

The concept of professional identity: Kindergarten teachers' professionalism requirement in Malaysian preschool curriculum

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jun 9, 2020

Revised Dec 20, 2020

Accepted Jan 28, 2021

Keywords:

Experience

New preschool curriculum

Professional development

Professional qualifications

Professionalism

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the professional identity concept based on professionalism requirement in Malaysia's new preschool curriculum. Three professional identities identified through works of literature such as professional qualifications, experience and professional development were verified based on the constructed hypothesis to validate the concept of professional identity. The analysis findings showed a significant difference between professional qualifications. The same analysis, however, demonstrated that there was no significant difference on the preschool curriculum knowledge with regards to experience, but there was a significant indication of interaction between professional qualifications and experience on preschool curriculum knowledge. Meanwhile, for the one-way ANOVA test, there was a significant difference in the preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development. The findings of this study confirmed that professional knowledge and professional development respectively hold a direct impact on the preschool curriculum, while experience acts as a support for professional qualifications.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of professional identity is not straightforward. It can be summed up by stating that it is inextricably linked to personal identity; it is not fixed but dynamic; it is multi-faceted; and the definition of human agency is linked to changes in professional identity. Malaysia's ministry of education (MOE) has coordinated the national preschool curriculum (NPC) as the nation's first preschool curriculum to all kindergarten and preschools in the National Education System prescribed under the subsection 22(1) Education Act 1996 (Act 550). Through Professional Circular Letter No. 15/2002, MOE had prescribed the use of NPC to all levels of government and private preschools [1]. In brief, after five years of implementation of NPC since 2003, MOE had conceptualized this preschool curriculum to the national standard preschool curriculum (NSPC), and subsequently, the implemented NSPC in 2010 underwent a review resulting NSPC (Revised 2017) to comply with the new policy of Malaysia education blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025, the current requirement, and to ensure that the quality of the curriculum is aligned with the international standard [2-4].

The transformation of the preschool curriculum had unequivocally demonstrated the Malaysian government's commitment to developing the quality of preschool education. However, the curriculum development alone without proper execution would not ensure the quality in education [5]. The transformation of the standard-based curriculum in NSPC demands highly professional teachers as they would be required to implement the teaching, which is up to the standard and needs of the students. Similarly, a continuous assessment of the children should be applied to align with the National Education Philosophy and NSPC during teaching and learning (T&L) [6]. Therefore, comprehensively, the effectiveness of a preschool curriculum does not only rely on the planning and developing but its professional implementers.

Beaver, *et al.* [7] stated, curriculum outlined the expectations on skills, performance, attitude and values for the children's learning. For professional teachers, they would always be applying their knowledge and considering the most efficient learning materials, interactions and experience for the children. Thus, the effectiveness of a preschool curriculum is undeniably dependent on professional preschool or kindergarten teachers. Local researches had evidently shown that teachers with professional identity such as professional qualifications [8], experience [9, 10] and professional development [10] held more understanding and implemented T&L which was aligned with the principles and objectives in NSPC. Accordingly, professional identity is not only a requirement to develop professionalism in preschool education but an advancement of knowledge and practices for kindergarten teachers on preschool curriculum [11].

Although professional identity is vital for the effectiveness of preschool education, most of the teachers in preschools and kindergartens across the country were recorded as non-professional teachers. In reference to the MEB 2013-2025 Annual Report, in 2017, only 22,971 (44.4%) of the total of 51,725 preschool or kindergarten teachers owned professional qualifications at least in Diploma in early childhood care and education (ECCE) while the other 28,754 teachers (55.6%) had lower professional qualifications [12-14]. In the same report, there was a huge gap of preschool or kindergarten teachers with no minimum qualification of Diploma between the government (5,527 teachers) and private (23,327 teachers) which amounted to a significant difference of 17,800 teachers [15, 16]. A survey conducted by Foong, *et al.* [17] found that a massive number of 3,087 preschool teachers from the private sector across the country were very young, lack in experience had low income and did not hold professional qualifications. They had acknowledged that the private preschool teachers did not meet the minimum qualification of Diploma in ECCE, unlike the government sector. Hence, this situation had urged a study on the professional identity among private kindergartens based on the fact that their teachers held diverse education background ranging from secondary school to degree level.

