et al., 2026; Taylor et al., 2024).

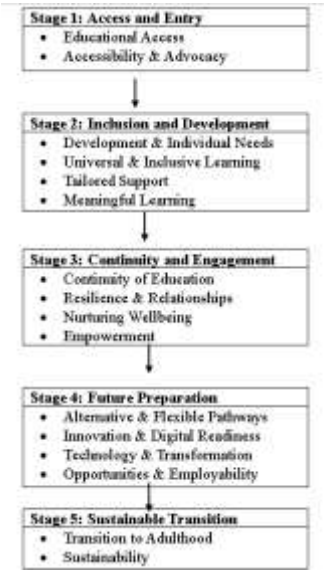
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework draws on four complementary foundations: ecological systems theory, the Capability Approach, inclusive education, lifelong and future-ready education. An **ecological perspective** recognizes that children's educational experiences are shaped by interactions between the child, residential care, school and wider social systems (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026). The **Capability Approach** shifts attention from access alone towards the real opportunities children must learn, participate in and pursue valued futures. This supports the framework's emphasis on empowerment, meaningful learning and opportunity. **Inclusive education** provides the basis for addressing barriers and responding to children's different abilities and circumstances. Research shows that educational experiences in care are influenced by individual needs, relationships and the support provided by schools and residential settings (Townsend et al., 2020; McCormick et al., 2026). **Lifelong and future-ready education** extends this focus towards skills, further learning, employment and preparation for adulthood, which are important considerations for young people leaving care (Taylor et al., 2024). Together, these foundations provide the theoretical basis for understanding sustainable education as a child-centred and future-oriented process. The framework hence shifts from educational accessibility and engagement to development, prospects and transition from residential care. The purpose of the framework is hence not only educational success, but rather lifelong learning, wellbeing, empowerment, employment and independence (Taylor et al., 2024). Consequently, EDUCATION MATTERS outlines an interconnected process where educational and social welfare provision collaborate in facilitating children's transition from access to engagement and finally sustainability.

Proposed Pathway of The Framework

The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework views education as a continuous journey rather than a one-time process. The five stages illustrate how educational support can progress from initial access towards inclusion, continuity, future preparation and sustainable transition, while allowing additional support to be provided according to children's changing needs and circumstances. The conceptual framework of EDUCATION MATTERS can therefore be represented through five broad stages:

Figure 2. Proposed Educational Pathway of the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework



Note. The levels are interconnected components of an ongoing educational pathway, allowing children to move between

levels and receive additional support according to their changing needs, circumstances, and educational opportunities.

Overall, the pathway represents an interconnected process in which children may move between stages or require additional support at different points depending on their educational needs, placement circumstances and developmental experiences. This flexibility reflects the central principle of EDUCATION MATTERS: education should be sustained throughout the child's development rather than ending with school access or completion.

Phased Implementation of The Education Matters Framework

Although the 16 dimensions of the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework are interconnected, they can be introduced in phases according to children's needs and circumstances. This allows residential care institutions and schools to focus first on the most immediate barriers before progressing towards longer-term development and transition goals.

Phase 1: Establishing educational foundations. Priority should be given to Educational Access, Accessibility & Advocacy, Development & Individual Needs, Universal & Inclusive Learning, Tailored Support, Continuity of Education and Nurturing Wellbeing. These dimensions focus on ensuring that children can access education, receive appropriate support, remain engaged in learning and have their immediate wellbeing needs addressed (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

Phase 2: Strengthening participation and development. Once basic educational needs are addressed, attention can shift towards Meaningful Learning, Resilience & Relationships, Empowerment, Innovation & Digital Readiness, and Technology & Transformation. The focus is on strengthening engagement, relationships, confidence, agency and relevant learning opportunities (McCormick et al., 2026; Townsend et al., 2020).

Phase 3: Preparing for the future. Alternative & Flexible Pathways, Opportunities & Employability, Transition to Adulthood and Sustainability should be developed progressively as children approach adulthood. This may include career guidance, vocational opportunities, independent-living skills, further education and employment preparation (Taylor et al., 2024; Feather et al., 2024).

The phases are not strictly linear. Children may move between phases or require additional support when their circumstances change. Regular review is therefore important to ensure that implementation remains responsive to each child's needs.

Implications

The EDUCATION MATTERS Framework has implications for multiple stakeholders involved in the education and care of children living in residential settings. Its primary implication is the need to shift from fragmented interventions

towards a coordinated educational pathway that extends from school access to preparation for adulthood.

Policymakers

For policymakers, the framework highlights the need for policies that move beyond educational enrolment towards continuity, inclusion, wellbeing, skills development and transition to adulthood. Policy planning should recognize residential care children as a population requiring coordinated educational and developmental support across different stages of their lives.

Ministry of Education (KPM)

For KPM, the framework suggests strengthening mechanisms that facilitate educational access while ensuring continuity, inclusive provision and appropriate support for children experiencing care-related and individual educational vulnerabilities. Greater coordination between schools and residential care institutions may also support monitoring of attendance, educational progression and transitions between educational stages.

