

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A COMPARISON OF SELECTED ASIAN COUNTRIES

Jaminan Kualiti Pendidikan Awal Kanak-Kanak: Satu Perbandingan Antara Negara Terpilih di Asia

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Abstract

Early childhood education is an important stage in a person's educational journey. Countries around the world have started to mandate early childhood education and consequently, many have developed framework or curriculum for learning during these early years. However, whether these are implemented appropriately requires quality assurance. This paper looks at the state of quality assurance for early childhood education in several countries. Specifically, governance, quality dimensions and quality assurance practices are analysed. Findings may be used to develop a quality assurance framework or to enhance existing quality assurance practices in early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education, quality assurance

Abstrak

Pendidikan awal kanak-kanak satu tahap pendidikan yang penting dalam pengalaman pendidikan individu. Banyak negara sudah mula menjadikan pendidikan awal suatu yang wajib untuk dilalui oleh kanak-kanak. Sehubungan itu, banyak juga negara yang sudah membina kerangka atau pun kurikulum pembelajaran untuk tahap awal kanak-kanak. Namun, untuk memastikan ia diimplementasikan dengan sepatutnya, ini memerlukan pendekatan jaminan kualiti. Artikel ini meninjau keadaan jaminan kualiti untuk pendidikan awal kanak-kanak di beberapa negara Asia. Khususnya, governans, dimensi kualiti dan amalan jaminan kualiti akan dianalisis. Dapatan boleh digunakan untuk membangunkan kerangka jaminan kualiti atau pun meningkatkan lagi amalan jaminan kualiti bagi pendidikan awal kanak-kanak.

Kata kunci: pendidikan awal kanak-kanak, jaminan kualiti

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The need to have quality early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized. Studies over the past decades have shown both short-term and long-term gains for children who received high quality early childhood education compared to those who received low quality early childhood education (e.g. Burger, 2015; Cortaza, 2015; Ulferts, Wolf & Anders, 2019), with benefits extending beyond cognitive development and academic achievement (Campbell et. al., 2014; Garcia et. al., 2020). Countries around the world have also acknowledged, if not embraced, the need for young

children to have the opportunity to receive high quality early childhood education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020a).

Nevertheless, as much as there is unanimous agreement on all parties concerned – the authorities, the researchers, the parents - on the need for quality early childhood, there is no such unanimous agreement on what constitutes quality in early childhood education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025). Consequently, there is even less agreement on how to assure quality in early childhood education.

Assuring the quality of education received during this early childhood years is vital, as it is not the child's exposure to early childhood education per se that provides the positive impacts seen in later years, but it is the exposure to high quality early childhood experience that is important – be it informally at home or in childcare centres, or formally in early childhood education settings (Klinkhammer & Schafer, 2017).

Hence, ensuring that early childhood education settings are of acceptable quality is a must if countries are serious about ECE. Some developed countries have moved from monitoring to quality assurance, but this is a recent development. With a large proportion of many Asian countries made up of young children, it is pertinent to address this emerging issue. This article explores how quality assurance is done in selected Asian countries. Asian countries have some markedly different issues from the Western countries, hence the need to look at their practices without comparing it to the West. Analysing the practices of Asian countries is also a way of benchmarking, with the objective of more efficient adoption of good practices.

2.0 QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance in ECE is the process to ensure that ECE providers comply to the prescribed standards or guidelines that aims to “promote the provision of quality early learning services” (UNICEF, 2020). The focus is on the process; hence it goes beyond measuring quality. Many measures of quality in the early childhood setting have been developed and used. These include Early Childhood Environmental Scoring System (ECERS), Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and more recently Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO). Initially developed in 1980 in the United States of America, ECERS is a standardized observation instrument to assess the overall quality of an ECE centre that caters to children aged 2.5 until 5 years old (Harms et al., 2014). The domains assessed are structural indicators such as space and furnishing and process indicators such as personal care routines and activities. CLASS is also another observation instrument developed in the United States in the early 2000s. It focuses on process particularly the teacher-child interactions that includes both instructional and emotional support and its use has been extended to beyond the preschool years to go until secondary school years (La Paro et al, 2004). MELQO came out in 2014 from an initiative led by UNESCO as an effort to support the monitoring of SDG goal 4.2 which pertains to ensuring all children have access to quality education, including during the early childhood years (UNESCO, 2017). It measures both the quality of the learning environment in pre-school and lower primary years and the developmental and educational outcomes of the children.