According to Khalil [18], the development of teacher's professionalism helped the existing and future T&L process. It stemmed from the fact that the professionalism shown by the teachers was their quality in maintaining professional ethics on the highest standard, standard compliance in the profession, display of lifetime learning on professional development and individual training of professional practices [19]. Professionalism is the ability, skills and execution of a professional individual [18], while professional is the implementation of excellent work, competent worker, display of trust and efficient service. Based on these definitions, professionalism could be simplified as a competency within a teacher, while the professional is a competency required by a teacher to implement work that is in accordance with the teaching profession.

The study of Löfgren [20] stated that professionalism was seen dominant when a professional identity was developed. In early education, the organization for economic cooperation and development (OECD) described that highly educated and professionally-trained personnel were the key to a quality ECCE service. This had also been stated on a local level by Malaysian qualifications agency (MQA) that a quality ECCE service relied on knowledgeable, competent and trained teachers through quality ECCE programs. Nonetheless, the assumption of professional identity was dynamic and referred to diverse aspects [21]. Teacher's professional identity, in fact, were understood differently by foreign researchers through their studies in early education [22] and preschool education [20, 21]. This had indicated that unanimity had not been achieved for proper professional identity required by the teachers in the early education field or preschool education. Therefore, the professional identity concept could not be precisely specified. Consequently, the types of professional identities need to be identified based on the local context so that the professional identity concept could be determined by the current preschool requirement in Malaysia.

As stated by Androusou and Tsafos [21], the professional identity for teachers differed according to the theoretical framework, the researcher's view and focus of a study. Based on this statement, the current studies have regarded that professional qualifications, experience and professional development are able to explain the professional identity concept for kindergarten teachers in Malaysia. These indications were identified through national researches by [8], which discovered that the novice preschool teachers with professional qualifications showed effective teaching skills, aligned with the standard NSPC. The study by Amirafiza, *et al.* [9]; Sofiah and Kamarul [10], on the other hand, had indicated that kindergarten teachers

with professional qualifications and more than five years of experience had an excellent grasp of NSPC and conducted the T&L efficiently, reflecting their knowledge. However, a study by Nazri and Nurul [1]; Mardziah, *et al.* [6] found that preschool teachers with professional qualifications encountered challenges in fulfilling the standard in NSPC. This obviously hinted for professional development since the study by Sofiah and Kamarul [10] had also demonstrated how the courses and pieces of training helped preschool teachers to understand children's development and suitable T&L techniques in the classrooms. As subject to this feature, the three professional identities are deliberated as professionalism requirement in the new preschool curriculum in Malaysia.

This study is outlined to determine the concept of professional identity for local kindergarten teachers based on the professional requirement in Malaysia's new preschool curriculum. Based on the previous discussion, professional qualifications and professional development were respectively seen to have an impact on the implementation of NSPC, while experience acted as a support to professional qualifications [21-25]. Hence, professional qualifications and professional development are deemed as the direct effects while the experience is the mediator. This study, however, is a preliminary study since the national researches regarding professional identities in early education, either ECCE or preschool education is very limited. Subsequently, this study regards the preschool curriculum knowledge as the foundation before determining the teacher's practices or skills in implementing the curriculum. This is because a study by Ntumi [25] found that preschool teachers' insubstantial knowledge on early childhood curriculum in Cape Coast Metropolis, Ghana was the cause of failure in implementing the curriculum. The effectiveness of students' learning also depended on the teacher's knowledge of the curriculum. It is, therefore, undoubted when the curriculum knowledge had been categorized by Shulman [26] as one of the seven basic knowledge required from the teachers to strengthen students' understanding.

Hence, the current study has suggested two particular objectives to meet the purpose of this study which are: 1) Determining the difference of preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional identities (professional qualifications and experience); and 2) Determining the difference of preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional identities (professional development). Four alternative hypotheses were constructed as Figure 1.

