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Declining Recruitment and Teacher Retention in Malaysian Early Childhood Education: A Qualitative Analysis of Contributing Factors and Psychological Support Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Teacher shortages in Early Childhood Education (ECE) have become an escalating concern in Malaysia, particularly within the private kindergarten sector. Despite the importance of ECE in shaping national human capital, the profession continues to experience declining recruitment, high attrition, and weak professional identity. This study explores the lived experiences of ECE educators to understand the systemic, emotional, and motivational factors influencing workforce decline. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), semi structured interviews were conducted with seven ECE educators in Kuala Lumpur. Thematic analysis identified five dominant challenges: low financial rewards, excessive workload, minimal career advancement, emotional burnout, and limited societal recognition. Intrinsic motivation especially passion for young children remained a strong sustaining factor, yet insufficient to counter structural constraints. Findings indicate that a sustainable ECE workforce requires competitive compensation, mental health support, structured career pathways, and professionalisation of the sector. This article contributes to workforce research by integrating psychological, motivational, and systemic insights to inform strategies for retaining educators in Malaysia's ECE sector.

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is globally recognised as a foundational stage in a child's development and a critical investment in national human capital [35]. In Malaysia, ECE is positioned as an essential component in preparing children for primary schooling and lifelong learning [13]. However, the sector faces persistent and severe teacher shortages, particularly in private kindergartens. The declining number of qualified educators has raised concerns about learning quality, child development outcomes, and the sustainability of ECE institutions [25]. In fact, teacher

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shortages in ECE are not unique to Malaysia. International studies highlight a global crisis marked by declining enrolment in teacher preparation programmes, ageing workforces, and shifting career perceptions [4,8]. Yet, Malaysia's case is distinct due to its rapidly expanding private ECE sector and structural inequities between government and private preschool systems [24]. Despite national initiatives to increase teacher recruitment, underlying issues remain unresolved. Several factors contribute to the decline in ECE workforce participation. Low salaries, heavy workload, limited professional mobility, and weak professional identity are frequently cited as barriers [16,29]. Moreover, the societal perception of ECE teachers as "babysitters" rather than professionals diminishes interest in the field. Emotional burnout, stress, and inadequate mental health support further exacerbate turnover intentions [31].

While existing literature often focuses on structural issues, there is limited qualitative research capturing the lived experiences of teachers themselves. Understanding such experiences is crucial for designing sustainable career pathways that address both psychological and professional needs. This study, therefore, aims to explore:

- a. What factors contribute to declining recruitment in Malaysia's ECE sector?
- b. What motivates ECE teachers to remain in the profession despite challenges?
- c. What psychological career pathway elements are necessary to support long-term retention?

By addressing above key questions, the study seeks to inform policy, institutional redesign, and professionalisation efforts within Malaysia's ECE landscape.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to thoroughly explore the lived experiences of Early Childhood Education (ECE) educators [26]. IPA is a qualitative methodology rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, which allows researchers to investigate the complex ways individuals perceive and make sense of their personal and professional realities [9,23]. This method was specifically chosen for its suitability in uncovering the emotional, psychological, and experiential dimensions associated with teacher shortages [37], offering a rich, in-depth understanding of the educators' perspectives.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Seven (7) ECE teachers employed in private kindergartens in Kuala Lumpur participated in the study. Participants were selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling [1,7]. Inclusion criteria required participants to have:

- a. At least one year of teaching experience.
- b. Direct involvement with children aged 4 to 6.

The sample represented a range of institutional types, including standalone kindergartens and franchise-based centres. All participants were female, reflecting the gendered nature of Malaysia's ECE workforce.

2.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes were conducted with participants both face-to-face and via online platforms to explore key themes of their professional experience. The questions specifically probed areas including professional motivation, workload and responsibilities, career expectations, emotional and psychological experiences, and perceptions of professional identity. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and then anonymised to ensure confidentiality, following ethical research practices [22].

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis rigorously followed Braun and Clarke's [6] six-step thematic approach, comprising familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and finally, report writing. The transcripts were coded inductively, which permitted the themes to emerge organically and be directly grounded in the participants' narratives. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility was strategically enhanced through the incorporation of member checking and subsequent peer debriefing throughout the analytical process.