Department of Social Welfare (JKM)

For JKM, education should be incorporated more systematically within residential care planning. Residential care institutions could be encouraged to maintain educational profiles, monitor children's educational progress and establish structured communication with schools and other educational stakeholders. This would position education as an integral component of care and development rather than as a separate service.

Residential Care Institutions

Residential care institutions have an important role in creating an environment that supports educational participation. This includes facilitating school attendance, providing appropriate study environments, communicating with teachers, identifying emerging educational difficulties and supporting children during educational transitions. Institutions may also contribute to career exposure, life-skills development and preparation for independent adulthood.

Schools

Schools should recognize that children living in residential care may experience educational circumstances that differ from those of their peers. The framework therefore highlights the importance of inclusive, flexible and supportive learning environments, differentiated educational approaches and effective communication with residential care staff. Schools can also play an important role in identifying possible learning or developmental needs that may otherwise remain unrecognized.

on-Governmental Organizations

NGOs can complement government and institutional services by providing targeted educational support, tutoring, mentoring, digital access, teacher development, career exposure and skills-based programmes. Their contribution may be particularly valuable in addressing gaps that cannot be fully met through formal education or residential care services.

Teachers

Teachers are central to translating the framework into educational practice. The framework highlights the importance of differentiated and inclusive teaching, relationship-building, early identification of learning difficulties and collaboration with caregivers and other professionals. Teachers may also contribute to developing children's confidence, aspirations and future-oriented skills.

Researchers

For researchers, the framework provides a conceptual basis for examining the interconnected dimensions of education among children in residential care. Future research can operationalize the proposed constructs, examine relationships between them and evaluate whether implementation of the framework produces measurable improvements in educational and developmental outcomes.

Operationalising The Education Matters Constructs

As the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework is conceptual, future research should establish the validity, measurability and feasibility of its 16 constructs. This is important because educational outcomes for children in residential care are shaped by multiple factors across the child, family, care, school and wider structural contexts (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2026).

The constructs could be operationalised using administrative data, standardised measures, observations and stakeholder perspectives. For example, Educational Access could be examined through enrolment and attendance, while Continuity of Education could consider school changes and interruptions to schooling, which are recognised factors affecting educational pathways in residential care (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021). Nurturing Wellbeing could include measures of wellbeing and perceived support, while Empowerment could consider children’s involvement in educational decisions and their aspirations (McCormick et al., 2026).

A mixed-methods approach would help capture both measurable outcomes and children lived experiences. Quantitative research could examine outcomes such as attendance, engagement, educational progress and post-care education or employment, while qualitative research could explore the experiences of children, caregivers and educators. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining whether educational, wellbeing and transition outcomes are sustained after leaving care (Taylor et al., 2024).

Future research should also develop and validate a framework-specific assessment tool. This could involve expert review, stakeholder feedback, cognitive interviewing, pilot testing and assessment of reliability and validity, consistent with established guidance for developing and evaluating measurement instruments (Mokkink et al., 2018). Such a tool could help identify needs, monitor implementation and assess changes in the EDUCATION MATTERS constructs over time.

Future Directions For Research

Since the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework is conceptual in nature, future research should empirically validate its proposed constructs within the Malaysian residential care context using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Guided by a constructivist epistemological perspective, future qualitative research should explore how children living in residential care, residential care staff, teachers, school administrators, caregivers and other relevant stakeholders construct and interpret their educational experiences, needs and opportunities. This perspective recognises that educational experiences are shaped by individuals' social contexts, relationships and lived experiences, rather than being understood through a single objective reality.

Future studies should also develop and validate measurable indicators for each construct of the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework and examine their relationships with educational continuity, well-being, academic achievement, future employment readiness and transitions to independent adulthood. Mixed-methods research could further integrate stakeholders lived experiences with measurable educational outcomes, thereby strengthening the empirical foundation of the framework. Such research would contribute to refining the framework while ensuring that its constructs remain contextually relevant, participatory and responsive to the diverse educational realities of children living in residential care in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Children placed in residential care facilities require more than just access to education. There are multiple factors affecting educational outcomes of such children including individual learning needs, documentation issues, socio-economic conditions, stability of placement, continuity of learning, inclusion, well-being, and preparation for adulthood. With these complexities in mind, this conceptual study suggests the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework as a comprehensive approach to improving sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking education for children in residential care facilities in Malaysia.

The framework sees education as a continuous process covering the following aspects: educational access, individual development, inclusion, continuity, flexible education paths, transitions, readiness for digital age, employability and well-being. Connecting these aspects together, the framework moves the focus of attention from access to sustainability and lifelong education. In addition, the framework highlights the importance of cooperation between various parties involved in providing education including the Ministry of Education (KPM), the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), residential care facilities, schools, NGOs, teachers and others to overcome fragmented support.

In this way, the EDUCATION MATTERS Framework represents a theoretical basis for the discussion about education provision to children in residential care facilities in Malaysia. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the comprehensive nature of the framework makes it possible to use it as a basis for further research and practice.

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