

Curriculum Transition from National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) to Preschool Curriculum 2026 (KP2026) in Malaysian Private Preschools: A Fullan-Informed Conceptual Analysis of Teacher Meaning-Making and Pedagogical Enactment

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia's early childhood education landscape is entering an important period of curriculum transition as the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC), revised in 2017, provides the foundation for the forthcoming Preschool Curriculum 2026 (KP2026) (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2017, 2024). Although the NPSC was designed to strengthen holistic, child-centred and play-based preschool education, Malaysian studies continue to report uneven enactment, particularly in private preschool contexts where teacher qualification, institutional capacity, curriculum interpretation and parental expectations differ substantially (Masnan et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021; Tee & Mariani, 2018). This conceptual paper examines the NPSC–KP2026 transition through Fullan's Change Theory, while deliberately grounding the discussion in Malaysian early childhood education scholarship. The paper argues that successful curriculum transition depends not only on policy design, but also on teachers' meaning-making, pedagogical enactment, assessment adaptation and institutional support. It further proposes that KP2026 readiness in private preschools should be understood as a context-sensitive process shaped by teachers' beliefs, professional learning opportunities, leadership support, parental pressure and local preschool cultures. By synthesising Malaysian and international literature, the paper contributes a conceptual argument for strengthening teacher professional development, assessment alignment and institutional readiness in preparation for KP2026.

Keywords: curriculum transition; NPSC; KP2026; private preschool; Malaysia; teacher meaning-making; pedagogical enactment; Fullan's Change Theory; early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform in early childhood education is rarely a simple matter of replacing one curriculum document with another. It involves a process through which teachers interpret policy expectations, adjust existing beliefs and practices, and negotiate the demands of their institutions and communities (Fullan, 2007, 2021; Spillane, 2004). In Malaysia, this issue is particularly relevant as preschools prepare for the transition from the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) to the Preschool Curriculum 2026 (KP2026). The NPSC has been central to Malaysia's effort to standardise preschool education and support children's holistic development across communication, cognitive, socio-emotional, moral, physical and creative domains (MOE, 2017).

However, Malaysian early childhood education research indicates that curriculum enactment remains uneven across preschool settings. Studies have linked these differences to teachers' curriculum knowledge, professional preparation, access to training, school leadership, resources and the expectations of parents and operators (Mariani & Nor, 2019; Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021). Tee and Mariani (2018) further suggest that private preschool practices may be shaped by parental demands for visible academic

achievement, which can place pressure on teachers to prioritise worksheets, early literacy drills and test-oriented routines over play-based learning. These Malaysian findings show that curriculum transition must be examined as a lived classroom process rather than as a policy announcement alone.

The transition from NPSC to KP2026 is therefore significant for private preschools. Private providers operate within diverse organisational models and may incorporate Montessori, Reggio Emilia, religious, commercial or academically oriented approaches (Majzub, 2013; Ng, 2010; Ng & Tan, 2020). This diversity creates pedagogical possibilities, but it may also create inconsistency in how national curriculum standards are interpreted and enacted. As Rahmatullah and Nor (2021) note, strengthening teacher competence in private preschool settings requires policy attention to professional development, practical guidance and institutional support. This paper responds to that concern by presenting a conceptual analysis of curriculum transition that combines Fullan's educational change perspective with Malaysian literature on preschool curriculum implementation.

This article derives from the methodological, contextual, and conceptual groundwork of a doctoral research project entitled "Curriculum Transition from National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) to Preschool Curriculum 2026 (KP2026) in Malaysian Private Preschools: Practices Among Selected Private Preschool Teachers in Selangor." The research conceptualises the shift in curriculum through the lenses of educators' meaning-making, instructional implementation, institutional backing, and assessment adjustments. Instead of viewing preparedness for KP2026 merely as an issue of regulatory adherence, this document contends that true readiness depends on the manner in which educators comprehend, appreciate, modify, and apply these curricular transformations within their actual early childhood teaching environments.

