

# Exploration Professional Development Approaches in Private Early Childhood Centers in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates professional development approaches among early childhood educators in private early childhood centres in Malaysia. It aims to identify the types of professional development programs available, examine their impact on teaching practices, explore the level of institutional support, and understand the challenges faced by educators in accessing such opportunities. A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving seven early childhood educators selected using purposive sampling. The data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed four key themes. First, educators engaged in a range of professional development activities, including workshops, seminars, mentoring, curriculum training, and online courses, all of which contributed to their professional growth. Second, participation in these programs positively influenced teaching practices, leading to improvements in instructional strategies, classroom management, lesson planning, creativity, understanding of child development, and overall teacher confidence. Third, the level of institutional support varied significantly across centres. While some educators received financial assistance, dedicated time, mentoring, and access to internal training, others reported minimal support. Fourth, several challenges hindered participation in professional development, including time constraints, financial limitations, heavy workloads, limited training opportunities, and accessibility issues. Overall, the study highlights the critical role of continuous professional development in enhancing teacher competency and improving the quality of early childhood education. However, inconsistencies in institutional support and ongoing barriers indicate the need for more structured, accessible, and sustainable professional development frameworks. Strengthening institutional commitment, policy support, and targeted interventions is essential to ensure equitable access to professional development opportunities for early childhood educators in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** professional development; early childhood educators; private early childhood centers; teaching practices; Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Early childhood education is foundational to children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The quality of these early experiences depends substantially on educators' pedagogical knowledge, professional competence, and ability to create developmentally appropriate learning environments. In Malaysia, continuing efforts to professionalize the early childhood workforce have therefore placed teacher preparation and ongoing learning at the centre of quality improvement (Majzub & Rashid, 2012; Azman & Siraj, 2017; Foong et al., 2018).

Professional development refers to sustained learning that strengthens educators' knowledge, skills, beliefs, and classroom practices. Effective provision is active, collaborative, connected to teachers' work, and supported over time rather than limited to isolated workshops (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al.,

2017). In early childhood settings, professional learning may address child development, curriculum implementation, classroom management, literacy instruction, safety, technology, mentoring, and reflective practice.

Access to such opportunities is not uniform. Public preschool educators often participate in structured programmes linked to government systems, whereas teachers in private centres may rely on employer-organized sessions, external providers, online learning, mentoring, or self-funded study. Financial resources, workload, centre priorities, teacher qualifications, and management support can consequently shape both participation and the extent to which new learning is applied (Abdullah & Ismail, 2019; Aziz et al., 2019; Hashim & Mahmud, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Private early childhood centres form an important part of Malaysia's education landscape, yet professional development within these settings remains uneven. Some centres provide funding, internal workshops, mentoring, and time for learning, while others operate with limited resources and no systematic development plan. Educators may therefore encounter inconsistent access to relevant training despite expectations that they continually update their teaching practices (Foong et al., 2018; Chee & Abdullah, 2019).

The problem is particularly important because variations in qualifications and professional experience can create different learning needs. Teachers with limited formal early childhood preparation may require foundational support, while experienced and qualified educators may need advanced opportunities to update curriculum, technology, assessment, and leadership practices. Without relevant and accessible development, educators may find it difficult to respond to diverse learners and changing educational expectations (Majzub & Jalaluddin, 2015; Ithnain & Saidin, 2021).

Although professional development has been examined broadly, fewer studies have documented how educators in Malaysian private early childhood centres experience available programmes, translate learning into practice, receive institutional support, and manage barriers to participation. This study addresses that gap through the perspectives of seven educators working in private centres.

### **Research Objectives**

The study was guided by four objectives:

### **Significance of the Study**

The study contributes context-specific evidence on professional learning in private early childhood education. For educators, it identifies approaches that support stronger pedagogy, confidence, and responsiveness to children's developmental needs. For centre leaders, it clarifies how funding, time, mentoring, internal training, and encouragement enable participation and application.

The findings are also relevant to policymakers and training providers seeking to reduce disparities across early childhood settings. By identifying both productive practices and persistent barriers, the study supports the development of structured, needs-based, and accessible professional learning systems for the private sector.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Professional Development in Early Childhood Education**

Professional development encompasses organized and self-directed learning undertaken throughout an educator's career. In early childhood education, its purpose extends beyond acquiring techniques; it supports deeper knowledge of development, curriculum, observation, family engagement, inclusion, and developmentally appropriate practice. Continuous learning is especially important because educators work with children whose needs vary substantially across developmental domains (Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Evidence suggests that effective professional development is content-focused, active, collaborative, coherent with institutional goals, and sustained long enough for teachers to experiment, receive feedback, and refine practice (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These features distinguish professional learning from one-off attendance that may produce awareness without lasting classroom change.

Professional learning can also strengthen educators' confidence and professional identity. When teachers apply new strategies and observe positive outcomes, changes in practice can reinforce their beliefs and motivation to continue learning (Guskey, 2002; Avalos, 2011). This reciprocal relationship is particularly relevant in private centres where formal career pathways and support systems may vary.

### **Professional Development Approaches**

Workshops and seminars remain common because they can address focused topics such as classroom management, curriculum, literacy, safety, assessment, and child development. Their value increases when educators actively practise techniques, discuss application, and receive follow-up support rather than passively receiving information (Desimone, 2009).

Mentoring and coaching provide individualized guidance through observation, feedback, modelling, and reflection. These approaches are particularly valuable for novice teachers, but experienced educators may also benefit when mentoring is reciprocal and connected to clearly defined professional goals (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015).

Professional learning communities and peer learning position development within everyday work. Collaborative discussion allows educators to share teaching ideas, analyse challenges, develop common practices, and build a culture of continuous improvement (Ali & Mahamod, 2016). Internal learning can also be cost-effective for private centres when external training budgets are limited.

Online courses, webinars, professional reading, and self-directed learning provide flexible access for teachers managing demanding schedules. Technology-supported learning has expanded opportunities for Malaysian preschool educators, although its effectiveness depends on relevance, digital access, engagement, and opportunities to apply learning (Hashim & Yunus, 2021).

### **Institutional Support and Participation Barriers**

Institutional support determines whether professional learning is treated as an individual responsibility or an organizational priority. Support may include training budgets, paid participation, workload adjustments, leave, internal sessions, access to resources, mentoring, recognition, and follow-up opportunities. Such provisions communicate that teacher learning is integral to educational quality (Hashim & Mahmud, 2020).

Leadership encouragement is important because educators are more likely to participate when centre managers discuss learning needs, nominate relevant programmes, and create conditions for new practices to be tested. Conversely, limited funding and weak planning can leave teachers dependent on occasional external courses or personal expenditure (Aziz et al., 2019; Chee & Abdullah, 2019).

Time and workload are recurring constraints. Early childhood educators balance direct teaching, preparation, documentation, classroom organization, and communication with families. Training scheduled outside working hours or without staff coverage may be inaccessible even when teachers are motivated to attend.

Relevance is another concern. Programmes designed without a needs assessment may not address teachers' qualifications, centre context, or immediate classroom challenges. Sustainable provision therefore requires a balance of external expertise, internal collaboration, flexibility, and alignment with educators' professional needs.

### **Influence on Teaching Practice**

Professional development can improve instructional planning, classroom management, curriculum implementation, and educators' understanding of child development. Meta-analytic and review evidence

indicates that well-designed in-service learning can positively influence teacher practice, particularly when learning is sustained and linked to classroom application (Egert et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Changes are not limited to technical knowledge. Educators may become more willing to use child-centred approaches, creative materials, project work, technology, and differentiated support. Professional learning may also strengthen communication with parents and collaboration among colleagues, thereby extending its effect

beyond individual classrooms.

The transfer of learning is nevertheless conditional. Teachers require time, resources, feedback, and organizational encouragement to convert ideas into consistent practice. Evaluating professional development solely by attendance can therefore obscure whether learning has influenced teacher behaviour or children's experiences (Guskey, 2002).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by Adult Learning Theory and Guskey's Professional Development Model. Adult Learning Theory views adults as self-directed learners who bring prior experience to learning and are motivated by content that is relevant, problem-centred, and immediately applicable to their professional roles (Knowles et al., 2015).

From this perspective, early childhood educators are likely to benefit from learning that responds to authentic classroom needs and allows them to connect new ideas with existing experience. Workshops, mentoring, peer discussion, online learning, and reflective practice provide different pathways for such engagement.

Guskey's model explains change as a process in which professional development leads to new classroom practices, observable outcomes, and subsequent changes in teachers' attitudes and beliefs (Guskey, 2002). Together, the theories support analysis of the programmes educators access, their application of learning, the role of institutional conditions, and the barriers that interrupt professional growth.

### **Research Gap**

Malaysian scholarship has established the importance of teacher qualifications and professional learning in early childhood education, but private-sector experiences remain less visible than public preschool systems (Majzub & Rashid, 2012; Azman & Siraj, 2017; Foong et al., 2018). Existing work also tends to examine training participation or competency separately rather than considering access, practice change, institutional support, and barriers together.

The present study addresses this gap through an integrated qualitative exploration of how educators in private early childhood centres experience professional development and interpret its contribution to their work.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative design was used to examine educators' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of professional development. This approach was appropriate because participation and application are shaped by institutional context, professional background, and personal meaning that cannot be understood through numerical indicators alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews provided a consistent focus on the research questions while allowing participants to explain experiences in their own words. The flexible format also enabled follow-up prompts when participants described specific training, institutional practices, or barriers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

### **Participants and Sampling**

Seven educators working in Malaysian private preschools, kindergartens, or childcare centres participated.

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants with direct experience of professional learning in private early childhood settings.

Participants met three inclusion criteria:

Teaching experience ranged from 1.5 to 11 years. Participants held SPM, diploma, or degree qualifications, which allowed the study to capture professional learning needs across different levels of preparation and experience.

### **Instrument and Data Collection**

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide aligned with the four research objectives. Questions covered participant background, professional development activities, perceived changes in teaching, institutional support, and barriers to participation. The guide enabled comparable coverage while retaining flexibility for elaboration.

Permission was obtained from participating centres before recruitment. Participants received information about the study, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews.

Interviews lasted approximately 15 to 25 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or online according to availability. With permission, responses were audio-recorded and supported by field notes to preserve contextual information.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis involved repeated familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding, grouping related codes, reviewing candidate themes, interpreting themes against the research objectives, and developing a coherent account of participants' experiences.

Credibility was addressed through careful comparison of interpretations with participants' accounts and member checking. Dependability was supported through documentation of data collection and analysis decisions, while confirmability was strengthened by maintaining an evidence trail between interpretations and participant statements.

Detailed description of the participants and private-centre context supports transferability to comparable settings. These procedures reflect established principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, pseudonyms or participant numbers were used, and identifying information was kept confidential. Research data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participant Profile**

The seven participants represented a range of teaching experience, academic preparation, and exposure to professional development. Experience ranged from 1.5 to 11 years, while qualifications included SPM, diplomas, and degrees in early childhood education. This variation supported comparison between novice and experienced educators and between teachers with different levels of formal preparation.

Participants had attended curriculum and classroom-management training, safety workshops, reading and language programmes, project-based learning workshops, online courses, and mentoring. Four interrelated

themes were developed from their accounts, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Themes and Principal Findings**

| Theme | Principal evidence | Interpretation |
|-------|--------------------|----------------|
|-------|--------------------|----------------|

### Theme 1: Professional Development Approaches

Participants described a varied professional learning landscape that combined workshops, seminars, internal sessions, external training, mentoring, online learning, peer exchange, and self-directed study. Programme content included safety and CPR, phonics and storytelling, curriculum implementation, classroom management, project-based learning, assessment, and child development.

Several accounts illustrated the practical focus of learning. Safety training increased confidence in responding to emergencies and encouraged closer attention to classroom hazards. Reading and language training led educators to use phonics games, storytelling techniques, voice modulation, and interactive literacy activities. Curriculum training improved understanding of learning standards, outcomes, assessment, and developmentally appropriate planning.

Project-based learning training encouraged the use of hands-on projects such as planting and recycling, which participants associated with greater engagement and collaboration among children. These findings support literature emphasizing the value of active, practice-connected professional learning (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

### Theme 2: Influence on Teaching Practices

All participants perceived professional development as beneficial to their teaching. They reported using more child-centred, play-based, hands-on, and interactive approaches after training. Learning was also associated with improved classroom routines, behaviour management, activity transitions, and the organization of learning environments.

Participants described stronger lesson planning and curriculum alignment, including clearer learning objectives, more varied activities, and greater attention to developmental levels. Training on child development helped teachers recognize milestones, emotional needs, individual differences, and the need to adapt instruction.

Professional learning also stimulated creativity. Educators reported using recycled resources, sensory activities, art projects, technology, and new teaching materials. Some also improved communication with parents and collaboration with colleagues, extending the effect of development beyond individual classroom techniques.

A recurring outcome was increased confidence. Participants felt better prepared to implement new approaches, manage classrooms, communicate with families, and respond to children's needs. This pattern is consistent with Guskey's (2002) proposition that observable improvements following new practice can strengthen teachers' beliefs and motivation.

### Theme 3: Institutional Support

Institutional support differed substantially across centres. Some participants received funding or partial sponsorship, permission to attend external programmes, leave or time allocation, internal training, mentoring, and encouragement from management. Regular internal sessions were valued because they addressed centre-specific needs and enabled colleagues to share practice.

Mentoring was particularly helpful for less experienced educators, who benefited from guidance, observation, feedback, and reassurance. Management encouragement also influenced motivation by signalling that professional learning was valued and connected to centre quality.

Other participants reported minimal support and paid for learning themselves or relied on free online opportunities. The variation confirms that access in private settings is shaped by organizational resources and priorities, consistent with Malaysian research on institutional support for educator development (Hashim & Mahmud, 2020).

#### **Theme 4: Challenges in Participation**

Time constraints were the most commonly reported difficulty. Participants balanced teaching, planning, documentation, administrative tasks, and communication with parents, leaving limited time for training. Sessions held during working hours created staffing difficulties, while after-hours programmes competed with personal responsibilities.

Financial cost was another prominent barrier. External courses and workshops often required fees, travel, or personal expenditure, and not all centres provided reimbursement. Heavy workload, limited staff coverage, inconsistent institutional encouragement, and irregular access to relevant programmes further restricted participation.

Despite these constraints, participants expressed positive attitudes toward continuous learning and willingness to attend when opportunities were accessible. The findings indicate that low participation should not automatically be interpreted as low motivation; structural conditions often determine whether professional interest can be translated into action.

#### **Integrated Discussion**

The four themes show that professional development is both an individual learning process and an organizational practice. Adult Learning Theory helps explain participants' preference for relevant, problem-centred activities connected to immediate classroom needs, while Guskey's model explains how applied learning, perceived improvement, and increased confidence reinforce continued engagement (Knowles et al., 2015; Guskey, 2002).

However, the benefits were uneven because institutional support and participation barriers shaped access and application. A workshop may introduce a useful strategy, but sustained change requires time, resources, feedback, and alignment with centre priorities. Professional development quality should therefore be judged by relevance, continuity, support, and classroom transfer rather than attendance alone.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Implications for Early Childhood Educators**

Educators should approach professional development as an ongoing component of professional practice. In addition to formal courses, they can use peer observation, professional reading, online learning, reflective discussion, and collaborative problem-solving to maintain learning when institutional opportunities are limited.

Professional learning should be connected to a specific practice goal and followed by application, reflection, and feedback. This process can help educators determine whether new strategies improve engagement, classroom organization, learning, or communication with families.

#### **Implications for Centre Administrators**

Private-centre administrators should establish an annual professional development plan based on educator needs, centre priorities, and available resources. A balanced plan may combine funded external courses with internal workshops, mentoring, peer learning, and online provision. Scheduled learning time and staff coverage are necessary if participation is expected.

Administrators should also evaluate transfer by discussing how educators applied learning, what support they required, and what outcomes were observed. Recognition, constructive feedback, and opportunities to share

practice can strengthen motivation and spread learning across the centre.

### **Implications for Policymakers and Training Providers**

Policy initiatives should reduce disparities between public and private early childhood settings by expanding affordable, quality-assured professional learning for private-centre educators. Subsidies, shared training hubs, micro-credentials, online provision, and partnerships with universities or professional bodies could widen access.

Training providers should conduct needs assessments and differentiate programmes by qualification, experience, and professional role. Courses should emphasize active learning, authentic early childhood practice, follow-up support, and materials that educators can adapt within resource-constrained centres.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

Private centres should implement professional learning communities, structured mentoring for novice teachers, regular needs assessments, and flexible blended learning. Incentives such as certification, recognition, and progression opportunities may further encourage sustained participation.

Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples across Malaysian regions, compare public and private settings, and include centre leaders. Longitudinal and mixed-method research could examine whether reported professional learning leads to sustained practice change and improved experiences for children.

## **LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study involved seven educators and focused only on private early childhood centres. The findings provide depth and contextual insight but are not statistically generalizable to the wider early childhood workforce. Differences in centre resources, policies, location, and educator background may also produce experiences not represented in this sample.

The analysis relied on self-reported interview data, which may be affected by recall or social-desirability bias. Future research should triangulate interviews with observations, professional development records, reflective journals, or manager perspectives and should examine the longer-term transfer of learning into practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored professional development among educators in Malaysian private early childhood centres. Participants engaged in workshops, internal and external training, safety programmes, literacy and curriculum learning, project-based learning, mentoring, online study, peer exchange, and self-directed development.

Professional learning was associated with stronger teaching strategies, classroom management, planning, creativity, understanding of child development, communication, use of resources, collaboration, and confidence. These benefits were most attainable when management provided funding, time, internal learning, mentoring, and encouragement.

At the same time, cost, workload, limited time, irregular provision, and uneven institutional support restricted participation. Strengthening private early childhood education therefore requires professional development that is structured, relevant, accessible, practice-connected, and supported as an organizational responsibility rather than left solely to individual educators.

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## ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and the study followed the ethical guidelines of UNITAR International University / UNITAR University College Kuala Lumpur. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The interview transcripts are not publicly available because of participant confidentiality and the conditions of ethical approval. Anonymized data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical requirements.

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