

Malaysian Early Childhood Educators' Perceptions Regarding Children's Social–Emotional Development

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Abstract: Social-emotional development at an early age is pivotal and it is significantly affecting children's future life. Children with good social-emotional skills will succeed in academic and later life. Nevertheless, to make sure all children mastered social-emotional skills, teachers need to be empowered with the knowledge, teaching approach, teaching strategies and good practices on social-emotional development first. Teachers with good knowledge and practices can support, nurture and foster children's social-emotional development positively. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the Malaysian early childhood educators' perceptions regarding social-emotional development. This study used a survey research design and quantitative approach. A self-developed questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire comprises four variables, which is an overview of social-emotional development, factors associated with social-emotional development, social-emotional learning in the classroom and social-emotional skills. A total of 332 early childhood educators participated in this research were selected using a random sampling technique. Descriptive and inferential statistics were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science to answer the research questions. Findings showed Malaysian early childhood educators have a moderate perception of social-emotional development. Furthermore, the descriptive analysis showed, Malaysian early childhood educators have a good understanding of the overview and skills of social-emotional development variables. However Malaysian early childhood educators demonstrated a poor understanding of the factors associated with social-emotional development and how social-emotional should be taught in the classroom variables. The findings from this study are discussed on teachers' roles and practice to support children's social-emotional development.

Keywords: *social–emotional, teachers' perception, early childhood, preschool, children*

INTRODUCTION

The first five years are a crucial period for social-emotional development. As noted by experts, the early years of life present a unique opportunity to lay the foundation for healthy social-emotional development (Cooper, Masi & Vick, 2009). Every experience faced by the children will affect their social-emotional development and they tend to absorb positive and negative influence from their environment at this period. Scholars in early childhood education agreed that this experience would give a significant impact on children's personalities in the future (Cooper et al. 2009; Edwards, 2018; Zins et al. 2004).

Social-emotional competencies are important in determining the success of the self-adjustment process during childhood (Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Schultz & Richardson, 2011) and teenagers (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; Durlak & Weissberg, 2005). The child's ability to control their feelings and social relationships will contribute to their success in the classroom, home and in daily life (Mohamed & Toran, 2018; Schultz & Richardson, 2011; State, Kern, Starosta, & Mukherjee, 2011). Children with good social-emotional competencies recognized as good

listeners, concerned with emotional signals, sensitive to the other circumstances, understand, respect and accept others' beliefs (Goleman, 1995).

Low social competencies during early childhood will lead to attitude and moral issues during teenager age (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010). These children are at risk to have behavior problems and can't control their emotions without appropriate support regarding social-emotional skills (Idayu, 2015; Schultz & Richardson, 2011). Research has found that children with low social-emotional competencies often involved with discipline matter in school, failure in academic (Rhaodes, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2010), delinquency, aggressive behavior and drug abuse (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2008; Greenberg et al. 2003).

Thus, efforts to foster childhood social and emotional development at an early age are seen as an important effort to ensure that these children succeed in academic success and achieving success in life in the future. Therefore, social-emotional learning was introduced at the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten level. Therefore, it is important to make sure all early childhood teachers are knowledgeable and well prepared to foster and nurture social-emotional development in their classrooms. This is important because teachers are the primary delivered of social-emotional skill and their attitude towards social-emotional can affect the children. Teacher beliefs are key indicators of their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their teaching practices (Mohamed et al., 2019; Yunus & Mohamed, 2019).

Then, the purpose of this study was to examine the Malaysian preschool teachers' perceptions regarding the social-emotional development among young children. The research questions that guided this research is what the level of Malaysian preschool teachers' perceptions regarding the social-emotional development are.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a survey research design with a quantitative approach.

Participants

The questionnaire was distributed to private preschool and publicly funded preschool programs located in the state of Selangor. A total of 332 teachers responded to the questionnaire for an overall response rate of 83%. 56 participants (16.8%) are from publicly funded preschool and 276 participants (83.1%) are from private preschool. A descriptive analysis on early childhood teaching experience showed 170 participants (54.3%) have experienced two years and below, 70 participants (22.4%) have experience 3 to 5 years, 35 participants (11.2%) have experience 6 to 10 years, and 38 participants have experience 10 years and above. Analysis of workshop participation showed 149 participants (47.6%) has attended courses on social-emotional development and 164 participants (52.4%) never attended any courses on social-emotional development.