Malaysian Early Childhood Curriculum Context

The evolution of the early childhood education system in Malaysia has been driven by a mix of governmental policy changes, involvement from the private sector, and the growing professionalization of preschool educators. Spanning from 2013 to 2025, the Malaysian Education Blueprint highlights the importance of unity, equity, quality, and accessibility across all educational levels, which encompasses early childhood learning (MOE, 2013). Under these policy guidelines, the NPSC was established and subsequently updated to offer a nationwide curriculum structure for preschools, aimed at fostering holistic child development and preparing children for formal schooling (MOE, 2017). Furthermore, researchers in Malaysia have emphasized that early childhood education serves as a vital cornerstone for a child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth (Mustafa et al., 2018; Rahmatullah et al., 2021).

Holistic child development alongside child-centered learning is strongly advocated by the NPSC. While aligning with global perspectives on early childhood education, its fundamental principles are specifically tailored to fit Malaysia's national philosophy, cultural landscape, and curriculum focus (MOE, 2017; Mustafa & Azman, 2013). According to Mariani and Nor (2019), the successful implementation of the curriculum is heavily dependent on how well teachers comprehend these guiding principles. This connection is crucial; without educators' ability to convert learning standards into practical, developmentally appropriate classroom activities, a standards-driven preschool curriculum will fail to reach its designated goals.

The private preschool sector presents a distinctive context for curriculum transition. Private preschools are more varied than public preschools in terms of ownership, curriculum emphasis, teacher qualification, parent expectations, and resources (Ng, 2010; Tee & Mariani, 2018). Some private preschools may have strong leadership and well-developed pedagogical models, while others may rely on commercially produced materials or more academically oriented routines. Research by Masnan et al. (2021) and Shafie et al. (2021) suggests that teachers may face difficulty implementing preschool curriculum expectations when they lack sufficient training, curriculum clarity, or institutional support.

The forthcoming KP2026 appears to continue the NPSC's emphasis on holistic development, play-based learning, and child-centred pedagogy, while strengthening curriculum coherence, teacher professionalism, and

assessment alignment (MOE, 2024). This means that unresolved challenges in the enactment of the NPSC may carry forward into KP2026. If teachers are not supported to understand the rationale of the curriculum, translate it into practice, and communicate its value to parents, the transition risks becoming a surface-level change rather than a meaningful pedagogical shift (Fullan, 2007; Rosmaliza Roslin et al., 2023).

Curriculum Transition as Educational Change

By treating educational transformation as an intricate process that entails shifts in organizational environments, teaching practices, and core beliefs, Fullan's Change Theory offers a valuable framework for examining the shift to NPSC-KP2026 (Fullan, 2007, 2021). From this standpoint, merely introducing a new curriculum document is not enough to bring about true reform. Educators need to comprehend the rationale behind the transformation, build assurance in the necessary methods, and obtain backing from their educational institutions. Such a viewpoint is particularly applicable to the Malaysian context, as research focusing on the implementation of preschool curricula has consistently pointed out the disconnect between what the curriculum intends and what is actually delivered in the classroom (Masnan et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021; Tee, 2015).

In a similar pathway, Spillane (2004) contends that the execution of a policy relies heavily on how educators interpret educational reforms. Within the context of private preschools in Malaysia, this interpretive process is influenced by more than just curriculum guidelines; it is also shaped by the institution's specific culture, the credentials of the teachers, demands from parents, access to resources, and leadership approaches (Ng, 2010; Rahmatullah & Nor, 2021; Tee & Mariani, 2018). Consequently, one educator might view KP2026 as a valuable chance to enhance play-centric education, whereas another could perceive it merely as an extra administrative burden. These varying perspectives are crucial, as the way teachers comprehend the policy directly dictates how it is carried out in the classroom.

Fullan's concept of an "implementation dip" is highly pertinent in this context. During periods of transition, educators may experience uncertainty, diminished self-efficacy, or inconsistent pedagogical practices before attaining a deeper level of understanding (Fullan, 2007). For Malaysian preschool educators, this decline in performance or confidence may be exacerbated if they lack formal training in early childhood education or if their respective institutions do not provide adequate mentorship and collaborative planning opportunities (Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021). Consequently, challenges encountered during such transitions should not be solely attributed to teacher resistance. Rather, they may indicate insufficient professional support, unclear policy articulation, or unresolved discrepancies between curricular principles and institutional expectations.