These are indeed useful tools to measure quality in ECE, but unless the findings are used to improve the processes in providing early learning services, they remain as quality control tools and not as quality assurance tools. Having a tool to measure quality per se is not an indicator of the existence of having a quality assurance measure in place. Hence, there is a need to look deeper into the quality assurance

practices so that the usage of quality control tools may be optimized to offer the best early childhood experience to all parties concerned.

To address this, a country comparison study was done to answer the following questions:

- a) What does the governance structure overseeing the early childhood education in the country look like?
- b) What are the quality dimensions addressed in the main early childhood education policy of the country?
- c) How are the quality assurance practices implemented in the country?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Four Asian countries were randomly selected based on several selection criteria. The most important one is that early childhood education sector is officially recognised in the country, indicated by the country having at least one centralised government agency overseeing the early childhood education sector. The second criterion is that official information on their early childhood education sector is easily available on the internet.

Several countries were identified. The final selection was made with an objective to ensure variations in the selection. The four final countries are in different geographical regions of Asia, they have different national languages from each other, and they are on the spectrum in terms of their GNP. The variations are important to reduce bias.

Document analysis on the official information from the agencies in charge was then done. Document analysis was used as the study sought to examine how early childhood education quality frameworks, and governance orientations are formally constructed and articulated at the policy level. Descriptive analysis for each country on the element of interest – governance, quality dimensions and quality assurance practices was initially done. Then comparative analysis between the countries on these dimensions was carried out.

4.0 COUNTRY PROFILE

Although spanning a huge part of the globe, Asian countries still have major similarities with each other. Even with different belief and economic systems, they still tend to gather on the same part of the values spectrum. Higher on collectivism compared to the West, many Asian countries tend to have a large proportion of children in the population. With filial piety in its various forms being a core value in these countries, children are not seen just as future leaders, but also the carers of the older generation as these children become adults. With this background of values tacitly underpinning the child-rearing practices, it is important to see how this plays out in more formal educational settings. For these reasons, these countries were selected, each one in its unique geographical setting.

4.1 Singapore

Singapore is a small multicultural and multilingual nation located at the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia with a population of approximately 6.04 million. It is a highly developed country with a gross domestic product (GDP) of 501.4 billion USD in 2023 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023). As of 2024, Chinese, Malays, and Indians comprise 74%, 13.5%, and 9.0% of the population respectively (Department of Statistics

Singapore, 2024). Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English were declared the four official languages by the Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965. Per the country's mandated bilingual education policy, all students are required to learn English and one of three 'mother tongue' languages (MTLs) at all educational levels including preschool (Dixon, 2005). The four stages of Singapore's educational system are preschool, primary, secondary, and post-secondary. Preschool in Singapore caters to children aged 18 months to below 7 years old. Singapore is also known for its excellent education system as indicated by it continuing to hold its consistently excellent ranks in the global benchmark research such as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ratings in 2022 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

4.2 Saudi Arabia

Located in the Arabian Gulf, Saudi Arabia is a monarchic country). It has an overall population of more than 30 million people (General Authority for Statistics, 2024). The primary written and spoken language of the country is Arabic. However, some of the Saudis, particularly the educated one, speak English as their secondary language.

Saudi's Early Childhood Education sector (ECE) is composed of nursery (0-3-year-old) and kindergarten (3-6-year-old) with kindergarten is further categorized into kindergarten grade 1 (3-year-olds), grade 2 (4-year-olds), and grade 3 (between 5 and 6-year-olds) (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). Following the government requirements, children attend the same kindergarten regardless of gender while all teachers and caregivers are female (Al-Jadidi, 2012). In 2018, the Ministry of Education launched a project called Early Childhood Stage whereby it is a combination of kindergarten grades 2 and 3 along with the first three grades of elementary schools in public schools (Manar, 2021). The minister's effort of changing the early childhood education system is one of the many significant moves made to accomplish Saudi's vision of 2030 and the National Transformation Plan (NTP) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020b).

4.3 Bhutan

Bhutan is a small, secluded kingdom nestled in the Himalayas, bordered by India and China. Its capital is Thimpu, and Dzongkha is the primary spoken language. For centuries, Bhutan remained largely isolated but has cautiously embraced certain aspects of the modern world while preserving its ancient cultural heritage and only started welcoming foreigners in the 1970s. Bhutan has ruled as a hereditary monarchy since 1907 and has transitioned to a two-party parliamentary democracy following its first elections in 2008.

