
CROSSING THE BRIDGE: PRACTICUM, TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, AND CURRICULUM REALITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Practicum is frequently characterised as the passage that bridges theoretical knowledge with practical application. For student-teachers in early childhood education, this journey transcends mere skill acquisition; it constitutes a transformative journey wherein personal beliefs, professional values, and teaching identities undergo profound redefinition. This paper investigates how practicum experiences cultivate transformative learning through experiential application, collaborative mentorship, and the evolution of teacher identity. Drawing upon Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, alongside Fullan's Change Theory, Rogan & Grayson's Framework, and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study conceptualises practicum as both a rite of passage and a context where the realities of national curricula intersect with personal metamorphosis. Findings from the literature reveal that while practicum placements present challenges, they simultaneously promote critical reflection, peer collaboration, and substantial professional growth. Mentorship emerges as a pivotal element in shaping student-teachers' confidence and adaptive pedagogical practices. Reflective engagement facilitates the reassessment of assumptions and values, fostering a more open-minded and enlightened outlook. This paper contends that practicum should not merely be regarded as a requisite, but rather as a rite of passage a process of becoming. By integrating mentorship, structured reflection, and supportive placements, teacher education programmes can nurture educators who are not only proficient but also empathetic, adaptive, and ethically grounded.

Keywords: Practicum, Transformative Learning, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Identity, Mentorship, Curriculum Implementation.

Author:

Teh Lai Ling (Perdana University, Malaysia)

Correspondence: tehlailing@perdanauniversity.edu.my

1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a pivotal role in nurturing holistic development and school preparedness amongst children, guiding them in their formative years and ultimately moulding the futures of individuals and communities alike. In Malaysia, the ECE landscape is characterised by a dual system comprising public and private preschools, each boasting its own unique character and approach to cultivating young minds. Public preschools tend to operate under the rigorous guidelines set by the Ministry of Education, providing a consistent framework for early learning. In contrast, private preschools often offer a more flexible, creative environment tailored to the specific needs, interests, and potential of their students, fostering a sense of curiosity and exploration that is vital for young learners.

While the Ministry of Education mandates the implementation of the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) across both sectors, disparities in compliance and fidelity persist, revealing a concerning divergence in educational quality. This variance is not merely a bureaucratic issue; it profoundly impacts the very experiences of children during these impressionable years. The environment in which they learn can either ignite their passion for knowledge or stifle their educational journey. Private preschools, which cater to a significant portion of Malaysia's young learners, often find themselves navigating a system of challenges related to curriculum adaptation, teacher qualifications, and institutional autonomy, all of which can impact the quality of education they provide.

These curriculum realities form the backdrop against which practicum experiences unfold for student-teachers. The practicum is not simply a site for skill acquisition but also a rich and lived encounter with structural challenges, policy expectations, and personal identity formation. As such, it becomes both a transformative journey and a vital context in which student-teachers must reconcile theoretical frameworks, curriculum mandates, and the complexity of classroom dynamics. Their experiences within this framework not only shape their professional identities but also influence their perspectives on educational practices, enriching their understanding of how to foster an environment that champions every child's unique potential and supports their holistic development.

2. Policy Context and Curriculum Reform

The NPSC was instituted to guarantee uniform quality and developmentally appropriate practices across Malaysian preschools, recognising the fundamental importance of early childhood education in shaping future citizens. Grounded in the National Education Philosophy, it emphasises a child-centric, holistic approach to development that encompasses cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This comprehensive framework aims to cultivate well-rounded individuals who are not only academically prepared but also equipped to navigate the complexities of life with resilience and empathy.

Nevertheless, despite the NPSC's noble intentions and a commitment to enhancing the preschool landscape, numerous private preschool providers frequently adapt or substitute these guidelines with alternative curricula, such as Montessori or thematic learning models. These alternatives are often perceived as more fitting for their unique educational environments, providing them with the flexibility to tailor their approaches to meet the individual needs of their students. This preference for alternative frameworks is particularly evident in areas where educators feel a deep personal connection to certain pedagogical philosophies, inspiring them to create enriching and engaging learning spaces for young children.

This inconsistency arises from a multitude of factors, including divergent pedagogical beliefs, varying resource availability, competitive market dynamics, and fluctuating parental expectations. In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, the pressures that preschools face to differentiate themselves and attract families can lead to a departure from established guidelines. As a result, the landscape of early childhood education in Malaysia becomes increasingly fragmented, leading to disparities in the quality and nature of preschool experiences available to children (Masnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021). Such fragmentation can have profound implications for children's developmental outcomes, with some children benefitting from nurturing and well-structured environments while others may find themselves in less supportive settings.

Even when private preschools recognise the importance of the NPSC, its principles are often not thoroughly integrated into daily practice. Educators may genuinely wish to adhere to the NPSC's ideals, yet they frequently encounter obstacles such as limited training, insufficient resources, or a lack of institutional support. Consequently, many educators and children navigate inconsistent applications of foundational educational ideals, making it all the more challenging to provide a high-quality preschool experience. This inconsistency not only affects teaching practices but can also leave parents feeling uncertain about the educational quality their children are receiving.

The aspiration for a cohesive, high-standard preschool experience for all children in Malaysia remains an intricate challenge, necessitating ongoing dialogue among educators, policymakers, and families, along with a collective recommitment to the foundational principles outlined by the NPSC. Such efforts are essential to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive in their formative years, establishing a robust foundation for their lifelong learning journey. This process requires heartfelt collaboration and understanding, valuing each child's individuality and the diverse contexts in which they learn. Through commitment and mutual support, all stakeholders can work together to nurture a meaningful educational experience that genuinely enriches the lives of young learners.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

This paper draws upon four pivotal theoretical frameworks to conceptualise the complex and multifaceted practicum and curriculum implementation process. Each framework provides a unique lens through which we can better understand the intricate dynamics at play in educational contexts.

Firstly, we consider Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, which posits that critical reflection is not merely an academic exercise but a vital component in shifting one's frames of reference. By engaging in deep reflection, educators can cultivate a more nuanced understanding of their practices, ultimately leading to profound professional transformation. This process of reflection encourages practitioners to question their assumptions, confront biases, and embrace new perspectives, resulting in enhanced teaching methodologies and a more impactful learning experience for their students.

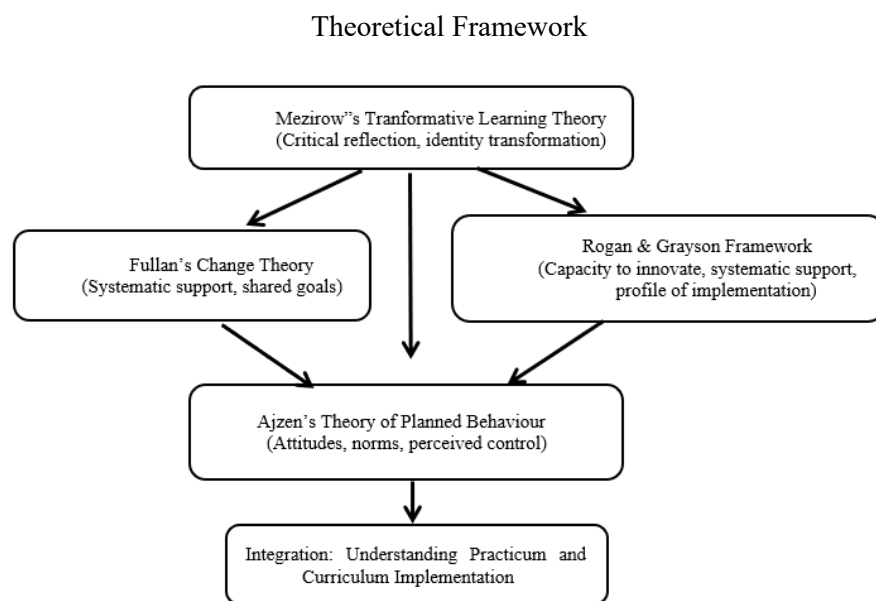
Secondly, Fullan's Change Theory (2015) articulates that educational reform is not a solitary endeavour; it necessitates the establishment of shared goals and a community-oriented approach. For reform to take root, there must be an internal commitment among educators to drive change, coupled with supportive systems that facilitate this initiative. Fullan emphasises that these collective efforts must foster a culture of collaboration, ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of the educational reform process. This communal commitment provides a robust foundation upon which lasting change can be built.

Thirdly, Rogan and Grayson's Framework (2003) draws attention to the capacity to innovate within educational settings. It stresses that success in reform hinges upon systemic support and the ability to implement tailored strategies that address specific contextual needs. By focusing on profiles of implementation, this framework evaluates the various dimensions that contribute to effective reform. In this light, the process becomes not just about enacting changes but also about nurturing an environment ripe for innovation where educators feel empowered to experiment and adapt.

Finally, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour offers a behavioural perspective, shedding light on the factors influencing teachers' implementation practices. It posits that educators' attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly shape their willingness and ability to embrace new methods. By understanding these psychological and social dimensions, we can better support educators in their journeys, recognising the importance of building a positive and supportive atmosphere that encourages progressive practices.

In integrating these theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to illuminate the complexities inherent in practicum and curriculum implementation. By doing so, it advocates for a more holistic approach to educational reform that prioritises critical reflection, collective engagement, innovative capacity, and an understanding of the behavioural determinants influencing educator practices. The synthesis of these ideas not only enriches our comprehension but also paves the way for more effective, sustainable reforms in educational settings. The convergence of these frameworks illuminates how practicum serves

both as a context for identity formation and as an encounter with the multifaceted realities of the curriculum. This vital intersection is not merely an academic exercise; it becomes a deeply personal journey for student-teachers, one that shapes their professional identities and pedagogical approaches. Together, they provide a holistic understanding of how student-teachers interpret, adapt to, and enact reforms within their professional landscapes. It is within this dynamic environment that the complexities of teaching are navigated, allowing educators to forge meaningful connections between theory and practice, thereby enriching not only their own professional development but also the educational experiences of their pupils' journeys.



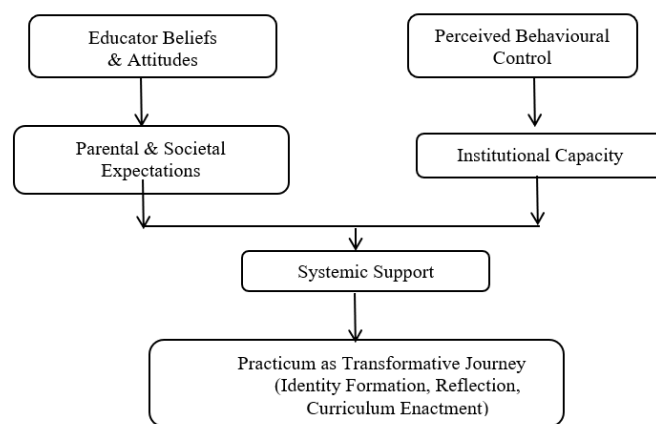
4. Conceptual Framework

Integrating these theories, the paper articulates a sophisticated conceptual framework delineating five interrelated dimensions: educator beliefs and attitudes, perceived behavioural control, institutional capacity, parental and societal expectations, and systemic support. These multifaceted dimensions significantly influence how educators make critical decisions, implement curriculum content, and respond to external pressures within the complex landscape of educational systems.

For instance, a student-teacher's conviction in play-based learning may be nurtured in diverse practicum contexts, yet it necessitates reinforcement through robust administrative endorsement, ongoing professional development, and alignment with parental aspirations and societal norms. This intricate interplay is paramount in cultivating innovative pedagogical methodologies, as highlighted by Korthagen (2004) and Loughran (2006). Furthermore, the practicum experience is globally acknowledged as one of the most potent elements of teacher education, effectively shaping enduring professional dispositions and competencies in educators (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010).

The conceptual framework further underscores critical leverage points for targeted policy interventions, including mentorship programmes, structured reflection practices, and systemic support mechanisms, which collectively serve to enhance curriculum fidelity and facilitate holistic professional transformation. By recognising and addressing these interdependent dimensions, educational stakeholders can contribute significantly to the evolution of teaching practices that are not only reflective of contemporary educational theories but also responsive to the ever-changing demands of society. Thus, it becomes imperative for institutions to consider these multifaceted dimensions in their strategic planning and policy formulation to ultimately improve educational outcomes and foster a conducive learning environment.

Conceptual Framework



5. Challenges in Implementing Private Preschools

Multiple studies have identified significant barriers to the effective implementation of curricula in Malaysia's private preschools. A prevalent concern is that many teachers may lack the formal training or qualifications essential for adeptly interpreting and applying the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPSC) (Masnan et al., 2021). This deficiency not only hampers their ability to deliver a comprehensive educational experience but also stifles the innovative teaching methods that are crucial for fostering creativity and critical thinking in young learners.

Moreover, institutional constraints present formidable challenges; large class sizes often inhibit individual attention, while rigid routines can stifle the natural curiosity and spontaneity of children. Additionally, limited resources ranging from insufficient learning materials to inadequate outdoor play areas further inhibit the enactment of child-centred activities that are vital for holistic development (Masnan et al., 2021).

Compounding these challenges is the commercial nature of certain private preschools, where an overemphasis on academic performance tends to overshadow the curriculum's holistic objectives. In

striving to meet the high expectations of parents regarding their children's education, these institutions risk neglecting the broader developmental goals that encompass emotional, social, and physical growth (Romarzila et al., 2021).

Furthermore, systemic challenges are prevalent within this educational landscape, characterised by minimal supervision and inconsistent support from educational authorities. The lack of structured guidance and oversight compromises the quality of education and makes it difficult for schools to address the various issues they face (Omar et al., 2021).

Consequently, the interplay of these barriers creates a complex environment that significantly impacts the overall quality of early childhood education in Malaysia's private preschools, ultimately affecting the formative experiences of young children during their crucial years of development.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The proposed conceptual framework outlines several vital implications for improving the implementation of curricula in private preschools across Malaysia. It is of the utmost importance that policymakers develop differentiated professional development programmes carefully tailored to address the unique and diverse needs of private educators. This differentiation will ensure that training is not only relevant but also impactful, empowering teachers to thrive in their roles and better cater to the varying demands of their young learners.

Furthermore, it is essential for monitoring systems to transition from a punitive compliance model towards one that emphasises developmental support. By fostering an environment where educators feel supported rather than scrutinised, we can cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth.

Moreover, the implementation of financial and policy incentives could serve as a catalyst, encouraging private providers to align more closely with the objectives set forth by the National Preschool Standards and Curriculum (NPSC). Such alignment is vital, as it ensures that all educational providers work towards a common vision of excellence in early childhood education ((Romarzila et al., 2021).

Lastly, a pivotal aspect of this framework involves actively engaging parents in curriculum literacy initiatives. By empowering parents with the knowledge and tools necessary to understand the curriculum, we can foster a robust home-school alignment, thereby significantly enhancing the prospects for child development. This collaborative approach will not only bridge the gap between home and school but will also affirm the vital role that families play in the educational journey of their children.

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