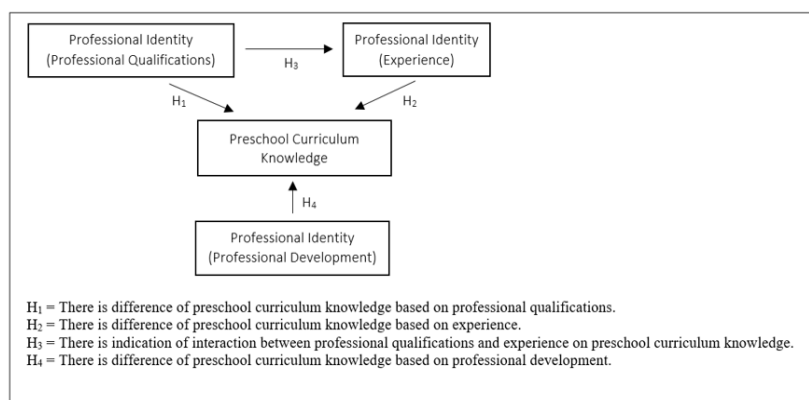


Figure 1. Research framework plan

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Population and sample

The population of this study is a total of 929 teachers from private kindergarten institutions which were registered under Private Education Division, MOE in a district in Selangor. To determine a sample size based on a significance level $p < 0.05$, the Table of Determining Sample Size was referred [27]. Consequently, this study involved 269 teachers from private kindergartens a district in Selangor who were appointed to conduct early or preschool education programs and the appointment process as well as an allowance or salary payment was administered by the institution itself. The selection of the sample was made via stratified random sampling.

2.2. Instrument

This study used a questionnaire instrument on Preschool Curriculum Knowledge among Private Kindergarten Teachers which was modified from the questionnaire of The Quality of Early Childhood Care

and Education in Malaysia developed by Ahmad, *et al.* [28] for the use of the National Child Development Research Centre in Sultan Idris Education University for the Research Project of Evaluation of Existing ECCE Program to Improve Quality that Inform Policy (P1/CUR). The questionnaire was modified to have the validity (Scale Content Validity Index [S-CVI/Ave]=0.907, average Kappa coefficient value [k^*]=0.757) and excellent reliability (Cronbach Alpha [α]=0.961).

2.3. Procedures and measurement

The data of this study was obtained through a survey questionnaire that was self-administered as well as administered with a number of P1/CUR researchers. The distribution of the questionnaire was directly made to the samples through kindergarten operators and supervisors and during the organization of the seminar program with the private kindergartens. It was also done through mailing. 302 questionnaires were successfully collected from the samples. However, only 269 of them were successfully sorted by stratification to meet the conditions for the ANOVA test. The score was analyzed using the service package for the social sciences (SPSS) software version 23 involving inferential statistics using two-way and one-way ANOVA to determine the discrepancies.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The difference between preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional qualifications and experience

Analysis from the two-way ANOVA test had found that there was a significant difference in preschool curriculum knowledge depending on the professional qualifications groups ($F[2,260]=3.499$, $p=0.032$). With results as displayed in Table 1, H_1 was accepted, and the Post Hoc Test was referred.

Table 1. The results of the two-way ANOVA test for professional qualifications and experience

Main indication	Total square	Degrees of freedom (df)	Mean square	F value	Significance
Professional qualifications	0.964	2	0.482	3.499	0.032
Experience	0.075	2	0.038	0.273	0.761
Professional qualifications*Experience	1.655	4	0.414	3.005	0.019
Error	35.813	260	0.138		
Total	3225.433	269			

Note: *significance at level $p < 0.05$

Referring to Table 2, private kindergarten teachers with professional qualifications in Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above ($M=3.520$, $SD=0.389$) showed higher preschool curriculum knowledge than ECCE/Preschool Teaching Certificates ($M=3.379$, $SD=0.366$) and None ($M=3.422$, $SD=0.372$). However, by employing Post Hoc Test using Tukey's HSD as shown in Table 3, there was obviously the significant difference between the groups of Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above and ECCE/Preschool Teaching Certificates (M difference=0.141, $p=0.046$). For the Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education with None, there was no significant mean value discrepancy (M difference=0.098, $p=0.160$).