Given its location and its mountainous terrain, Bhutan faces geographic and resource challenges that impact access on delivering quality of ECE system. Bhutan has only recently begun opening to global influences including education reforms and Bhutan's ECE system is relatively new and still evolving. It presents a valuable opportunity to study how a nation builds and scales an ECE system from the ground up, including its quality assurance and policy development.

4.4 South Korea

South Korea is a highly developed nation in East Asia known for its advanced technology, strong economy, and rich cultural heritage. Surrounded by the sea and featuring numerous islands, the country's geography has influenced its cultural and economic landscape. With a population of approximately 51.63 million as of 2022, South Korea ranked as the 29th most populous nation globally, and its official

language and writing system, “Hangeul,” is central to its identity. However, demographic challenges such as an aging population and declining birth rates pose significant concerns, with projections indicating that by 2025, 20% of the population will be 65 or older (World Bank Open Data, 2024).

To address these challenges, the government has emphasized strengthening ECE (Rhee, 2007) and supporting working parents through initiatives like paid childcare leave subsidies, which have shown some success in raising conception rates (Kim, Lee & Halliday, 2023). These efforts reflect a commitment to preparing children as future contributors to society while upholding values of collectivism and filial piety. Advancements in ECE ensure that children receive a strong educational foundation (Kim, 2023), fostering both academic, cultural and social development in line with broader Asian cultural norms.

5.0 FINDINGS

5.1 Governance

In every country, education is under the purview of the Ministry of Education, but each will differ in how much the ministry directly oversees the early childhood education sector. In some cases, several regulatory bodies work closely with the Ministry of Education.

In South Korea, the Ministry of Education is the only authority that governs early childhood education for kindergartens (Education in Korea, 2023). Bhutan also has similar provisions to South Korea; however, the Ministry of Education also cooperates with other relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Health (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2021b). Saudi Arabia and Singapore have one main figure of kindergarten authority with other sub-regulators. In Saudi Arabia, the supervision of kindergartens falls under the Ministry of Education and within the minister's supervision, further regulatory bodies are appointed to manage public and private kindergartens. The Early Childhood General Department regulates both types, but private kindergartens also have a Deputy Ministry supervising them (OECD, 2020). However, in Singapore, both types are regulated by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) with additional forces from two other ministries; the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2024).

Apart from the regulatory bodies, each country except Bhutan also differs in the national standards upheld in early childhood education. Saudi Arabia launched the Saudi Arabian Early Learning Standards (SELS) in February 2015 with the intention to improve children's quality of care and early learning. Done in collaboration with the United States National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Tatweer for Education, the SELS serves to guide educators, teachers, and parents to achieve various child developmental outcomes and expectations.

In Singapore, the sole regulator of kindergartens; ECDA built a framework called the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK). Implemented since January 2011, it is a quality assurance framework that guides preschools in teaching and learning, administering and managing operations, and improving the overall development and well-being of children (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2024).

The Ministry of Education of South Korea is the sole developer of early childhood education curriculum named Nuri Curriculum. Introduced in 2013, the curriculum is designed to support the holistic development of children in physical, emotional, cognitive, and social skills (Education in Korea, 2023). In 2019, the curriculum underwent a revision to make it more flexible, such as eliminating content

by children's ages and strictly emphasizing child and play-led (Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, 2019) and to make it more integrated. ECEC Integration is a single framework introduced to unify education and care for young children (Ministry of Education, 2023).

To ensure the enforcement of the national standards, each country has passed laws for all early childhood education sectors to follow. In Saudi Arabia, a manual for the kindergarten's organization has been developed. It covers different areas from building specifications to the presence of emergency materials such as first-aid kits (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020a). Apart from public kindergartens, Saudi Arabia also offers private and international schools, and all are governed by laws or standards established by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education Saudi Arabia, 2023). Similar rules are also found in Singapore, namely the Early Childhood Development Centres Act 2017. It outlines the operations of non-government early childhood development centres. Singapore also has an additional regulation concerning "assistant educator" and it falls under the Early Childhood Development Centres Regulations 2018 (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2024).