Curriculum transition should therefore be understood as a teacher-mediated and institutionally supported process. In the Malaysian context, the NPSC-KP2026 transition requires attention to four interrelated elements: the formal curriculum direction, teacher meaning-making, pedagogical and assessment enactment, and institutional capacity. This integrated view helps explain why the same national curriculum may be enacted differently across preschool settings.

Teacher Meaning-Making in the NPSC-KP2026 Transition

The concept of teacher meaning-making describes how educators make sense of curriculum shifts by relating them to their own personal beliefs, practical experiences, and actual classroom environments. Within the realm of early childhood education, daily teaching practices are heavily shaped by how educators perceive assessment, play, learning, and the children themselves. According to Mariani and Nor (2019), the quality of curriculum implementation is deeply connected to how well teachers comprehend the curriculum. Likewise, research by Ahmad et al. (2018) highlights the critical role of educators' perceptions within the context of early childhood curricula. Collectively, these studies from Malaysia reinforce the idea that successful curriculum reforms need to engage with educators' thought processes rather than simply focusing on their strict compliance.

In the context of private preschools, the process of meaning-making becomes particularly crucial, as educators often face a variety of conflicting curriculum directives. While state policies frequently advocate for play-

centered learning and comprehensive child development, parents may demand tangible academic results, such as assigned homework or early reading programs (Tee & Mariani, 2018). Furthermore, to appeal to families, preschool management might promote specific educational philosophies or guarantee school readiness (Ng, 2010; Ng & Tan, 2020). Consequently, educators are tasked with making pragmatic choices to navigate and harmonize market pressures and institutional goals with national curriculum standards.

The Malaysian literature suggests that teachers' confidence and curriculum interpretation are shaped by professional preparation. Masnan et al. (2021) found that teachers' knowledge of the preschool curriculum remains a critical issue, while Omar et al. (2021) link curriculum innovation to teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Shafie et al. (2021) also point to implementation challenges in the Malaysian preschool context. Together, these studies show that teacher meaning-making is not merely an individual psychological process. It is supported or constrained by teacher education, leadership, training access and practical classroom guidance.

For KP2026, teacher meaning-making should therefore be deliberately supported through professional dialogue, examples of practice, peer learning and reflective mentoring. Teachers need opportunities to discuss what play-based and inquiry-oriented learning means in real classrooms, how it can meet learning standards, and how children's learning can be documented without reverting to narrow academic testing. Without such support, the transition may reproduce existing gaps already observed in NPSC enactment (Masnan et al., 2021; Rosmaliza et al., 2023; Tee & Mariani, 2018).

Pedagogical Enactment and Classroom Practice

Pedagogical enactment refers to how curriculum is translated into teaching and learning. In early childhood education, this includes play-based activities, child-centred interaction, thematic learning, exploration, storytelling, movement, art, music, inquiry and guided teacher support. The NPSC emphasises integrated and developmentally appropriate learning across multiple domains (MOE, 2017). KP2026 is expected to strengthen similar principles, particularly by reducing premature academic pressure and reinforcing play-based learning (MOE, 2024).

Yet Malaysian studies suggest that pedagogical enactment may not consistently reflect curriculum ideals. Tee (2015) and Mustafa and Azman (2013) note issues in preschool curriculum implementation, while Masnan et al. (2021) report concerns about teachers' knowledge of the new preschool curriculum. These concerns are significant because teachers who are unsure about curriculum expectations may depend on teacher-led routines, worksheets or commercially prepared materials rather than designing rich learning experiences. Shafie et al. (2021) similarly highlight implementation challenges that can affect curriculum fidelity.

