

PRIVATE SECTOR EARLY CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: WORKFORCE READINESS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION

Lydia Foong, Palanisamy K. Veloo, Mogana Dhamotharan and Carynne Loh*

SEGi University Kota Damansara, Selangor, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding author: rynneloh@gmail.com

Published online: 27 April 2018

To cite this article: Foong, L., P. K. Veloo, M. Dhamotharan and C. Loh. 2018. Private sector early child care and education in Malaysia: Workforce readiness for further education. *Kajian Malaysia* 36(1): 127–154. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.1.6>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.1.6>

ABSTRACT

Studies from several countries have shown that qualified educators in early childhood programmes make a significant difference in providing quality Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) have resulted in improved outcomes for young children. Given this fact, the Malaysian government has proposed to raise the minimum qualification of all preschool teachers to a diploma in early childhood education by 2020. This study examines the status of the private sector early childhood workforce in Malaysia and their readiness for further training. A stratified sample comprising 3,087 teachers was asked to complete a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that explored their readiness for further education. Results of the study show that a large proportion of private sector teachers are young, under qualified, inexperienced and underpaid. Teachers are aware of the need to upgrade their skills and are ready to do so if given the opportunity. The study suggests that there is an urgent need to attend to private sector teacher professionalism so that quality early childhood care and education can be provided to the very young in the country by the private sector.

Keywords: early childhood workforce readiness, work conditions, professionalism

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) in Malaysia: A Brief Historical Background

Informal Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres were established in the early 1900s during the British Colonial period by various communities in Malaya. The first legal document in relation to the registration of early childhood education centres was the draft of *Kaedah-kaedah Guru/Kaedah-kaedah Kindergarten dan Sekolah Asuhan (Pendaftaran) 1972 Warta Kerajaan P.U. (A) 414* which included the procedures to register a kindergarten, its teachers and its board of governors. From this beginning, various government agencies started their own preschools, one of the earliest being Tabika KEMAS in 1971 under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, PERPADUAN preschools in 1976 under the Department of National Integration and Unity. By the 1980s, there was a large number of preschools from both the private and government sectors. In 1992, The Ministry of Education started preschools as a pilot project annexed to existing primary schools (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). By the year 2003, all preschools from both the public and private sectors were required by law to follow the National Preschool Curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2007).

Today, there is an increasing demand for early childhood education in Malaysia. Firstly, Malaysia's rapid economic development has resulted in an increase in the number of mothers joining the workforce. Strong initiatives by the government and non-government agencies, along with an improved access to higher education have empowered a larger percentage of Malaysian women to join the workforce. The female participation rate in the workforce has climbed from 46.9% in 2010 to 54.1% in 2015 (Jayaram, 2016). Hence, the need for childcare has grown in tandem with the increase in women's participation rate in the labour force. This has caused a rise in the demand for non-parental care for children. More preschools have sprung up all over the country to cater to the needs of children and families.

Secondly, a growing body of research has pointed to the importance of early learning, both in its own right, as well as in its potential to enhance subsequent academic performance and promote holistic development (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Profeta, 2012). Intervention in the early stages of a child's life has become a means of preventing later problems in families and in later childhood, particularly for children who are at risk. There is evidence to prove that the quality of early childhood programs potentially produces lasting effects on all aspects of development of the child, with impact on the family and society as well (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001; Heckman, 2006; National Scientific

Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Rao and Sun, 2010). In the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action 2030 by UNESCO, the implementation of sustainable development Goal 4 for education was meant to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The sustainable development Goal (SDG) 4.2 states: "By 2020, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UNESCO, 2015: 20).

Early Childhood Care and Education in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the 1984 Child Care Act (308 Act) requires childcare centres catering to children from birth to four years old to be registered with the Department of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. Children between ages four to six are enrolled into preschools under the Education Act 1996. Early Child Care and Education (ECCE) programs in Malaysia are provided by the Ministry of Education, Department of National Unity and Integration, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the Department of Rural and Regional Development, as well as private establishments (UNICEF, 2006; Chiam, 2008).

In 2014 there were about 30 million people in Malaysia. In the 2010 population census, more than 9.5 million were children under the age of 18. There were approximately 2.5 million children who were four years old and below, and 2.5 million children between ages five to nine. These figures show that more than a quarter of our children were below five years of age and were often taken care of by caregivers other than their parents (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). Parents in a modern society like Malaysia, characterised by social progress, and urbanisation, are also more aware of the importance of early childhood education for both boys and girls. Preschool children's enrolment in kindergartens has registered an increase from 67% in 2005 to 84.2% in 2014 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The Malaysian government aims to achieve a 97% enrolment rate in preschools by 2020. Of the total number of kindergartens catering to the five and six year olds in the country, 40% are privately owned and operated. Private kindergartens in Malaysia are in general better equipped, employ more staff and accommodate more children than the public kindergartens. The ratio of teacher to children in the private kindergartens is 1:14 while the ratio in public kindergartens is 1:22. The average number of children per kindergarten is 28 in the public sector, and 61 in the private sector (United Nations Children's Fund, 2013).