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Singapore, South Korea upheld different laws for different child age stages. Specifically for kindergartens, it falls under the Early Childhood Education Act. It provides a detailed implementation of a kindergarten from staff to costs, and rules and penalties (Statutes of the Republic of Korea, 2004). In Bhutan, the country regards law as policy and all education sectors follow the National Education Policy. The policy has different sections for different levels of education. For kindergarten reference, the section would be early childhood care and development (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2020).

Table 1 Summary of the findings on the governance of ECE

	Singapore	Saudi Arabia	Bhutan	South Korea
Regulatory Body(ies)	Ministry of Education; Early Childhood Development Agency, Ministry of Social and Family Development	Ministry of Education Early Childhood General department regulates public and private Additional Deputy Minister to regulate private ECE	Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health	Ministry of Education
National Standard Governing Document	SPARK (Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework)	SELS (Saudi Arabia Early Learning Standards)	none	Nuri Curriculum
Laws for ECE	Early Childhood Development Centres Act	Ministry of Education Regulations	National Education Policy	Early Childhood Education Act

5.2 Quality Dimensions

Each country's unique characteristics have contributed to the development of specific ECE quality dimensions to maintain the quality of their ECE systems. In a comparison of the four countries, Singapore stands out for its standardized ECE quality dimension. This country has implemented a consolidated framework called the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) to enhance ECE quality. The SPARK framework outlines eight criteria: leadership, planning and administration, staff management, early years learning environment, early learning and development,



resources, curriculum, and pedagogy. These criteria are designed to ensure strategic and curriculum leadership, effective program planning, staff development, and continuous family and community involvement, all aimed at fostering a holistic and high-quality early learning environment. Leadership encompasses the communication and translation of the institution's core mission and values, while curriculum leadership focuses on classroom observation and professional learning. The comprehensive nature of SPARK has positioned Singapore as a possible benchmark for ECE quality in the Asian region.

In contrast, South Korea, Bhutan, and Saudi Arabia do not have a comprehensive framework to oversee the quality of ECE. Instead, these countries rely on a combination of legislative measures and government guidance. Quality of ECE in South Korea is primarily maintained through government-led evaluations and curriculum guidelines (Kaga, Barnett & Bennett, 2012), which emphasize child-centered learning, safety standards, and teacher qualifications. The National Kindergarten Curriculum acts as a foundation for educational content, ensuring a consistent approach across different settings. The curriculum has undergone significant reforms, with the introduction of the Nuri Curriculum, first implemented for five-year-olds in 2012 and expanded to include all three- to four-year-olds by 2013. The Nuri Curriculum is designed to promote the balanced growth of both mind and body, focusing on five key developmental areas: 1) physical exercise and health, 2) communication, 3) social relationships, 4) artistic experiences, and 5) nature exploration (Na & Park, 2013). Self-evaluation reports, government inspections and teacher training initiatives under the evaluation of the Kindergarten Evaluation System (KES) further reinforce adherence to set standards, creating a balanced structure that supports and enhances quality in ECE.

Bhutan's approach to ECE reflects the nation's unique philosophy of Gross National Happiness, emphasizing holistic child development and the integration of cultural values. The Ministry of Education oversees ECE by establishing guidelines and policies that promote inclusion and equitable access. All private Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Centres are mandated to provide care and stimulation to children aged three to six, adhering to developmentally appropriate practices within Bhutan's cultural context. Based on the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2021), Bhutan's ECE programmes cover developmental areas such as physical well-being, emotional and social growth, language and communication, cognition, and spiritual, moral, and cultural development. Staff must exhibit good character and possess relevant knowledge, training, and experience. Centres are required to uphold high standards for safety, health, hygiene, and physical facilities. Although Bhutan does not have a unified framework comparable to SPARK, community involvement, curriculum guidelines, and teacher development initiatives ensure that ECE quality is maintained. This nurturing approach aligns with the broader goal of holistic child development, balancing academic and socio-emotional growth.

Saudi Arabia's ECE quality assurance is centred upon oversight by the Ministry of Education and affiliated agencies, embedding Islamic values within its educational goals and curriculum. While Saudi Arabia lacks a structured accreditation framework, it ensures quality through comprehensive teacher training programs, standardized curricula known as the Saudi Early Learning Standards (SELS), and regular monitoring to meet national standards (OECD, 2020). The SELS play a pivotal role as a guiding tool for parents, educators, and caregivers in supporting and interacting with young children (Ministry of Education, 2018). There are two versions of SELS: one for ages 0-3 and another for ages 3-6. These standards are organized around seven key domains: 1) approaches to learning, 2) social-emotional development, 3) language and early

literacy development, 4) cognition and general knowledge, 5) patriotism and social studies, 6) Islamic education, and 7) health and physical development.