Instrument

The questionnaire for this research consists of two sections, Section A: Demographic information and Section B: Teachers' knowledge about social-emotional. 5-point Likert scale used in scoring for both section A and B; 1= completely disagree; 2= disagree; 3= undecided; 4= agree; and 5= completely agree. Items in Section B were developed based on a literature study on the teachers' knowledge and perceptions regarding social-emotional development. Two early childhood educators' experts have been appointed to examine the content validity of

the questionnaire. The questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability with Cronbach's alpha value was 0.92.

Procedures

A convenient sampling technique was used for sample selection. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants together with a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study. After two weeks the questionnaires were collected back. Data were analysed using descriptive statistic to examine Malaysian early childhood educators' knowledge regarding social-emotional development. Moreover, an inferential statistic was performed to identify the correlation between Malaysian early childhood educators' knowledge and teaching experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research finding shows the mean score for teachers' perceptions about the social-emotional development among young children was moderate with mean value 2.14 and standard deviation value 0.47. A descriptive analysis of teachers' perceptions item showed Malaysian early childhood educators have a poor score on three items. Whereas the majority of them respond as completely disagree, disagree and undecided for these items. The items are a) parents' level of education will influence children's social-emotional development; b) children raised by the foster family are at high risk for social-emotional disturbance, and c) children living in poverty are at high risk for the social-emotional disturbance. These items are about the factors associated with social-emotional development. This shows Malaysian early childhood educators have poor knowledge about the factors that will influence social-emotional development.

A total of 266 teachers stated they are did not know that children living in foster care are at high risk for social-emotional problems. Comprise this total, 11.7% of teachers are responded 'completely disagree', 31.3% of teachers respond 'disagree' and 37.0% teachers respond 'undecided'. This showed, 80% of teachers had no idea about the factors associated with children's social-emotional development.

Living in foster care is one of the factors associated with social-emotional development. Researchers in the early childhood field agree children who are removed from their families and placed into foster care are vulnerable to social-emotional problems (Squires & Bricker, 2007; Dowling, 2014). These children are usually victims of extreme neglect or extreme violence.

Based on the feedback, a total of 199 teachers had no idea about the connection between parents' level of education and social-emotional development. Comprise this total are 11.1% teachers respond, 'completely disagree', 23.5% teachers respond 'disagree' and 25.3% teachers respond 'undecided'. As for poverty status, 176 teachers recorded as do not know. Descriptive analysis for this item found, 3.6% of teachers are 'completely disagree', 14.8 teachers are 'disagreed' and 34.6% of teachers are 'undecided'. This showed 59.9% and 53.1% of teachers are clueless about the connection between parents' level of education, poverty status, and social-emotional development.

The level of education and household income are two main components in the measurement of socioeconomic status. Studies showed socioeconomic status is significantly associated with social-emotional development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Mohamed & Toran, 2018). Whereas parents from different socioeconomic status tend to practice different parenting styles (Tominey & Rivers, 2002). The differences in parenting style would give a significant impact on children's social-emotional competencies. Studies reported children who are living with low

socioeconomic status to tend facing up with social-emotional problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Noralina & Siti Hajar, 2017; Mohamed & Toran, 2018).

These research findings quite surprising when there are teachers respond, 'completely disagree', 'disagree' and 'undecided' for items in variables teaching social-emotional in the classroom. Based on the feedback, 6.7% and 24.6% of teachers emphasized teaching social-emotional in the classroom as not important and can't decide respectively. As for the second item, 8.1% of teachers stated social-emotional learning should not be taught continuously from kindergarten, primary school, and secondary school. Meanwhile, 11.1% of teachers respond as uncertain. Analysis for the third item shows 17.4% of teachers fail to agree with the statement 'social-emotional need to be taught in classroom likes science and mathematics' and another 26.2% can't decide.

