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Predictors of Special Education Career Interest among Early Childhood Educators in Selangor's Private Sector

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ABSTRACT

The increasing implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia has intensified the demand for qualified special education (SPED) educators, particularly within the private early childhood education (ECE) sector. However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the factors influencing early childhood educators' interest in pursuing SPED careers. Guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this study examined the influence of self-efficacy, environmental barriers, and environmental support on educators' interest in special education careers. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed involving early childhood educators from selected private childcare centres and preschools in Selangor, Malaysia. A total of 33 questionnaires were collected. Following data screening and cleaning, 16 valid responses were retained for statistical analysis. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. The findings revealed that self-efficacy was the only significant predictor of educators' interest in pursuing SPED careers. Environmental barriers demonstrated a significant negative relationship with career interest in the correlation analysis but were not significant predictors in the regression model. Environmental support also did not significantly predict career interest after controlling for the other variables. This study contributes empirical evidence to the limited literature on career interest in special education within Malaysia's private early childhood education sector. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening educators' self-efficacy through professional development and targeted training initiatives to encourage greater participation in the special education workforce, thereby supporting Malaysia's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central priority in educational reform worldwide, reflecting a growing commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their physical, cognitive, social, or developmental characteristics. This commitment is reinforced by

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Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all [17,18]. Achieving this goal requires education systems to develop a competent workforce capable of supporting learners with diverse educational needs, particularly during the early childhood years when timely intervention is critical.

In Malaysia, the commitment to inclusive education is reflected in several national policy initiatives, including the Education Act 1996, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, and the Special Education Action Plan 2016–2025 [12,13]. These initiatives aim to expand access to inclusive learning environments while strengthening teacher preparedness and professional competency in special education. Despite these policy efforts, significant implementation challenges remain, particularly within the private early childhood education (ECE) sector.

The private ECE sector plays an increasingly important role in providing educational services, especially in highly urbanised states such as Selangor, where private childcare centres and preschools enrol large numbers of young children with diverse developmental and learning needs. Compared with public institutions, however, many private providers continue to experience constraints related to funding, professional development opportunities, institutional support, and workforce capacity [15]. These limitations may reduce educators' confidence and willingness to pursue careers in special education, thereby affecting the availability of qualified personnel to support inclusive practices.

Teacher shortages in special education remain a persistent concern both internationally and in Malaysia, driven in part by ongoing challenges with attrition and retention in the profession [4]. Previous studies have reported that many educators feel inadequately prepared to teach children with disabilities or manage inclusive classrooms effectively [1]. Within the private sector, additional concerns regarding workload, remuneration, career progression, and organisational support may further discourage educators from considering careers in special education [14]. Although inclusive education has been widely examined in Malaysia, existing research has predominantly focused on public primary and secondary schools. Comparatively little empirical attention has been given to educators working in private ECE settings, particularly regarding the factors that influence their interest in pursuing careers in special education.

This lack of empirical evidence represents an important research gap. Most previous studies have concentrated on pedagogical practices, teacher competencies, and learner outcomes, while relatively few have explored the career-related factors that shape educators' interest in entering the special education profession. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective workforce planning strategies, improving teacher preparation programmes, and strengthening institutional support for inclusive education within the private ECE sector.

To address this gap, the present study examines the factors influencing early childhood educators' interest in pursuing special education careers within private educational institutions in Selangor, Malaysia. Guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) [10], the study investigates the influence of self-efficacy, environmental barriers, environmental support, and outcome expectations on educators' career interest in special education. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education workforce development while providing practical recommendations for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and private education providers seeking to strengthen Malaysia's special education workforce.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Education in Malaysia

Inclusive education refers to the educational practice of integrating learners with disabilities and special educational needs into mainstream learning environments while ensuring equitable access to meaningful educational opportunities [5,17].

In Malaysia, inclusive education has gradually evolved from traditional segregated special education approaches toward more integrated and learner-centred educational practices. National educational policies, including the Malaysia. Education Blueprint 2013–2025, emphasise educational equity and improved support mechanisms for children with special educational needs (Ministry of Education Malaysia [12].

Despite these policy commitments, implementation remains inconsistent across educational settings. Public educational institutions generally benefit from stronger institutional support systems, structured teacher training, and more comprehensive resource allocation. In contrast, private early childhood education (ECE) institutions often experience disparities in access to professional development, financial support, and inclusive education infrastructure [15]. As inclusive education continues to expand within Malaysia, the readiness and willingness of educators to engage in special education practices have become increasingly important factors in achieving national educational goals.