In private preschools, the tension between child-centred learning and academic pressure is particularly visible. Tee and Mariani (2018) link parental expectations to curriculum fidelity, suggesting that teachers may feel pressured to demonstrate academic progress through written products. This can narrow the curriculum and reduce opportunities for exploration, language interaction, socio-emotional development and creativity. However, private preschool diversity can also be a strength. Where leadership is supportive and teachers are professionally trained, private preschools may adapt curriculum creatively through thematic projects, outdoor learning, storytelling, arts-based activities and inquiry learning (Ng & Tan, 2020; Rahmatullah & Nor, 2021).

The implication for KP2026 is that professional development should not stop at explaining curriculum content. It must demonstrate how learning standards can be achieved through play, guided interaction and developmentally appropriate assessment. Teachers need models of lesson design, examples of classroom interaction, observation tools and opportunities to reflect on practice. This is consistent with Fullan's (2007, 2021) emphasis on capacity building and with Malaysian recommendations for strengthening teacher competency and professional support in private preschool contexts (Rahmatullah & Nor, 2021; Rosmaliza Roslin et al., 2023).

Institutional Support, Challenges and Professional Development

Institutional support is a central condition for successful curriculum transition. Teachers require clear leadership, planning time, access to training, teaching resources, professional collaboration and constructive feedback. Fullan (2007) argues that educational change is sustained when organisational conditions support changes in teacher belief and practice. In Malaysia, the importance of institutional support is reflected in studies that identify teacher preparation, resource availability, leadership and professional development as factors affecting preschool curriculum implementation (Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021).

Private preschools vary widely in institutional capacity. Some may provide structured induction, internal mentoring and curriculum leadership, while others may have limited resources and little time for collaborative planning. Ng (2010) highlights challenges in private preschool resource allocation, and Rahmatullah and Nor (2021) call attention to teacher competency and policy-practice recommendations for private preschool settings. These issues matter because curriculum transition is not enacted by teachers alone. It is shaped by the organisational system in which teachers work.

Professional development should therefore be sustained, collaborative and practice-based. Short workshops may raise awareness but are unlikely to transform practice unless they are followed by mentoring, peer observation, reflective discussion and classroom-based support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fullan, 2021). In the Malaysian context, professional development must also address the realities of private preschool teachers, including workload, cost, access to training and uneven formal qualifications (Masnan et al., 2021; PEMANDU, 2013).

A further challenge is the relationship between curriculum policy and parental communication. If parents understand quality preschool education mainly as early academic performance, teachers may experience pressure to use methods that conflict with developmentally appropriate practice (Tee & Mariani, 2018). Therefore, KP2026 implementation should include communication strategies for parents and preschool operators. Explaining the value of play, inquiry, socio-emotional development and formative assessment is necessary to reduce the gap between curriculum ideals and market expectations.

Assessment Adaptation During Curriculum Transition

Assessment adaptation is another critical dimension of curriculum transition. In early childhood education, assessment should be continuous, authentic and used to support learning rather than rank children. The NPSC's holistic orientation implies that teachers should document children's progress across developmental domains, not only early academic skills (MOE, 2017). KP2026's expected emphasis on play-based and child-centred learning further requires assessment practices that capture observation, interaction, creativity, language use, problem-solving and socio-emotional development (MOE, 2024).

In practice, however, assessment in private preschools may be influenced by parental demand for visible evidence. Teachers may feel that worksheets, spelling tests, written tasks and graded outputs are more easily understood by parents than anecdotal records, portfolios or observation notes (Tee & Mariani, 2018). This creates a challenge for curriculum transition because assessment practices can either support or undermine pedagogical reform. If assessment remains narrowly academic, play-based pedagogy may be weakened even when policy promotes holistic development.

Malaysian studies on curriculum implementation suggest that teacher knowledge and institutional support influence how assessment is understood and used (Mariani & Nor, 2019; Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021). Teachers need clear guidance on how to observe children, document progress, interpret evidence and communicate learning outcomes to parents. Without this guidance, assessment adaptation may become superficial. For example, teachers may collect portfolios but use them mainly as display files rather than as evidence for planning and responsive teaching.