The national policies that have provided the impetus for the growth of the early childhood care and education services in Malaysia are as follows:

1. Education Act 1996 (Act 550)
2. National Key Result Area (2010–2012)
3. Government Transformation Programme Version 2 (2013–2017)
4. Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025)

Given the importance of ECCE, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia has decided to impose a minimum qualification condition for all preschool teachers in the country. By the year 2020 all preschool teachers in Malaysia must possess a minimum qualification of a diploma in early childhood education. According to a report from the Ministry of Education dated, September 2011, there were 5,355 preschool teachers from government preschools with a diploma in preschool education and 2,783 teachers with a bachelor's degree in ECE. The number of qualified teachers in the government sector was significantly higher than that of the private sector. In the private sector, out of an estimated total of 25,000 preschool teachers, only 1,592 had a diploma in ECE and 693 teachers had a degree, some in fields not related to ECE (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). It is not surprising that the majority of preschool teachers in the private sector do not possess a diploma in early childhood education as the current minimum requirement for the registration of preschool teachers in the private sector is a pass in SPM/O-level whereas childcare providers are required to complete a 144-hour Permata childcare course (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2016). This situation has raised a number of serious questions with respect to the quality of services provided by private sector ECCE centres in Malaysia. Are our young children in private sector preschool centres receiving quality early childhood care and education? How can the professionalism of preschool teachers in the private preschools be improved and are there structures to support it? The government's target of achieving preschool enrolment of 97% by 2020 will be seriously undermined if national policies such as those designed to raise teachers' qualification and improving the quality of ECCE to young children are not aligned to achieve this target. For example, in the Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011–2015), the Government's Transformation Programme, the Economic Transformation Programme and the Malaysia Education Blueprint should have been aligned to achieve this important agenda (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014; Ng, 2010).

This agenda is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals but there exist problems of accessibility to quality ECCE services in the urban/rural divide, different socio-economic groups, and different geographical regions of the country. For instance, children who attend public preschools run by the Ministry of Education and government agencies, enjoy free education, and furthermore these centres are staffed by trained and qualified teachers. However, due to limited places in public preschools, most working-class parents send their children to private preschools. It was noted earlier that many private preschools do not have

qualified staff and do not have adequate operational expenditure to hire staff with specialised knowledge in ECE and as a result these children may not be receiving quality ECCE. Quality ECCE programmes do come with a price. But the price will be even higher if children are not provided with high quality programmes.

The Malaysian ECCE Workforce

The ECCE workforce in Malaysia and in other parts of the world is undergoing a shift in philosophy in response to the body of scientific work that has accumulated over the past 202 years. This work has demonstrated that differences in an adult's life outcomes can be explained in part by early childhood experiences which impact on brain development (Kilburn and Karoly, 2008; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). The study of brain development informs educators on how children learn best, and the connection between the learning environment and the neurobiological changes in the child's brain. The ECCE workforce is now expected to provide not just child-minding services but also education services that enhance the overall development of children. The ECCE workforce in Malaysia includes all personnel working in childcare centres (*taska* – childcare centre) for the children aged birth to four years, and those in preschools (*tadika* – kindergarten) for children aged four to six years. This involves approximately 55,000 ECCE personnel working with approximately half a million children in the country.

We have noted earlier that the Malaysian Ministry of Education has encouraged all preschool teachers to obtain a minimum of a Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education by 2020 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). All preschool teachers working in public preschools have fulfilled this minimum requirement, but preschool teachers at the private sector are yet to fulfil this requirement.

THE IMPACT OF QUALITY WORKFORCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Extensive research studies have shown that qualified educators and teachers in early childhood preschool programmes do make a difference and have resulted in improved outcomes for young children. A joint report by the United States Department of Health and Human Services and United States Department of Education (2016) states that the quality of any early learning setting is directly related to the quality of their staff, which includes their understanding of children's growth and development. Children educated by teachers with more education and specialised training in child development and early education were more sociable, exhibited a more developed use of language and performed at a higher level on

cognitive tasks, as well as being more likely to enter into the appropriate grade for their age at follow-up than children cared for by less qualified teachers (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001; Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog, 2003; Myers, 2006; Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2006). It was found that qualified early childhood educators with a good understanding of child development and proven teaching and learning methods are the key to raising the quality of ECCE. In a recent systematic review of studies by Rao et al. (2014) which included Bangladesh, Costa Rica and China, the programme quality and children's cognitive development were significantly associated with the qualification and training of teachers.

In a longitudinal study in England, Sylva et al. (2004) found that qualified staff in the most effective preschool settings provided young children with more curriculum-related activities, particularly in language and mathematics. They also engaged children in challenging play activities. It was noted that staff with a Bachelor of Education or post-graduate Certificate in Education, were able to provide the most effective instruction and were most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking. The quality of the ECCE workforce is influenced not only by the qualifications they possess, but also by other factors such as their work setting, salary and remuneration and professional status, which have an impact on their job satisfaction. The job satisfaction of the teachers impacts the interactions between the teachers and children in ECCE settings (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012).

A positive relationship was found between the qualifications of staff and ratings of quality. Children made more progress in preschool centres where staff had higher qualifications, particularly if the manager was highly qualified (Sylva et al., 2004). Directors and teachers act as pedagogical leaders guiding and organising ECCE educators in order to build shared understandings about child development. Pedagogical leaders also encourage family and community participation in ECCE (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). In doing so, pedagogical leaders set the tone of professionalism intended (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

As public expectations toward the ECCE workforce have also changed gradually, the workforce is expected to understand child development, programme planning, children's health and safety as well as relationships with families. Neuman, Josephson and Chua (2015) reported that preschool teachers who were better educated and trained were more likely to hold child-centered teacher beliefs and practices which translated into better child development and learning outcomes. It was also found that the less qualified staff were significantly better at supporting learning when they worked with qualified teachers (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Apart from that, much research evidence has shown that education level of child

care teaching staff and better work conditions were important determinants of the quality of services children received as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Model of the relationship among workforce, program quality, and child outcomes in ECCE settings.

Staff wages was one of the most important predictors of the quality of care children received compared to the other variables like educational qualifications and working conditions (Halfon and Langford, 2015). Better quality centers had staff earning higher wages, better work environments, lower staff turnover, better educated and trained staff, and more staff caring for fewer children (Whitebook and Eichberg, 2002; Bridges, 2011; Whitebook, Howes and Phillips, 1998; 2014).