2.2 Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

According to SCCT, individuals are more likely to develop interest in a particular career path when they perceive themselves as capable of performing relevant tasks, anticipate favourable outcomes, and experience supportive environmental conditions. This central construct of self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments, underpins much of SCCT's explanatory power [3]. Within the context of special education careers, educators' confidence in supporting children with disabilities, perceptions of institutional support, and expectations regarding remuneration and professional advancement may significantly shape career interest and career-related decisions, consistent with SCCT's account of how contextual supports and barriers interact with self-efficacy in shaping career choice [9]. Recent educational research has continued to apply SCCT in examining teacher motivation, career intentions, and professional decision-making, demonstrating its continued relevance across educational contexts [2], including recent theoretical work reaffirming SCCT's applicability to career development in a rapidly changing occupational landscape [19]. SCCT therefore provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining educators' motivations to pursue careers in special education within Malaysia's private ECE sector.

2.3 Research Gap

Although inclusive education has received increasing scholarly attention in Malaysia, empirical research focusing specifically on private-sector early childhood educators' interest in special education careers remains limited. Existing studies predominantly examine public educational settings and prioritise student outcomes and instructional approaches rather than educators' professional motivations and career development processes. Furthermore, limited research has examined the combined influence of self-efficacy, environmental barriers, environmental support, and outcome expectations within a unified theoretical framework.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how these factors collectively influence educators' interest in pursuing special education careers within private ECE institutions in Selangor, Malaysia. By applying Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of workforce development within inclusive early childhood education and offers practical implications for educational policy and institutional practice. Unlike previous Malaysian studies that primarily examined inclusive teaching practices, the present study focuses on educators' career interest using SCCT within the private ECE sector.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the factors influencing early childhood educators' interest in pursuing careers in special education (SPED) within Malaysia's private early childhood education (ECE) sector. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic measurement of relationships among variables and facilitates statistical analysis of the proposed research framework [6]. The study was guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which explains how career interests are influenced by interactions among self-efficacy, environmental conditions, and outcome expectations [10].

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

The study was conducted among educators employed in selected private childcare centres and preschools located in urban and suburban areas of Selangor, Malaysia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) currently employed as an early childhood educator in a private ECE institution, and (b) directly involved in teaching or caring for children.

A total of 33 questionnaires were collected, which is considered acceptable for exploratory research involving small and specific populations [8]. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for completeness and suitability. Questionnaires containing substantial missing responses for the variables under investigation were excluded from the final analysis. Consequently, 16 valid responses were retained and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27.

3.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire comprising five sections. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire measured the following constructs: 1) Self-efficacy, 2) Environmental barriers, 3) Environmental support, 4) Outcome expectations, 5) Career interest in special education.

The questionnaire items were developed based on the constructs of Social Cognitive Career Theory and adapted from relevant literature on career interest, teacher motivation, and inclusive education.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of responses. Cronbach's

alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of each construct. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables, while multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which self-efficacy, environmental barriers, environmental support, and outcome expectations explained educators' interest in pursuing careers in special education [7]. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 level.

4. Results

4.1 Respondents' Educational Background

Table 4.1 presents the educational background of the respondents. Among the 16 valid respondents, the majority possessed a Diploma qualification (62.5%, $n = 10$), followed by a Master's degree (31.3%, $n = 5$). Only one respondent (6.3%) held a Doctorate (PhD). These findings indicate that the sample primarily consisted of diploma-qualified early childhood educators.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As shown in Table 4.2, the self-efficacy construct demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.901$). Environmental barriers showed good internal consistency ($\alpha \approx 0.85\text{--}0.90$), while the environmental support construct achieved acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.742$) after one item was removed to improve scale reliability. Overall, the reliability results indicate that the measurement instrument was sufficiently reliable for subsequent statistical analyses.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables (Table 4.4). The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between self-efficacy and career interest ($r = 0.903$, $p < .01$), indicating that educators with higher confidence in their ability to work with children with special educational needs were more likely to express interest in pursuing careers in special education. Environmental barriers demonstrated a significant negative relationship with career interest ($r = -0.646$, $p < .01$), suggesting that perceived barriers may reduce educators' interest in special education careers. In contrast, environmental support showed a weak and non-significant relationship with career interest ($r = 0.010$), indicating that perceived institutional support alone was not significantly associated with educators' career interest within this sample.

4.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which self-efficacy, environmental barriers, and environmental support predicted educators' career interest in special education. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 12) = 25.711$, $p < .001$, explaining 86.5% of the variance in career interest ($R^2 = 0.865$). Among the three predictor variables, self-efficacy emerged as the only statistically significant predictor of career interest ($\beta = 1.006$, $t = 6.299$, $p < .001$). Neither environmental barriers ($\beta = 0.063$, $p = .694$) nor environmental support ($\beta = -0.243$, $p = .058$) significantly predicted career interest after controlling for the other variables. These findings suggest that educators' confidence in their own knowledge and capability plays a more influential

role in shaping career interest in special education than perceived institutional support or environmental barriers.

5. Discussion

This study examined the factors influencing early childhood educators' interest in pursuing careers in special education (SPED) within Malaysia's private early childhood education (ECE) sector using the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) framework. The findings indicate that self-efficacy was the strongest and only significant predictor of educators' career interest after controlling environmental barriers and environmental support. Although environmental barriers demonstrated a significant negative relationship with career interest in the correlation analysis, their predictive effect was no longer significant in the regression model. Similarly, environmental support did not significantly predict career interest after accounting for the influence of self-efficacy.