Table 2. Distribution of preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional qualifications

Professional qualifications	Frequency (f)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
None	109	3.422	0.372
ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates	73	3.379	0.366
Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above	87	3.520	0.389
Total	269	3.442	0.379

Table 3. Results of post hoc test for professional qualifications

Professional qualifications		Tukey's HSD comparison		
		Mean difference	Error	Significance
None	ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates	0.043	0.057	0.724
ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates	Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above	0.141*	0.060	0.046
Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above	None	0.098	0.054	0.160

Note: *means difference at significance level 0.05

The analysis results of the similar two-way ANOVA test on the abovementioned Table 1 also discovered no significant difference in preschool curriculum knowledge based on experience ($F[2,260]=0.273$, $p=0.761$). This indicated that private kindergarten teachers with experience of fewer than three years, 3-6 years and more than six years had similar preschool curriculum knowledge. Hence, H2 was rejected. Nonetheless, there was still a significant indication of interactions between professional qualifications with experience towards preschool curriculum knowledge which was value $F(4,260)=3.005$, $p=0.019$. Hence, H3 was accepted.

Specifically, the interactions between professional qualifications and experience were inverse. Referring to Table 4, private kindergarten teachers in the group Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above with experience of fewer than three years showed the highest preschool curriculum knowledge ($M=3.611$, $SD=0.395$). The second highest was from the group non-professionally qualified with experience of more than six years ($M=3.550$, $SD=0.347$) and the third-highest was from the group Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above with experience of 3-6 years ($M=3.514$, $SD=0.385$). For the group Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above with experience of more than six years displayed the fourth and least preschool curriculum knowledge ($M=3.473$, $SD=0.387$). This inverse interaction was more apparent on the graph line in Figure 2.

Table 4. Distribution of preschool curriculum knowledge based on interactions of professional qualifications and experience

Professional qualifications + Experience	Frequency (f)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
None, Less than three years	41	3.339	0.374
None, 3-6 years	26	3.346	0.363
None, More than six years	42	3.550	0.347
ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates, Less than 3 years	15	3.302	0.402
ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates, 3-6 years	20	3.488	0.363
ECCE/Preschool teaching certificates, More than 6 years	38	3.352	0.350
Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above, Less than three years	24	3.611	0.395
Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above, 3-6 years	19	3.514	0.385
Diploma in ECCE/Preschool education and above, More than six years	44	3.473	0.387
Total	269	3.442	0.379

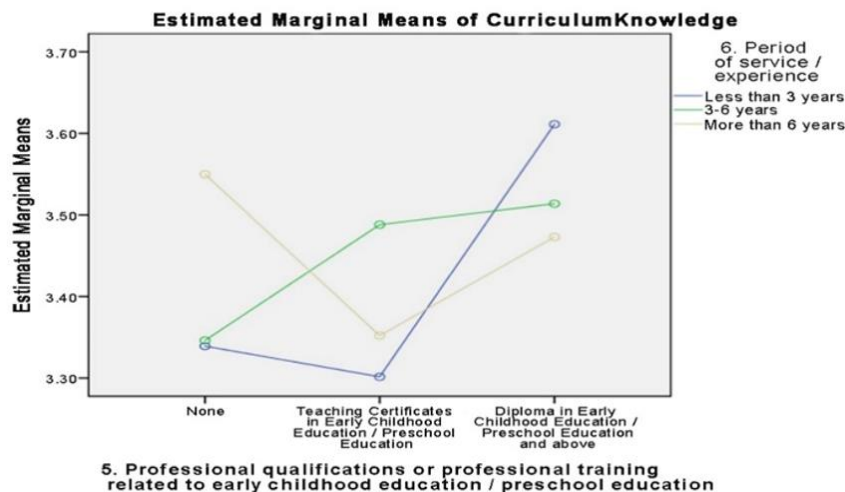


Figure 2. Line graph of interaction between professional qualifications and experience on preschool curriculum knowledge

3.2. The difference between preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development

Inferential analysis using one-way ANOVA test as Table 5 found that there was a significant difference in preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development ($F[5,263]=2.879$, $p=0.015$). Hence, H4 was accepted, and Post Hoc Test was further referred.