In the United Kingdom, the Nutbrown Review called for a new long-term vision for the early-years workforce, advocating for a reformed system of qualifications. The report also emphasised striking a balance between supporting existing good practices and challenging the sector to provide high quality services in all settings. It suggested that babies and young children must have the very best early education and care. If those working with young children have the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding, they have the potential to offer the formative experience all young children deserve (Nutbrown, 2012). In the U.S., the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University suggested that one of the effectiveness factors in ECCE programmes is having highly skilled, qualified and appropriately compensated personnel, apart from other factors such as small class sizes, high adult-to-child ratios, age-appropriate curricula and stimulating materials in a safe physical setting, a language rich environment, warm and responsive interactions between staff and children, and high and consistent levels of child participation (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research evidence shows that qualified educators in early childhood programmes do make a difference and have resulted in improved overall outcomes for young children in the cognitive, physical and social domains. Given this fact one may think that it is only natural to have well qualified and highly talented people in the workforce. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the private sector ECCE centres

in Malaysia as only 21.6% of preschool teachers possessed a diploma in early childhood education in 2014 (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). The only requirement for childcare providers in Malaysia today is that, they have to complete a basic 144-hour childcare course (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2016).

Another factor that affects early childhood preschool programmes is high staff turnover. There is evidence that quality of ECCE programmes suffer when there is a high staff turnover (Neuman, Josephson and Chua, 2015). Research shows that high turnover affects children's language and socio-emotional learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). There is also evidence that private sector ECCE centres suffer high staff turnover in Malaysia (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014).

At present, information about early childhood workforce in Malaysia is scarce. With rapid expansion of early childhood education led by the private sector, there is an urgent need to investigate the workforce involved in early childhood education in the private sector. Given the importance of early childhood education for a child's overall development, the care of our children in the early years must be in the hands of qualified and trained people. This study examines the current status and working conditions of early childhood workforce in private early childhood centers in Malaysia and their readiness for further training.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The data presented in this paper were drawn from a larger research study on the status and work conditions of the Malaysian private sector early child care and education workforce from 2012–2013. This study investigated the demographic information and working conditions of a sample of private preschool teachers and childcare providers from registered preschools and childcare centres throughout Malaysia. A stratified sample involving about 12% (3,087 respondents) of teachers from all states in Malaysia, who took part in a 3-week training programme for private preschool teachers, participated in the study. The teachers attended the training programme offered by the Ministry of Education. The use of a stratified sampling procedure allowed the inclusion of parameters for special interest groups to be a part of the sample. The sample was stratified by zone as a geographical moderator variable: northern, southern, central, east coast of peninsular Malaysia and East-Malaysia.

The Instrument

Data were collected by means of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed based on the review of literature in this study and was validated by a group of early childhood experts and practitioners. The questionnaire was pilot tested before a final version was produced and used in the main study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections, A, B and C. Section A sought background information of the respondents, Section B sought information on working conditions at the workplace, such as age group taught, position in school, job status (temporary, permanent, contract), session taught, remuneration, and Section C obtained information about respondents' view about pursuing further training and education. The instrument used was found to be fairly reliable with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.71.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected by administering the questionnaire directly to child care providers and preschool teachers. Informed consent was received from the Ministry of Education, and the relevant state education departments and agencies. A total of 4,500 questionnaires were distributed to child care providers and preschool teachers who participated in a 3-week preschool teacher training programme called the Program Latihan Guru Prasekolah & Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional (JPNIN) (Preschool Teachers' Training Programme & Department of National Unity and Integration), conducted by the Ministry of Education between November to December of 2011 and between May to June of 2012. The programme was an overview of early childhood education in Malaysia, child development, assessment and Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum). All participants were briefed on the purpose of the survey and were informed that the data collected would be kept confidential. Participation in the study was voluntary. A total of 3,087 completed questionnaires were returned.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16. Descriptive statistics of variables of interest were computed and cross tabulation of selected variables was used to explore possible relationship among variables.

Specifically, the study explored the relationship between age, income, family size and tenure of the ECCE workforce and their intention for professional training. The results of the analysis are presented in the results section of this paper.

RESULTS

The respondents in the study comprised two distinct groups from the ECCE workforce: a group employed either as principals or administrators and a second group employed as ECCE childcare providers, educators or teachers. The first group comprised approximately 12% of the respondents and the second group comprised approximately 88% of the respondents. The results of the study are presented below under various sub-headings.

Gender

The vast majority of the respondents were female. Table 1 shows that almost 99% of those who participated in the survey were female.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	32	1.0
Female	3,049	98.6
Total	3,083	99.7

Age

About 39% of the respondents were in the 20–25 age group, about 13% in the 26–30 age group, and about 14% in the 31–35 age group, as illustrated in Table 2. In fact, more than three-quarters of respondents in the study were 40 years of age or below. Fifty-two percent of the respondents were between 20 to 30 years of age with a mean age of 23.9 years.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by age

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
18–19	3	0.1
20–25	1,190	38.6
26–30	414	13.4
31–35	440	14.3
36–40	335	10.9
41–45	335	10.9
46–50	229	7.4
>50	135	4.4
Total	3,081	100.0

Educational and Professional Qualification

Table 3 shows the educational qualification of respondents in this study. It was found that about 76% of the respondents did not have a diploma, with most of them being SPM (O-Level) school leavers, while 24% had a diploma or higher qualification.

Table 4 shows that about 9% of the respondents in the study did not have any professional qualification in ECE. About 10% indicated that they had a certificate in ECE from an institution of higher learning while 16% indicated that they had a diploma in ECE. There was a total of 39% grouped under the others category. This group included those who had attended training programmes such as "Basic Course in Child Care", "Preschool Certificate from Preschool Association of Malaysia", or other short courses conducted by the private sector or the Ministry of Education.