A transition framework for KP2026 should therefore treat assessment adaptation as part of pedagogical change. Teachers need practical exemplars of observation-based assessment, child portfolios, learning stories, checklists and developmental documentation that align with curriculum standards. Institutional leaders also need to support teachers by giving time for documentation and by educating parents about the meaning of holistic progress. This would help align assessment with the child-centred and play-based direction of KP2026.

Proposed Conceptual Argument

This paper proposes that the NPSC-KP2026 transition in Malaysian private preschools should be conceptualised as a four-part process. First, policy intent provides the formal curriculum direction through the NPSC and KP2026. Second, teacher meaning-making shapes how curriculum change is interpreted, accepted, questioned or adapted. Third, pedagogical and assessment enactment determines how curriculum principles become children's daily learning experiences. Fourth, institutional capacity provides the leadership, resources, professional development and parental communication needed to sustain change.

This conceptual argument is grounded in Fullan's Change Theory, but it is strengthened by Malaysian evidence on preschool curriculum implementation. The work of Masnan et al. (2021), Shafie et al. (2021), Omar et al. (2021), Tee and Mariani (2018), Mariani and Nor (2019), Rahmatullah and Nor (2021), Ng (2010), and Rosmaliza Roslin et al. (2023) collectively shows that teacher knowledge, curriculum understanding, institutional support and parental expectations are central to curriculum enactment in Malaysia. These studies demonstrate why Malaysian private preschool teachers should not be viewed merely as implementers of reform. They are active curriculum interpreters working within complex institutional and social conditions.

The proposed framework also highlights the risk of surface compliance. A preschool may formally adopt KP2026 terminology while continuing existing teacher-led or academically pressured routines. Conversely, meaningful transition occurs when teachers understand the curriculum rationale, receive practical support, adapt pedagogy and assessment, and are backed by institutional leadership. Therefore, KP2026 readiness should be evaluated not only by whether preschools possess curriculum documents, but also by whether teachers and institutions have the capacity to enact the curriculum in developmentally appropriate ways.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For policymakers, the main implication is that KP2026 implementation should be supported by differentiated strategies for private preschools. A single national training model may not adequately address the diversity of private settings. Training should be sensitive to differences in teacher qualification, school resources, pedagogical orientation and parental expectations (Ng, 2010; Rahmatullah & Nor, 2021; Tee & Mariani, 2018).

For teacher education and professional development providers, the implication is that training should focus on curriculum interpretation, classroom enactment and assessment adaptation. Teachers need concrete examples of how play-based learning can meet curriculum standards, how inquiry can be facilitated with young children, and how holistic progress can be documented and explained to parents (Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021). Professional learning should include modelling, mentoring and reflective practice rather than relying only on one-off workshops.

For private preschool leaders, the implication is that curriculum transition requires organisational planning. Leaders should provide time for lesson planning, support teachers in adapting materials, create peer discussion opportunities and communicate curriculum values to parents. If institutional culture continues to reward only academic output, teachers may struggle to enact KP2026 principles even when they understand them. Therefore, leadership support is central to bridging policy and practice (Fullan, 2021; Rosmaliza Roslin et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The transition from NPSC to KP2026 represents an important opportunity to strengthen Malaysian preschool education, particularly by reinforcing holistic, play-based and developmentally appropriate learning. However, this transition will not succeed through policy documents alone. It requires attention to teachers' meaning-making, pedagogical enactment, assessment adaptation and institutional support. Malaysian studies consistently show that private preschool implementation is shaped by teacher knowledge, professional development, leadership, resources and parental expectations (Mariani & Nor, 2019; Masnan et al., 2021; Shafie et al., 2021; Tee & Mariani, 2018).

By integrating Fullan's Change Theory with Malaysian early childhood education scholarship, this paper argues that KP2026 readiness should be understood as a context-sensitive and teacher-mediated process. The success of KP2026 in private preschools will depend on whether teachers are supported to interpret curriculum reform meaningfully, enact it through child-centred pedagogy, adapt assessment practices and work within institutions that value holistic child development. Future empirical research should examine how these processes unfold in actual private preschool classrooms and how teachers negotiate the transition in relation to institutional and parental expectations.

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