The significant influence of self-efficacy is consistent with the propositions of Social Cognitive Career Theory [10], which suggests that individuals are more likely to develop interest in a career when they believe they possess the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to perform successfully. In the context of early childhood education, educators who perceive themselves as capable of teaching children with special educational needs are more likely to consider special education as a viable and rewarding career pathway. This finding also supports previous studies that identified teacher confidence as a critical determinant of willingness to implement inclusive education and engage in special education practices [1,16,20,21], and is consistent with meta-analytic evidence linking teachers' self-efficacy to more positive attitudes toward inclusive education more broadly [22].

Similarly, environmental support demonstrated a weak and non-significant relationship with career interest in the regression analysis. While institutional support, professional development opportunities, and administrative encouragement are recognised as important components of successful inclusive education, the present findings suggest that these external factors alone may not be sufficient to influence educators' career decisions. Instead, external support may strengthen career interest only when educators already possess adequate confidence and competence. This finding should be interpreted cautiously due to the relatively small sample size and may warrant further investigation using a larger and more diverse sample.

The findings have important practical implications for workforce development within Malaysia's private ECE sector. Rather than focusing solely on improving institutional policies or financial incentives, stakeholders should prioritise initiatives that strengthen educators' self-efficacy. Structured professional development programmes, mentoring by experienced special education practitioners, supervised teaching experiences, and continuous competency-based training may enhance educators' confidence and increase their willingness to pursue careers in special education. These initiatives would also support Malaysia's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 by strengthening the capacity of educators to deliver inclusive and equitable quality education.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although 33 questionnaires were collected, only 16 valid responses were retained following data screening, resulting in a relatively small sample size that may limit the generalisability of the findings. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design, preventing conclusions regarding causal relationships between the variables. Third, the study focused exclusively on private early childhood education institutions in Selangor, and therefore the findings may not be representative of educators working in public schools or in other Malaysian states. Future research should employ larger samples, include educators from different educational settings, and consider longitudinal designs to examine changes in career interest over time.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for policy, practice, and future research concerning inclusive education and workforce development in Malaysia's private early childhood education (ECE) sector.

6.1 Practical Implications

The findings indicate that self-efficacy is the most influential factor associated with educators' interest in pursuing careers in special education. This suggests that professional development initiatives should prioritise building educators' confidence and competence through specialised training, mentoring programmes, practical teaching experiences, and continuous professional learning. Strengthening self-efficacy may encourage more educators to consider careers in special education and improve the implementation of inclusive education practices within private ECE institutions.

6.2 Policy Implications

The findings provide valuable evidence for policymakers and educational authorities in designing strategies to strengthen Malaysia's special education workforce. Government agencies, teacher education institutions, and private education providers should collaborate to enhance access to specialised training, establish structured career pathways, and promote professional certification in special education. Such initiatives would support the implementation of inclusive education policies and contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the application of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) within the Malaysian private ECE context. The findings reinforce the importance of self-efficacy as a key determinant of career interest, while demonstrating that environmental factors may have a less direct influence once educators' confidence is considered. These findings extend the empirical application of SCCT to career decision-making among early childhood educators working in private educational institutions, adding to the broader body of evidence on the empirical status of SCCT's interest, choice, and performance models 25 years after the theory's introduction [11].

6.4 Research Implications

Given the relatively small number of valid responses included in the final analysis, future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples across different Malaysian states and educational settings. Future research may also adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to gain a deeper understanding of how educators' career interests develop over time and to explore additional factors that may influence career decisions in special education.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing early childhood educators' interest in pursuing careers in special education (SPED) within Malaysia's private early childhood education (ECE) sector using the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as the guiding framework. The findings indicate that self-efficacy plays a central role in shaping educators' interest in special education careers, while environmental barriers and environmental support were not significant predictors after controlling for the other variables. These findings suggest that educators' confidence in their knowledge, skills, and ability to work with children with special educational needs is a key factor influencing career interest.

The study contributes to the limited body of empirical research on special education career interest within Malaysia's private ECE sector by extending the application of SCCT to this educational context. The findings provide evidence that strengthening educators' self-efficacy through targeted professional development, practical training, mentoring, and continuous learning opportunities may be more effective than relying solely on organisational support or policy initiatives to encourage participation in special education careers.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, teacher education institutions, and private education providers in designing professional development programmes that enhance educators' competence and confidence in inclusive education. Strengthening educator capacity is expected to support workforce development and contribute to Malaysia's ongoing commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study analysed a relatively small number of valid responses from educators working in selected private ECE institutions in Selangor, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should include larger and more geographically diverse samples, incorporate educators from both public and private educational settings, and employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing career interest in special education.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of developing educators' self-efficacy as a foundation for strengthening the special education workforce. Enhancing educators' confidence and professional competence may encourage greater participation in special education careers and support the successful implementation of inclusive education in Malaysia.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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