Table 3: Educational qualification of respondents

Educational qualification	Frequency	Percent
PMR/SRP/LCE	158	5.1
SPM/O Level/MCE	1,781	57.9
STPM/A-Level/HSC	319	10.4
Certificate from IPT	69	2.2
Diploma in ECE	477	15.5
Bachelor's degree	188	6.1
Master's degree	31	1.0
Others	53	1.7
Total	3,076	100.0

Note: PMR/SRP/LCE – Penilaian Menengah Rendah/Sijil Rendah Pelajaran; SPM/MCE – Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/Malaysian Certificate of Education; STPM/HSC – Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia/Malaysian Higher School Certificate; IPT – Institusi Pengajian Tinggi

Table 4: Professional qualification in ECE of respondents

Professional qualification in ECE	Frequency	Percent
No qualification in ECE	292	9.5
Certificate in ECE from IPT	300	9.8
Diploma	477	15.6
Bachelor's degree	70	2.3
Master's degree	14	0.5
No response	713	23.4
Other	1,193	38.8
Total	3,076	100.0

Work Experience

Table 5 shows that about 65% of the respondents had between 0 to 5 years of work experience with a mean of 2.01 years of working experience. This means that a large percentage of the respondents were relatively new to the profession and are inexperienced.

Table 5: Number of years of working experience of respondents

No of years	Frequency	Percent
0–1	574	18.9
1–2	750	24.6
3–4	374	12.4
4–5	281	9.2
5–10	501	16.5
11–15	289	9.3
16–20	155	5.2
>21 years	120	3.9
Total	3,045	100.0

Salary Earned

Table 6 shows that about 69% of the respondents earned between RM300 and RM900 per month with a mean monthly income of RM565.

Table 6: Distribution of salary earned by respondents

Salary (RM)	Frequency	Percent
<300	104	3.4
301–500	729	23.9
501–700	742	24.4
701–900	518	17.0
901–1,100	390	12.8
1,101–4,000	177	18.5
Total	3,046	100.0

Marital Status

Table 7 shows that about 49% of the respondents were single.

Table 7: Marital status of respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Married	1,578	51.3
Single	1,499	48.7
Total	3,079	100.0

Family Size

Table 8 shows that about 60% of the respondents do not have any children. About 26% had between one and two children while the rest had between two to six children.

Table 8: Distribution of the number of children in the family

Number	Frequency	Percent
0	1,487	59.8
1	296	11.9
2	337	13.6
3	190	7.6
4	110	4.4
5-6	52	2.1
>6	14	0.6
Total	2,486	100.0

Employment Status

Table 9 shows the employment status of the respondents. The majority of the respondents worked full-time at the early childhood centers. About 24% were employed on a part-time basis. Another 13% were employed on a short-term contractual basis.

Table 9: Employment status of respondents

Employment status	Frequency	Percent
Full-Time	1,916	62.8
Part-Time	745	24.4
Contract (<1 Year)	224	7.3
Contract (>1 Year)	165	5.4
Total	3,053	100.0

Working Sessions

Table 10 shows that the majority of the respondents in this study worked half-day with a total of 64% recorded, while the rest, about 36% worked full-day in the early childhood centres.

Table 10: Working sessions of respondents

Working session	Frequency	Percent
Half-day	1,966	64.4
Full-day	1,087	35.6
Total	3,054	100.0

Awareness of a Minimum Diploma Qualification for Teaching in Preschools

Table 11 shows that about 84% of the respondents indicated that they were aware of the Ministry's intention to impose a minimum diploma level qualification in Early Childhood Care on those intending to teach in preschools. The early childhood community is aware of the intentions of the Ministry of Education in Malaysia to impose these requirements.

Table 11: Awareness of minimum qualification required to teach in early childhood centres

Awareness	Frequency	Valid percent
Yes	2,411	84.4
No	447	15.6
Total	2,858	100.0

Importance of Diploma in ECE for Teachers at ECCE Centres

Table 12 shows that a combined total of around 81% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it is necessary for the workforce in the early childhood industry to have a minimum diploma qualification. This is an important result because the respondents recognise the importance of having a professional qualification in Early Childhood education to be effective in their professional practice.

Table 12: Importance of Diploma in ECE for teachers of ECCE Centres

Agreement	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	823	28.5
Agree	1,501	52.0
Disagree	513	17.8
Strongly disagree	47	1.6
Total	2,884	100.0

Intention to Pursue Further Studies

Table 13 shows that a majority of participants (83%) would like to further their studies up to diploma level if given an opportunity. About 17% of participants do not wish to further their studies. This group comprises participants who felt they were too old, or have children and family commitments, financial burden, lack of interest or are already in possession of a diploma or higher qualification in ECE.

Table 13: Teachers' intention to pursue further studies

Intention	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2,361	82.6
No	498	17.4
Total	2,859	100.0

Cross-tabulation Analysis between Selected Variables

Salary and readiness to pursue further studies

Cross-tabulations were used to explore the relationship between the respondents' salary scale and their readiness to pursue further studies. It can be hypothesised that respondents who were in the lower salary scale would have a greater motivation to pursue further studies in order to improve their income level than those in the higher income bracket. The cross-tabulation analysis in Figure 2 shows that the respondents' intention to pursue studies peaked at the salary scale of RM501 to RM700. The intention to further pursue studies generally declined as their salary scale increased beyond this RM700 point. Respondents were more interested to pursue studies when their salary was lower than RM700.

Age and intention to pursue further studies

The analysis shows that approximately 89% of the respondents were 45 years old or below. They should be encouraged to pursue further studies as they are still at a potentially active stage of lifelong learning being less than 45 years old. Cross-tabulation results (Figure 3) show that as the ECE workforce grows older, their intention to pursue further studies declined. The intention to pursue further studies among the younger ECE workforce is the highest with about 66% of the participants between 20 to 35 years of age.