Table 5. Result of one-way ANOVA test for professional development

Preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development	Total square	Degrees of freedom (df)	Mean square	F value	Significance
Intergroup	1.995	5	0.399	2.879	0.015
Intragroup	36.451	263	0.139		
Total	38.446	268			

Note: *significance at level $p < 0.05$

Referring to Table 6, teachers from Others group ($M=3.655$, $SD=0.340$) displayed the highest preschool curriculum knowledge. The second highest was from the group KAP ($M=3.568$, $SD=0.316$), followed by NSPC Courses ($M=3.458$, $SD=0.358$), SKM Courses ($M=3.410$, $SD=0.355$), None ($M=3.393$, $SD=0.380$) and finally KAAK ($M=3.385$, $SD=0.410$). Precisely, the results of Tukey's HSD Post Hoc Test as indicated in Table 7 showed significant mean values discrepancy between professional development groups of Others and None (M difference= 0.261 , $p=0.024$). There was also significant mean values discrepancy between professional development groups of Others and KAAK (M difference= 0.270 , $p=0.042$). The remaining professional development groups did not show significant difference in mean values.

Table 6. Distribution of preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development

Professional development	Frequency (f)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
None	115	3.393	0.380
NSPC courses	31	3.458	0.358
SKM courses	20	3.410	0.355
KAAK	51	3.385	0.410
KAP	28	3.568	0.316
Others	24	3.655	0.340
Total	269	3.442	0.379

Table 7. Results of post hoc test for professional development

Professional development		Tukey's HSD comparison		
		Mean difference	Error	Significance
None	KAAK	0.009	0.062	1.000
NSPC courses	None	0.064	0.075	0.958
NSPC courses	SKM courses	0.048	0.107	0.998
NSPC courses	KAAK	0.073	0.085	0.955
SKM courses	None	0.016	0.090	1.000
SKM courses	KAAK	0.025	0.098	1.000
KAP	None	0.174	0.078	0.232
KAP	NSPC courses	0.110	0.097	0.866
KAP	SKM courses	0.159	0.109	0.694
KAP	KAAK	0.183	0.088	0.294
Others	None	0.261*	0.084	0.024
Others	NSPC courses	0.197	0.101	0.376
Others	SKM courses	0.245	0.112	0.253
Others	KAAK	0.270*	0.092	0.042
Others	KAP	0.087	0.104	0.960

Note: *means difference at significance level 0.05

3.3. Discussion

By using comparative analysis and hypothesis testing, the findings of this study had assisted the validation of the concept of professional identity. In reference to the two-way ANOVA analysis, there was a difference in preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional qualifications. Private kindergarten teachers with Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above demonstrated better preschool curriculum knowledge than ECCE/Preschool Teaching Certificates and None. This finding coincided with the findings of Nair and Yassin [29] which revealed that the early childhood teachers across Peninsular Malaysia with higher professional ECCE exhibited better comprehension in the ECCE curriculum and T&L process than teachers with lower ECCE professional qualifications. Distinctly, teachers with professional qualifications had a better grasp of the needs and implementation of teaching that fit the development of children.

The findings of two-way ANOVA analysis further illustrated that there was a sign of inverse interaction between professional qualifications with experience towards preschool curriculum knowledge. Private kindergarten teachers with Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education with experience of fewer than three years displayed the highest preschool curriculum knowledge. Private kindergarten teachers with

Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above with experience of 3-6 years was the third-highest. As for private kindergarten teachers with Diploma in ECCE/Preschool Education and above with experience of more than six years, they were the fourth and least. As expected, the experience served as a support for professional qualifications, especially during the early service years. Therefore, this finding could verify the study by Abdul Halim and Aznanche [8] which stated that four novice preschool teachers with professional qualification of bachelor's degree in preschool education with two years of experience showed T&L skills coinciding with NSPC.

Interestingly, the same analysis findings also indicated that non-professionally qualified private kindergarten teachers with more than six years of experience had the second-highest preschool curriculum knowledge. This finding explained that even though experience helped the kindergarten teachers to develop knowledge on preschool curriculum, the knowledge became stagnant as experience increased. This means that the kindergarten teachers' experience acts as a support, but is inadequate to construct, enrich or develop their preschool curriculum knowledge, especially when there is curriculum change. This statement is almost identical to that of [23]. On the other hand, there is a limit in the finding to validate that experience has impacts on the practices of kindergarten teachers in implementing the preschool curriculum. Hence, it is suggested that future studies only determine the direct impacts of experience on the preschool curriculum to support the study by Tee and Mariani [30] which found that the principles of private preschool teachers with Malaysian Education Certificate (SPM) were still academic regardless of their 6-year experience.