In summary, while Singapore's SPARK framework offers a structured, all-encompassing model for ECE quality assurance, South Korea, Bhutan, and Saudi Arabia each utilizes a mix of regulations, curriculum guidelines, and teacher training programs to achieve quality in early education. Bhutan's focus on holistic development rooted in cultural values, South Korea's systematic curriculum reforms, and Saudi Arabia's adherence to Islamic principles highlight how different countries adapt their ECE quality dimensions to align with national philosophies. Each country's unique strategy reflects its values and educational priorities, showcasing diverse approaches to achieving quality in early childhood education.

Table 2. Summary of the findings on quality dimensions of ECE in the 4 countries

Singapore	Saudi Arabia	Bhutan	South Korea
Leadership Planning & Administration Staff management Learning environment Early learning & development Resources Curriculum Pedagogy	Approaches to learning Socio-emotional development Language & literacy Cognition & general knowledge Patriotism & social studies Islamic education Health & physical development	Holistic child development Integration of cultural values Staff character and competency Physical facilities	Child-centred learning Safety standards Teacher qualification

5.3 Quality Assurance Practices

In Singapore, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) assesses quality assurance using the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) to ensure consistency across public and private providers. Furthermore, the Kindergarten Evaluation System (KES) involves both internal and external evaluations to uphold standardised quality. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's early childhood care system relies on the Ministry of Education via the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) to govern quality assurance. However, there is also a dual management structure in which private kindergartens are also placed under the purview of the Department of Private Schools. In Bhutan, the Ministry of Education or the relevant agency of the Royal Government of Bhutan responsible for coordinating quality assurance to manage early childhood education quality. However, in Bhutan, there is an inconsistent implementation on ensuring all the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres following the national quality standards (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2021).

Each country varies in how often it assesses the quality of early childhood education. Singapore performs annual self-assessments with six-year cycles for Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK), while South Korea requires twice a year evaluation with inspections and annual accreditation assessment. However, Bhutan and Saudi Arabia are less clearly defined on how often to conduct an evaluation in ECE system in respective countries. In contrary, ECE system in Bhutan lacks a national legislative and strategic framework that led to a difficulty of consistency quality of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) (ECCD-SEN Division, 2017). In Saudi Arabia, it is unclear how often the Ministry of Education ensures the quality of early childhood care system as the ministry govern quality assurance through a dual management structure, in which private kindergartens are also directed by Departments of Private Schools which gives them greater distance from the regulatory requirements of public kindergartens (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Both South Korea and Singapore have regular,



systematic review processes that encourage continuous improvement in quality and help them to uphold high standards. However, no such system is evident in Saudi Arabia and Bhutan which can lead to discrepancies in quality. It can result in unequal access to quality education across different regions, especially in rural areas.

Most countries take a similar approach to quality assurance. For example, Singapore uses a multi-tiered approach under Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK), requiring preschools to register, conduct annual self-appraisals and undergo a Quality Rating Scale (QRS) assessment covering leadership, planning and administration, staff management, early years learning environment, early learning and development, resources, curriculum and pedagogy. In South Korea, Kindergarten Evaluation System (KES) utilise internal reports, site inspections and independent panel reviews to ensure the quality. Saudi Arabia's Noor System combines self-assessment and field inspections with a focus on relations, culture, curriculum, and leadership, aiming to refine national standards in ECE. However, in Bhutan, implementation of the Quality Monitoring Tool for ECCD Centres (QMTEC) in the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres remains uncertain (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2020) and this led to not all Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres met national quality standards (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2020).

South Korea and Saudi Arabia have the same issue of monitoring of early childhood education settings. In South Korea, the methods of assessment conducted by provincial offices of education is different from one another as some items in the assessment are modified to be applied properly at the targeted centres (KICCE Policy Brief, 2017). Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, the licensing and monitoring of early childhood education settings in Saudi Arabia is inconsistent, especially for private kindergartens. Although these are visited by the same supervisors as public kindergartens, it is widely understood that they often operate according to different procedures and use different curriculum and resources (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020b).