Intention to pursue further studies by qualification

The cross-tabulation results of the relationship between teachers' professional qualification and their intention to pursue further studies increased from those having no qualification and peaks at the diploma level, as shown in Figure 4. Respondents with qualification higher than diploma level showed a declined interest to pursue further studies. This result confirms our earlier findings that the ECE workforce is keen to pursue further studies if given the opportunity. This will be discussed further in the discussion section of this paper.

Years of working experience and intention to pursue further studies

The cross-tabulation results in Figure 5 shows the interaction between the number of years of working experience of the private sector ECE workforce and their intention to pursue further studies. The cross-tabulation results show that respondents' intention to pursue further studies generally increase in the first two years of teaching after which their intention to pursue further studies generally declined. It appears that educators are most receptive to further studies in the first two to three years of their working life.

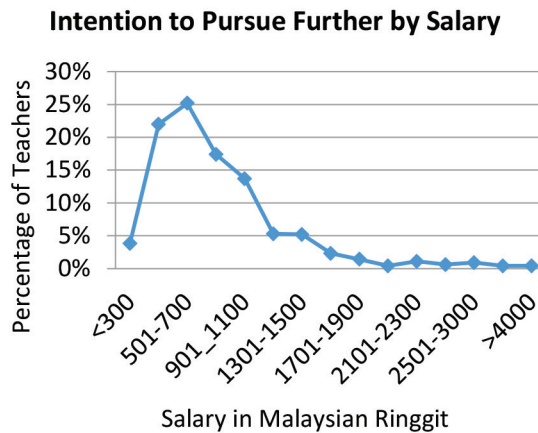


Figure 2: Cross-tabulation of salary by intention to pursue further studies.

Intention to Pursue Further Studies by Age

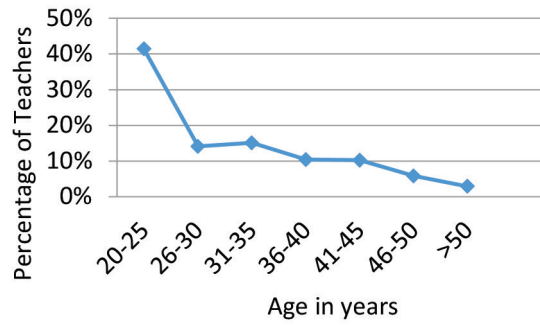


Figure 3: Cross-tabulation of intention to pursue further studies by age.

Qualification and Intention to Pursue Further Studies

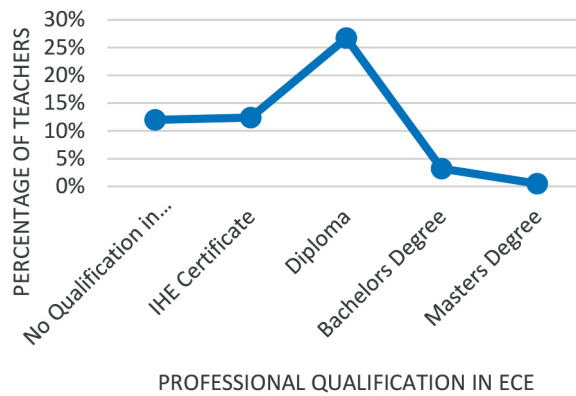


Figure 4: Teachers' qualification and their intention to pursue further studies.

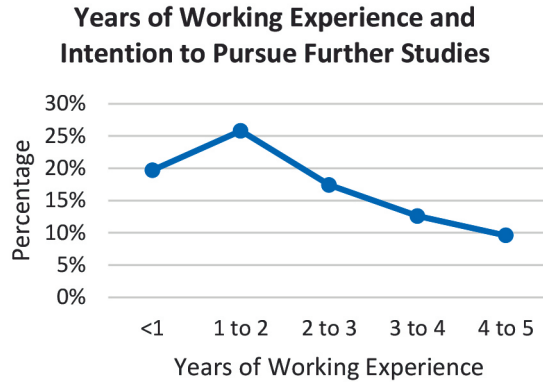


Figure 5: Years of working experience and intention to pursue further studies.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The Private Sector ECCE Workforce: The General Picture

This paper discusses the Malaysian private sector early childhood workforce and their readiness for further education. Early childhood education in Malaysia has seen rapid expansion in recent years. Concerns have been expressed about the quality of early childhood centres and in particular the quality of the workforce involved in early childhood education in the private sector. Given the importance of early childhood education for a child's overall development, the care of our children in the early years must be in the hands of qualified and trained personnel. Our analysis of data shows that a substantial proportion of the private sector early childhood workforce are relatively young, inexperienced, and do not possess professional qualification in early childhood education. The average pay of this group of the workforce is about RM565 which is substantially below the Malaysian government's minimum wage of RM1,000, according to the Minimum Wages Order 2016 (Federal Government Gazette, 2016). A better pay scale should be recommended for childcare providers and preschool teachers in the country in accordance with to the minimum wage policy. Increase in remuneration, improved work conditions in working hours, fringe benefits and better prospects for future career advancement are critical for more sustainable workforce development and to provide an elevated image of the profession. Attention to these aspects will allow for the recruitment and retention of better qualified ECCE workforce. In some countries, the increase in early child care and education costs are shared by governments and parents, rather than by the childcare providers or teachers

(Productivity Commission, 2011). This has been a contributing factor to the low remuneration offered to private ECCE workforce in Malaysia.

The gender

The early childhood workforce in Malaysia is overwhelmingly female, a situation which is similar to those found in many other countries. In Malaysia about 99% of the early childhood workforce is female. This sector of employment does not seem to attract males for a variety of reasons. The low status of early child educators, the unattractive salary offered to teachers, long working hours are some of the possible reasons for low male participation in this sector of employment.