3. Results

Thematic analysis revealed three (3) major themes and several sub-themes.

3.1 Theme 1: Systemic Barriers Weakening Workforce Recruitment

3.1.1 Low Salary and Limited Financial Stability

All study participants consistently identified low salaries as the principal barrier preventing individuals from entering and remaining in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) profession. Teachers reported their earnings were significantly below those of their counterparts in the retail or service sectors, despite carrying substantially heavier professional responsibilities for children's care and development. This stark finding underscores a fundamental economic disincentive. These local experiences powerfully align with broader international research which consistently demonstrates that inadequate compensation is a major and reliable predictor of high teacher turnover rates [8,15]. The lack of financial stability emerging from these low wages directly contributes to the chronic instability plaguing the ECE workforce.

3.1.2 Excessive Workload Beyond Teaching

Participants detailed an excessive workload that extended significantly beyond their primary teaching and curriculum responsibilities. This included a demanding array of non-teaching duties such as thorough classroom cleaning, extensive administrative paperwork, assisting with meal preparation, complex event coordination, and constant, time-consuming parental communication. Many teachers strongly articulated that these numerous additional responsibilities resulted in considerable physical exhaustion and a sharp decline in overall job satisfaction. This issue is not unique, as it mirrors findings from previous regional and global surveys reporting that ECE teachers are often compelled to serve multiple, non-pedagogical roles within severely under-resourced institutions [2], further stretching their capacity and contributing to burnout [34].

3.1.3 Weak Professional Status and Public Perception

A recurring sentiment among participants was the belief that ECE fundamentally lacked recognition as a legitimate and respected profession within the wider community. Several teachers expressed deep frustration and resentment at commonly being perceived and referred to merely as “babysitters” rather than skilled, professional educators responsible for foundational early learning. This pervasive weak professional status and negative public perception significantly undermine the career’s attractiveness and prestige. This erosion of professional standing strongly echoes established literature on professional identity erosion [30], confirming that societal undervaluation acts as a critical non-financial barrier to building a stable, high-quality ECE workforce [11].

3.2 Theme 2: Intrinsic Motivation Sustains Commitment Amid Challenges

3.2.1 Passion and Emotional Fulfilment

Despite the significant structural difficulties encountered, intrinsic motivation emerged clearly as the strongest factor sustaining Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in their careers. Educators overwhelmingly emphasized the profound emotional fulfilment they derived from their core responsibilities, including nurturing young children, witnessing tangible developmental progress, and forming deep, meaningful bonds with their students. This deep-seated passion acted as a vital counterbalance to the pressures of low pay and excessive workloads. These personal testimonies strongly align with prior psychological research, such as the work by Mayangsari et al. [19], which established a direct link between intrinsic motivation and long-term career persistence. This finding underscores that while systemic reforms are needed, the personal reward inherent in the work is a powerful, irreplaceable motivator [12].

3.2.2 Supportive Work Relationships

Several participating teachers highlighted that robust supportive work relationships significantly and positively influenced their motivation and career longevity. Specific examples included the encouragement they received from empathetic colleagues and the presence of supportive, understanding leadership. A positive and collaborative school environment was credited with providing essential emotional stability and actively helping to reduce burnout symptoms. This experience supports established organizational psychology principles [18], particularly supports the findings by Boyd et al. [5], which demonstrated that cohesive and supportive work environments act as a crucial buffer against the high stress and emotional demands of the teaching profession, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging and commitment.

3.2.3 Desire for Professional Growth

Participants expressed a strong and active desire for professional development opportunities, which they highly valued as a pathway to enhancing their competence and career satisfaction. Areas of particular interest included specialized training in special needs education, advanced emotional support techniques, and effective classroom management strategies. However, access to these crucial opportunities was reported to be inconsistent, varying widely across different ECE centres. Research consistently validates this desire, showing that continuous and relevant professional development directly correlates with increased teacher competence, improved instructional quality,

and higher levels of job satisfaction [13]. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality training is therefore a key element in sustaining and professionalizing the ECE workforce.

3.3 Theme 3: Absence of Career Pathways Weakens Retention

3.3.1 Stagnant Progression

A significant structural barrier reported by teachers was the stagnant progression and limited scope for career advancement within the ECE sector. Teachers noted that opportunities were often narrowly restricted to moving into a senior teacher position or a low-level administrative role. This pronounced lack of a clear, structured career ladder was highly demotivating and directly contributed to increased intentions to leave the profession [28]. This experience aligns precisely with Vroom's Expectancy Theory [36], which posits that motivation is severely reduced when the link between effort (performance) and desirable outcomes (rewards or promotion) is unclear or absent [27]. Without visible pathways for professional growth as past experiences [14], the ECE workforce will continue to suffer from high turnover.

3.3.2 Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout

Participants consistently described experiencing intense mental fatigue, chronic stress, and emotional overload, indicating high levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout. A critical deficit identified was the almost complete lack of access to formal counselling services or dedicated mental health leave provisions within their workplaces. The teachers were left to manage the significant psychological toll of their demanding roles largely unsupported. This finding has critical implications for workforce stability, as various studies, including research by Ryan et al. [31] and Menon et al. [20], have definitively shown that emotional burnout is a powerful and reliable predictor of subsequent teacher attrition. Addressing this systemic lack of mental health support is crucial [3] for retaining valuable ECE personnel.

3.3.3 Weak Professional Identity

Teachers expressed a strong, collective desire for the ECE sector to be formally professionalised. They advocated for the establishment of clear certification pathways and for achieving a level of recognition and status comparable to that of schoolteachers. Many felt the need for their expertise to be publicly acknowledged, moving beyond the "babysitter" perception. Strengthening this professional identity is viewed as essential because it validates the teachers' roles and expertise, thereby making the career more attractive and sustainable. Research, such as that by Suarez and McGrath [33], corroborates that enhancing a strong and valued professional identity directly contributes to greater workforce stability and job commitment within the education field.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm that teacher shortages in Malaysia's ECE sector arise from a complex interplay of structural, motivational, and psychological factors. Low remuneration and excessive workload are consistent with global research identifying economic and administrative pressures as primary contributors to teacher shortages such study by Blanco et al., [4] and Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas [8]. Teachers' emotional narratives reflect the heavy psychological toll associated with ECE work, where nurturing young children requires significant patience, emotional engagement,

and resilience. Intrinsic motivation emerged as a powerful sustaining factor but insufficient to ensure long-term retention.

Indeed, Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential to intrinsic motivation [10]. While teachers exhibit strong relatedness (emotional connection to children), their sense of autonomy and competence is compromised by restrictive work environments and lack of structured development. The absence of a clear career pathway further weakens retention. Indeed, Career Construction Theory suggests that individuals seek pathways that align with their identity, values, and aspirations [21,32]. However, ECE teachers in Malaysia face limited upward mobility and low professional identity, diminishing long-term commitment.

Thus, the professionalisation of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce is urgently necessary to ensure its sustainability and quality. This requires implementing several key reforms, including clear certification requirements, establishing tiered career pathways, offering competitive salaries, and providing robust mental health provisions for educators. Furthermore, a concerted effort to foster strengthened public recognition of the profession is vital. These comprehensive reforms are directly aligned with international recommendations aimed at developing sustainable ECE workforces globally [35].

5. Conclusion

This study critically highlights significant recruitment and retention gaps within Malaysia's private Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector, revealing a complex interplay of systemic and personal challenges that severely compromise workforce stability. Teachers face substantial structural barriers, including persistently low salaries, excessive workloads, and severely limited career pathways, which often lead to high levels of emotional burnout and a weak professional identity. While the enduring intrinsic motivation of many dedicated educators currently sustains the sector, systemic reforms are essential for achieving long-term sustainability. Based on these findings, key recommendations are proposed: implementing competitive remuneration schemes to attract and retain talent; drastically reducing the administrative burden to allow educators to focus on teaching; establishing structured psychological career pathways for growth; providing institutionalised mental health support to address burnout; and actively pursuing professionalisation and greater public recognition of the ECE role. The findings of this research offer vital contributions to informing policy development, reforming institutional practice, and guiding future research, all by strongly emphasising the necessity of a holistic approach to effectively sustaining Malaysia's critical ECE workforce.

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