Most of the countries mentioned have a national legislative and strategic framework for early childhood care system to ensure the quality of the education. However, in Bhutan, there is a lack of awareness about the importance of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in getting children ready for formal schooling, along with public concerns about inadequate infrastructure, facilities and the skills of the teachers (Ministry of Education, 2014). Moreover, the expenditure report showed that the expenses were only for center-based programmes and excludes costs related to health and nutrition (ECCD & SEN Division, 2017). These are due to the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres which was 37.66% in 2023 of children aged three to five years old (Policy and Planning Division, 2023).

Besides that, Singapore and South Korea both provide public access to quality ratings emphasising transparency. SPARK accreditation provides a visible indicator of a centre's quality, which helps parents make informed choices. Similarly, the accreditation status of South Korean ECCE centres is also made visible. These public ratings can also foster healthy competition between centres. Saudi Arabia and Bhutan have yet to make the quality ratings for their ECCE centres available publicly via their websites.

Table 3. Summary of the findings QA practices

	Singapore	Saudi Arabia	Bhutan	South Korea
Regulatory body	Early Childhood Development Agency	Education & Training Evaluation Commission Department of Private Schools (private)	Ministry of Education; but lack of consistency in implementation across regions	Korean Childcare Promotion Institute (pre-K) Ministry of Education (kindergarten)
Accreditation cycle	6 years	Not specified	Not specified	Annually
Evaluation/assessment cycle	Annually (self-assessment)	Not specified	Not specified	Twice a year
Assessment tool	QRS (Quality Rating Scale) based on SPARK	Noor System	QMTEC (Quality Monitoring Tool for ECCD Centres)	KES (Kindergarten Evaluation System)
Standardized QA implementation?	Yes	No – procedural issue	No – geographical issue	No – procedural issue
Quality ratings made public?	Yes	No	No	Yes

6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This brief survey highlights the variations and commonalities present in the offering of early childhood education in these four Asian countries. It is expected this is a microcosm of the larger state of ECE in Asia, with the variabilities not seen to be due to political factors, and perhaps slightly but not entirely due to fiscal factors, but more of a cultural factor. Policy makers need to do an indigenous needs analysis in terms of their expectations of what early childhood education should entail. What can be discerned here is that as much as the language used in these policy documents seem to mirror the language coming out from the Western countries, the content of the curriculum and the objectives of ECE when perused further indicate that values education is an important element even in ECE. This is where the adaptation is needed if one is modelling ECE from the Western-based findings. This particular discourse is not new. Dahlberg (Dahlberg et. al., 1999) posited that the global ECE movement has been dominated by the Western perspectives and argued that ECE should not be standardised globally while ignoring the local values. More recently, Phillips and Ochs (2004) repeat the same concern and proposed that societal values should mediate educational transfers. Hence, focusing on practices in Asian countries adds to the body of knowledge pertaining to this issue.

The findings also highlight although there are quality control and legislation in place in these countries, the quality assurance practices themselves vary and perhaps are not quite as evident. Again, this is to be expected as QA itself is a relatively new notion compared to QC. QC mechanisms are more visible and measurable, perhaps because they focus on compliance, inspection, and minimum standards. In contrast, QA emphasises continuous improvement, reflective practice, and systemic capacity-building, making QA to be comparatively emergent in many ECE systems. Yet in education, it is more appropriate for policy makers and stakeholders to focus more on QA and not QC, particularly in the early years when nurturing individual potentials should be the focus and not a product-focused approach. Particularly when ECE is associated with a profitable sector of education, it is important not to equate quality with simply compliance or outputs (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Penn, 2011).

It is hoped that the findings presented here will allow those interested in the early childhood education field see the variations in practices, similar to a benchmarking exercise. More importantly, it is hoped that this is a start to a more serious discussion towards quality assurance i.e., focusing more on the processes, to ensure that children are nurtured in an environment that provides them with a solid foundation as they grow and develop further.

7.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors affirm there is no conflict of interest in the research and the development of this article.

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9.0 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lihanna Borhan: main author, overall framework, data analysis, discussion, final write-up; Ameerah Abdul Azmil, Venisry a/p Periasamy Gnana Sambathar, Auni Hanisah Mahadzir, Nurhanan Ahmad Shakri: data collection, data analysis, preliminary write-up of findings

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