Staff turnover

There also appears to be a high turnover of staff in the early childhood workforce. This conclusion was based on the fact that about 65% of the workforce had an average of two years of work experience. Early childhood education began in Malaysia over 40 years ago. Thus having a workforce with such low years of working experience suggests a high staff turnover. Many in the early childhood workforce do not stay long in the workforce as the remuneration is quite unattractive. When a better paying job becomes available they leave the workforce and new personnel have to be recruited. As we had argued earlier this situation can only be arrested if better working conditions and pay is provided to the private sector ECCE workforce.

Awareness of training needs

There is an awareness among the early childhood workforce of the importance of having a higher professional qualification in ECCE. But awareness alone is insufficient. More should be done to attract this group of teachers to upgrade. Better pay incentives must be in place to motivate teachers to upgrade. Training and education courses must be accessible and affordable with generous funding to support training. Scholarships and interest free or low interest student loans must be made available to this sector of the workforce. Funded access will also encourage more mature practitioners to pursue higher qualifications.

To encourage the ECCE workforce to further their studies to a minimum of diploma level, there is an urgent need to provide increased access to professional development through multiple pathways such as online education, part-time courses and blended learning. To create a more professional private sector ECCE workforce and to achieve the required academic qualification that is nationally recognised, this increased access to professional development should be made

available so that the ECCE workforce can be upgraded by the year 2020 (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). Training through nationally accredited institutions, as well as a pathway for accreditation through prior learning experiences must go hand-in-hand so that the varied needs of pre-service and in-service teachers can be met.

Private Sector Early Childhood Workforce Readiness for Further Training

Given the scenario presented in the preceding section, would the current private sector ECE workforce be ready to pursue further studies if given the opportunity to do so? What inhibitions or barriers are there if any, to for teachers in the private sector from pursuing further training? These questions were explored through cross-tabulation analysis of selected variables considered in the study.

Salary and readiness

The cross tabulation interaction between salary and readiness for further studies show that readiness for further studies was highest among respondents earning between RM501 and RM700. This result is encouraging as the respondents in the lower salary bracket are interested in pursuing further studies. Neuman, Josephson and Chua (2015) stated that remuneration can be a good attraction of the ECCE profession and may affect teachers' motivation and job satisfaction. The motivation would be with a better qualification they would be able to move into a higher salary bracket. Teachers without the necessary professional qualification in ECCE should be encouraged to pursue further studies through incentives and encouragement from the ECCE operators. A scheme that would entice teachers to pursue further studies while still in-service should be worked out to encourage teachers to upgrade.

Family size and readiness

This study shows that as the number of children in the family increased, the intention of the respondents to pursue further studies declined. As shown in Figure 6, the intention to pursue further studies was highest among those who had no children. It was noted earlier that the majority of the workforce is female and about 49% of them were single. The results show that once they settle down into family life and have children it negatively impacts their intention to pursue further studies. The responsibility of taking care of family and children after work is no easy task for any parent. Hence any future plans for upgrading of qualifications of the private sector ECE workforce will need to consider the heavy commitments of those who are married and have children. They will be required to divide their time between

work and family. ECE personnel in such situations may prefer a more flexible mode of study through part-time studies, distance learning or a combination of both to help them meet the minimum diploma qualification requirement.

The challenge to policy makers is to entice this sector of the workforce – those who have children, to upskill. We believe that if multiple pathways to obtain professional training are made available, then a sizeable number of teachers would avail themselves of the opportunity to upskill.

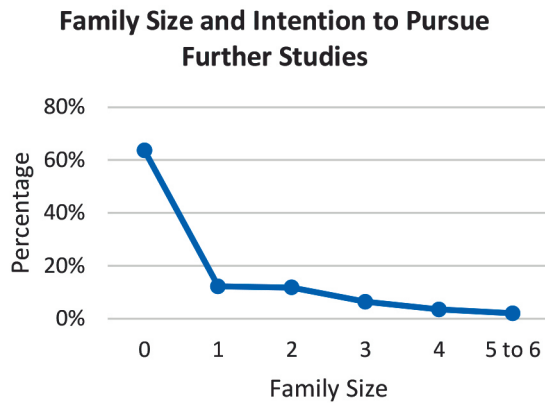


Figure 6: Cross-tabulation of intention to pursue further studies by number of children in the family.

Age and readiness

It has been noted earlier that the intention to pursue further studies was highest among the younger ECE workforce. These findings are encouraging as about 66% of the respondents were between 20 to 35 years of age. The younger teachers in the private sector ECCE workforce should be encouraged to pursue further studies through the various schemes as we have discussed earlier. To further support personnel in the ECCE profession to pursue their studies, incentives and interventions should be provided in a holistic manner. This could be in terms of incentives for further studies, such as availability of loans, scholarships and funds. Other forms of support include employers granting time off from work to attend classes, and provision of study or examinations leave. As more personnel pursue higher education to increase their professional competence, it will result in improvements in the quality of professional services provided to our children.

As the workforce are relatively young and inexperienced, formal or informal mentoring programmes can also be considered in guiding and refining professional practices. This is important for early childhood teachers in the first

two years of their career (Waniganayake et al., 2008: 256). Mentoring, supported by ongoing guided reflection was found to be highly successful in challenging and extending the pedagogical practices of early childhood staff (Nolan, Raban and Waniganayake, 2005). Ongoing professional development is also important for maintaining a skilled and capable workforce. Access to support programmes encourages the sharing of knowledge, and can promote staff retention.