Finally, one-way ANOVA analysis indicated that there was a difference in preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional development. The private kindergarten teachers involved in Others professional development program such as Malaysian Association of Islamic Kindergartens (PERTIM), Malaysian Association of Kindergartens (PTM), Malaysian Association of Kindergarten Teachers (PGTM), Private Preschool Teachers Training Program 2011 under the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), Q-Dees Training, Secretarial and Smart Reader demonstrated the highest preschool curriculum knowledge and had significant differences with KAAK and None. Private kindergarten teachers involved in KAP were the second-highest while as for NSPC Courses, the third-highest. The second least would be the private kindergarten teachers with None involvement in professional development. This finding proved how kindergarten teachers' involvement in professional development gave commendable knowledge on preschool curriculum compared to those without professional development. While this finding supported a previous study by Sofiah and Kamarul [10], it was not able to validate the factors, influence or main impacts of either NSPC Course, SKM Courses, KAAK, KAP or Others towards preschool curriculum knowledge.

From the abovementioned discussion, the findings of this study had validated two professional identities such as professional qualifications and professional development respectively in helping kindergarten teachers to gain better preschool curriculum knowledge, while experience as a support for professional qualifications during early service years. The three professional identities have separate functions in developing knowledge and understanding of kindergarten teachers on preschool curriculum and further developing their professionalism in implementing it. Hence, these findings are able to describe the concept of professional identity for kindergarten teachers according to the local context more distinctly. For that reason, the findings validated that the concept of professional identity is the professional background obtained by the kindergarten teachers through professional qualifications, experience and professional development which could potentially develop their professionalism in either understanding the preschool curriculum, planning as well as conducting more vibrant, effective and suitable T&L for the children's needs.

3.4. Limitation and recommendation for further research

As per the previous discussion, this research is a preliminary study regarding professional identity on the preschool curriculum. The findings of this study merely surveyed the preschool curriculum knowledge based on professional identity to clearly determine the concept of professional identity through comparison analysis and hypothesis testing. Hence, this study by the survey has limits to validate the factors, influence, control or main impacts of professional identity (professional qualifications, experience or professional development) towards knowledge, comprehension or practices of kindergarten teachers on the preschool curriculum. Further research should use a new analysis whether by regression or ANCOVA test to determine the factors, influence or control of one of the three professional identities or by using qualitative analysis to ascertain the main impacts of professional identity. With the aforementioned analysis, the research on the professionalism of kindergarten teachers towards preschool curriculum would be enhanced.

4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the constructed hypothesis to verify the definition of professional identity, three professional identities defined through works of literature such as professional credentials, experience and

professional growth were confirmed. This study included 269 samples of private preschool teachers selected through stratified random sampling in a district in Selangor. While this study has limitations in some aspects as discussed, it is capable of proving that the three professional identities such as professional qualifications, experience and professional development are the professionalism requirements for the new preschool curriculum in Malaysia. Kindergarten teachers with higher professional qualifications and involved with professional development are proved to have better preschool curriculum knowledge, while the experience is support for them, especially during the early years of service. By meeting the objectives of the study, this study has successfully conceptualized the professional identities for kindergarten teachers through the Malaysian context. Thus, the literature results and findings of study create rooms and opportunity for ECCE and preschool education scholars to further research on the professionalism of kindergarten teachers and preschool curriculum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This long-term research grant scheme (LRGS) research is supported by the ministry of finance (MOF) through the ministry of education (MOE) Malaysia. We thank the National Child Development Research Centre (NCDRC), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) as the leading university in this study in collaboration with SEGi University. The title of this study is "Development of a Comprehensive and Integrated Model of Quality Malaysian Early Childhood Care and Education (2015-0024-106-04) with the sub-project is Project 1/CUR: Evaluation of Existing ECCE Programs to Improve Quality that Inform Policy" (2015-0024-106-04-1). It is funded by the Ministry of Finance through the Ministry of Education Malaysia. We thank all members of the research team who have contributed to this research. The authors also thank the steering committee, critical informants, teachers, parents and other stakeholders who participated in the study.

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