This finding showed Malaysian early childhood educators still have limited knowledge of the approach and strategy should be used to foster and nurture children's social-emotional development. In developed countries, social-emotional are taught directly. A few social-emotional learning centers like Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) and Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was developed to empower early childhood practitioner. Experts in this field emphasized integrating social-emotional learning in daily classroom practices. Additional information about the teachers' knowledge of social-emotional development is provided in Table 1.

Correlation between teachers' perceptions and teaching experience

The relationship between teachers' knowledge of social-emotional development and teaching experience in early childhood was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. There was a negative correlation between the two variables, $r(332) = -0.175$, $n = 332$, $p = 0.002$ ($p < 0.01$), with high levels of knowledge on social-emotional development associated with less experience in teaching early childhood. The differences between the content of the curriculum for teachers training maybe be a contributing factor to these findings. In Malaysia, the course for teacher's training always has been improved to make sure the teachers have all the knowledge as time goes on.

Table 1. Preschool Teachers' Knowledge regarding Social-Emotional Development

Sub-scale/Items	<i>n</i> (%)				
	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Completely Agree
An overview of social-emotional					
Definition of social-emotional	4 (1.2)	16 (4.8)	39 (11.7)	145 (43.7)	123 (37.0)
Heard the term	21 (6.3)	30 (9.0)	75 (22.6)	100 (30.1)	98 (29.5)
Social-emotional and mental health	6 (1.8)	23 (6.9)	102 (30.7)	143 (43.1)	57 (17.2)
Social-emotional skills needs to be nurtured	13 (3.9)	9 (2.7)	14 (4.2)	105 (31.6)	190 (57.2)
Social-emotional skills develops from birth	14 (4.2)	28 (8.4)	59 (17.8)	125 (37.7)	101 (30.4)
Factors associated with social-emotional development					
Parents' level of education	37 (11.1)	78 (23.5)	84 (25.3)	88 (26.5)	44 (13.3)
Children living in the foster care	39 (11.7)	104 (31.3)	123 (37.0)	39 (11.7)	26 (7.8)
Children living in poverty	12 (3.6)	49 (14.8)	115 (34.6)	113 (34.0)	43 (13.0)
Environmental factors	10 (3.0)	12 (3.6)	23 (6.9)	107 (32.2)	178 (53.6)
Early social-emotional development and later life	8 (2.4)	17 (5.1)	55 (16.6)	149 (44.9)	102 (30.7)
Social-emotional learning in the classroom					
Teaching social-emotional is important	2 (0.6)	19 (6.1)	77 (24.6)	129 (41.2)	76 (24.3)
Should be taught continuously	13 (3.9)	14 (4.2)	37 (11.1)	121 (36.4)	145 (43.7)
Need to be taught in the classroom formally	17 (5.1)	41 (12.3)	87 (26.2)	128 (38.6)	56 (16.9)
Social-emotional skills					
Succeed in academic	11 (3.3)	10 (3.0)	44 (13.3)	150 (45.2)	115 (34.6)
Able to express a good attitude and behaviour	-	3 (1.0)	19 (6.1)	121 (38.7)	166 (53.0)
Able to start and maintain relationship	-	2 (0.6)	33 (10.5)	135 (43.1)	143 (45.7)
High curiosity	1 (0.3)	6 (1.9)	34 (10.9)	155 (49.5)	117 (37.4)

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate Malaysian early childhood educators' perceptions of social-emotional development among young children. The findings showed Malaysian early childhood educators' have moderate knowledge about social-emotional development. Participants demonstrated a good understanding on basic information of social-emotional development and list of social-emotional skills. Moreover, participants also aware that social-emotional competency related to children's emotional management, cooperative attitude, curiosity level and abilities to start and maintain a relationship. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated a limited knowledge about the factors influence social-emotional development and on how social-emotional should be taught to the children. As primary teachers, early childhood educators should be knowledgeable about this. Because with this knowledge they can identify which children need extra support and special attention from them. Early childhood educators are important individuals who act as a guide to children. Early childhood educators with good knowledge on social-emotional development can support, nurture and foster social-emotional development among young children. Without knowledge about social-emotional, a teacher cannot support, foster and nurture children's social-emotional development.

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