Qualifications and readiness

The interactions between qualifications and intention to pursue further studies show an increase in respondents' intention to pursue further studies among those having no qualification, certificate and diploma. The respondents' intention to pursue further studies peaked at the diploma level and thereafter, the intention to pursue further studies declined. With the recent announcement by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2016) for all preschool teachers to obtain a minimal qualification of Diploma by 2020, we believe that the respondents' awareness of the intention of the Ministry of Education to impose a minimum qualification level on ECCE teachers and the readiness of teachers who do not have a diploma to obtain one are positive indicators and augers well for the future of private sector ECCE in Malaysia.

Working experience and readiness

The results show that the respondents' intention to pursue further studies generally increase in the first two years of teaching after which their intention to pursue further studies generally declined. It appears that educators are most receptive to further studies in the first two to three years of their working life.

Educators who are new to the ECE profession might sense their lack of professional knowledge and skills in the initial period of employment more acutely. Hence, their desire to pursue further training might be greater. As they acquire more skills and competencies in handling young children, their desire to pursue further studies declines. It was noted earlier that the majority of the workforce is female. It is likely that many of them would have settled down into family life and this would negatively impact their intention to pursue further studies. The challenge to policy makers is to entice this sector of the workforce, those who have worked between three to five years, to upskill.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study essentially confirm existing theoretical knowledge about the state of the ECCE workforce in Malaysia. The Malaysian private sector ECCE workforce is increasing steadily in size and complexity. This is in part due to demands of the development needs of the child, and the social, economic and political development needs of society. There is therefore an urgent need to attend to the professionalism of the ECCE workforce. As Evans (2010) suggests, the ECCE workforce should comprise professional childcare providers and professional preschool teachers. It is imperative that we not only look at the behavioural change of the workforce but also at attitudinal change and enhanced intellectual capacity which are even more critical to increased levels of professionalism.

However, we need to be mindful of the fact that with the eagerness to bring about changes to the qualification of the workforce, we need to recognise that the wish to change must come from the teachers themselves and the circumstances in which they have been working. As (McIntyre and Hagger, 1992) have suggested, it is the teachers who should develop themselves and it is not the task of other people to develop them. The notion of development should take from what is there as a valuable starting point, a useful platform on which to build, and not as something to be replaced. For instance, when working with the in-service teachers, recognise their valuable existing expertise. Whatever is new will be added and integrated with what is already there, and will indeed grow from what is there. Hence, the will or motivation to embrace policy changes must work hand-in-hand with the will of the teachers to grow from where they are to where they want to be in the future, collectively. The essence of improving access and quality ECCE is developing competent, well-trained, and well-supported teachers, hence the well-being of the workforce should be recognised to be as important as the transformation agenda (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014; Neuman, Josephson and Chua, 2015).

Finally, in advancing the education level of the ECCE workforce, as well as the professionalisation agenda, the workforce need to realise that the ability of a profession to understand and adapt to change is an indication of its viability, and its role in leading positive change is an indication of its strength. It should be able to demonstrate proactive practice and concomitantly communicate competence and value of their practice. In doing so, motivation and pride for the profession would be fostered (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 1992). For example, Lyons (2012) examined the concept and practice of "professionalization" of children's services in Australia, and found that gender, skills and regulation played an important role. As long as the society does not recognise the expertise, there will be real challenges to reaching professional status even if the workforce had the relevant credentials. It was suggested that a revamp in the positions, tasks and responsibilities at the ECCE centres would be a necessity. In addition, the

positions of the untrained and unqualified from centre-based employment require serious attention. In other words, the scope of the workforce must be re-defined and the role of the early childhood professional must be conceptualised as multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary. Conceptualising the profession in this way creates important and appropriate professional roles for highly qualified and experienced practitioners (Evans, 2008; Miller and Cable, 2011).

Thus, the private sector ECCE workforce are like eggs in a carton, settled in a somewhat illusory comfort zone, with the lowly notion that they are only childcare providers or preschool teachers. This is a detrimental pedagogical notion, for as it fossilises, these teachers begin to lose interest in pursuing further qualifications. Furthermore, existing conditions and incentives drive the wedge deeper into their complacent attitudes. However, when the "shove" of discomfort from within the carton results in the "push", professional transformation becomes imperative as we are witnessing in the Malaysian private sector workforce at present.

Hence, the motivation to embrace changes must work hand-in-hand with the will of the teachers to grow from where they are to where they want to be in the future, collectively. Individual willingness and concerted efforts from all agencies, supported by strong public and private partnership in the spirit of 1 Malaysia, to ensure that the workforce can upgrade themselves professionally within the stipulated timeframe in line with the Malaysian government's aspiration to becoming a developed nation by 2020 is an imperative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by SEGi University research grant: SEGi/2011/SS/03/1.

REFERENCES

- Bowman, B., M. Donovan and M Burns. 2001. *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Bridges, M. 2011. California early learning quality improvement system. In *Head start state collaboration office, Vol. 1(1)*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.
- Chiam, H. K. 2008. Child care in Malaysia: Then and now. *International Journal of Child and Education Policy*, 2: 31–41.
- Council of Australian Governments. 2009. *Investing in the early years—A national early childhood development strategy*. Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). 2007. *Early childhood care and education policy implementation review*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.

- Dahlberg, G., P. Moss and A. Pence. 1999. *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer Press.
- Evans, L. 2010. New theoretical perspectives on job satisfaction and motivation: Challenging Herzberg and linking with professional development. Paper presented at the Symposium of the European Conference on educational research, University of Helsinki at the Symposium of job satisfaction and motivation amongst European education professionals: Developing theory and theoretical perspectives, University of Helsinki. 26th August.
- _____. 2008. Professionalism, professionalism and the development of education professionals. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 56(1): 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2007.00392.x>
- Federal Government Gazette. 2016. Minimum wages order 2016 (P.U. (A) 116). http://sta.org.my/images/staweb/New_Archived/2016/PerintahGajiMinimum2016.pdf
- Foong, L., P. K. Veloo and M. Dhamotharan. 2014. *Early child care and education in Malaysia: Towards professionalisation*. Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Halfon, S. and R. Langford. 2015. Developing and supporting a high quality child care workforce in Canada: What are the barriers to change? *Our Schools/Our Selves* Summer: 131–144. Retrieved from https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Workforce.pdf
- Heckman, J. J. 2006. Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science* 312 (June 30): 1900–1902.
- Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. 1992. *The early childhood care and education workforce: Challenges and opportunities: A workshop report*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press.
- Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat. 2016. Kursus asuhan permata. <http://www.jkm.gov.my/jkm/index.php?r=portal/left&id=UUNhTjJCQnIYjBrUHIBU0tuSFVCdz09>
- Jayaram, S. V. 2016. Malaysian government's initiatives to increase women in workforce makes headway. *HR in Asia*. 22 July. <http://www.hrinasia.com/general/malaysian-governments-initiatives-to-increase-women-in-workforce-makes-headway/>
- Kontos, S. and A. Wilcox-Herzog. 2003. Effective preparation for early childhood education: What does North American research tell us? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 11(1): 79–92.
- Kilburn, M. R. and L. A. Karoly. 2008. *The economics of early childhood policy: What the dismal Science has to say about investing in children*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp.
- Lyons, M. 2012. The professionalization of children's services in Australia. *Journal of Sociology* 48(2): 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783311407945>
- McIntyre, D. and H. Hagger. 1992. Professional development through the Oxford internship model. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 40(3): 264–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.1992.9973930>
- Miller, C. and L. Cable. 2011. *Professionalization, leadership and management in the early years*. London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446288795>

- Ministry of Education Malaysia. 2016. *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, Annual Report 2016*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- _____. 2015. *Malaysia education blueprint: Annual report 2014*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia. http://www.padu.edu.my/files/annual_report/2014-pdf/PADU-ENG-LoRes-Full.pdf
- _____. 2012. *Malaysia education blueprint 2013–2025*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Montie, J. E., Z. Xiang, L. J. Schweinhar. 2006. Preschool experience in 10 countries: Cognitive and language performance at age 7. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21: 313–331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.07.007>
- Myers, R. G. 2006. Quality in program of early childhood care and education (ECCE). Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001474/147473e.pdf>
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. 2007. The Science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do. http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Science_Early_Childhood_Development.pdf
- Ng, S. B. 2010. Governance of education related ecce policies in Malaysia. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 4(1): 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/2288-6729-4-1-45>
- Neuman, M. J., K. Josephson and P. K. Chua. 2015. *Early childhood care and education personnel in low- and middle-income countries*. France: UNESCO.
- Nolan, A., B. Raban and M. Waniganayake. 2005. Evaluating a strategic approach to professional development through guided reflection. *Reflective Practice* 6(2): 221–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940500106070>
- Nutbrown, C. 2012. Foundations for quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications. Final report. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2012. *Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. Paris, France: OECD.
- Productivity Commission. 2011. Early childhood development workforce: Productivity commission research report. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/education-workforce-early-childhood/report/early-childhood-report.pdf>
- Profeta, M. 2012. *Promoting holistic learning and development in early years: An analysis of quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) from the Asia-Pacific region*. Singapore: Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood.
- Rao, N. and J. Sun. 2010. *Early childhood care and education in the Asia pacific region: Moving towards goal 1*. Hong Kong: UNESCO.
- Rao, N., J. Sun, V. Pearson, E. Pearson, H. Liu, M. A. Conostas and P. L. Eagle. 2012. Is something better than nothing? An evaluation of early childhood programs in Cambodia. *Child Development* 83(3): 864–876. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01746.x>

- Rao, N., J. Sun, J. M. S. Wong, B. Weekes, P. Ip, S. Shaeffer, M. Young, M. Bray and E. C. D. Lee. 2014. *Early childhood development and cognitive development in developing countries: A rigorous literature review*. London: Department for International Development.
- Rushton, S., A. J. Rushton and E. Larkin. 2010. Neuroscience, play, and early childhood education: Connections, implications and assessments. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 37: 351–361. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-009-0359-3>
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. and L. Manni. 2007. *Effective leadership in the early years sector: The ELEYS study*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Sylva, K., E. Melhuish, P. Sammons, I. Siraj-Blatchford and B. Taggart. 2004. The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project: Final report: A longitudinal study funded by the DfES 1997–2004. London. <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf> (accessed 17 May 2014).
- UNESCO. 2015. Education 2030: *Incheon declaration and framework for action for the implementation of sustainable development goal 4*. Incheon, Republic of Korea: UNESCO.
- United Nations Children's Funds and Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department. 2013. *Implementation of children's rights with equity*. Petaling Jaya: United Nations Children's Fund, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department.
- UNICEF. 2006. Early childhood care and education. UNESCO Bangkok, UNICEF EAPRO and UNICEF ROSA.
- United States Departments of Health and Human Services and United States Department of Education. 2016. High quality early learning settings depend on a high-quality workforce: Low compensation undermines quality. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/files/ece-low-compensation-undermines-quality-report-2016.pdf>
- Waniganayake, M., L. Harrison, S. Cheeseman, C. Burgess, K. de Gioia and F. Press. 2008. Practice potentials: Impact of participation in professional development and support on quality outcomes children in childcare centres. Report prepared for the Professional Support Coordinators Alliance. <http://www.cscentral.org.au/Resources/PDResearchReportMac08.pdf> (accessed 17 May 2014).
- Whitebook, M. and A. Eichberg. 2002. *Finding a better way: Defining and assessing public policies to improve child care workforce compensation*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.
- Whitebook, M., D. Phillips and C. Howes. 2014. *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
- _____. 1998. *Worthy work, unliveable wages: The National Child Care Staffing Study, 1988–1997*. Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce.