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Education Access Policy in Malaysia's Education Blueprint: A Phenomenological Study of Equitable Quality in Public Preschool

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Abstract

This study explored the policy engagement of Malaysia's National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Blueprint), focusing on the lived experiences of teachers in public preschools. The study aimed to uncover how teachers interpret and implement the Blueprint, particularly in promoting equitable quality education within Malaysia's preschool education context. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, the study utilised semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling with twelve preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur. This methodology enabled a thorough exploration of the interplay between policy texts, institutional power and teachers' backgrounds. Data were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA), revealing systemic tensions between policy intent and classroom realities. Through IPA, six superordinate themes emerged: systemic barriers, negotiated agency, and moral-emotional dimensions were evident in policy interpretation; and operational challenges, praxis in adaptation, and identity-ethics were presented in policy implementation. The study critiques bureaucratic performativity and resource disparities that undermine equitable access, advocating for policy clarity, participatory teacher involvement, equitable resource allocation, and collaborative governance. By theorising teacher agency through Bourdieu's framework and hermeneutic phenomenology, the research repositions teachers as co-constructors of policy knowledge, urging responsive reforms that reconcile systemic constraints with localised innovation. Furthermore, the study emphasises the critical role of government agencies in supporting teachers through clear guidelines and resources. It also underscores the importance of enhancing policy clarity and communication to ensure that teachers can effectively implement the Blueprint. By centering teachers' voices and experiences, the study provides valuable insights into the complexities of educational policy implementation and offers practical recommendations for improvement. Finally, the study contributes to the understanding of how educational policy was interpreted and enacted in diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. It highlights the need for the Blueprint (and any policy) that is adaptable to local realities and responsive for all children. The findings have implications for policymakers, teachers, and researchers, offering recommendations for enhancing equitable quality education in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Malaysia Education Blueprint, early childhood education, public preschool, hermeneutic phenomenology, education policy, Bourdieu's framework, equitable quality education*, *education access*

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AGD	Accountant General Department Malaysia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BECERA	British Early Childhood Education Research Association
C4D	Communication for Development
CCC	Central Curriculum Committee
CEU	Central European University
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DEOs	District Education Offices
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
DPM	Department of Prime Minister's Office
DSPK	Malaysia Curriculum and Assessment Standards Document
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ECCE	Education and Care in Malaysia
ECEC	early childhood education and care
ELT	English Language Teaching
EPC	Educational Planning Committee
EPRD	Educational Planning and Research Division
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
EQP	Equitable Quality Policy
eRAS	Educational Research Application System
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
ETP	Economic Transformation Programme
FYPs	Five-Year Development Plans
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEM	General Education Monitoring
GPDR	General Data Protection Regulation
GTP	Government Transformation Programme
GTP-ETP	Economic Transformation Programme (ETP)
HEAD	The Head Foundation

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDEA	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDELA	International Development and Early Learning Assessment
IELS	International Early Learning Study
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IRP	Interpretive Research Paradigm
JKM	Department of Social Welfare
JPNIN	Department of National Unity and Integration
KEMAS	Ministry of Rural and Regional Development
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
KPM	Ministry of Education
KPWKM	Ministry of Rural and Regional Development
LIFE	Lapland International Forum of Education
MAIWP	Federal Territory Islamic Religious Council
MEB	Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MOE	Ministry of Education
MSC	Malaysia Skill Certification
NAPLAN	The Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NEM	New Economic Model
NEP	National Educational Policy
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NMQS	National Minimum Quality Standards
NPCS	National Preschool Curriculum Standards
NPM	New Public Management
NPQS	National Preschool Quality Standard
NPSC	National Preschool Committee, curriculum standardisation
NSPC	National Standard Preschool Curriculum
NTP	National Transformation Programme
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

OPP	Outline Perspective Plans
PEMANDU	Performance Management and Delivery Unit
PERMATA	Permata Program
PERPADUAN	Preschool under Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), Ministry of National Unity
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
PISA	Programme for International Children Assessment
PPPs	Public-Private partnerships
Pre-K	Pre-Kindergarten
QIAS	Quality Improvement Accreditation System
ROI	Return of investment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goals (Article 4)
SEAMEO-CECCEP	Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre For Early Childhood Care
SEDs	State Education Departments
SEED	Study of Early Education and Development
TA	Teaching Assistants
TABIKA	*Taman Bimbingan Kanak-kanak* (Kindergarten under KEMAS – Government Agency)
TADIKA	*Taman Didikan Kanak-kanak* (Kindergarten)
TIMMS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGA	United Nation General Assembly
UNHCR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nation's Children Fund
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development

Glossary

Administrative Bottlenecks	Delays or obstacles in the administrative process that hinder progress.
Agency	The capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices.
Audit Trail	A transparent record of the research process, including decisions and changes made.
Back-Translation	The process of translating a document back into the original language to check for accuracy.
Blueprint	A comprehensive plan developed by the Malaysian government to transform the country's education system.
Bourdieu's Social Critical Theory	A theoretical framework focusing on habitus, capital, and field to understand the relationship between agency and structure.
Centralised Governance	A system where decision-making is concentrated at a central point.
Cross-Case Patterns	Similarities or trends observed across different cases in a study.
Cultural Brokerage	The act of mediating between different cultural contexts.
Cultural Norms	Shared expectations and rules that guide behaviour within a cultural group.
Cultural Resonance	The extent to which a concept or practice aligns with cultural values and beliefs.
Cultural Sensitivity	Awareness and respect for cultural differences in research and practice.
Curriculum Framework	A structured plan that outlines the content and objectives of an educational program.
Decentralised Implementation	The distribution of decision-making authority across different levels or locations.
Dialectic Interplay	The interaction between opposing forces or ideas.
Educational Access	The opportunity for all individuals to receive education, often focusing on removing barriers.

Educational Access Policy	Guidelines and regulations that ensure all individuals have the opportunity to receive education.
Educational Assessment	The process of evaluating children' learning and performance through various methods.
Educational Challenges	Difficulties and obstacles faced in the education system that require solutions.
Educational Collaboration	The partnership and cooperation among educators, institutions, and stakeholders to achieve common goals.
Educational Context	The environment and circumstances in which education takes place, including cultural, social, and economic factors.
Educational Disparities	Differences in educational opportunities and outcomes among different groups.
Educational Equity	The principle of providing fair and just access to educational opportunities for all children.
Educational Goals	The desired outcomes and objectives of an education system or program.
Educational Improvement	The efforts to enhance the quality and effectiveness of education.
Educational Infrastructure	The physical and organizational structures needed for the operation of an education system.
Educational Innovation	The introduction of new ideas and practices to improve education.
Educational Leadership	The guidance and direction provided by individuals in positions of authority within the education system.
Educational Modernity	The adoption of contemporary educational practices and standards.
Educational Outcomes	The results and achievements of an educational process, often measured by assessments.
Educational Policy	A set of guidelines and regulations that govern educational practices and systems.
Educational Policy Analysis	The study and evaluation of educational policies to understand their impact and effectiveness.

Educational Policy Reform	Changes made to improve educational policies and systems.
Educational Practice	The methods and techniques used by educators in teaching and learning processes.
Educational Reform	Changes and improvements made to an education system to enhance its effectiveness.
Educational Research	The systematic study of education systems, practices, and outcomes.
Educational Standards	The benchmarks and criteria used to measure educational quality and performance.
Educational Strategies	Plans and actions designed to achieve specific educational goals.
Emergent Themes	Patterns or ideas that arise during the analysis of qualitative data.
Epistemic Sovereignty	The authority to define and interpret knowledge within one's cultural context.
Epistemology	The study of knowledge and how it is acquired.
Equity	Fairness and justice in education, ensuring all children have access to quality education.
Equity Metrics	Measures used to assess fairness and justice in educational outcomes.
Ethnic Stratification	The hierarchical organization of ethnic groups within a society.
Global Benchmarking	The process of comparing practices or standards against international norms.
Global Policy Ideals	International standards and goals for education.
Hermeneutic Circle	The process of understanding a text by interpreting its parts and whole in relation to each other.
Hermeneutic Phenomenology	A research approach focusing on the interpretation of lived experiences.
Hierarchical Policy	Top-down or bottom up organisation in policymaking
Holistic Development	An approach to education that considers the whole child, including emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Idiomatic Expressions	Phrases whose meanings are not deducible from the literal meanings of the words.
Institutional Discourse	The language and communication practices used within an organization or institution.
Institutional Support	Resources and assistance provided by an organization to help individuals achieve their goals.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	A qualitative research method used to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences.
Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK)	National curriculum standard in Malaysia.
Linguistic Agency	The ability to use language to express oneself and influence others.
Localised Ontologies	The specific cultural and social realities of a local context.
Macro Policy	High-level, systemic policies designed by national/international bodies
Micro Policy	Localised policy enactment, adopt macro-policies to the specific context
Multiculturalism	The presence and co-existence of diverse cultural groups within a society.
Multilingual Learners	Children who are learning in more than one language.
Noema	The textual reality of a policy, such as the Blueprint's vision.
Noesis	The lived acts of policy engagement by teachers.
Ontology	The study of being and existence, often used in research to describe the nature of reality.
Parental Involvement	The participation of parents in their children's education and school activities.
Pedagogy	The art and science of teaching and educational methods.
Performative Compliance	Actions taken to meet formal requirements without genuine engagement or change.
Person Experiential Themes	Themes that emerge from the personal experiences of individuals.

Phenomenological Study	A research approach that focuses on the lived experiences of individuals.
Phronesis	Practical wisdom or the ability to make prudent decisions.
Policy Actors	Individuals or groups who shape, interpret or implement policies.
Policy Adaptation	The process of modifying policies to fit local contexts and needs.
Policy Advocacy	The act of supporting and promoting policies to achieve desired outcomes.
Policy Alignment	The process of ensuring that policies are consistent with goals and objectives.
Policy Communication	The dissemination of policy information to stakeholders and the public.
Policy Critique	The analysis and evaluation of policies to identify strengths and weaknesses.
Policy Development	The process of creating and formulating policies to address specific issues.
Policy Dissemination	The process of distributing and communicating policy information to relevant stakeholders.
Policy Evaluation	The assessment of the effectiveness and impact of policies.
Policy Feedback	The responses and evaluations of policies from stakeholders and participants.
Policy Framework	A structured plan that outlines the principles and guidelines for policy development and implementation.
Policy Illiteracy	A lack of understanding or knowledge about policy goals and objectives.
Policy Impact	The effects and outcomes of policies on
Policy Implementation	The process of putting educational policies into action within schools and classrooms.
Policy Implementation Challenges	Difficulties encountered in putting policies into practice.

Policy Integration	The incorporation of policies into existing systems and practices.
Policy Negotiation	The process of discussing and reaching agreements on policy issues.
Policy Revision	The process of reviewing and updating policies to improve their effectiveness.
Policy Stakeholders	Individuals or groups with an interest in the outcomes of a policy.
Positionality	The social and political context that influences a person's identity and perspective.
Postcolonial Context	The historical and cultural context following the end of colonial rule.
Praxis	The process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted or practiced.
Quirkos	A software tool used for qualitative data analysis.
Reflexive Journal	A personal record used by researchers to document their thoughts and decisions during the research process.
Reflexive Memoing	The process of writing reflective notes during research to capture thoughts and insights.
Rukun Negara	Malaysia’s national principles.
Semantic Accuracy	The precision of meaning in language translation or interpretation.
Semantic Content	The meaning conveyed by language or text.
Social Reproduction	The process by which social structures and inequalities are perpetuated over time.
Socioeconomic Factors	Social and economic conditions that influence individuals' opportunities and outcomes.
Stakeholder Engagement	The involvement of individuals or groups with an interest in the outcomes of a project or policy.
Standardised Assessments	Tests administered and scored in a consistent manner to measure educational achievement.
Systemic Barriers	Obstacles within a system that hinder progress or access.

Systemic Constraints	Limitations imposed by the structure or organization of a system.
Systemically Inadequate Resourcing	Insufficient resources provided by the system to support educational goals.
Teacher Agency	The ability of teachers to make decisions and take actions that influence their teaching and children' learning.
Teacher Solidarity	The unity and support among teachers in advocating for common goals and interests.
Teacher Training	Programs and courses designed to prepare individuals for the teaching profession.
Thick Description	A detailed account of a cultural context that includes the meanings and intentions behind actions.
Tokenism	The practice of making a symbolic effort to include members of minority groups.

Executive Summary

The title of the research is "*Education Access Policy in Malaysia's Education Blueprint: A Phenomenological Study of Equitable Quality in Public Preschools".*

The aim of this research was to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices related to educational access, with the goal of promoting equitable quality education within the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Blueprint) framework, which provided the national policy context for early childhood education in Malaysia.

The primary objective of this research was to explore local interpretations and perceptions from teachers' perspectives of national education policy in relation to equitable access to quality education in early childhood education and care in Malaysia. The secondary objective was to explore the lived experiences of early childhood teachers in implementing the national education policy with regard to educational access, promoting equitable and quality early childhood education and care.

The research methods helped identify policy trends and implementation strategies in the early childhood sector within the Blueprint, enabling recommendations for policy reforms and re-enactments to be made. The following research questions were designed to achieve the objectives of the research:

1. What do public preschool teachers experience in interpreting national policy in relation to educational access for promoting equitable quality in early childhood education?
2. What do public preschool teachers experience in practising educational access policy in the promotion of equitable quality in early childhood education?

To address these questions, individual semi-structured interviews and teachers' journals were conducted with early childhood teachers. The aim was to learn about their perspectives and experiences regarding access to education that would promote equitable quality education in a preschool setting, based on the hermeneutic phenomenology study as the research method. The research adopted synchronous

communication (online) to conduct the interview session. Additionally, the second method involved reflections from the teacher's journal on their experiences in implementing the Blueprint, particularly in relation to the early childhood area in their setting.

The population of this study was based in the urban state of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, focusing on public preschools in early childhood education from various government agencies. This study employed purposive sampling to select individuals who had experienced the phenomenon of interest, which was suitable for phenomenological designs. In this research, it was intended that data be gathered from early childhood teachers who have experienced adopting an educational access policy in equitable quality education within the setting. This approach was adapted to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest, thereby confirming the credibility of the study.

The recruitment process was developed using a screening survey within purposive sampling. This survey was employed to identify localities and participants for semi-structured interviews and journaling. The screening criteria involved filtering the general population based on the highest qualification, years of experience in public preschool, position and roles in the preschool, attendance at the Blueprint course, training, or town hall, and proficiency. Twelve teachers participated in individual interviews and journals, which took around up to 110 minutes and included four reflections, respectively. Interviews were conducted and recorded in a private setting to maintain confidentiality. Participants were interviewed via an online video conferencing tool known as Teams, and due to ethical considerations, only audio was recorded for further processing. Prior to the recorded interview session, the Participant Information Sheet was reviewed, and verbal consent was obtained.

The study was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, drawing on the work of Heidegger to explore how preschool teachers interpreted and enacted the Blueprint. Hermeneutic phenomenology in this study positioned understanding as an interpretative process shaped by context, relationship, and lived experiences. For data analysis, the study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a guiding framework. In this study, IPA aligned with the hermeneutic tradition and offers

a structured, idiographic method for exploring how teachers as individuals make sense of their experiences. This design enabled the study to remain grounded in philosophical depth while ensuring analytic clarity and rigour; the six steps of the IPA procedure were employed in this stage.

The findings revealed six main superordinate themes that highlighted critical tensions in policy engagement. For policy interpretation, three themes emerged: systemic barriers, negotiated agency, and moral-emotional dimensions. Meanwhile, for policy implementation, three themes also dominated: operational challenges, praxis in adaptation, and identity and ethics. Both phases reflected the struggles between systemic constraints and adaptive agency. Interpretation focused on decoding ambiguities and emotional-ethical trade-offs, while implementation prioritises operational hurdles and identity negotiations. Creativity, collaboration, and leadership variability emerged as adaptive tools, yet they were unevenly distributed. The findings were underpinned by discussions that addressed both research questions accordingly. Additionally, these discussions were extended to explore the interplay within and between policy interpretation and implementation. The discussions centred on reciprocal reinforcement pathways for policy engagement, which were analysed in two ways: through vicious and virtuous interplays, supported by evidence from the findings.

This study proposed actionable reforms and future research directions to enhance equitable quality in Malaysia's early childhood education policy. Key recommendations include: (1) Enhancing policy clarity through simplified frameworks, regional modular guidelines, and multidirectional communication channels to reduce ambiguity and foster accountability; (2) Strengthening teacher involvement in policy co-creation via deliberative forums, ministerial committees, and participatory models; (3) Optimizing resource allocation using weighted funding for marginalized regions and embedding iterative, classroom-focused CPD programs; (4) Advancing collaborative governance through cross-sectoral partnerships to build relational trust; and (5) Promoting pedagogical flexibility with curricula balancing system-wide goals and localized adaptation, supported by design-thinking training.

Furthermore, this study advanced knowledge by theorising teacher agency in policy interpretation through Bourdieu's lens, revealing how institutional, cultural, and material constraints shaped compliance and compromise. It exposed systemic inequities in Malaysia's early childhood education, demonstrating how resource disparities and bureaucratic performativity undermine equitable access despite policy intentions. The research redefined governance roles, advocating collaborative networks over hierarchical enforcement, and highlighted support systems as ecological conversion factors bridging macro-micro gaps. By positioning teachers as co-constructors of policy knowledge, it challenged exclusionary design processes, proposing participatory frameworks where lived experience informs reform. These insights enriched global debates on equitable education, emphasising context-sensitive, teacher-empowered policymaking.

Finally, the study concluded that equitable quality in early childhood education within the Blueprint required reconciling systemic constraints with teachers' adaptive agency. Policy engagement was shaped by interpretative and operational cycles, highlighting the need for responsive reforms towards the implementation in preschool education practice in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The formative years of childhood lay the foundation for societal progress, with equitable access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) recognised globally as both a moral imperative and an economic catalyst (World Bank, 2023). Anchored in global frameworks such as UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nations are increasingly prioritising ECEC to break cycles of intergenerational inequity (UNESCO, 2016). In Malaysia, this commitment is enshrined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Blueprint), which envisions universal preschool access as a keystone for nurturing holistic development and national cohesion (UNICEF, 2023b). Yet, beneath its aspirational targets lies a complex landscape where policy ambitions collide with on-the-ground realities, including geographical disparities, uneven resource allocation, and the under-recognised agency of preschool teachers as pivotal policy actors.

The introductory chapter for the thesis situates the research within the context of current practice and policy landscapes in ECEC. This study clarifies the need by exploring unresolved tensions and gaps between policy aspirations and implementation realities, particularly in Malaysia's pursuit of preschool education under the Blueprint. This chapter establishes the rationale for exploring how teachers interpret and implement policy mandates in ECEC settings, providing a critical bridge between macro-level policymaking and micro-level implementation from the teachers' perspective. The following section outlines the research's conceptual foundations and background, objectives, significance, and scope, culminating in a roadmap to explore how equitable quality in public preschools can transition from rhetoric to reality through the Blueprint. Additionally, this chapter provides key terminology definitions and articulates the researcher's positionality in this study, ensuring a cohesive foundation for the subsequent formulation of research questions and methodological design.

1.1 Early Childhood Education: Global Significance and Malaysia's Policy-Practice Background

Global Imperatives and Malaysia's Progress Toward Equity in ECEC

An increased acknowledgement of the significance of early childhood as a critical phase for growth and brain development has resulted in heightened global attention to ECEC (World Bank, 2023). The first five years of life represent the most critical phase of human development and growth, with approximately 90% of brain development occurring during this period (UNICEF, 2020). Boyd (2020) states that children are significantly impacted by their environment and the people surrounding them. Early childhood education serves not only as preparation for primary education but also strives to establish a robust and comprehensive foundation for lifelong learning by addressing holistic development, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Denboba *et al.*, 2016).

Investing in ECEC generates a multiplier effect, yielding economic and social returns for individuals and societies. Robust evidence demonstrates that high-quality ECEC programmes, such as the Perry Preschool Project, deliver seven to ten per cent of annual returns through higher adult earnings and reduced social costs, including crime and welfare dependency (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Meloy, Gardner and Darling-Hammond, 2019). Moreover, longitudinal studies underscore its role in narrowing inequalities, where children from disadvantaged backgrounds who receive early interventions earn 25% higher wages as adults (Denboba *et al.*, 2016), while preschool participation correlates with a seventeen-dollar social return per dollar invested and improved high school graduation rates (Meloy, Gardner and Darling-Hammond, 2019; Siraj *et al.*, 2023). Critically, neglecting investments in the first thousand days risks irreversible deficits in health, cognition, and socioeconomic mobility, perpetuating disparities (Nores *et al.*, 2024). Cross-sector collaboration and data-driven funding are essential to maximise developmental returns, as ECEC strengthens human capital, fosters gender equality, and enhances social cohesion (MacLeod and Urquiola, 2018; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018). By prioritising scalable, equity-focused programmes that span nutrition, healthcare, and carer support, policymakers can unlock transformative, intergenerational benefits for national economies (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018; Nores *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, global efforts to expand preschool access reflect overwhelming evidence of its long-term societal returns. Countries like Norway (OECD, 2018b), South Korea (UNESCO, 2022), and Malaysia have significantly increased enrolment, with Malaysia achieving an 83.5% preschool enrolment rate by 2020 through sustained investment

in 16,700 government and 9,100 private institutions (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2019; AGD (Accountant General's Department of Malaysia), 2022). Between 2010 and 2020, the government's expenditure on early childhood education operations increased by more than threefold, from RM247 million to RM837 million (AGD, 2022). However, Malaysia's spending on preschool education, at 0.15 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017, is relatively low compared to other countries. According to the report by the World Bank (2023), this is significantly lower than the 1 per cent of GDP target set by the OECD. The efforts to increase access can be seen, such as by policy frameworks like the Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013), which exemplify how strategic prioritisation of ECEC strengthens human capital and equity, including developed initiatives to enhance accessibility of preschool education (Economic Planning Unit (EPU), 2021; AGD, 2022).

Despite Malaysia's progress in preschool enrolment, persistent gaps in access, affordability, and quality hinder its goals of universal ECE. While enrolment reached 83.5% in 2020, disparities persist, with rural states like Sabah and Kelantan facing limited availability of preschool capacities due to under-resourced infrastructure, leaving many children unserved (World Bank, 2023). To achieve universal preschool enrolment, the Blueprint prioritised constructing new preschool facilities, particularly in underserved rural and low-income urban areas. This includes upgrading existing PERMATA (national early childhood centres) and integrating them into the Ministry of Education's formal system (Ministry of Education, 2022). For example, between 2013 and 2020, over 3,000 new public preschools were established, reducing reliance on informal community-based programmes. Moreover, to accelerate the expansion of ECEC, the Blueprint partnered with private providers through subsidised schemes, aiming to fill geographic gaps. Private operators received funding from the MOE and curriculum guidance to ensure alignment with national standards. In 2025, these collaborations covered 30% of preschool seats, although concerns persist about the consistency of quality and profit-driven motives in private centres (Mamat *et al.*, 2023; Ngadni and Saminder Singh, 2024).

Additionally, by 2020, only 65% of preschool teachers held diplomas in ECEC, falling short of national targets (Ministry of Education, 2021). Affordability remains a barrier for low-income families, compounded by fragmented governance and overlapping mandates across six ministries, which create inefficiencies in service delivery (Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Parental

awareness gaps further exacerbate inequities, as surveys reveal that 30% of rural households undervalue the role of ECEC in foundational skills development (World Bank, 2023). These challenges mirror trends in other developing nations, such as Indonesia and Nigeria, where systemic underfunding and coordination failures stall equitable access (Ololade Elizabeth Adewusi *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

Policy Implementation: Ambiguities, Institutional Dynamics, and Teacher Agency in Malaysia's Blueprint

The persistent gaps in Malaysia's preschool system underscore the inherent complexity of translating social policies into effective practice. Evaluating the impact of educational policy is notoriously challenging due to the absence of universally accepted analytical frameworks (Kymissis, 2021) and the contextual variability of implementation. For instance, the Blueprint, despite its clear goals of improving access, quality, and equity, has faced uneven interpretation across stakeholders, mirroring patterns observed in other developing countries (Barton, 2008; Layne *et al.*, 2024). Spours, Coffield, and Gregson (2007) conceptualise this complexity through three dimensions: (1) policy drivers and levers (mechanisms and intent), (2) the 'bigger blacker box' (unpredictable systemic interactions), and (3) targets and outputs (measurable outcomes). In Malaysia, the Blueprint's strategic shifts, such as universal enrolment and teacher upskilling, function as policy drivers. However, as Barton (2008) noted, these drivers are reinterpreted at different governance levels, which means that ministerial directives may diverge from their execution at the school level, creating inconsistencies. For example, the mandate for preschool teachers to hold diplomas in early childhood education by 2020 was only partially met (Ministry of Education, 2021), reflecting ambiguities in resource allocation and accountability.

Such disconnects align with Spours, Coffield, and Gregson's (2007) "bigger blacker box" concept, where the overlapping roles of ministries and fragmented data systems obscure policy outcomes (World Bank, 2023). The Blueprint's implementation occurs within a diverse range of educational institutions, each with its own unique culture, resources, and challenges on a country basis. This diversity means that the processes of policy implementation can vary significantly from one institution to another. The variation is caused by several factors, including regional disparities, resource availability, teacher training, and local leadership (Ainscow, 2016). All play a role in shaping how the Blueprint is enacted and implemented. The complexity within this

‘bigger blacker box’ can lead to uneven implementation and outcomes, making it difficult to generalise the success of the policy across all educational contexts. The challenges are not unique to Malaysia; similar implementation gaps plague education reforms globally, particularly where governance structures lack coherence (UNESCO, 2022).

The last dimension is targets and outputs; while the Blueprint prioritises measurable outputs like PISA and TIMSS scores (Ministry of Education, 2022), overreliance on such standardised assessments risks overlooking critical dimensions of educational impact (Hin, 2020). For instance, improvements in children’s socioemotional well-being, teacher retention, and community trust are considered key predictors of long-term learning outcomes, which are rarely quantified (Shavitt *et al.*, 2022). In rural Sabah, preschools with high parent-teacher collaboration reported 30% higher attendance rates. However, they saw no corresponding gains in PISA-linked outcomes, highlighting a mismatch between policy targets and local priorities (UNICEF, 2023a). Similarly, teacher satisfaction surveys reveal that workloads tied to test preparation often undermine pedagogical creativity, a concern echoed in OECD (2021) studies of high-stakes accountability systems. These gaps align with Shavitt *et al.'*s (2022) critique that narrow metrics obscure the holistic benefits of education reforms, such as gender equity or social cohesion (MacLeod and Urquiola, 2018).

Additionally, to fully assess the Blueprint’s impact, mixed-method evaluations that balance quantitative benchmarks with qualitative insights are essential (Bakar, 2023). The HEAD Foundation (2019), a Singapore-based think tank focused on Asian education reform, identifies three systemic barriers that undermine Malaysia’s Blueprint: weak feedback loops, inaccurate information flows, and unrealistic policy design. These challenges are interdependent, perpetuating gaps between policy intent and implementation. First, centralised decision-making often excludes frontline stakeholders, such as teachers and rural administrators, resulting in policies that are detached from on-the-ground realities (Aziz *et al.*, 2021). For example, the mandate requiring all preschool teachers to hold diplomas in early childhood education by 2020 failed to account for access to rural training, leaving 35% of teachers in Sabah and Kelantan unqualified by the deadline (Ministry of Education, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Without a structured feedback mechanism, policymakers cannot adjust reforms to address such gaps, resulting in rigid and under-resourced mandates (Cheong *et al.*, 2016).

Second, inconsistent communication exacerbates implementation challenges. In Kelantan, conflicting directives from the Ministry of Education and the Welfare Department regarding teacher-children ratios led to operational paralysis in 40% of preschools (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, Sabah's rural teachers report receiving unclear guidance on bilingual curricula, which leads to confusion and mistrust (Bush *et al.*, 2023). These breakdowns reflect the observation by Honig (2006) that hierarchical systems often distort policy intent, leaving implementers unsupported. Third, ambitious targets frequently overlook systemic constraints. For instance, the Blueprint's universal enrolment goal did not initially address affordability barriers for low-income families, resulting in a 20-percentage-point gap between urban and rural enrolment rates (Ministry of Education, 2022). Likewise, infrastructure gaps, such as the insufficient number of classrooms in Sarawak, were overlooked in early policy drafts, thereby delaying progress (AGD, 2022). Such misalignment between aspirations and capacity fuels frustration, as evidenced by Malaysia's 35% teacher turnover rate in underserved regions (Bush and Ng, 2019). These challenges are mutually reinforcing. Weak feedback loops hinder the detection of information gaps, allowing unrealistic policies to persist despite incomplete data. To break this cycle, the HEAD Foundation (2019) emphasises decentralising decision-making, strengthening data systems, and aligning targets with resource realities. Without such reforms, Malaysia's education system risks perpetuating the inequities its Blueprint aims to address.

Research consistently highlights the necessity of integrating teachers' experiential insights into educational policy design (Wilinski, Morley and Landgraf, 2021; Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023; Choi and Bowers, 2024). Systems that prioritise teacher collaboration during policymaking, such as those in Finland and Singapore, demonstrate significantly higher policy adherence and better outcomes for children compared to top-down models (OECD, 2025). In contrast, Malaysia's Blueprint formulation involved fewer preschool teachers (Bakar, 2023), despite their critical role in assessing child development and adapting curricula (Ministry of Education, 2021). This exclusion has tangible consequences, where teachers report that professional development programmes emphasise theoretical training over classroom-ready strategies, limiting their capacity to implement reforms effectively (Bush *et al.*, 2023).

It becomes evident that the successful implementation of the Blueprint requires careful consideration of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in policy implementation.

Policymakers must recognise the varied interpretations of policy drivers, the intricate processes within educational institutions, and the limitations of relying solely on predetermined targets and outputs (Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021). To navigate this complexity, the implementation of the Blueprint can be more effective in addressing the diverse needs of Malaysia's education system and achieving its objectives by prioritising structured collaboration with stakeholders across all levels (Reznikova, Labanino and McKee Mathews, 2024). Hence, this research focuses on one of the policy actors, namely teachers, and examines how they contribute to policy implementation, aiming to capture their experiences within local factors. This study includes how they interpret the Blueprint at the initial stages and operationalise the policy in the context of their everyday practices and concerns in early childhood education settings.

Positioning Preschool Teachers as Policy Actors in the Blueprint

Studying the Blueprint through the lens of teachers' perspectives is a critical effort that explores the interplay between macro-level policy and the micro-level realities of pedagogical practice in preschool education. At its core, this approach challenges the traditional top-down policy paradigm, which often treats teachers as passive implementers rather than active agents whose lived experiences, knowledge, and contextual constraints shape policy outcomes (Setiawan, 2020). By focusing on the voices of preschool teachers, this study highlights the epistemological gaps in the development and implementation of the Blueprint. Although the Blueprint emphasises equity, it might risk inequities if disconnected from the ground challenges teachers face daily. From a policy analysis perspective, teachers' narratives reveal the hidden hierarchies of power embedded in the Blueprint's implementation (Giudici, 2021). While the government focuses on metrics to indicate quality (such as enrolment rates and teachers' training hours), it often obscures the ontological dissonance experienced by teachers who fulfil the competing demands, especially from the top. This situation shows teachers adhere to centralised mandates while addressing the localised needs of children from diverse communities. This reflects Malaysia's centralised education governance, which limits teachers' agency in curriculum adaptation and decision-making (Joseph, 2018). It effectively reduces teachers' role to policy receivers rather than co-constructors of equitable practice. Ultimately, this study underscores the connection between policy and practice. The Blueprint is

viewed as similar to other education policies, which are not static texts but dynamic processes continually reshaped by teachers' agency, resistance, and resilience (Groff, 2013). Thus, by foregrounding the teachers' perspective in exploring their experiences of interpreting and implementing the Blueprint, it advocates for the opportunity to reposition teachers as policy actors, occupying a liminal space between policy rhetoric and preschool realities.

1.2 Research Aim

The study had extensively explored and documented the national educational policy processes and their local impacts in public preschools in Malaysia. There is significantly less understanding regarding the implementation of the Blueprint, especially within early childhood education settings. Thus, this research aimed to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices related to educational access, as outlined in the Blueprint. This study was accomplished through the phenomenology of lived experiences of early childhood teachers in public preschools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this research was to explore local interpretations and experiences from the perspectives of public preschool teachers regarding national education policy and its impact on equitable access to quality education in early childhood education and care in Malaysia.

The secondary objective was to explore the lived experiences of early childhood teachers in implementing the national education policy regarding educational access, with a focus on promoting equitable, quality early childhood education and care in public preschool settings.

To achieve these objectives, individual semi-structured interview sessions and analyses of reflections from teachers' journals were conducted with early childhood teachers, aiming to gain insights into their perspectives on their experiences with the education access policy. This approach promoted equitable quality education in a

preschool setting through a hermeneutic phenomenology study. These research methods allowed this study to identify policy trends and implementation strategies, particularly among preschool teachers in Malaysia's early childhood education sector. The Blueprint served as the primary focus of the policy analysis, examining its impact on teachers who experienced it throughout their service in public preschool education, thereby enabling recommendations for policy reforms and reenactments to be made. Since a policy has both intended and unintended outcomes, the study developed detailed descriptive narratives of teachers' lived experiences regarding the implementation of the national policy aimed at equitable quality in early childhood education and care. Therefore, by exploring teachers' perspectives as key policy actors, the study gained insights into their experiences with the Blueprint, especially regarding how the educational access policy was understood and practised in preschool education to foster equitable quality education.

The following **research questions** were designed to achieve the objectives of the research within the phenomenological framework:

1. What do public preschool **teachers experience in interpreting** the national policy about educational access for promoting equitable quality in early childhood education?
2. What do public preschool **teachers experience in practising** the educational access policy in the promotion of equitable quality in early childhood education?

To answer those questions, the research adopted a phenomenological approach, where instead of offering a description or personal reflection of the experiences, the study aimed to examine the scope from a specific angle to understand the essence of the teachers' experiences. The focus was on exploring the most constant and fundamental elements of the teachers' experiences, and efforts were directed at identifying the most overt display of those experiences. From this viewpoint, the research focused on the questions of "what" and "how" a person experiences things, specifically in the case of the Blueprint (Van Manen, 2017). These findings provided the researcher the chance to observe social phenomena and offered an exciting and unexpected journey of discovery (Creswell, 2014). The research questions guided the study, leading to the discovery of an unexpected essence of the phenomenon. In particular, the research involved two aspects of lived experiences: the first being

“interpreting the educational access policy” and the second, “implementing the educational access policy”. The study aimed to identify teachers who lived the experiences that led to the practice of promoting equitable quality in early childhood education in Malaysia. This understanding may influence the implementation of the Blueprint and shed light on human experiences associated with the national initiative.

1.4 Statement of the Problems and Significance

Statement of the problems

This research examined the fragmentation of preschool education in Malaysia, focusing specifically on governance within the public sector, particularly regarding the agency to which teachers belong and its impact on how they interpret and implement the Blueprint in their workplace. It is marked by incoherent policymaking and bureaucratic situations, as well as teachers’ equity mindsets and policy interpretations, which shape foundational learning experiences for children. The conceptualisation of equitable quality education has become more sophisticated in both global and local contexts. Policies continue to accommodate interpretation at the school level, resulting in wide variations. In Malaysia, the early childhood education sector is governed by more than one ministry (such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Rural Development) and administered by several government agencies, which leads to inefficient coordination and integration among them (Boon, 2010; Rahmatullah *et al.*, 2021a). Sound consultation and coordination are absent within and between different ministries and organisations, resulting in incoherent policy-making, duplicated policies, and multiple bureaucracies (Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021). This fragmented governance structure undermines the effectiveness of the Blueprint, which aims to improve early childhood education across the board. Without a unified approach, policies may be developed in silos, resulting in inconsistencies and gaps in implementation at the grassroots level, particularly in early childhood, where foundational learning experiences are crucial. Thus, this research focused on the consequences observed in real-life situations within early childhood settings by examining teachers' actual practices.

Next, in the study of equitable quality education, the focus remains on teachers who are working with children rather than the entire composition of what is theorised to be an equitable quality school. As a result, the policy emphasis on equitable quality education for all remains a largely uncharted area. Nadelson *et al.* (2019) suggested that the education equity mindset and identity are essential for ensuring that all children are supported in achieving their full potential, as they play a significant role in achieving educational equity. Teachers' mindset and identity have a considerable influence on their practice and, consequently, on children's academic performance (Ainscow, 2020; Kozleski and Proffitt, 2020). Even though the role of teachers as equity agents has been recognised, only a few studies have investigated their mindset and practice in depth.

Furthermore, no review studies have adequately addressed the interrelationships between teachers' mindsets and practices in the context of equitable quality education in early childhood settings in Malaysia (Chen and Abdullah, 2022). Finally, where teaching standards continue to emphasise teachers' and their practices' responsibility for the education system, less emphasis is placed on the whole-school context and collaborative responsibility in understanding equitable quality education as a process rather than a product (Hughes, 2017). The interaction of these elements results in an intensified focus on the work of teachers in facilitating educational outcomes, which raises critical questions about how teachers' identities and institutional contexts mediate their understanding of equity in implementing the Blueprint. Additionally, how does this variation (if any) impact children's foundational learning experiences? Hence, this study aimed to gain a better understanding of how these elements may constrain or inform policy principles in the context and practice of early childhood education in Malaysia.

Third, the consequences of incoherent policy-making on teachers' practices can be inconsistent due to varying interpretations of policies and a lack of clear directives, especially when it comes to interpreting ambiguous issues such as equitable quality in education (Mohammed and Razak, 2015; Biesta *et al.*, 2021a). Dieudé and Prøitz (2024) argue that this variation is closely related to teachers' autonomy in school settings, where the mechanisms and intentions behind policies can be interpreted differently at various levels, leading to inconsistencies in implementation. When

teachers are left to interpret policies without adequate guidance and support, it can result in varied educational experiences for children, thereby limiting the realisation of equitable quality education (Sun, Wu and Shi, 2023). This variance can be seen in Malaysia, where the absence of coordinated policy-making and a sound discussion process leads to a lack of coherent support for teachers, and they may struggle to implement best practices effectively, hindering their ability to provide high-quality education that supports children's learning (The HEAD Foundation, 2019).

Why is it significant?

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive exploration of the interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint from the perspectives of preschool teachers. A central theme of the research is the promotion of equitable quality education in early childhood education.

This study challenges the dominance of Western-derived equity frameworks (Kozleski and Proffitt, 2020) by examining how Malaysia's unique multicultural and assimilationist policy environment influences interpretations of equity. While global discourses, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advocate for inclusive education, Malaysia's Blueprint reflects a tension between national homogeneity that prioritises Malay identity and equitable access for minority groups, such as ethnic Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous communities. By centring teachers' lived experiences in this contested landscape, the research exposes how equity is negotiated within a postcolonial system that often conflates equality with assimilation. For instance, teachers may interpret equity as standardising curricula to align with national identity and inadvertently marginalising minority cultures. This critical analysis contributes to decolonising equity theory by offering a non-Western case study that redefines equity beyond Eurocentric ideals. It also emphasises culturally situated practices and policy reforms in pluralistic societies.

While fragmented governance, such as multi-ministry coordination, is often criticised as inefficient (Biesta et al., 2021b), this study investigates whether such decentralisation could enable context-responsive strategies. For example, rural preschools under the Ministry of Rural Development might reinterpret the Blueprint's equity goals to address infrastructure gaps. At the same time, urban teachers under

the Ministry of Education might focus on cultural inclusion for children from migrant or refugee backgrounds. By documenting these localised adaptations, this research reframes bureaucratic coordination as a potential site for grassroots innovation. The findings could inform policymakers about leveraging Malaysia's decentralised structure to foster bottom-up policymaking, where teachers' contextual insights drive tailored solutions rather than rigid top-down mandates. This perspective shifts the discourse from systemic dysfunction to adaptive potential, offering valuable lessons for other nations in the Global South that are dealing with fragmented governance in education.

Moving beyond the narrow focus on teachers as individual equity agents and policy actors, this study highlights how institutional ecosystems, including school leadership, parental expectations, ministry guidelines, and community norms, collectively mediate equity practices. For instance, teachers' ability to implement inclusive pedagogies may depend on principals' support for flexible curricula or parental resistance to multicultural content. By mapping these interdependencies, this research advances a systems-thinking approach to equitable education, emphasising that equity is co-constructed through institutional interactions rather than achieved through isolated teacher actions. This insight challenges Malaysia's current emphasis on teacher accountability in policy evaluations and calls for collaborative frameworks that redistribute responsibility across stakeholders (The HEAD Foundation, 2019). Practically, the findings could reshape teacher training programmes, school leadership models, and policy design to prioritise systemic alignment over individual performance metrics.

Broader significance

Additionally, the study's phenomenological design, centring on teachers' voices through interviews and reflective journaling, may add methodological significance by capturing the emotional and cognitive dimensions of equity work that are often overlooked in policy implementation. For Malaysia, the findings could inform revisions to the Blueprint to address contradictions between assimilationist goals and equitable ideals. Globally, the research contributes to the debate on equitable education in multicultural societies, offering a model for interrogating how national identity politics intersect with equity agendas. By bridging theory and practice, the study holds

relevance for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers invested in reimagining equitable education in fragmented postcolonial contexts.

1.5 Research Scope

This research focuses on Malaysia's early childhood education, examining the equitable quality of education within the national education policy through an analysis of how the policy is interpreted, contested, and recontextualised by local actors. As mandated by UNESCO for leading and coordinating SDG 4, this can be accomplished by focusing on capacity building in equitable, high-quality education policies and advocating for political commitment and resource mobilisation. This space for policy discussion and guidance, information sharing, and standard setting is designed to help improve educational quality (UNESCO, 2016). The Blueprint is aligned with the SDGs, a mutually reinforcing framework that shapes Malaysia’s academic priorities. Furthermore, Education 2030 serves as a reference document for the national assessment of the blueprint's execution. The intent is to ensure that its national targets, such as universal preschool access, teacher upskilling, and quality aspects, resonate with the global objectives of the World Bank (2023). With this aspiration, the Blueprint is being implemented in Malaysia. As the implementation period ends, the study critically examines the relationship between centralised policymaking and localised practices. By framing teachers as policy actors rather than passive implementers, the research examines how their agency, beliefs, and resource constraints mediate the translation of equity-driven goals into classroom practice.

By hosting key regional forums, such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Education and Training in 2015 and the 2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education in 2016, Malaysia positioned itself as a regional leader in advancing SDG 4. These platforms enable the country to showcase Malaysia's integration of regional insights into its educational reforms, in line with the achievement of the Blueprint’s aims. Moreover, Malaysia’s Funds-in-Trust Agreement with UNESCO reflects its transition from a policy beneficiary to a donor nation. This demonstrates that by sharing best practices from the Blueprint, such as teachers' professional development frameworks or standardised early childhood education

curricula, Malaysia has contributed significantly to UNESCO's regional stocktaking activities and has been a valuable source of expertise in many areas relevant to the promotion of quality education (Salleh and Woolard, 2019).

From a financing implication perspective, Malaysia is expected to establish nationally appropriate education spending targets, guided by international and regional benchmarks, such as allocating at least 4% to 6% of GDP and/or 15% to 20% of public expenditure on education (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, the aim is to increase and improve the equity of external financing, as well as enhance aid effectiveness through harmonisation and coordination among policy actors. The increase in resource allocation would enable the government to bridge infrastructure gaps and address teacher shortages in underserved areas, aligning with the Blueprint's goals of universal preschool enrolment and access by 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2018). Additionally, from this situation, the Blueprint's success hinges on multi-stakeholder coordination. Harmonising external financing could ensure resources are allocated to targeted populations and translated into actionable support. Also, it is to ensure the teachers are equipped to deliver the policy's standardised outputs. Therefore, the research explores to what extent the implementation of equitable quality policies aligns with practices in early childhood education, particularly within the public preschool sector based on the premise that a believing teacher is part of the policy actor.

In line with the Malaysian government's desire to provide educational opportunities for all, both the public and private sectors participated in the effort to achieve the Blueprint's objectives. However, the research focuses on public preschools, where the government has made an effort to improve the quality of early childhood education. One of the indicators is the increasing percentage of preschool enrolment rate, which is achieved by providing more available classes for children to register in public preschools (Ministry of Education, 2015). This illustrates the emerging trend, as investment in education has become a priority from the outset, given that early childhood education has been proven effective in closing the socio-economic gap in Malaysia.

1.6 Personal Motivation and Research Position

Personal motivation

My previous work experience in early childhood education, during which I interacted with children whose families came from a wide range of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, sparked my interest in conducting research in this field. In 2007, I began my teaching career as a substitute teacher in a primary religious school. This experience sparked my interest in advancing my education to a higher level. Early childhood education was the major that I chose to study for my undergraduate degree at Birmingham, and I graduated in 2011. During my teaching practicum in the West Midlands for two consecutive semesters at an Infant and Primary School, I discovered a significant gap between my childhood experiences in my country and those in the UK in terms of pedagogy and approaches, curriculum and resources, and parental collaboration and support.

After graduating, I returned to Malaysia and began my career as an early childhood teacher at an international private school. The fact that children had varying opportunities to pursue their interests was reflected here. Public schools typically have fewer high-tech and varied teaching aids, larger teacher-to-children ratios, more structured curricula, and more extensive lesson planning when compared to international schools. Insufficient public funding for early childhood education has driven the privatisation of the sector, transforming it into an increasingly profit-driven enterprise. I participated in humanitarian work by giving my time as a volunteer teacher to underprivileged children, including those who were homeless and stateless.

This made me realise that not all children receive an appropriate education due to a lack of resources and qualified teachers, which reflects to me that we are still a long way from providing high-quality education to children from a young age. Another piece of evidence demonstrating the rhetorical and political interest gained through children's issues is the "education for all or no one left behind" aspiration in the Blueprint, which contrasts with grassroots realities. This exposes the failures affecting marginalised children, especially those from low-income populations. These disparities reflect Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, where socioeconomic hierarchies dictate educational access through habitus, field, and capital aspects (Grenfell, 2014).

Until 2018, I was involved in committees working on educational reform, specifically in early childhood education, special needs, and homeschooling in Malaysia. As part of this work, my team and I developed a quality instrument for early childhood services that measures the quality of those services. After evaluating the services, it became clear to me that there is a shortage of early childhood services, which do not meet the quality indicators, and that there is a lack of resources. I joined a non-governmental organisation (NGO) movement, "*Untuk Malaysia*" (For Malaysia), during the Covid-19 pandemic; the NGO targeted illiterate children in primary and secondary education. From there, I identified gaps, including a shortage of services, misalignment with quality indicators, and resource deficiencies. This aligns with the (UNESCO, 2020) Global Education Monitoring Report, which criticises the privatisation of education as intensifying inequities in low-income countries. My policy work with the MOE revealed a critical disconnect, where teachers, as frontline actors, had minimal agency in shaping policies directly impacting their classrooms. This mirrors Biesta *et al.*'s (2021b) concept of learning in education, where teachers' voices are marginalised in top-down policy frameworks. These experiences intensified my research focus on how power, through teachers' agency, aligns with policymaking in instances that perpetuate inequities in preschool education. This is particularly evident in the Malaysia context, where globalised quality frameworks often clash with local realities. This disconnect raises urgent questions about how education inequities can be resolved without centring grassroots perspectives in government decision-making.

From personal motivation to research position

My research adopted a phenomenological framework to thoroughly explore and understand the lived experiences of teachers within early childhood education systems across diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts in Malaysia. Influenced by my background in early childhood education, this study aimed to investigate the essence of these encounters and their impact on educational access. My views on the importance of equitable quality in early childhood education are shaped by these societal and communal idiosyncrasies that marginalised many young children. To explore the issue based on my biases and presumptions, I must conduct a research study to uncover truths about perceptions of equitable quality education through

school practice, define the terms in the local language, and uncover discursive influences on the formation and implementation of the Blueprint.

Through in-depth interviews and journal reflections, the research provides nuanced insights into how these disparities manifest in real educational settings and policies. This phenomenological methodology could enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by underprivileged communities through the lens of teachers, guiding the development of equitable and effective early childhood education policy informed by the lived experiences of those directly impacted. Therefore, after thoroughly reading, brainstorming, and engaging in discourse, I chose a hermeneutical phenomenological stance so that I could critically understand, interpret, and construct meaning from practitioners' perspectives of equitable quality education in early childhood education.

1.7 Research Terminologies

Access in education:

The term ‘access in education’ refers to how educational institutions and policies ensure, or at least strive to ensure, that children have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. It includes the availability and ability for each child to receive educational resources and opportunities, as well as support where necessary, to achieve their academic goals (Geith, 2023; Hudson, 2015).

Equity in education:

This phrase means that every child receives the necessary support and resources for academic success, regardless of their social, economic, or educational background, to achieve their full academic and social potential. This involves eliminating disparities and biases that may arise from social, financial, or cultural factors and providing personalised support to address children’s needs and conditions (Jurado de los Santos et al. 2020; OECD, 2016).

Quality education:

The expression ‘quality education’ refers to how well educational institutions support children to consistently achieve positive outcomes and promote the holistic learning development of children. It includes effective teaching and learning, a safe and inclusive environment, resources and support, and a focus on the children’s development (Karatsiori, 2023; Lynch, 2020).

Early Childhood Education (ECEC):

The phrase ‘early childhood education’ is used to mark the period of learning that takes place. In Malaysia, the period of ECEC is from 2 months until 6 years old. It involves formal and informal teaching surrounding the children, such as family, daycare, and school settings. ECE focuses on the holistic development of children, encompassing cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional development. The primary goals of ECE are to prepare children for a lifetime of learning and to develop foundational skills that support overall growth (World Bank, 2024; UNICEF, 2023b).

Government agencies in ECEC:

Throughout the thesis, the term ‘government agencies’ is used to show how ECE is overseen by several entities, each playing a distinct role in the development and implementation of policies and programmes. Key agencies involved include the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KEMAS), the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), and the Department of Prime Minister's Office (DPM). These agencies collaborate to ensure that ECE in Malaysia is comprehensive, accessible, and high quality, addressing the diverse needs of children across the country (MOE, 2023).

Public preschool:

The term ‘public preschool’ is an ECE programme that is provided and funded by a local government. This programme is designed to provide early childhood learning before children enter primary school. Public preschools aim to provide accessible and affordable educational opportunities for all backgrounds (MOE, 2023, UNESCO, 2015).

Preschool Teacher:

A preschool teacher is a person who specialises in working with children typically between the ages of 2 and 5 in a preschool setting. They are responsible for providing care, developing and implementing age-appropriate lesson plans, and fostering a safe and stimulating learning environment. Preschool teachers focus on promoting holistic development to prepare them for future educational success (World Bank, 2023; EPU, 2020).

National Educational Policy (NEP);

The 'National Educational Policy' is the heart of this research and is employed to denote a comprehensive framework developed by a government to guide the development and implementation of education systems within the country. These policies outline the vision, goals, standards, and regulations for educational institutions at all levels, aiming to address various aspects of education, including curriculum, teaching methods, teacher training, infrastructure, and access to education (MOE, 2023a; 2023b).

Malaysia Education Blueprint (Blueprint) 2013–2025:

The 'Malaysia Education Blueprint' (Blueprint) is a comprehensive plan developed by the Malaysian government to transform the country's education system. The Blueprint aims to address key challenges and improve the quality of education through a series of strategic shifts. The five primary areas focus on access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency, from preschool to higher education levels (MOE, 2013).

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One has outlined the conceptual, policy, and practical background to the research problem related to the Blueprint. It has also clarified the aim and focus of the study by stating the research questions to be answered.

Next in Chapter Two, this chapter provides a review of relevant literature, establishing the contextual issues and empirical landscape that are significant to the research topic. It discusses global policy and the issue of access to education in promoting equitable quality early childhood education within the local Malaysian landscape. Additionally, this chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the study, underpinned by Bourdieu's social critical theory, and how it is framed within the research area.

The Chapter Three is devoted to methodology, where a detailed explanation of the research design, data collection methods, and analysis is provided, along with ethical considerations and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, reliability, and overall research quality.

The data analysis and research findings are presented in Chapter Four. The findings that emerged from the interpretative phenomenological study of the qualitative data collected from in-depth interview sessions and the teacher's journal reflections, addressing two research questions regarding teachers' experiences in interpreting and implementing the Blueprint.

Grounded in the findings presented in the previous chapter, Chapter Five provides a discussion of the results for both research questions, where the meaning of each theme is explored in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature, as well as the research questions that guided the inquiry. The synthesis of research questions is discussed to examine the interrelation between them.

The final chapter, the Closing Chapter, presents the implications of the research findings for policy, practice, and research. The statements of recommendation for action and further study, together with the research findings, contribute to the knowledge, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

In the previous chapter, the foundational context and significance of the study were established, focusing on exploring the local interpretation in implementing the educational access policy to promote equitable quality education in early childhood within the framework of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Blueprint). This research has driven by the need to understand how public preschool teachers in Malaysia interpret and implement the Blueprint, particularly in the context of Kuala Lumpur's diverse socioeconomic and cultural landscape. The previous chapter also highlighted some studies conducted in Malaysia that informed changes in the landscape of government preschool education. This chapter delves into existing literature to further establish the contextual issues and empirical landscape significant to the research. The review explores the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning this study, guided by Bourdieu's social critical theory within the framework of phenomenology. This is followed by the historical development of early childhood education in the Malaysian context, emphasising the Blueprint. It also encompasses global and local policy discussions on education access and equitable quality.

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the research offers a roadmap of theories relevant to the issues within the key area of study (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016). Additionally, these theories are employed to describe and comprehend the phenomena, challenge existing knowledge, and foster an extension of understanding regarding the topic. Mills and Birks (2014) explained the conceptual framework is used to outline possible courses of action or to present a preferred approach to an idea or thought. Unlike the theoretical framework, it is not based strictly on existing theories. Instead, it organises concepts and their relationships in a way that aligns with research perspectives and questions. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) mentioned that conceptual and theoretical frameworks are often interchangeable, which helps explain the meaning of nature and the challenges of a phenomenon by tying together broad concepts and theories that provide a foundation for this research study. Hence, this section provides the

theoretical framework that guided this research study by adopting Bourdieu's Social Critical Theory to set the foundation of how this study was framed to describe the teachers' lived experiences with the Blueprint in public preschool settings. The theory provides a perspective for understanding how these experienced teachers interpret and practise the Blueprint during its implementation through a phenomenological study, offering deep insight into personal perceptions and the subjective nature of reality (Dangal and Joshi, 2020).

Although Bourdieu's social critical theory originated in Western sociological traditions, its conceptual tools that include habitus, capital, and field are highly relevant to this study in the Malaysian context due to their emphasis on understanding how social structures, power relations, and individual agency interact within specific cultural and institutional settings. The framework's focus on the dialectical relationship between objective structures and subjective practices allows for an important analysis of how teachers in Malaysian public preschools interpret and enact the Blueprint, accounting for local socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics. Furthermore, Bourdieu's concepts have been widely applied and adapted in diverse non-Western educational contexts, as demonstrated in studies from Uganda (Kabugo et al. 2024), Vietnam (Nguyen and Bui, 2016), Colombia (Arcila, 2018), and South Korea (Kim, 2021), which highlighting their transnational applicability in examining policy implementation, equity, and teacher agency. By adopting Bourdieu's framework, this research does not impose Western theoretical assumptions but uses his constructs as heuristic devices to critically explore and contextualise the lived experiences of Malaysian teachers, thereby contributing to a more global and comparative understanding of education policy enactment.

2.1.1 Bourdieu's Social Critical Theory

Bourdieu's concept of Habitus, Capital, Field, in relation to 'power'

Bourdieu conceptualises power as a phenomenon that is culturally generated and reproduced through the constant operation of agency and structure (Bourdieu, 2003). The debate over agency and structure focuses on the connection between the individual and the greater social sphere. In essence, it examines how structure determines action and how structural constraints affect human freedom and originality.

Thus, Bourdieu believes that three concepts function together, and the interconnected concepts of habitus, capital, and field could illustrate the relationship between agency and structure.

Habitus is engrained as a set of internalised dispositions, characteristics, and attributes that contribute to the way an individual thinks, feels, judges, and acts in predetermined ways as a result of social conditioning and socialisation (Bourdieu, 2003). Through their experiences, actions, and interactions, individuals have acquired the perceptions, values, emotions, and worldviews that define their existence, which include language, culture, and ideology (Bourdieu, 1990). It refers to the perceptions and actions that make up a person's character, as well as the social structure that is ingrained in all individuals and their ways of interpreting the social world, which are influenced by our social milieus (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002; Grenfell, 2019). Bourdieu's notion of habitus enables us to comprehend individuals as a complex amalgamation of their past and present (Bourdieu, 1990) that could significantly influence an individual's life chances. Furthermore, according to Webb *et al.* (2017), an individual's life chances are determined by their habitus, which becomes embodied in their articulation, values, and beliefs. This could be how they act and engage within the sociocultural aspects of everyday life, including their choices and activities in daily practices.

Bourdieu (2010) states habitus is not a fixed entity and is transposable, which means it might persist and transfer from one context to another. As a result, new experiences within the social context can introduce new social norms, allowing individuals to exercise choice and control over their habitus, albeit subject to certain limitations (McMillan, 2024). The idea of habitus development can influence how an individual adapts or innovates in response to emerging situations (Fearnley, 2020). Consequently, one could argue that habitus influences and is influenced by the social environment. Despite the resilience of habitus, it may undergo changes in a supportive environment, provided that the conditions are striking and sustained enough to induce those changes (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Grenfell (2019) points out the habitus is not immutable. In addition, Grenfell (2014) contends that the habitus is in constant flux, indicating the shifts in the habitus and social field are interdependent. However, the social field might change at a significantly faster pace than the habitus, resulting in the misalignment of the habitus with the social field that shaped it (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014; Grenfell, 2014, 2019).

In education, ‘habitus’ refers to an individual's social position within a given field, determined by their ability to perform in a given environment by aligning with the social space's recognised preference. Behaviours and characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and others can affect people's experiences (Veenstra, 2011; Bécares and Priest, 2015). For example, children may be judged on their dialect or accent, branded clothing, mobile phone use, ethnicity, appearance, migrant status, or ability, which reflecting their socioeconomic backgrounds. Bourdieu emphasises the importance of time in developing habitus and forms of capital, arguing that catching up through education policy and practice interventions is difficult if the groundwork has not been laid in early, family-led stages of socialisation (Bourdieu, 2010). Grenfell (2019) further clarifies that even though habitus influences practice, that relationship is not purely mechanistic. While habitus could provide a foundation for practice, practice also depends upon the circumstances in the social field. The extent to which habitus determines an individual's future direction is unclear, yet this question underpins debates about how to tackle inequalities in education and society (Reay, 2017). If an individual is guided by ingrained habits or corrupt or inert institutions, then the changes through educational programmes may not matter.

Next, one of the Bourdieu's concepts of capital includes an individual's possession of recognised knowledge (Bourdieu, 1990). Webb *et al.* (2017) argue that a feature that serves as positive capital in certain contexts may represent negative capital in others, contingent upon the rules that govern the field. It cannot be comprehended in isolation but must be considered alongside other forms of capital. Bourdieu (1996) examines four forms of capital that collectively represent social advantage and disadvantage, which are cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, and symbolic capital. Grenfell (2014) argues that these various forms of capital can grant an individual access to or ownership of a variety of resources. These resources may be material, cultural, or social in nature. Cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours, and skills, in addition to other cultural acquisitions. Cultural capital represents non-economic factors such as family, dedication to education, and social class, and thus may be related to a person's social standing and social mobility (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Social capital refers to a person's social network, which includes support and influence networks, such as family, friends, and membership in a group. Economic capital is wealth consisting of financial, real estate, and other assets. Lastly, symbolic capital is socially sanctioned and acknowledged with prestige

or honour (Webb et al. 2002). The amount and type of capital an individual possesses will determine his or her position in the social hierarchy (Fearnley, 2020).

Bourdieu distinguished between acquired and inherited capital (Bourdieu, 2010). Beyond the individual's immediate family, community networks, agencies, or the state may provide additional capital. It is not easy to determine a person's social position and potential based on their education, bank account, or neighbourhood. For instance, inherited capital may be used to pay for children's private education, individual tutoring, or extracurricular activities, buying them status, kudos, and confidence. Therefore, one form of capital may be transferred from parent to child, then 'cashed in' for new forms of cultural, educational, and emotional capital deemed valuable in the child's competitive field development (Hart, 2019). According to UNESCO (2017), children from the poorest households are less likely to participate in learning-promoting activities at home; as a result, they may feel they are starting behind their wealthier peers. In fact, at the most severe end of the spectrum, capital transfer processes may result in a negative capital transfer (Hart, 2019). For example, this situation occurs when a family is impoverished and dependent on their children to support elderly and disabled family members. In essence, Bourdieu's forms of capital can be compared to currencies, with the exception that individuals may receive both debt and inherited wealth, and some will undoubtedly benefit more than others in terms of recognised and valued currencies.

Field represents social and institutional places, spaces, or networks in which a person may be socially situated (Bourdieu, 2010). Within these places, spaces, and networks, a person's habitus develops and becomes ingrained. Individuals compete for various types of capital within the field to improve their positions; consequently, power differentials characterise the field (Bourdieu, 2003). Moreover, Fearnley (2022) argues that fields can be social, cultural, educational, religious, artistic, economic, or intellectual. They are hierarchical, and each has its own set of guiding principles and rationale. The intersection of these principles, an individual's habitus, access to, and possession of capital, determines their position in the field; one of the most important properties of fields is the way in which they allow one form of capital to be converted into another (Bourdieu, 2010; Bathmaker, 2015). Likewise, self, identity, aspirations, and capabilities develop through interaction with different fields. People encounter diverse cultural norms, values, and power relations in many fields (Bathmaker, 2015). For instance, bilingual skills may be developed in a multicultural home environment,

whereas in an educational setting an individual may be expected to communicate in an additional language rather than their preferred primary language, which could lower their confidence, belonging, and identity (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). This symbolic power does not refer to a specific type of power but rather to a characteristic of power that is typically utilised in social life (Bourdieu, 1989). This power is typically expressed symbolically, rather than through the use of physical force. Consequently, symbolic power possesses a legitimacy that it would not otherwise possess.

Linking Bourdieu to the phenomenology in education policy in this research

Several studies adopt Bourdieu's foundational concepts of field, habitus, and capital to analyse policy implementation. For instance, Kabugo *et al.* (2024) utilise Bourdieu's field theory to explore structural hierarchies and power imbalances in Uganda's National Teacher Policy, arguing that disparities in teachers' access to cultural and social capital hinder effective policy enactment. Similarly, Hardy and Lingard (2008) frame teacher professional development in Australia through Bourdieu's triad, emphasising how tensions between federal and state policies reflect struggles over symbolic power within the educational field. Musofer and Lingard (2021) extend this perspective by conceptualising teachers' adaptation to Australia's national curriculum as "position-making", which is a dynamic process where habitus mediates responses to shifts in the field. These works collectively demonstrate how Bourdieu's framework reveals the interplay between institutional structures and individual agency in policy processes (Hardy and Lingard, 2008; Kabugo *et al.*, 2024).

While equitable quality in preschool education has become a central focus in education policy, it expects all policy actors to play their roles in achieving the objectives. Teachers, as one of the hierarchical layers in policy implementation, understand and enact the Blueprint; exploring this is necessary to identify the challenges in practising it from their lens. To this end, Bourdieu's social critical theory framework is fitting. To start, Bourdieu focused on the relationship between objective social structures and daily practice, specifically, power dynamics, the locus of power and the rationale behind it (Webb *et al.*, 2017). It shows that the interactions between institutions, rules, and practices matter (Grenfell, 2014). In this research, objective social structures consist of the sector and governance, the schools and their organisations, and the classroom and learning environment. Furthermore, the second

relational aspect of daily practices can be seen in individual actions and their underlying motivations, including instruction, learning, and the roles of teachers within the established objective structures, which are in focus. Bourdieu (1990) stated that practice is simultaneously essential and relatively independent, as it arises from the dialectical interplay between a situation and a habitus. The analysis of the relationship between objective social structures and daily activities provides insights into the comprehension and implementation of the Blueprint from teachers' perspectives by adopting three conceptual tools in detail: habitus, capital, and field, and using that to make sense of lived experiences in public preschool.

This research explored how teachers' habitus influence their interpretation and implementation of educational policies, specifically the Blueprint, by considering their internalised dispositions shaped by their socio-cultural background and professional experiences. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept that habitus affects how they perceive and act on education policy within their social context, leading to varied practices in promoting equitable quality education (Grenfell, 2014; Archer *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that individuals' actions are influenced by their ingrained dispositions and highlights that teachers' interpretations of the education policies are not uniform but are shaped by their unique habitus (McMillan, 2024). Nguyen and Bui (2016) and Nguyen, Dalrymple and Azim (2016) illustrate how Vietnamese teachers exercise tactical agency by blending global and local pedagogies to subvert mandates of English language policy. Hardy (2014) describes Australian teachers' "appropriation" of NAPLAN testing policies, using professional capital to resist performative logics and reframe policies for educative ends. Kabugo et al. (2024) advocate for reflexive habitus among Ugandan teachers, urging critical engagement with policy to redistribute capital equitably. These cases highlight how habitus enables agentic responses even within restrictive fields, though success often hinges on access to cultural and social capital (Hardy, 2014; Nguyen, Dalrymple and Azim, 2016; Kabugo *et al.*, 2024).

These varied interpretations underscore the importance of understanding teachers' lived experiences to inform strategies that support them in classroom settings. Importantly, as Nash (1999) mentioned, the idea of habitus refers to an agent's feel for the game, reflecting the social practices and structures of the school playing field, which are founded on values and beliefs that regulate behaviours. The agent's understanding of this game, along with their knowledge and capacity to adhere to the rules, is manifested in their ways as a reflection of the habitus in practice (Edgerton

and Roberts, 2014). Thus, the connection between habitus and the implementation of the Blueprint highlights the need for policies to be grounded in the actual circumstances and capacities of schools to meet the expectations (Hunkin, 2018; Grenfell, 2019). Related to this study, teachers in public preschools become an identifiable group when considered to be sharing similar dispositional characteristics and habitus that support their ability to play the game, interpreting and implementing the Blueprint.

Bourdieu's notion of capital incorporates cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital, which collectively represent social advantage and disadvantage (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002). Firstly, in cultural capital, which includes knowledge, skills, and education qualifications, teachers influence their capacity to understand and apply policy directives effectively. However, their educational backgrounds and professional training impact their ability to implement the Blueprint in promoting equitable quality education. This aligns with Bourdieu's idea that cultural capital is a relational concept that cannot be comprehended in isolation but must be considered alongside other forms of capital (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). By examining how teachers' social networks influenced their policy practices, the research provided insights into the role of social capital in achieving the goals of the Blueprint. The social networks might be seen where the preschools are governed by different government agencies, in which each agency has its own way of practices to fulfil, alongside achieving the objectives of the Blueprint. The support systems provided by the government agencies could either facilitate or hinder teachers' ability to implement policies effectively, resulting in the variance in the effectiveness of each support system.

Next, economic capital, which includes financial resources and assets, is essential in understanding the disparities in educational access (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Furthermore, economic capital impacts the quality of education provided, where resource availability can vary significantly. For example, schools with more resources can offer better facilities and support for teachers and children (Mamat *et al.*, 2019). This reflects Bourdieu's idea that the amount and type of capital an individual or institution possesses determine their position in the social hierarchy (Fearnley, 2020). Lastly, symbolic capital, which involves socially sanctioned prestige or honour, influences how teachers interpret the Blueprint. Bourdieu's critique of power inequalities and symbolic violence (the implicit imposition of dominant norms) is central

to studies critiquing policy as a tool of control. For example, Flynn (2015) employs Bourdieusian analysis to show how UK teachers unconsciously internalise policy demands for English language teaching, perpetuating exclusionary practices against linguistically diverse children. In South Korea, Kim (2021) combines Bourdieu with Bernstein's classification and framing to reveal how narrow interpretations of multicultural policy reinforce systemic inequities. Li (2010) further highlights how Chinese EFL teachers, despite critiquing national policy gaps, lack the cultural capital to challenge bureaucratic hierarchies, leading to disempowered compliance. These studies underscore how policy can reproduce inequities by privileging dominant groups' capital, often through symbolic violence (Flynn, 2015; Kim, 2021; Li, 2010). This symbolic power embedded in policy documents affects teachers' perceptions and actions. It highlights the legitimacy and influence of cultural norms and language in shaping social structures (Adolfsson and Alvunger, 2020). Thus, by exploring how symbolic capital impacted teachers' engagement with the Blueprint, the research could provide insights into the complexities of policy interpretation and implementation.

Bourdieu's concept of field refers to the social and institutional spaces where individuals compete for various forms of capital to improve their positions, characterised by power differentials and hierarchical structures (Bourdieu, 2010). Bourdieu's notion of cross-field effects suggests that external influences reshape local policy fields. It is pivotal in studies examining globalisation. Lingard, Rawolle, and Taylor (2005) analyse the emergence of a global education policy field where global actors, like the OECD, reconfigure national policies, eroding teachers' autonomy. Arcila (2018) shows Colombian teachers balancing neoliberal English mandates with local values, navigating tensions between global logics and community needs. Meanwhile, Smit (2001) critiques how South African teachers' local knowledge, which is a form of cultural capital, is marginalised by globally influenced policies that undermine contextual relevance. These works underscore the dominance of neoliberal logic in reshaping educational fields globally, often at the expense of local agencies (Smit, 2001; Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor, 2005; Arcila, 2018).

Bourdieu's framing of policy as a site of struggle is evident in analyses of conflicting institutional logics. Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2016) link teachers' policy interpretations to competing societal logics (e.g., market accountability vs. communal sentiment), mediated by racial and ethnic habitus and school context. Curtner-Smith (1999) attributes UK teachers' divergent physical education implementations to

occupational socialisation (habitus) and resistance to centralised control. On the other hand, Blackmore (2010) critiques Bourdieusian analyses for overemphasising structural constraints, urging attention to teachers' collective capital-building for systemic change. Such studies position policy implementation as a dynamic negotiation of competing interests within hierarchical fields (Curtner-Smith, 1999; Blackmore, 2010; Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer, 2016). Reflecting on the research context, the field was the education setting, particularly public preschools in Malaysia. The study explored how teachers operated within the field, navigating the power dynamics and institutional structure that influence the practice of the Blueprint. The field is not a static environment; it is shaped by the interactions between teachers, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders, with each bringing their own habitus and capital to the table. This highlights the power dynamic, which plays a crucial role (Gao and Cui, 2024). As policy actors, teachers must interpret and implement the Blueprint within the constraints and opportunities presented by their specific educational contexts. Furthermore, the field is characterised by power differentials, which can lead to varied interpretations and practices of certain policies across different settings (Bathmaker, 2015). The variability shows the importance of understanding the local factors that influence the policy implementation, which can significantly impact the success of the Blueprint's objectives.

The research also touched on issues of educational equity, which Bourdieu addresses through the interplay of habitus, capital, and field. By exploring the various factors, such as socio-economic and cultural factors that affect educational access and quality, the study aligns with Bourdieu's critique on how social structures perpetuate equity (Reay, 2017). Thus, the research aimed to uncover the underlying mechanisms that contribute to disparities in educational outcomes, resonating with Bourdieu's focus on the structural constraints that limit the individual actions (Bourdieu, 2003).

2.1.2 Conceptual Framework

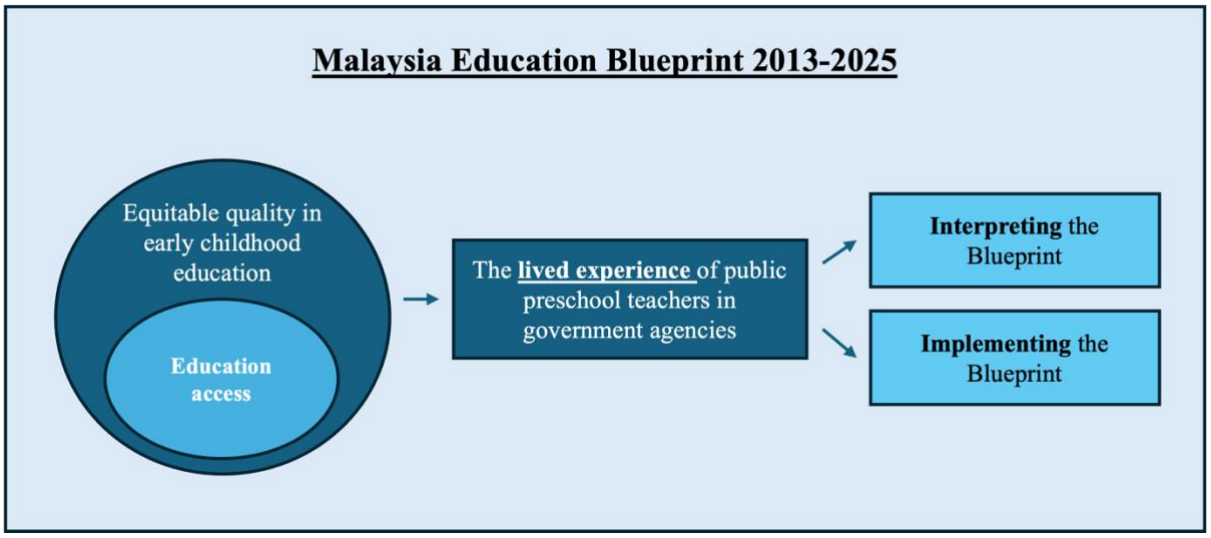

Figure 1: Research Conceptual Framework

The above Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for the research, designed to comprehensively address the research objectives and questions by visually representing the relationship and interactions between the key elements. The framework is centred around the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, specifically focusing on early childhood education. At the core of the framework are the central themes of equitable quality in early childhood education. This central theme signifies the goal of the research, which is to promote high-quality and equitable early childhood education in line with the national education policy.

The central theme underscores the subtheme of education access, emphasising its importance as a critical component in achieving equitable quality education. This aligns with UNESCO (2016), which emphasises educational equity, highlighting the importance of providing equal opportunities for all children, irrespective of their backgrounds, to access quality education. The inclusion of education access resonance in Malaysia's education framework within the broader goal of equitable quality illustrates that providing equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, to access education is essential for promoting overall quality (UNESCO, 2015).

The lived experiences of teachers are depicted as an integral part of the framework, connecting both central and sub-themes. This signifies that teachers' real-life experiences and insights are crucial for understanding and achieving the education

access in promoting equitable quality. Teachers, as policy actors in the Blueprint, influence how it is enacted in practice (Ball *et al.*, 2011; Day and Taneva, 2021). Their lived experiences provide valuable perspectives as a key player on how national policy is interpreted and implemented in practice.

The key processes of interpreting and implementing the Blueprint are represented on opposite sides of the framework, showing that both understanding and applying the policy are essential for promoting equitable quality (Ball *et al.*, 2011). The process of interpreting the Blueprint focuses on how teachers understand and make sense of the national education policy, while the process of implementing the blueprint focuses on the practical actions and strategies used by teachers to promote equitable quality through education access.

Furthermore, the framework includes a comparative analysis of experiences across different government agencies. This is illustrated by arrows or connecting lines that illustrate the similarities and differences in interpretation and implementation. However, this comparative analysis provides insights into how the experiences of teachers may vary depending on the specific government agency they are associated with collectively or as individuals (Biesta *et al.*, 2021a). Thus, this framework provides a structured approach to exploring the local interpretation and practical experiences of public preschool teachers, individually, in relation to the Blueprint.

2.2 Conceptualising Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education

2.2.1 The conceptual influences on equity in education

Equity in early childhood education has emerged as a significant topic of global debate, with extensive research indicating that these challenges persist not only in developing and underdeveloped regions but also in developed countries (OECD, 2016). The review by Jurado de los Santos *et al.* (2020) highlights a lack of a defined research direction of equity in education. While initial studies predominantly addressed broad issues of children's diversity, recent research has shifted towards more specific dimensions of equity, such as gender and race. This is important in understanding equity in education from a wider perspective because the primary objective is to embed equity within educational systems, ensuring equal opportunities and access to education irrespective of gender or socio-cultural factors.

Achieving equity in education requires the creation of environments where all individuals have equal access to resources, opportunities, and support, coupled with the establishment of just and impartial systems. On top of this, Schleicher (2014) states that equity can be understood from two perspectives: inclusion and fairness. To understand, equity as fairness indicates that personal or socioeconomic conditions, such as gender, ethnicity, or family background, are not barriers to children's educational achievement. It aims to ensure that personal or socioeconomic conditions do not impede educational achievement for children, and addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that go beyond mere commitment to fairness (Ling and Nasri, 2019; Murray, 2020). Additionally, it is also important to acknowledge and actively dismantle any kind of inequalities and biases that lead to disparities in educational outcomes. While striving for equity as fairness is a step in the right direction, sustained efforts are necessary to create equitable educational opportunities for all children.

On the other hand, equity as inclusion focuses on ensuring that all children attain a minimum level of capabilities. Equitable education systems are characterised by fairness and inclusivity, enabling children to realise their learning potential without encountering explicit or implicit barriers or lowering expectations. Chapman and Ainscow (2019) highlight the importance of fostering educational environments that support all children in reaching these foundational capabilities. For example, a study

by Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) demonstrates that school leaders play a pivotal role in promoting inclusivity, which facilitates children in achieving their full learning potential without barriers based on background or ability. However, to realise genuinely equitable education systems, it is imperative to address the root causes of inequity, provide targeted support for marginalised groups, and continually strive to eliminate systemic barriers that obstruct children's success (OECD, 2018a). While Schleicher's (2014) framework of equity through fairness and inclusion provides a foundational understanding, it may inadvertently overlook other critical dimensions such as historical context, power dynamics, and structural inequalities that occur in the society. This reductionist approach risks simplifying the complexities of discrimination, thereby highlighting the need for transformative change to address deeply entrenched problems (Espinoza, 2007). Addressing these multi-layered issues requires a holistic approach that incorporates diverse perspectives and acknowledges the historical and cultural contexts in which educational inequities occur. By expanding the framework to include these broader considerations, scholars and policymakers can work towards achieving a more comprehensive and transformative vision of equity in early childhood education.

Education equity is an important concern for global education systems, emphasised by international frameworks such as the Programme for International Children Assessment (PISA) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD, 2020). The SDGs advocate for "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and encouraging lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2016), which aligns with PISA's focus on equity. This synergy underscores global recognition of the obligation to provide inclusive, equitable education, emphasising the urgency to address gaps, foster lifelong learning, and create environments conducive to reaching individuals' full potential (Tonegawa, 2023). Such initiatives reflect a shared commitment to fostering inclusive societies, promoting social justice, and building a more equitable future.

However, reliance on standardised global assessments, such as those promoted by PISA, can oversimplify the intricate educational challenges present in diverse contexts. A large-scale study by Strand (2021), in a comprehensive study of equity in Norwegian education, highlights the limitations of standardised assessments. The research, centring on reading literacy among fifth-graders, reveals that these assessments can perpetuate a narrow focus on test scores and obscure deeper

inequities, such as those based on socio-economic status and language background. Similarly, a comparative analysis by Akmal and Pritchett (2021) across five developing countries demonstrates that closing the learning gap among different socio-economic groups is crucial for advancing the SDG targets of universal literacy and numeracy. Thus, while global assessments provide valuable benchmarks, they must be complemented by concrete actions and resource allocations that address the issue of equity effectively. Global initiatives should prioritise grassroots perspectives and local contexts to ensure that efforts to promote educational equity are both inclusive and impactful.

The role of schools in promoting educational equity cannot be overstated. Numerous studies have identified socioeconomic status, gender, and immigrant background as significant predictors of academic achievement and educational outcomes (OECD, 2018c, 2020). To enhance equity, school systems must endeavour to weaken the link between individual circumstances and educational outcomes. According to Ainscow (2020), in his work on a whole-system approach to promoting equity within education systems, the framework positions schools at the centre, surrounded by interrelated factors such as administration, community involvement, the use of evidence, and the principles of inclusion and equity for school development. As with every school system, this approach focuses on enhancing the capacity of local mainstream schools to support diverse learners in which there is a certain amount of difference in children's educational outcomes.

Efforts to minimise the impact of individual circumstances on educational outcomes are critical for promoting equity (Levinson, Geron and Brighouse, 2022). By addressing these disparities, schools can strive to create a more level playing field where all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed. A study lesson from England by Kerr and Ainscow (2022) shows that while some differences in educational outcomes are inevitable due to diverse children's needs and abilities, efforts to reduce the influence of external factors can help advance the goal of fostering equitable educational opportunities for all children. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in the ability of school systems to effectively address these disparities. By acknowledging these factors without implementing concrete strategies to mitigate their impact, it could lead to continuing existing inequities in education. Additionally, accepting a certain level of difference in educational outcomes could inadvertently reinforce a status quo that disadvantages some children based on factors beyond their control, rather than

actively working to level school autonomy and promote educational equity in educational reform (Salokangas and Ainscow, 2018).

In summary, educational equity does not entail that all children are subjected to a "one size fits all" or standardised approach to teaching and learning. Instead, it relates to the goal of providing conditions that minimise any negative impact a child's background may have on his or her performance to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach or exceed their own personal potential.

Equity and equality in education: How do the two differ?

In educational research, the terms "equity" and "equality" are often used interchangeably, leading to confusion and ambiguity in scholarly discourse (UNESCO, 2016; Frønes *et al.*, 2020; Strand, 2021). Despite their common objective of addressing fairness in education, these terms embody fundamentally different approaches. A lack of clear differentiation can result in varied interpretations and outcomes, particularly when addressing the needs of marginalised children populations. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers and policymakers to delineate equity from equality to effectively confront and measure disparities in educational outcomes.

Equality in education is about providing the same resources, opportunities, and treatment to all children, regardless of their individual circumstances (Roemer and Trannoy, 2016). As articulated by Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan (2007) and further supported by Qureshi, Malkani, and Rose (2019), equality is grounded in the principle of "sameness in treatment." This paradigm posits that each child should experience the same educational conditions. However, this approach is limited in that it does not consider the diverse needs and backgrounds of children, which can significantly affect their educational experiences and outcomes. Conversely, equity acknowledges the diversity of children's circumstances and posits that varying levels of support are necessary to achieve comparable educational outcomes (Frønes *et al.*, 2020). Equity in education involves tailoring resources and opportunities to the specific needs of each child to ensure a fair chance at success (Hughes, 2017). This perspective emphasises fair competition, recognising that outcomes may inherently vary due to differing starting points. Unlike equality, which aims for uniform outcomes, equity centres around providing each child with what they need to succeed based on their unique circumstances.

The pursuit of equity in education necessitates the provision of differentiated support and resources to ensure equitable opportunities for all children. This approach does not promise equal outcomes but strives to level the playing field, enabling each child to succeed according to their individual circumstances (Espinoza, 2007). Consequently, striving for equity may result in an unequal distribution of resources and support, as more assistance may be allocated to those facing greater challenges. The study by Akmal and Pritchett (2021) in relation to learning goals and achievement gaps between wealthy and impoverished children in five developing countries exemplifies this concept. Their research indicates that achieving learning equity demands more than mere equality, requiring increased support and resources for the poorest children to bridge the socioeconomic gap.

The principle of equity through diversity encapsulates this approach, suggesting that social differences can be mitigated by recognising and addressing the unique needs of each child (Kozleski and Proffitt, 2020). Rather than treating all children identically, an equitable education system would prioritise providing additional support to those who encounter greater obstacles, such as children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those whose home language differs from the language of instruction. The goal is to establish conditions where all children have a fair opportunity to realise their potential, even if this necessitates varying levels of support tailored to their situations.

Furthermore, the foundational principle of democratic political and economic institutions is the provision of equal opportunities for all individuals to improve their lives, irrespective of personal circumstances. This principle is vital for fostering a fair and just society. Equality in education is typically quantified by assessing tangible resources available to children, such as computers or books (Strand, 2021). However, equity presents a more complex challenge, as it encompasses both quantitative assessments and moral judgements regarding the fairness of resource distribution, incorporating various notions of fairness and justice (Espinoza, 2007; Frønes *et al.*, 2020). Ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities not only benefits individuals but also enhances educational and social outcomes at large (Galloway and Ishimaru, 2020). Prioritising equity in education ensures efficient use of resources, paving the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future for all.

Nonetheless, institutional biases, socio-economic disparities, and structural inequalities can significantly impede individuals' ability to seize educational

opportunities (Gunnestad *et al.*, 2022). From an equality perspective, these factors are often overlooked, as equality focuses primarily on uniform access rather than addressing underlying disparities (Cole and Hill, 2004). Merely ensuring access to education is insufficient to overcome these rooted challenges. Hence, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions, equitable policies, and broader societal changes to establish truly inclusive educational systems that enable all children to realise their potential.

From a different perspective, Roemer and Trannoy (2016) argue that equality does not oblige identical outcomes for all children. Instead, it involves ensuring that each child acquires the skills necessary to fully engage with society and is provided with equal opportunities to realise their potential. While various education systems strive to support disadvantaged children, the organisational structure of these systems, children's assignment practices, learning environments, and teaching methodologies can exacerbate the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Although the intent to assist disadvantaged children is commendable, the effectiveness of education systems in narrowing the achievement gap is often curtailed by systemic issues. Systemic factors, such as unequal resource distribution, segregation practices, and inequitable teaching methods, can perpetuate disparities and hinder the goal of providing equal opportunities for all children (OMOEva, Menezes Cunha and Moussa, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a focus on systemic reforms, targeted support for marginalised groups, and a comprehensive approach to tackling the root causes of educational inequality. By implementing these strategies, educational systems can move towards achieving equity, ensuring that all children have a fair chance to succeed.

In conclusion, distinguishing between equity and equality in education is crucial for effectively addressing educational disparities. While equality focuses on uniform access and resources, equity emphasises the necessity of differentiated approaches to meet diverse needs and ensure fair outcomes. Understanding and implementing these distinctions is essential for researchers and policymakers aiming to foster inclusive and just educational systems. By embracing equity, educational institutions can better serve all children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, and work towards creating a more equitable future.

2.2.2 The conceptual influences on quality in education

The World Education Forum in Dakar marked a pivotal moment in the discourse on quality education, where diverse perspectives and significant debates emerged (UNESCO, 2000). The concept of quality, with its roots in industrial and management sectors, has been transposed onto education, aligning closely with economic-rationalist views. This transposition has led to an evaluation framework focused on standards, outcomes, and the performance of children, teachers, schools, and nations (Hughes, 2017). The OECD (2016) endorses a rigorous focus on measurement quality, with the Programme for International Children Assessment (PISA) serving as a global benchmark for assessing school systems' quality, equity, and efficiency. Ng (2015) notes that quality education can be perceived differently depending on whether one emphasises educational outcomes or processes. Understanding these dual perspectives is crucial for developing holistic strategies to enhance educational systems and outcomes. However, relying too heavily on standardised tests to evaluate educational quality may oversimplify complex educational issues and prioritise certain forms of knowledge over others. It can also be argued that assessment-driven education has the potential to narrow curricula, stifle creativity, and exacerbate inequalities within school systems. Furthermore, it is essential to contend with whether assessments like PISA capture the full spectrum of educational quality and urge for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that considers diverse perspectives and values when defining and measuring quality education.

In this context, two predominant schools of thought emerge: the economic perspective and the progressive/humanist perspective. From an economic standpoint, quality education is viewed as a means to achieve public financial returns and address social challenges impacting human development (European Union, 2021). This perspective underscores the role of education in promoting sustainability and inclusion for disadvantaged groups. Quality education benefits not only individuals but also society at large by fostering economic growth and addressing social issues (Fils, Nkemgha and Che, 2023; Musah, Aawaar and Musah, 2024). A report by Lynch (2020) shows that investments in education can lead to long-term economic growth, increased productivity, and enhanced social outcomes, ultimately contributing to job creation, economic recovery, and human well-being. However, a different scenario happened in Sweden, where Hällsten (2017) offers a nuanced view by exploring the link between

educational failure and adverse outcomes, particularly university dropout risks and subsequent labour market exclusion. The findings suggest a slight scarring effect of dropout on labour market marginalisation, highlighting the risks of viewing education solely as an economic investment.

Focusing on education for sustainability allows schools to equip children with the skills necessary to tackle environmental challenges and contribute to a sustainable future. This approach emphasises foundational skills, such as literacy, numeracy, reasoning, and social skills, while also providing opportunities for children to acquire advanced skills throughout their lives (Castelló-Climent and Hidalgo-Cabrillana, 2012; Okoye *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, promoting inclusion for disadvantaged groups is critical to ensuring equitable access to quality education, which can reduce inequalities, foster social cohesion, and support overall human development. Prioritising an educational framework that integrates economic implications, sustainability, and equity is vital for building a prosperous, inclusive society that addresses individual needs and broader societal challenges (Verguet *et al.*, 2023).

However, while quality education can indeed generate public financial returns and address social challenges, framing education solely from an economic perspective risks reducing its value to monetary outcomes. A working paper by MacLeod and Urquiola (2018) cautions that this approach could lead to an overemphasis on economic benefits at the expense of holistic educational goals such as personal development, critical thinking, and societal well-being. This focus may neglect the intrinsic value of education in promoting creativity, cultural understanding, and individual fulfilment. Economic-oriented education policies might prioritise certain skill sets over others, perpetuate inequalities, and undermine the broader social and humanistic purpose of education. Therefore, balancing economic considerations with a comprehensive understanding of education's societal role is crucial. This balance ensures that quality education effectively serves the diverse needs of individuals and communities, supporting both economic growth and the holistic development of children (Lynch, 2020).

On the other hand, from a progressive standpoint, quality education emphasises the individual learner and the educational process, focusing on the school environment, governance, pedagogy, and classroom methods. According to UNICEF (2000), quality education involves a comprehensive approach that includes ensuring that learners are healthy, well-nourished, and supported by their families and communities. This

perspective advocates for safe, gender-sensitive environments enriched with adequate resources. The curriculum should encompass relevant content, emphasising foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, and life skills, as well as knowledge areas like gender, health, and peace (UNESCO, 2000).

Child-centred teaching strategies in well-managed classrooms, combined with skilled evaluation methods, are crucial for facilitating learning and reducing inequalities (Karatsiori, 2023). Quality education aims to equip children with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to meet national educational goals and foster active societal participation. The World Bank supports this view by interpreting quality as adherence to a set of predetermined, quantifiable indicators or criteria (Klees, 2002). These elements highlight the involved nature of quality education, underscoring the importance of holistic approaches that transcend traditional academic instruction (Cameron, 2024).

By prioritising learners' health and well-being, creating supportive and inclusive environments, and offering relevant and diverse curricula, educational systems can better prepare children for success. Furthermore, according to Sims and Jerrim (2022), implementing child-centred teaching methods and effective evaluation practices enhances learning outcomes and contributes to reducing educational inequalities. Besides, aligning educational objectives with national goals and promoting positive societal engagement ensures that education imparts not only knowledge and skills but also cultivates responsible citizenship, contributing to societal development and progress.

However, achieving universal access to resources such as adequate nutrition, safe environments, and community support remains challenging, especially in underprivileged areas (Karatsiori, 2023). Additionally, the effectiveness of child-centred teaching strategies may vary across contexts, highlighting the need to consider cultural differences and individual learning styles. A more holistic and inclusive approach to education is necessary to address the diverse needs of learners. This approach should ensure that educational goals align not only with national objectives but also with global values and priorities, fostering well-rounded citizens capable of engaging positively in a rapidly changing society. By embracing these principles, educational systems can better equip children to navigate and contribute to the complex challenges of the modern world (OECD, 2018).

The notion of quality in education traditionally implies a specific level of excellence, yet the assessment of this excellence is inherently subjective. The ongoing debate about defining and standardising quality education underscores the complexity and subjectivity involved in evaluating educational excellence (Gellert, 2021). Efforts to standardise definitions risk creating an idealised version of what education should be and potentially undermining the actual goals within specific educational environments (Soudien, 2011). Singh, Allen, and Rowan (2019) warn that attempting to establish a universal definition of quality education might oversimplify the diverse needs and contexts of learners, potentially leading to an unrealistic portrayal of education. Without standardised definitions, inconsistencies and disparities in educational standards could emerge across different regions, potentially lowering standards or perpetuating educational inequalities.

In early childhood education, a child's rights approach is often emphasised (Sims, 2015). However, this approach has been critiqued for being co-opted by neoliberal agendas that view children as future human capital investments (Hunkin, 2018). Early childhood programmes are increasingly justified by their potential to reduce disadvantage and enhance human capital, with accountability tied to outcomes, investment, and cost-effectiveness. For instance, the International Early Learning Study (IELS) exemplifies the trend of cross-national assessments, testing children aged 4.5 to 5.5 years to establish a robust accountability system reliant on standardised testing (Moss *et al.*, 2016). It shows that testing is the result of quality education in the early childhood field. Kagan and Kauerz (2015) adopt a market-based approach to quality assurance and define quality to educate parents as consumers, with the goal of having the market drive improvements to care settings and, ultimately, to children's school preparation. Conversely, Moss and Urban (2017) argue that early childhood testing contradicts the rights of children, families, and communities to meaningful participation in decisions affecting young children's education, turning a public space into a business agenda.

These developments raise significant concerns about the inherently complex concept of quality education. Effective policy-making for quality education should involve extensive consultation and debate both within states and between governments and educational stakeholders. Such dialogue is necessary to ensure that policies are

responsive to the unique educational landscapes of different national and local contexts (Tikly, 2011; Pechmann and Haase, 2022). The emphasis on diverse contexts and perspectives may lead to complex or convoluted policies that are difficult to implement effectively.

Balancing the need for standardisation with the recognition of diverse educational contexts is a complex task that requires careful consideration. Policies must be crafted to ensure that quality education is accessible, equitable, and effective for all learners (Huston, 2008a). Engaging in open discussions and incorporating varied perspectives allows policymakers to better align educational systems with the diverse needs and goals of learners and communities, fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment (Alexiadou and Rambla, 2023). It is believed that by addressing these complexities, policymakers can work towards an educational framework that not only meets standardised benchmarks but also respects and responds to the diverse cultural, social, and economic contexts in which education occurs. This approach aims to create educational systems that are both rigorous and adaptable, ensuring that quality education remains a dynamic and inclusive concept (Penchmann and Haase, 2022). In conclusion, reconceptualising quality education requires balancing economic and humanist perspectives. While economic arguments emphasise education's role in driving financial returns and addressing societal challenges, the humanist perspective advocates for a broader understanding that values diverse educational processes and outcomes. This dual approach is essential for developing educational systems that are not only effective and efficient but also equitable and inclusive.

2.2.3 Equitable Quality Education: Aligning equity and quality in education

The Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, initially informed by UNICEF (2013a), brought equity and access into sharp focus as critical components of quality education. This report underscored education as a fundamental human right that is essential for realising a broad spectrum of social, cultural, economic, and political rights. It highlighted the transformative potential of quality education in producing responsible citizens who uphold values such as respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity, thereby contributing to more resilient and stable societies. Despite these ideals, translating them into actionable policies

presents significant challenges, particularly in regions with limited resources or political instability (Rad *et al.*, 2022). The aspiration for universal access to quality education often confronts feasibility issues in such contexts. Moreover, framing education merely as a tool for producing responsible citizens may overlook its broader purposes, such as fostering critical thinking, creativity, and personal growth.

Nevertheless, the recognition of education as a catalyst for comprehensive societal progress emphasises the need to prioritise quality education as foundational for inclusive, resilient, and culturally diverse communities. This framing necessitates integrating two pivotal objectives within future development frameworks: equal access and equitable quality education. These goals are encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG 4) of the United Nations, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNGA, 2015). Implementing SDG 4 is challenging at both international and national levels, requiring concerted efforts among governments, educational institutions, communities, and stakeholders to overcome barriers to educational access and quality. Durrani *et al.* (2023) argue that emphasising lifelong learning not only encourages personal development but also strengthens societal growth and resilience. By aligning with the objectives of SDG 4, nations can endeavour to build educational systems that empower individuals, advance equality, and foster sustainable global progress.

However, the practicalities of providing lifelong learning for all, particularly in resource-constrained regions or those facing socio-economic adversities, remain daunting. This is further highlighted by Tonegawa (2023), who discusses the potential gaps between international ambitions and national realities, often due to differing priorities. Additionally, the complexity of measuring and assessing progress towards these goals poses significant challenges, particularly in evaluating the quality and inclusivity of education on a global scale. Despite the noble intentions underpinning SDG 4, a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary for equitable access to high-quality education is crucial. This includes equal preconditions and opportunities for autonomous engagement and achievement (Hudson, 2019a). Moreover, issues of equity and access must be addressed comprehensively across societal, institutional, and classroom levels. This requires strategies, robust support systems, and sustainable investments to ensure all children can access quality education throughout their lives.

The issue of access to quality education in the context of international development has traditionally been viewed as a simple issue of school enrolment. Nevertheless, Humphreys *et al.* (2015) argue that enrolment figures are insufficient indicators of access, as enrolment does not guarantee attendance, and attendance does not ensure productive learning. They delineate four stages of access: (a) enrolment, (b) sustained attendance, (c) classroom access, and (d) engagement with the curriculum. These stages culminate in the ultimate goal of high epistemic quality in education, a concept that resonates with Morrow's (2009) principle of epistemic access, which seeks to optimise the likelihood of all children receiving a high-quality education.

Furthermore, a central challenge lies in unequal access to preschool programmes. In India, Ethiopia, and Peru, disparities in enrolment are stark, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds often excluded due to insufficient infrastructure, affordability barriers, and geographic isolation (Woodhead *et al.*, 2009; Woldehanna, 2016). Even in high-income countries like England and the U.S., availability of preschools remains skewed toward wealthier communities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage (Fuller and Liang, 1996; West, 2006). For instance, in Georgia (U.S.), low-income and high-minority neighbourhoods often lack high-quality programmes, despite greater numerical availability due to under-resourced facilities and subpar learning environments (Bassok and Galdo, 2015). Quality disparities further exacerbate inequities. High-quality preschools are characterised by well-trained teachers, child-centred curricula, and stimulating materials (Reid and Kagan, 2022). However, underfunded programmes frequently struggle with low teacher wages, high turnover, and inadequate training, thereby undermining educational outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Krieg *et al.*, 2015). In India, weak regulatory frameworks and inconsistent policy implementation have led to fragmented quality, with private programmes often outperforming public ones (Rao *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, China's efforts to standardise preschool quality through legislation highlight the challenges of balancing rapid expansion with equitable resource distribution (Hu and Li, 2012).

Structural inequities related to race, class, and geography further marginalise vulnerable groups. Wright (2011) critiques how systemic biases in policymaking and resource allocation disproportionately affect children of colour and those in rural areas. In Ethiopia, preschool access is heavily influenced by parental wealth and education, reinforcing intergenerational inequality (Woldehanna, 2016). Even when access is achieved, cultural and linguistic diversity is often overlooked, limiting inclusivity for

marginalised groups (New, 1998; Vandenbroeck, 2010). Efforts to advance equitable quality require multilevel interventions. Rad *et al.* (2022) propose a holistic framework addressing child-, family-, community-, and policy-level factors, and emphasising collaboration between stakeholders. Public investment in universal programmes, as seen in South Australia and China, can mitigate disparities by prioritising disadvantaged communities (Krieg *et al.*, 2015; Gu, 2023). Additionally, pedagogical innovations, such as participatory documentation in Finland, demonstrate how centring children's voices can promote equity in decision-making (Paananen & Lipponen, 2018).

Implementing and measuring these stages of access pose significant challenges (Hudson, 2019a). Evaluating access beyond enrolment demands intricate monitoring mechanisms and substantial resources. Additionally, assessing sustained attendance, classroom access, and curricular engagement involves complexities and subjectivities that complicate quantification and comparison across diverse educational settings (Archambault, Côté, and Raynault, 2020). While the emphasis on epistemic access and quality education is paramount, there is a risk of neglecting other essential components of a comprehensive education, such as socio-emotional learning, creativity, and critical thinking skills. Focusing exclusively on epistemic quality may inadvertently overlook these critical dimensions, which are vital for fostering a well-rounded educational experience. Therefore, while enhancing epistemic access and quality is crucial for improving learning outcomes, it is imperative to adopt a holistic and inclusive approach. This approach should encompass a broader spectrum of educational needs and outcomes, ensuring that all children receive a meaningful and well-rounded education. By integrating these diverse elements, educational systems can better address the complex and multifaceted nature of learning, ultimately contributing to more equitable and effective educational environments.

In conclusion, while the path toward achieving equitable quality education is fraught with challenges, it remains a critical objective. By fostering collaborative efforts and adopting context-sensitive approaches, educational stakeholders can work towards bridging the gap between international objectives and national realities, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive global education landscape.

Conceptual equitable quality education influences on the research context

As previously stated, the multifaceted nature of equitable quality education agendas underscores the diverse influences that shape the interpretation of educational principles and practices. These agendas are conceptually and theoretically moulded by social, historical, political, scientific, and economic contexts, each playing a pivotal role in defining their significance within the contemporary educational landscape (Tikly, 2011; Pechmann and Haase, 2022). These contextual factors not only inform the formulation of educational policies and strategies but also impact their implementation and outcomes. The interconnectedness of these influences highlights the complexity of addressing equity and quality issues in education, necessitating comprehensive and inclusive approaches that incorporate varied perspectives and considerations (Alexiadou and Rambla, 2023).

By acknowledging the diverse contextual influences on equitable quality education agendas, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can navigate the complexities of modern education systems more effectively. This understanding is crucial for creating inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational environments that cater to the diverse needs of learners in today's dynamic world (Hudson, 2019a). However, while recognising these influences is essential, the practical application of such awareness presents challenges. Navigating the complexities of social, historical, political, scientific, and economic factors requires substantial expertise and resources, which may not always be readily available. These diverse influences can potentially create conflicting priorities, leading to confusion and inefficiencies in policy implementation. There is a risk of oversimplifying these complexities if attempts are made to address a wide array of contextual factors without a clear focus, suggesting that a more targeted approach could yield more tangible results (Archambault, Côté and Raynault, 2020).

Thus, while acknowledging these influences is important, it is crucial to strike a balance between understanding the complexities of the educational landscape and implementing practical, sustainable solutions. By doing so, educational systems can more effectively cater to the needs of learners and communities, ensuring that equitable quality education is both attainable and impactful. This balance is essential for fostering educational environments that are responsive to the diverse and evolving demands of contemporary society (Durrani *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, Figure 2 depicts the prominent philosophies and practices that inform these principles. Please note that the orientations of the words are neither sequential nor indicative of importance or influence in the context of the research.

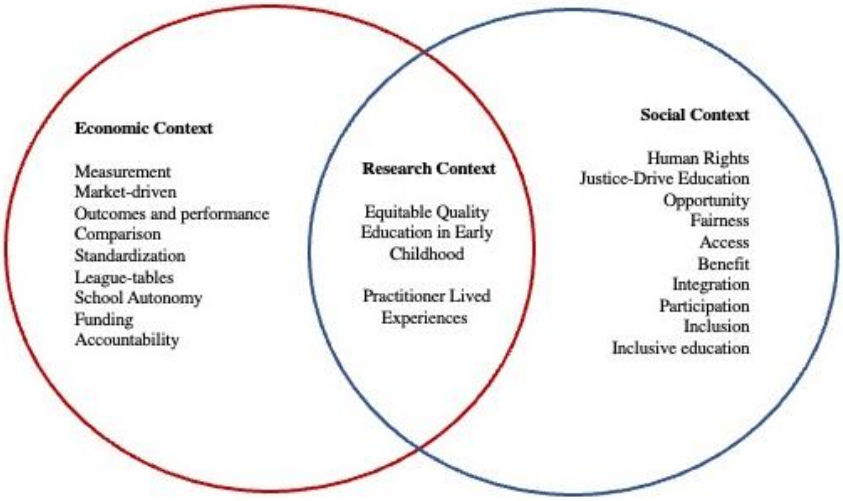

Figure 2: The conceptual influence on equitable quality in early childhood education on the research context (adapted from (UNESCO, 2018)

Economic Context: measurement, market-driven, outcomes and performance, comparison, standardisation, league-tables, school autonomy, funding, accountability
Social context: human rights, justice-driven education, opportunity, fairness, access, benefit, integration, participation, inclusion, inclusive education
Research context: interlaps between economic and social context, equitable quality education, focusing on early childhood education, lived experiences of teachers
Given the widespread use of the expression 'equitable quality education,' it is essential to specify that this term will be used in a particular way and in relation to a specific concept in the study. This requires an analysis of how each principle is conceptualised within policy and education ideologies. The integration of economic, social, and research contexts is crucial for understanding and advancing equitable quality education in this study. The economic context, with its emphasis on measurement, market-driven approaches, and accountability, shapes educational policies and practices (Khazanah Research Institute, 2016). Social considerations, such as human rights, justice-driven education, and inclusive practices, underscore the importance of fairness, access, and integration within educational systems (Akiba *et al.*, 2023).

Research examining the interplay between economic and social factors, particularly in areas like early childhood education and teacher experiences, provides valuable insights for promoting equitable quality education (Hughes, 2017).

By considering these diverse contexts, policymakers, educators, and researchers can develop comprehensive strategies that address the multifaceted needs of learners and communities. By fostering collaboration and dialogue across these domains, stakeholders can work towards creating inclusive, effective, and sustainable educational environments that prioritise equity, quality, and social justice. This approach ensures that educational systems not only meet academic standards but also promote ethical values, societal cohesion, and lifelong learning opportunities for all (World Bank, 2023).

However, it recognises that the limitation faced in this study, the interplay between economic and social factors, might be in isolation, emphasising the need for a more integrated approach that considers the intersectionality of various influences on equitable quality education (Aun, 2020). Focusing on the teachers' experiences might limit the practical implication rather than the broader systemic changes that are necessary to achieve lasting improvements in educational outcomes.

2.3 Early Childhood Education and Care in Malaysia (ECEC)

2.3.1 History of ECEC in Malaysia

Malaysia's ECEC system operates through a fragmented governance model, with preschool education (ages 4–6) divided across the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KEMAS) and the Department of National Unity and Integration (PERPADUAN), while childcare (ages 0–4) falls under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM) (Curriculum Development Division, 2007). This multi-ministry structure, while expanding access, has perpetuated systemic fragmentation, as noted in the World Bank's analysis (World Bank, 2023). Studies corroborate these challenges, such as persistent coordination gaps, with MOE's standardised curriculum often conflicting with KEMAS's community-centric pedagogy in rural areas (Mustafa and Azman, 2013; Taha *et al.*, 2020a). Similarly, Aziz *et al.* (2021) critique the lack of unified quality benchmarks across

ministries, which exacerbates urban-rural disparities in service provision. The compartmentalisation of ECEC governance reflects what Burns, Köster, and Fuster (2016) term ‘decentralised siloing,’ a structural barrier to holistic early childhood systems in middle-income nations.

Malaysia’s postcolonial ECEC trajectory shifted markedly after ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, compelling alignment with Articles 28 (access to education) and 24 (healthcare) (Rahmatullah *et al.*, 2021b). However, Chiam (2008) argues that CRC implementation became entangled with neoliberal agendas, particularly after the 1990 Jomtien Declaration reframed ECEC as a tool for economic growth. Recent analysis by Yoke-Yean *et al.* (2021) demonstrates how SDG 4.2’s emphasis on quality early childhood development has reinvigorated rights-based advocacy. Neuroscientific evidence and research on critical-period brain plasticity further legitimised policy investments by linking early stimulation to lifelong cognitive gains and whole developments (Denboba *et al.*, 2016; Dag *et al.*, 2021). These converging forces for rights frameworks, economic globalisation, and scientific evidence catalysed Malaysia’s education system towards recognising it as a developmental cornerstone.

Malaysia’s ECEC policy trajectory evolved significantly in the late 20th century, driven by global normative shifts and postcolonial development goals. Initially, ECEC was excluded from national priorities, common among newly independent states prioritising industrialisation over human capital (World Bank, 2024). Vision 2020’s industrialisation agenda positioned ECEC as a dual-purpose investment: cultivating future human capital and enabling female labour participation (Da Wan *et al.*, 2020; Tang *et al.*, 2021). Recent data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in 2023 reveals that female workforce participation hovered around 55.8% in 2022, partly attributed to expanded childcare subsidies (Hamid and Muzafar, 2024). In terms of human capital return of investment (ROI) models, longitudinal studies by Heckman and Masterov (2007) and Lee (2012) on early intervention return of investment continue to shape policy rationales, which projected 7–10% annual returns from ECEC investments via improved educational outcomes. By 2013, the MOE’s white papers formalised these economic rationales, tying preschool expansion to enhanced PISA scores and tertiary enrolment (World Bank, 2013). Moreover, while Malaysia has made significant strides in expanding preschool enrolment rates, achieving 84% in 2020 from 67% in 2009, challenges related to access and quality persist. The country aimed to

achieve universal preschool enrolment by 2020, but this target remains unmet, a common issue faced by many developing nations and validates tensions between market-driven growth and equitable access (UNICEF, 2023b; World Bank, 2023).

2.3.2 Childcare services (0-4 years old)

Childcare services for children aged between 0 and 4 years in Malaysia emerged primarily to facilitate women's workforce participation, aligning with the nation's human capital development goals under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) (Mohd Salleh and Nankervis, 2023). While the private sector dominates childcare provision, KEMAS plays a significant role as the largest government provider, operating Taska centres (nurseries) alongside its preschool programmes (Aziz *et al.*, 2021). Early critiques of childcare quality, such as the landmark 1982 Ministry of Social Welfare-UNICEF study, exposed systemic gaps in nutrition, environments, and staff training (Curriculum Development Division, 2007). Early initiatives for this age group were limited until a pivotal 1982 study by the Ministry of Social Welfare and UNICEF exposed critical gaps in childcare quality, particularly in nutrition, environments, staff training, and holistic child development (Boon, 2010). This research informed regulatory reforms, culminating in the Childcare Centre Act 1984, which established minimum standards, mandated centre registration, and prioritised child protection and carer education. The Act marked a shift in societal attitudes, as noted by Chiam (2008), fostering greater demand for quality care while supporting working mothers through structured frameworks. These findings catalysed the Childcare Centre Act 1984, which established minimum standards and registration protocols. A recent policy paper by Hui *et al.* (2024) contextualises this act within broader postcolonial state-building, arguing it represents Malaysia's first formal acknowledgement of childcare as public infrastructure rather than familial duty.

Further advancements came with the 2007 amendments to the Childcare Centre Act, which extended operating licences from one to five years and diversified service models (Chiam, 2008). Furthermore, new categories included Community Childcare Centres (CCCs), which are collaborative ventures with the private sector for affordability, and Workplace Childcare Centres, which are subsidised to accommodate rising female labour participation (Zaid, Amin and Mohd Noor, 2020). Aminuddin et al. (2023) empirically demonstrate that CCCs reduced urban low-income families'

childcare costs while improving service accessibility. In addition, the Quality Improvement Accreditation System (QIAS) introduced benchmarks for staff qualifications, developmental practices, and safety protocols (Curriculum Development Division, 2007). Complementing these reforms, the National Permata Programme (PERMATA) (2007), modelled after the UK's Sure Start, emphasised holistic development through community-responsive curricula. World Bank (2022) evaluations credit PERMATA with raising cognitive readiness scores among participating B40 (bottom 40% income) children, though sustainability challenges persist due to reliance on federal funding.

Policy integration reached a milestone with the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy 2008, which unified national efforts under a vision linking early childhood care to Malaysia's aspiration for high-income status by 2020 (UNESCO, 2015). The policy prioritised early intervention, standardised training, and stimulating environments to optimise child development (UNESCO, 2015). Building on this foundation, the MOE introduced a dedicated ECEC curriculum for children aged 0 to 4 years in 2011. The curriculum is rooted in PERMATA's principles, emphasising play-based, age-appropriate learning, and validated by Hashim et al. (2024) through a longitudinal study that links its implementation to improved socioemotional skills in national nursery learning. However, Rahim and Zainal (2023) caution that the privatisation childcare provision perpetuates inequities, with fees at urban private Taska averaging RM800 per month versus RM150 at KEMAS centres (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2012). This disparity is alarming for the equitable educational system in Malaysia. Collectively, these reforms reflect Malaysia's evolving recognition of childcare as both a social imperative and an economic driver, balancing quality enhancement with accessibility to meet workforce demands and national development goals.

2.3.3 Preschool Education (4-6 years old)

Preschool education in Malaysia for children aged 4 to 6 years has evolved through distinct phases of development, shaped by socio-political priorities and institutional reforms (Adams, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Prior to the 1960s, early childhood education was largely informal and urban-centric, managed by religious or non-governmental organisations catering to affluent families (Curriculum Development

Division, 2007). These early programmes, termed 'kindergartens,' lacked standardised curricula or teacher training and rarely served children under three, leaving younger children under parental care (Rahmatullah *et al.*, 2021b). The 1970s marked a turning point with state-led initiatives, during which KEMAS emerged as the first major government provider, establishing '*Taman Bimbingan Kanak-kanak*' (TABIKA), or children learning centres, specifically KEMAS preschools, in rural and low-income areas (World Bank, 2023). These institutions aimed to bridge educational disparities, targeting children aged 4 to 6 years old with structured programmes focused on foundational skills (Curriculum Development Division, 2007). By the late 1970s, PERPADUAN, under the Department of National Unity and Integration, had introduced urban preschools under its TADIKA PERPADUAN initiative, prioritising interethnic integration through community-based learning. Embedded in the *Skim Rukun Tetangga* (Neighbourhood Watch Scheme), these preschools emphasised national unity and moral values, fostering interactions among multiracial families (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022).

The 1980s saw an increase of preschools managed by diverse entities, exposing systemic fragmentation (Muhamad Ridza *et al.*, 2024). The MOE collaboration with UNICEF and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation produced the 1986 Preschool Guidebook, which aligned pedagogy with global trends like play-based learning (Curriculum Development Division, 2007). Nordin (2011) critiques this curriculum's urban bias, noting minimal adaptation to Indigenous communities' cultural contexts. The process of formalisation accelerated under the National Education Act 1996, which recognised preschools as part of the national school system. By 2003, the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) mandated literacy and numeracy outcomes, a policy linked to Malaysia's subsequent 15-point PISA score improvement (2009–2018) (Taha *et al.*, 2020b; Shafie, Ab Rahim and Shaik Abdullah, 2021).

Policy momentum intensified under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006–2010), which prioritised rural access through MOE preschool expansion (The Prime Minister's Department, 2006). By 2023, MOE preschools served 42% of 4–6-year-olds, second only to KEMAS (MOE, 2023). The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 set ambitious targets, achieving 97% enrolment for 5-year-olds by 2022 (World Bank, 2023). However, Ng (2024) reveals persistent urban-rural teacher qualification gaps: 92% of urban preschool teachers hold diplomas versus 68% in rural areas. The Blueprint's emphasis on cultivating innovative thinkers reflects OECD-influenced

human capital goals, though Bakar and Ismail (2023) argue this prioritises economic metrics over holistic development.

Contemporary challenges centre on harmonising Malaysia's multi-provider system. While the 2018 Preschool Operational Guidelines aim to standardise safety and infrastructure requirements, UNICEF Malaysia (2023) reports that 23% of private preschools in Sabah and Sarawak remain unregistered, exacerbating equity gaps. The NPCS revision introduced computational thinking modules, aligning with IR 4.0 workforce goals (MOE, 2024). However, a study by Mustafa, Yunus, and Azman (2014a) cautions that privatisation trends risk deepening socioeconomic stratification, with elite urban preschools charging fees up to 12 times higher than KEMAS centres. Throughout this evolution, preschool education in Malaysia has balanced competing imperatives by addressing equity through rural outreach, fostering national cohesion via multicultural integration, and meeting global standards for human capital development. Although structured curricula and assessment systems have enhanced quality, challenges persist in harmonising diverse providers and ensuring equitable access, a testament to the complex interplay of historical legacies, policy ambitions, and socio-economic realities (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022).

2.3.4 Preschool Education in Malaysia: 1991–2009

In these decades, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia began to improve the national preschool system. During this period, there was support for the view that preschool education enhanced lifelong academic achievement and that government investment in early childhood education should be prioritised (Heckman, 1998; Moss, 2013). Furthermore, the extensive support facilitated the enactment of the Education Act 1996, which nationalised preschool education within Malaysia's educational framework and standardised the curriculum for kindergartens for children aged 3 to 5 years old. Despite the institutionalisation of preschool education, enrolment rates in preschools remained stagnant. In fact, in 2025, the gross enrolment rate for children aged 4 to 5 in preschools was 67.4% (UNICEF, 2013b). This highlights several issues that occurred during that period, including the shortage of governmental financial support for preschool education, which marginalised low-income families, as discussed in Chung *et al.* (2021). Investments in preschool education contributed 1.1% of operational expenditures, compared with primary and secondary schools with

48.5% and 41.3% of spending, respectively (UNICEF, 2013b). According to Khazanah Research Institute (2016), education constituted merely 1 to 2% of monthly expenditures for households living below the median income in Malaysia. This minimal percentage indicates that families deprioritised schooling in favour of fixed expenses, such as housing and food, which accounted for a concerning 71% of the monthly budgets of the poorest households.

Furthermore, Chung *et al.* (2021) highlights that families opted to forgo preschool education due to a scarcity of qualified preschool teachers. Additionally, a study by Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.* (2021) revealed that preschool teachers had lower educational qualifications in public education and were often employed in temporary part-time roles. Despite the Ministry of Education's mandate for public preschool teachers to hold a minimum diploma, a significant number of private sector teachers lacked certifications or held lower qualifications, with around 68% of them lacking a formal qualification in education. This disparity in education qualifications between public and private preschools highlights this issue, leading to inconsistent education quality and undermining efforts to provide a solid early childhood educational foundation.

The quality of preschool education was adversely affected by the low status associated with the positions of preschool teachers. Historically, Malaysia has been a decentralised industry characterised by low social and financial advantages. Public preschool teachers were seen as inferior to those in other educational divisions (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). In addition, it is hardly surprising that over 70% of private sector preschool teachers earned less than the minimum wage of RM900 per month in 2013. Research conducted by Foong, Veloo, and Dhamotharan (2014) revealed that over half (51.4%) of the participants received a salary at or below poverty level. This combination of low remuneration and a lack of social recognition hindered the professionalisation of the preschool education sector.

During this period, there was a particular issue regarding the lack of sufficient preschool facilities, as well as the problems associated with registration and monitoring of privately funded and operated preschools (Mustafa, Yunus and Azman, 2014b). Mustafa and Azman (2013) state that the demand for early childhood education exceeds the available supply because the government could not provide more places for children. The situation created an opportunity for the private sector to provide the space, which required registration with the Ministry of Education. However,

many private preschools remain unregistered (Aziz *et al.*, 2021). The lack of registration means these preschools operate without government oversight, resulting in their education quality being unmonitored and uncontrolled. This lack of regulation can lead to significant disparities in the quality of education provided. One of the main reasons is that the registration process requires approval from multiple ministries and the local government, making it a complex and cumbersome procedure (Aziz *et al.*, 2021). This bureaucratic complexity can dissuade private preschool programmes from registering, as they may find the process too time-consuming, costly, or complicated. As a result, these preschools choose to operate without registration, further exacerbating the issues of quality education.

2.3.5 Preschool Education under the National Transformation Programme (NTP): 2009 – 2015

Malaysia's preschool education reforms during the National Transformation Programme (NTP, 2009–2015) illustrate the application of New Public Management (NPM) principles to early childhood policy. Central to this effort was the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), established in 2009 as a technocratic body tasked with overcoming bureaucratic inertia through a delivery science framework (Barber et al., 2011). This model prioritised measurable outcomes, cross-ministerial coordination, and private-sector efficiency metrics, aligning with global trends in educational governance that position delivery units as accelerators of human capital development (World Bank, 2018). The NTP's dual frameworks consisted of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), aimed at promoting social equity, and the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), which focused on enhancing workforce readiness. These frameworks operationalised reforms through seven OECD-aligned initiatives, including centralised governance via the National Preschool Committee (NPSC), curriculum standardisation, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) (MOE, 2010; OECD, 2012).

A persistent issue was the urban-rural divide, where marginalised communities, including Indigenous (Orang Asli) populations and those in Sabah and Sarawak, faced limited access to adequately resourced preschools. Rural facilities often lacked basic infrastructure, such as electricity and clean water, and struggled with teacher shortages (MOE, 2014; UNESCO, 2015). Critics argue that the GTP's "one-size-fits-

all" enrolment targets obscured these disparities, failing to address geographic and socioeconomic barriers (Morshidi et al., 2013; World Bank, 2016).

Interagency collaboration proved pivotal to the implementation of the initiatives. Partnerships between the MOE, KEMAS, and JPNIN enabled adaptive strategies across diverse regions. However, the reforms were further hampered by fragmented governance. This decentralisation led to overlapping mandates, inconsistent curricula, and uneven resource distribution (Abdullah et al., 2016). For example, KEMAS preschools in rural areas operated with distinct pedagogical frameworks compared to MOE-regulated institutions, creating a bifurcated system (Rahimah, 2012). The World Bank (2013) noted that such fragmentation diluted the impact of quality initiatives, as accountability mechanisms were poorly defined.

The 2010 National Preschool Quality Standard (NPQS) institutionalised outcome-based assessments, mandating teacher-child ratios (1:15) and graduate teacher thresholds (80%), surpassing ASEAN benchmarks (Nazir et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2015). However, teacher quality emerged as another critical challenge. Although the GTP mandated that educators hold diploma-level qualifications, the implementation in rural areas lagged due to reliance on underqualified temporary staff and insufficient professional development programmes (MOE, 2014). Teacher training programmes upskilled 14,500 educators, but they faced annual attrition due to workload pressures (MOE, 2014). Training modules prioritised theoretical knowledge over practical skills, leaving teachers ill-equipped to address diverse classroom needs (Hashim et al., 2017). This highlighted that the support necessary for teachers, such as mentorship and reduced administrative burdens, was overlooked, which contributed to high attrition rates in underserved regions (Rashid & Rahman, 2015).

Under GTP 2.0 (2013–2015), reforms shifted toward policy layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), with the introduction of the National Minimum Quality Standards (NMQS) to address quality gaps identified by the OECD (2015). By 2016, 89% of urban centres had achieved NMQS compliance, compared to 54% in rural areas (ETP Annual Report, 2016), validating critiques of "two-tiered systems" under neoliberal reforms (Penn, 2018). Nevertheless, the adoption of NMQS correlated with improved outcomes: TIMSS 2015 showed that preschool attendees outperformed their peers by 12.3% in literacy (MOE, 2016). The GTP-ETP synergy exemplified heterarchical governance (Ball, 2012), blending state oversight with market mechanisms. While enrolment reached 91.2% by 2020 (DOSM, 2021), persistent quality gaps

underscored the need for equity-centred strategies to fulfil SDG 4.2's vision of inclusive, quality early childhood development.

However, curriculum design also drew criticism for its overemphasis on academic readiness. The National Preschool Standard-Based Curriculum (NPSC) focused heavily on literacy and numeracy, marginalising play-based learning and socioemotional development (Yeo et al., 2016). This alignment with primary school preparedness contradicted global best practices, which advocate for holistic early childhood education (ECE) frameworks (UNICEF, 2014). Teachers reported pressure to "teach to the test," stifling creativity and critical thinking in classrooms (Nores & Barnett, 2014).

Furthermore, the ETP's reliance on public-private partnerships (PPPs) to expand access inadvertently exacerbated inequities. Private preschools, predominantly serving urban middle-class families, outperformed public centres in resource allocation and teacher-children ratios, deepening class-based divides (Tan, 2015). In rural areas, low-fee private providers prioritised profitability over quality, compromising learning outcomes (Jomo et al., 2016). The ETP's Early Childhood Care and Education Council (ECCE Council), established in 2011, facilitated a total of 68 PPPs. However, 82% of these partnerships were clustered in urban hubs like Selangor and Penang (Rahim & Nor, 2017). Critics warned that market-driven approaches risked commodifying education, undermining the state's responsibility to ensure equitable access (Mehrotra & Delamonica, 2017). Finally, limited community engagement weakened the reforms' sustainability. Parental involvement, particularly in low-income households, was hindered by cultural norms undervaluing ECE and lack of awareness about its benefits (MOE, 2015; Rahimah, 2012). The GTP's top-down approach neglected grassroots participation, reducing local ownership of preschool initiatives (Ng, 2014).

2.3.6 Early Childhood within The Malaysia Education Blueprint: 2013- 2025

This section has been submitted and is currently waiting for publication. Please refer to **Appendix R.**

2.4 Equitable Quality in ECEC in Malaysia: Policy, Programme, and Evaluation

2.4.1 Government policy on equitable quality in education

Malaysia's education system operates under a centralised framework administered by the federal government through the Ministry of Education (MOE). The MOE standardises curricula, examinations, and policies nationwide, guided by the National Educational Philosophy (NEP) to align education with national development goals (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). The Education Minister leads the Educational Planning Committee (EPC), the MOE's apex body responsible for policy formulation, while subsidiary committees such as the Central Curriculum Committee (CCC) and the Finance Committee are responsible for overseeing specialised domains like curriculum development and resource allocation (MOE, 2023a).

At the state level, State Education Departments (SEDs) and District Education Offices (DEOs) implement federal policies to ensure uniformity in programme execution (MOE, 2023b). Furthermore, the MOE guarantees 11 years of compulsory basic education, incorporating an automatic promotion system to support inclusivity for disadvantaged and special-needs children. Elementary education follows a uniform curriculum, while secondary education offers diversified subjects and individualised pathways. Post-secondary options include Form 6, matriculation programmes, polytechnics, and vocational training institutions (MOE, 2023a). Preschool education, which is delivered by multiple government agencies and private entities, adheres to MOE-developed curriculum guidelines (MOE, 2023b).

Malaysia’s alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) ensures inclusive, equitable quality education that reflects its longstanding integration of sustainability principles into national policy frameworks. This commitment, traceable to the 1970s, emerged through iterative policy mechanisms such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and subsequent Five-Year Development Plans (FYPs), which institutionalised sustainability as a multidimensional paradigm encompassing economic equity, social justice, and environmental stewardship (Jomo, 2020; MOE, 2022). While the explicit terminology of “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD) gained traction in Malaysian discourse post-1990s (UNESCO, 2015), its foundational ethos was embedded earlier through redistributive agendas like the NEP

(1971–1990), which sought to eradicate poverty and address structural inequalities via equitable access to education and economic participation (Abdul Rahman, 2018).

The national Outline Perspective Plans (OPP), implemented through a series of national Five-Year Development Plans since the mid-1960s, serve as the foundation for all aspects of socio-economic development in Malaysia. Among others, major thrusts of the plans include strengthening unity, eradicating poverty, reducing social and economic inequality and imbalance, equity in economic growth, reducing disparities in economic development between states and between urban and rural areas, restructuring society, promoting human resource development, making science and technology an integral component of socioeconomic planning and development, and protecting the environment and ecology (Economic Planning Unit (EPU), 2021). Critically, Malaysia's policy reflects a developmentalist approach to sustainability, prioritising growth-with-equity while negotiating tensions between industrialisation and environmental conservation (Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2021). However, scholars note asymmetries in implementation, particularly in rural Sabah and Sarawak (the other parts of Malaysia located in Borneo), where geographic and socioeconomic barriers persist in achieving SDG 4 targets (Lee, 2023).

Malaysia's policy for sustainable development (SD) reflects the interplay between globalised SDG frameworks and domestically rooted developmental priorities, as demonstrated in the Blueprint. The foreword by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to the Mid-Term Review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001–2005) explicitly framed SD as a moral imperative, asserting that "the ethical and moral basis of our actions" must coexist with economic growth, particularly through environmental stewardship and redistributive justice (EPU, 2003). This rhetoric institutionalised a tripartite SD model to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions through quantitative indicators tracking GDP per capita, poverty reduction, and access to public services (EPU, 2003). However, scholars argue that such metrics prioritised growth-mediated sustainability, privileging macroeconomic targets over systemic inequities in resource distribution (Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2021).

The New Economic Model (NEM), launched in 2009, further codified this approach by anchoring Malaysia's SD trajectory to three pillars: high-income status, inclusivity, and environmental sustainability (National Economic Advisory Council [NEAC], 2010). While the NEM's alignment with SDGs 8 (Decent Work) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) was evident (United Nations, 2015), its implementation through the Eleventh Malaysia

Plan (11MP, 2016–2020) revealed tensions between technocratic governance and grassroots realities. The 11MP's emphasis on "people-centred development" (EPU, 2015) ostensibly mirrored SDG 17, yet ethnographic studies highlight persistent disparities in Sabah and Sarawak, where Indigenous communities remain marginalised in SD policymaking (Lee, 2023). Notably, Malaysia's SD indicators, particularly those measuring "quality of life," have been critiqued for their neoliberal undertones. Rasiah et al. (2018) argue that reliance on GDP growth as a proxy for well-being obscures structural inequalities, a tension exacerbated by the NEM's focus on achieving high-income status by 2020. This aligns with Ferguson's (2010) concept of "anti-politics machines", wherein technocratic SD metrics depoliticise systemic inequities.

2.4.2 Equitable Quality Policy and the Malaysian Education Project

The intersection of equity and quality in education has emerged as a critical theme in global policy discourse, reflecting the tension between expanding access and ensuring meaningful learning outcomes, particularly in diverse and stratified societies. In Malaysia, this debate is contextualised through the Equitable Quality Policy (EQP) framework, articulated across three key documents: the Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025 (12MP), the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Blueprint), and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV 2030). Scholarly analyses of these policies reveal a complex interplay between technocratic educational reforms and broader socioeconomic imperatives, with implications for equity, inclusivity, and systemic governance.

The Blueprint positions equity as a prerequisite for quality, arguing that universal access to education must be coupled with pedagogical excellence to achieve national development goals (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This aligns with UNESCO's (2015) Education 2030 Framework, which emphasises "equitable quality education" as a driver of social mobility. Nonetheless, critics such as Lee (2019) contend that Malaysia's policy discourse conflates equity with equality, focusing on equal resource distribution rather than addressing structural barriers rooted in poverty, ethnicity, and geography. For instance, while the 12MP prioritises infrastructure upgrades in Sabah and Sarawak, Jamil and Rahman (2021) note that such measures often neglect intersecting vulnerabilities, such as Indigenous linguistic marginalisation or gender-

based disparities in STEM participation. Similarly, SPV 2030's emphasis on "needs-based" affirmative action (Prime Minister's Office, 2019) signals a shift towards redistributive justice; however, its integration with education policy remains under-theorised in official documents.

A recurring critique in the literature concerns the siloed nature of Malaysia's equity-orientated reforms. The Blueprint's focus on teacher training and standardised curricula (Pillay et al., 2018) operates independently of SPV 2030's antipoverty agenda, creating a disjuncture between classroom-level interventions and macroeconomic inequalities. This fragmentation mirrors what Ball (2012) terms "policy schizophrenia", wherein competing priorities dilute coherence. For example, the 12MP's investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) aims to align education with industrial demand, but studies by Azman et al. (2020) reveal persistent stigma toward TVET pathways among B40 (low-income) communities, perpetuating cycles of underemployment. Such findings underscore the limitations of supply-side reforms when detached from demand-side strategies, such as wage policies or industry partnerships, as advocated in SPV 2030.

The Blueprint's emphasis on quality measured through standardised assessments like the Programme for International Children Assessment (PISA) has sparked debates about the compatibility of equity and quality goals. As Sahlberg (2021) observes, standardised testing often reproduces inequities by privileging urban, middle-class cultural capital. In Malaysia, this tension is evident in the persistent performance gaps between high-performing urban schools and rural or Orang Asli (Indigenous) institutions (Noh et al., 2022). While the Blueprint advocates for "differentiated support" for underperforming schools, critics argue that its accountability mechanisms, such as school rankings that incentivise competition over collaboration, exacerbate resource hoarding by elite institutions (Tan, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of disaggregated data on marginalised groups (e.g., refugees and children with disabilities) limits the policy's responsiveness to intersectional inequities, a gap highlighted by Rosnon and Talib (2019).

The SPV 2030's explicit critique of "policy leakage" (Prime Minister's Office, 2019) draws attention to systemic governance failures that undermine equity goals. Scholars such as Gomez (2022) argue that Malaysia's centralised education bureaucracy, coupled with patronage networks, perpetuates rent-seeking behaviours, such as misallocation of infrastructure funds or nepotism in teacher placements. This aligns

with global findings on corruption as a barrier to educational equity (Hallak & Poisson, 2007). For instance, despite the 12MP's pledge to digitise rural schools, audits by the Malaysian Auditor General (2022) reveal persistent mismanagement, including unused computer labs and delayed connectivity projects. These inefficiencies suggest that technocratic solutions, while necessary, are insufficient without parallel reforms in transparency, decentralisation, and community participation, as advocated by proponents of participatory governance (Gaventa, 2006).

Malaysia needs to adopt an integrated policy framework that bridges education-specific reforms with broader socioeconomic transformation. The SPV 2030's call for "holistic inclusivity" (Prime Minister's Office, 2019) provides a conceptual foundation for this integration, yet operationalising it requires reimagining education as a subsystem within a larger equity ecosystem. Comparative studies offer potential models: Chile's Equity Index (García-Huidobro, 2020), which allocates school funding based on multidimensional disadvantage metrics, or Finland's decentralised governance model, which empowers municipalities to tailor equity interventions (Sahlberg, 2015). For Malaysia, those approaches would entail recalibrating the Blueprint's top-down accountability mechanisms to incorporate grassroots input, particularly from East Malaysian and Indigenous communities whose marginalisation reflects historical centre-periphery power asymmetries (Loh, 2021).

2.4.3 Equitable quality education issues in early childhood

Malaysia's early childhood education (ECE) policies, while aligned with global commitments such as Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and SDG 4, reveal stark disparities in equitable access and quality. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (1525) reports a 91% preschool enrolment rate for children aged 4-6 (MOE, 2015, cited in Da Wan et al., 2018), yet this aggregate statistic masks stratified access shaped by intersecting socioeconomic hierarchies. The T20 (top 20%), M40 (middle 40%), and B40 (bottom 40%) income classifications (DOSM, 2017; EPU, 2018) function as proxies for Bourdieusian cultural capital disparities, wherein B40 households, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities, face systemic barriers to quality ECE. These include under-resourced facilities, overcrowded classrooms (EPU, 2020), and curricula misaligned with localised epistemologies (Powell, 2021), perpetuating cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

Sen's (1999) capability approach underscores how multidimensional poverty, which encompasses inadequate nutrition, healthcare, and housing, constrains cognitive development and educational participation. In Malaysia, longitudinal studies correlate B40 status with higher rates of childhood stunting (Noh et al., 2020) and developmental delays, which are compounded by psychosocial stressors such as parental job insecurity (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This deprivation aligns with Wilkinson and Pickett's (2010) inequality paradox, wherein relative poverty in middle-income nations exacerbates educational inequities. For instance, only 34% of Orang Asli preschoolers meet national literacy benchmarks compared to 89% in urban centres (JAKOA, 2021), reflecting systemic exclusion from curricula that privilege majority ethnic norms (Powell, 2022). Such disparities contravene the MEB's equity targets, revealing a policy-performance gap rooted in structural neglect.

Malaysia's decentralised ECEC governance, which is split across the Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Rural Development, and KEMAS, has inadvertently reinforced spatial inequities. MOE preschools in urban zones have average teacher-child ratios of 1:10, while KEMAS programmes in rural Sabah operate at 1:25 (EPU, 2020), a disparity exacerbated by privatised ECEC options catering predominantly to T20/M40 families (Tan, 2022). This fragmentation mirrors Roberts' (1997) cycle of disadvantage, where early exclusion predicts lifelong wage penalties, with B40 adults comprising 72% of Malaysia's informal labour sector (ILO, 2023). Furthermore, 63% of Orang Asli children in Pahang lack birth certificates, legally barring them from public schools (JAKOA, 2022), while refugee populations endure de facto segregation in informal learning centres with ratios of 1:45 (UNHCR, 2023). These exclusions exemplify Sen's (1999) "unfreedom", where procedural equity masks capability deprivation.

Malaysia's Vision 2020, framed around neoliberal developmentalism, prioritised human capital formation to achieve economic parity with advanced economies (Jomo, 2020). However, post-2020 evaluations reveal a paradox: while GDP per capita rose to \$12,460 (World Bank, 2022), income inequality (Gini coefficient: 0.41) remains ASEAN's second-highest (DOSM, 2023). The B40's over-representation in under-resourced schools underscores the limitations of growth-centric models. Bourdieu's (1986) institutional habitus explains why interventions like the B40 Infrastructure Grant fail to address rural Sabah's curricular misalignment with Indigenous knowledge systems (Powell, 2021). Similarly, metric-driven reforms such as deploying "coaches"

to boost TIMSS rankings prioritise standardisation over pedagogical transformation, perpetuating Sahlberg's (2021) "standardisation fallacy".

Toward Decolonial Recalibration

Proposed solutions, including increased funding and teacher incentives, often replicate the inequities they aim to resolve. A decolonial recalibration is imperative, centring Indigenous epistemologies and dismantling documentation barriers for non-citizen learners (Powell & Azman, 2023). This requires decentralising governance to empower local communities in curriculum design and resource allocation, aligning with the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030's emphasis on needs-based affirmative action. Without such systemic shifts, Malaysia's ECE reforms risk entrenching the very hierarchies they purport to dismantle, leaving the most vulnerable learners, including Orang Asli, refugees, and the rural poor, trapped in cycles of unfreedom.

The pursuit of equitable quality is critically tested within the implementation of Malaysia's Standard National Preschool Curriculum (KSPK). While the KSPK is designed to provide a unified framework for holistic development, its standardized content and pedagogical expectations often act as a mechanism that inadvertently widens equity gaps. For instance, the curriculum's emphasis on school readiness skills, such as early literacy and numeracy in the national language (Malay language), presupposes a baseline linguistic and cultural capital that children from minority and rural backgrounds, including the Orang Asli and indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, frequently do not possess (Powell, 2021; Nair, 2023). This creates a mismatch where the curriculum, rather than being an equalising tool, functions as a filter that privileges majority norms and places students with diverse linguistic heritages and localised knowledge systems at an immediate disadvantage. The pedagogical ideal of play-based, child-centered learning further exacerbates this disparity, as its effective implementation demands significant teacher expertise, low student-teacher ratios, and abundant learning resources. These conditions consistently met in urban MOE schools but severely lacking in many rural and non-MOE settings (KEMAS, JPNIN) (EPU, 2020; Tan, 2022).

Consequently, the challenge of quality is intrinsically linked to equitable adaptation. A high-quality ECEC experience, as envisioned by the KSPK, is not achieved through uniform implementation but through a contextually responsive approach that adapts curricular goals to local realities. This involves validating children's home languages and cultural backgrounds as assets within the learning process, a practice often

absents in the standardised rollout of the curriculum. Without this flexibility, the curriculum risks perpetuating a situation in which the dominant culture is implicitly imposed, devaluing local knowledge and hindering a sense of belonging and engagement among marginalised children (Powell, 2022). Therefore, achieving equity requires moving beyond a one-size-fits-all model to ensure the KSPK remains a flexible framework that empowers teachers to serve as cultural brokers, adapting pedagogical strategies and content to bridge the gap between national standards and the diverse capabilities and needs of all Malaysian children.

Publication

For this section, some parts related with the equitable quality education in early childhood has been submitted for publication. Please see **Appendix S**.

2.5 Educational Access

2.5.1 Concept of educational access

The concept of access to education is not clear, as some authors defined it as physical access or enrolment in schools (Gamede, 2005; Alexander, 2008; USAID, no date). Early scholars like Morrow (1994) provide a useful distinction between formal physical access to education and epistemological access, which is access to the knowledge that the institution distributes. While this dichotomy challenges the focus on enrolment, it could be argued that it inadequately addresses the structural inequities embedded in educational systems. This is where Gamede (2005) contends Morrow's concept of access is limiting because under the human rights framework, it disregards issues of equity; it should focus not only on increasing access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds but also on providing support to increase their chances of success. In terms of access, Morrow (1994) states that the concept rules out the existence of a hidden curriculum that favours some and excludes others. This aligns with Cole and Hill (2004), who perceive the similar concept that marginalisation of certain forms of knowledge can compromise access to knowledge.

Learning the responsiveness of the curriculum entails teaching and assessing children in ways that are accessible to them. This includes making available what is valued about the underlying discipline, how it is assessed, and which evaluative criteria are of significance, but also adjusting the teaching to rhythms, tensions, and emotions of learning (Lotz-Sisitka, 2009). Furthermore, curriculum responsiveness embraces economic, cultural, disciplinary, and learning responsiveness. It entails accommodating the diversity of socio-cultural realities in children by developing a wider variety of instructional strategies and learning pathways. This version expanded on Morrow's concept of epistemological access by shifting the focus away from external factors impacting on schooling to the internal processes of schooling.

According to du Plooy and Zilindile (2014), access to basic education is meaningful when schools ensure epistemological access and support children's systematic learning of basic skills, knowledge, values and practices, while also respecting the children's dignity and background. Epistemological access and systematic learning imply that learning must be structured so that children develop coherent ways of understanding and engaging with different learning areas. Teaching for meaningful access is about carefully designed learning programmes and materials that enable

children to gradually develop competencies that cannot be learnt in an instant and go beyond the informal learning that goes on daily at home (Pendlebury, Lake and Smith, 2009). It demonstrates that access dovetails with meaningful access and systematic learning, which extends beyond mere physical access and includes ways to ensure quality teaching and learning. Pendlebury, Lake and Smith (2009) reflect that access to lead success in schooling should include access for whom (equity), access for how long (retention), access to what (curriculum), and access for what success (achievement). Similarly, Gamede (2005) further argued that access at the classroom level should be expanded to include the political and social dimensions that equip the teaching and learning process, such as resource disparities and linguistic hierarchies that hinder marginalised learners from participation.

Additionally, Chimombo (2005) discusses access to schooling, equity and gender issues, cultural and religious attitudes, efficiency and educational quality, relevance of education, and financial issues in achieving Education for All in developing countries. Education should be inclusive, responding to the diverse needs and circumstances of learners and giving appropriate weight to the abilities, skills, and knowledge they bring to the teaching and learning process. Two key debates appear related to how children could gain access to school knowledge: the first is separating horizontal knowledge (everyday knowledge) and vertical knowledge (school knowledge), and the second is bringing the two together in the teaching and learning process (Lingard and Mills, 2007). The combination of school knowledge and children's everyday worlds appears to be one way of allowing all children, especially previously marginalised children, to gain epistemological access to early schooling.

2.5.2 Educational access to equitable quality education

In this study, questions of equity and access became central considerations that were informed by UNESCO's Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda (UNESCO, 2013). This report focused on education with special reference to societal challenges and the need for worldwide responses from education systems to them. It pinpointed education as essential for fostering responsible citizenship grounded in principles of human rights, which could enhance societal resilience (UNESCO, 2013). It also highlighted the benefits of investment in quality education, among them the formation of responsible citizenship orientated towards

principles of respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity, which in turn contributes to more resilient and stable societies (UNESCO, 2013). From this report, two main education-specific goals were considered to be addressed as a part of the future development framework: equitable access and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2013). Subsequently, these goals were reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNGA, 2015). However, this issue is a challenge not only at the global level but also nationally for all contemporary societies and education systems.

In Malaysia, the Blueprint shares similar aspirations as in preschool to secondary education, which are access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency (MOE, 2015). The preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education systems share a vision of what the outcome of a Malaysian education should look like and what that means for individual children. While the blueprint's emphasis on equitable access aligns with UNESCO's equity-quality aspects, it is argued that its reliance on standardised metrics, such as PISA rankings, risks reducing "quality" to performative benchmarks rather than pedagogical perspectives (Jamil & Azman, 2022).

There is a need for a better understanding of the conditions under which everyday teaching practices and classroom interaction produce equitable access to high-quality education, including equal preconditions and chances of autonomous participation and success. In doing so, the need to consider issues of equity and access at the societal, institutional, and classroom levels is acknowledged (UNESCO, 2015). Regarding the issue of access to quality education in an international development context, this has generally been considered to be simply a question of school enrolment. However, Humphreys *et al.* (2015) argued that enrolment figures are an inadequate indicator of access because being enrolled in school does not necessarily mean being in school, and being in school does not necessarily mean being engaged in productive learning. For this reason, Humphreys *et al.* (2015) identified four distinct stages of educational access for all levels: access as enrolment, access as sustained attendance, access to the classroom, and access to the curriculum. These collectively form access to good quality education as the ultimate goal, which aligns with the concept of epistemic quality (Hudson, 2019a). This argument is resonant with Morrow (2009), who offers the notion of epistemic access, which has subsequently been used as a curriculum principle that maximises the chances for all children to experience

high-quality education in a school setting. Furthermore, du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) relate this to the idea of meaningful or expanded access to education, building on the previous notion.

2.5.3 Equitable access in early childhood education in Malaysia

Education inequities that originate in early childhood education perpetuate cyclical disadvantages, particularly for children from economically marginalised backgrounds (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011). Despite the fact that middle- and upper-income families frequently have access to high-quality preschool programmes, low-income communities are frequently denied comparable opportunities due to systemic disparities in resource allocation. Although affordable early childhood education initiatives exist, their utilisation frequently requires proactive parental engagement through community-based research and advocacy (Ministry of Education, 1984). Compounding systemic challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient pedagogical materials (e.g., textbooks and digital tools), and overcrowded classrooms, are encountered by schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged environments. These conditions are exacerbated by underqualified teaching staff experiencing chronic occupational burnout due to prolonged exposure to resource-deficient environments (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011).

The emphasis on the Curriculum Development Centre since 1972 (Ministry of Education, 1984) in the administration of preschool education indicates that Malaysia's education system for preschool programmes has continued to focus on accessibility to equity and quality strengthening, as well as improving the achievement of rural children to reduce the performance gap between rural and urban areas (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011). The socio-economic urban-rural gaps are expected to narrow, but they will also affect the corresponding achievement gaps between federal states and school types. Achieving this reduction would make Malaysia one of the more equitable systems in the world.

Although the education system was envisioned to equip all Malaysian children, regardless of their conditions, with the tools they need to unlock their future, children, especially those in rural areas (Redmond et al., 2017), experienced significantly higher non-income deprivation than children in urban areas. In 2017, the Ministry of Education reported that approximately 90.9% of children were enrolled in preschool

(Ministry of Education, 2019). In that category, most of the children were from low-income communities, and only 60% of children had the opportunity to attend preschool (MOE, 2019). Among those children, boys from rural low-income areas were often not interested in enrolling in primary school after preschool and were more likely to drop out of school to help their parents (UNICEF, 2019). Consequently, they were tired at school and could not focus on their studies. These children have no reason for failing to attend school, as they will miss the free food. Hence, the school must consider alternative strategies, such as distributing food coupons, and parents should also play a role in encouraging their children to concentrate on their studies (Faizuddin, 2018).

Many preschools still differ across states by gender, socio-economic status, and location (Majzub, 2009). The best school systems provide the best possible education for all children, regardless of ethnicity, geographic location, or even socio-economic background. In this case, the education system will actively support social mobility by providing additional assistance to those at a disadvantage, thereby ensuring that a child's socio-economic background will no longer be the biggest driver of whether or not he or she succeeds (OECD, 2018). However, diverse groups of children with special needs should be accommodated in the preschools; these include those with Down syndrome, the mentally retarded, the autistic, and the slow learners. Evidence from Singapore's inclusive preschool model shows that early intervention programmes can improve developmental outcomes by 37% for these populations (UNESCO, 2020). However, implementation requires systemic reforms in teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and assistive technology integration, areas where Malaysia's preschool system shows a 42% deficiency, according to recent audits (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The Ministry of Education Malaysia provides programmes for children with special needs, vulnerable children, and gifted children. Although the education system desires to provide access to alternative educational pathways, like vocational education, to make adequate opportunities for children with different abilities to develop their talents, this underperformance is related to three demographic and structural challenges (MOE, 2013): First, 73% of under-enrolled schools are located in remote rural areas (OECD, 2013), which requires children to travel long distances to attend school, thereby reducing the likelihood of high-performing teachers and principals. Second, these schools lack the advantages associated with scale: co-curriculum offerings, better facilities, and interactions with a more diverse group of peers (World Bank,

2015). Finally, many of these schools are in low-income areas and face difficulties related to lower socioeconomic status. Low-income families face more significant challenges in keeping their children in school, as the costs of school supplies, uniforms, and transportation fees often result in higher child absenteeism (Mortimer et al. 2014). Statistically, 50.1% of boys and 99.9% of girls attend preschool, while 66.4% of them are either mismatched by age or over-aged for preschool, and 7.1% of Malaysian children of all ages drop out from studying (Mortimer et al., 2014). Therefore, children from low-income families are less likely to have attended preschool; they will enter primary school without the preschool benefits enjoyed by their more affluent peers.

2.6 Policy Interpretation and Implementation

2.6.1 Policy interpretation in education

Education policy interpretation refers to the dynamic process through which stakeholders, particularly among teachers, administrators, and policymakers, negotiate, adapt, and enact policy directives within specific institutional, cultural, and socio-political contexts. This process is not merely a technical exercise, but a contested, meaning-making endeavour shaped by competing institutional logics, localised practices, and power dynamics (Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017; Ball et al., 2011). For example, teachers often mediate between top-down mandates and classroom realities by recontextualising policies to align with their pedagogical beliefs, resource constraints, and community needs (Arcila, 2018; Remillard, 1992). In Colombia, English language teachers reinterpret national policies through the lens of rural school contexts, balancing compliance with professional autonomy (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2024). Similarly, South Korean teachers navigate multicultural education policies by interpreting the government's "narrow" (assimilationist) versus "broad" (inclusive) definitions, which shape their classroom practices (Kim, 2021).

Interpretation is deeply influenced by institutional logics and includes societal norms and values that frame how policies are understood. Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2017) demonstrate how teachers in the U.S. interpret instructional reforms through the competing logics of market accountability, such as standardised outcomes, professional bureaucracy like expertise, and communal sentiment, such as relational trust. Ambiguity in policy language further complicates interpretation. For instance, terms like "children-centred learning" or "peaceful coexistence" (Charalambous et al., 2014) are open to multiple readings, enabling stakeholders to align policies with their priorities while risking fragmentation (Hill, 2001). In Zimbabwe, teachers' willingness to adopt curriculum reforms is hindered by vague directives and insufficient training, illustrating how ambiguity can disempower implementers (Chimbi & Jita, 2019).

Teachers are not passive implementers but active policy actors who reinterpret mandates through their professional identities and localised knowledge (Ball et al., 2011; Smit, 2005). In Peru, Indigenous teachers contest top-down bilingual education policies by infusing them with community cultural practices, transforming policy intent (Valdiviezo, 2009). Similarly, Greek-Cypriot teachers reinterpret peace education initiatives in dialogue with historical narratives of conflict, revealing how policy

meanings evolve through interaction with entrenched discourses (Charalambous et al., 2014). This agency, however, is constrained by structural factors. For example, school leaders mediate teachers' understanding of accountability policies, filtering district directives through their own sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002). Social networks also shape interpretation: district policies influence teacher collaboration patterns, which in turn affect how reforms are enacted (Coburn & Russell, 2008).

Furthermore, interpretation is inherently political, reflecting asymmetries in power and voice. Policymakers' priorities often clash with teachers' grassroots realities. For instance, in China, EFL teachers critique national curriculum mandates as misaligned with classroom needs, advocating for greater involvement in policy design (Li, 2010). Meanwhile, neoliberal reforms like standardised testing are reinterpreted by educators to resist market-driven agendas (Alfrey et al., 2017). Such tensions underscore the hermeneutic complexity of policy work: interpretations are shaped by actors' values, material conditions, and historical trajectories (Ball et al., 2011). For instance, South African teachers' experiences of post-apartheid reforms reveal how policy success hinges on addressing the "human side" of implementation, including emotions, identities, and lived realities (Smit, 2001).

2.6.2 Policy implementation in education

Education policy implementation refers to the complex, multi-layered process through which formal policy directives are translated into practice by actors including teachers, administrators, and institutions. Unlike linear models of policy execution, contemporary scholarship emphasises implementation as a dynamic, contested, and context-dependent process shaped by institutional logics, power dynamics, and localised sensemaking (Ball et al., 2011; Spillane et al., 2002). For instance, Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2017) demonstrate how teachers' interpretations of instructional reforms are mediated by societal logics, such as market accountability, professional bureaucracy, and communal sentiment, which compete to shape classroom practices. Similarly, in Colombia, public-private partnerships and policymakers' priorities influence how teachers perceive and enact national English language policies, often privileging economic goals over pedagogical needs (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2024). These examples underscore that implementation is not merely technical but deeply political, reflecting tensions between top-down mandates and grassroots realities.

Teachers play a central role as mediators and reinterpreters of policy. Rather than passive implementers, they exercise agency by adapting policies to align with their professional identities, resource constraints, and children's needs (Arcila, 2018; Ball et al., 2011). For example, South Korean teachers navigating multicultural education policies reinterpret the government's "narrow" (assimilationist) versus "broad" (inclusive) definitions, often subverting rigid frameworks to address classroom diversity (Kim, 2021). In rural Colombia, English teachers balance compliance with national mandates against contextual challenges like limited infrastructure, blending policy requirements with localised pedagogies (Arcila, 2018). However, this agency is constrained by structural factors. In Zimbabwe, teachers' willingness to implement curriculum reforms is hindered by vague directives and inadequate training, illustrating how systemic disempowerment stifles effective enactment (Chimbi & Jita, 2019).

Policy implementation is influenced by competing institutional logics and deeply ingrained societal norms that shape stakeholders' priorities. For instance, school leaders mediating accountability policies often prioritise market-driven metrics (e.g., test scores) over communal or professional values, filtering district directives through their own sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002; Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017). Ambiguity in policy language further complicates implementation. Terms like "peaceful coexistence" in Cyprus (Charalambous et al., 2014) or "children-centred learning" in the U.S. (Hill, 2001) are interpreted divergently, enabling flexibility but risking fragmentation. In Peru, vague intercultural education policies are reinterpreted by Indigenous teachers to integrate community practices, yet systemic marginalisation persists due to top-down design (Valdiviezo, 2009). Such cases highlight how ambiguity can both empower and undermine implementation.

Similar to policy interpretation, policy implementation is also inherently political, reflecting power asymmetries between policymakers and practitioners. In China, EFL teachers critique national English curricula as misaligned with classroom realities, advocating for participatory policy design (Li, 2010). Similarly, South African teachers' experiences of post-apartheid reforms reveal how policy success hinges on addressing the "human side" of implementation, which includes emotions, identities, and historical legacies (Smit, 2001). Resistance also emerges when policies clash with local values. Greek-Cypriot teachers, for instance, reinterpret peace education initiatives in dialogue with entrenched narratives of conflict, sometimes subverting state goals to reflect community histories (Charalambous et al., 2014). These

dynamics underscore that implementation is not a neutral process but a site of struggle over meaning and resources.

Moreover, social networks and leadership significantly shape implementation. Coburn and Russell (2008) show how district policies reconfigure teachers' professional networks, fostering collaboration or isolation during curriculum reforms. School leaders, as intermediaries, translate accountability policies into actionable steps, yet their interpretations are filtered through personal biases and organisational cultures (Spillane et al., 2002). For example, in England, the National Literacy Strategy was diluted as teachers recontextualised prescribed materials into habitual classroom interactions, prioritising familiarity over innovation (Lefstein, 2008). Such findings emphasise the need for leadership that bridges policy intent and teacher expertise.

2.6.3 Policy interpretation and implementation: Issues in preschool education

Education policy interpretation and implementation in preschool education involve dynamic processes where teachers, administrators, and institutions translate national directives into practice, shaped by institutional logics, contextual constraints, and professional agency. Unlike K–12 settings, preschool policies often emphasise holistic child development, yet their enactment is complicated by competing priorities, resource disparities, and ambiguities in policy language (Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010; Mligo, 2016). For instance, Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies prioritise child well-being, but interpretations vary widely due to professional rivalries and scope expansion, diluting their core aims (Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010). Similarly, Tanzanian preschool teachers struggle to implement child-centred curricula due to inadequate training and overcrowded classrooms, illustrating how systemic gaps undermine policy goals (Mligo, 2016). These cases underscore that interpretation and implementation are deeply intertwined, mediated by localised sensemaking and structural inequities.

Preschool teachers interpret policies through institutional logics, which are societal norms that frame their priorities. In the U.S., Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2017) found that teachers' interpretations of reforms are influenced by the logic of market accountability (e.g., standardised outcomes), professional bureaucracy (e.g., expertise), and communal sentiment (e.g., relational trust). These logics intersect with individual and contextual factors; for example, Colombian preschool teachers

reinterpret national ECEC policies by blending state mandates with community-centred practices, creating hybrid models that reflect local values (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023). Ambiguity in policy language further drives divergent interpretations. In New York City, pre-K teachers face tension between policy directives for child autonomy and their own pedagogical beliefs, leading to fragmented practices (Luna & Grey, 2019). Such ambiguity allows flexibility but risks misalignment with policy intent, particularly when teachers lack guidance (Roslin et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, implementation in preschool education hinges on teachers' agency and systemic support. In Colombia, teachers exercise agency by positioning themselves as advocates, negotiating policy demands, and authoring new practices that prioritise child development over bureaucratic compliance (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023). However, agency is constrained by structural barriers. Tanzanian teachers, for instance, lack the resources and training to implement child-centred curricula, perpetuating rote-learning practices (Mligo, 2016). Even in high-resource contexts, like Finland, ECEC policies falter when interpretations prioritise administrative expansion over pedagogical coherence (Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010). Leadership also plays a critical role: school leaders mediate policy directives, yet their interpretations often prioritise institutional survival over innovation (Goldstein, 2008). For example, U.S. Head Start teachers report that competing policy mandates (e.g., nutrition education vs. standardised curricula) dilute their capacity to implement holistic programmes (Peterson et al., 2016).

Policy implementation in preschool education is fraught with equity challenges. In South Africa, teachers' experiences of post-apartheid reforms reveal how historical inequities and under-resourced schools stifle meaningful change (Smit, 2001). Similarly, U.S. teachers implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) face barriers to service access and quality, particularly in marginalised communities (Hebbeler et al., 2012). Power dynamics further shape implementation: Colombian teachers' agency in redefining ECEC policies clashed with top-down mandates, highlighting tensions between grassroots innovation and state control (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023). Teachers' professional identities also mediate implementation. In New York City, pre-K teachers resisted policy shifts that conflicted with their beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice, leading to dissonance and burnout (Akaba et al., 2019).

Issues in Malaysian preschool education

Malaysian preschool policies often suffer from vague language and insufficient operational guidelines, leading to fragmented interpretations. For example, the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) emphasise holistic child development but lack clear directives on pedagogical strategies, leaving teachers to rely on personal judgement. This ambiguity has resulted in inconsistent practices, such as some teachers prioritising academic readiness over play-based learning, despite policy mandates (Romarzila Omar et al., 2021). Similarly, the revised NPCS 2017 introduced child-centred approaches but failed to provide standardised assessment criteria, causing confusion. Teachers reported using ad hoc methods to evaluate children's progress, which often misaligned with the curriculum's intent (Mohd Zailani & Wan Shakizah, 2018). Such inconsistencies are exacerbated by the absence of structured feedback mechanisms between policymakers and practitioners, perpetuating a cycle of misinterpretation.

Moreover, resource shortages are a critical barrier to effective policy implementation. Preschools, particularly in rural and underserved areas, lack basic infrastructure, including digital teaching aids, age-appropriate learning materials, and safe play spaces (Siew & Tee, 2024). For instance, the implementation of early mathematics curricula is hindered by the scarcity of manipulatives, like counting blocks, forcing teachers to resort to rote memorisation techniques (Chee et al., 2015). Special education programmes face even greater challenges: overcrowded classrooms and insufficient assistive technologies limit individualised support for children with disabilities (Bari et al., 2016; Saari et al., 2022). These issues are compounded by systemic underfunding and poor inter-ministerial coordination, as highlighted in the ECEC Policy Implementation Review (Boon, 2010). Urban-rural disparities further widen access gaps, with urban preschools more likely to receive government and private sector support compared to their rural counterparts (Fong et al., 2021).

Despite the policy emphasis on innovative pedagogies like play-based learning and STREAM (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics), many Malaysian preschool teachers lack the skills to translate these concepts into practice. While teachers exhibit high theoretical knowledge of the National Preschool Curriculum Standards, their practical application remains weak due to inadequate training (Romarzila Omar et al., 2021). For example, sexuality education is mandated

to address child safety, which is delivered informally, with teachers avoiding sensitive topics due to limited training and cultural discomfort (Wan Nawi et al., 2021). Similarly, STREAM education, although prioritised in the policy, is often reduced to disjointed activities rather than integrated learning experiences (Phang et al., 2023). Studies show that teachers with higher qualifications (diploma or above) demonstrate better classroom practices, underscoring the need for continuous professional development (Nair et al., 2017). However, existing training programmes are often fragmented, focusing on administrative compliance rather than pedagogical innovation.

Socio-cultural norms and institutional priorities frequently clash with policy objectives. Play-based learning, a cornerstone of Malaysia's preschool framework, is frequently sidelined due to parental demands for academic rigour and school administrators' focus on standardised outcomes (Norsuhaily, 2019). Teachers, pressured to demonstrate "visible" progress, resort to worksheet-driven instruction, undermining the policy's child-centred ethos. Similarly, inclusive education for children with disabilities is impeded by societal stigma and a lack of inclusive pedagogies. While policies advocate integration, many teachers resist including children with special needs in mainstream classrooms due to limited training and fears of disrupting routines (Sukumaran et al., 2015). Cultural conservatism also shapes the interpretation of sensitive policies like sexuality education, where teachers avoid discussing body autonomy, citing community norms (Wan Nawi et al., 2021). These tensions highlight the disconnect between progressive policy ideals and entrenched societal expectations.

Furthermore, weak governance structures and fragmented stakeholder collaboration undermine policy coherence. The ECEC Policy Implementation Review revealed that overlapping responsibilities between the Ministry of Education and private providers lead to inconsistent service quality (Boon, 2010). For instance, after a decade of the report, private preschools often prioritise profit over pedagogical standards, while public schools struggle with bureaucratic delays in resource allocation (Foong et al., 2021). Policymakers recognise these gaps but lack mechanisms to enforce accountability, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, teachers and parents are rarely consulted during policy design, resulting in top-down mandates that ignore on-ground realities. The lack of a unified framework for public-private partnerships further complicates efforts to standardise early childhood education (Saari et al., 2022).

Lastly, the absence of standardised assessment tools and monitoring systems exacerbates implementation gaps. The NPCS 2017 revision, for example, emphasised formative assessments but provided no clear benchmarks, leaving teachers to rely on subjective observations (Mohd Zailani & Wan Shakizah, 2018). This ambiguity has led to inconsistent reporting practices and teacher burnout, as educators struggle to balance documentation demands with instructional time. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms are often punitive rather than supportive; inspections focus on administrative compliance (e.g., record-keeping) rather than pedagogical quality (Norsuhaily, 2019). Without robust feedback loops to refine policies based on classroom evidence, systemic inefficiencies persist.

2.6.4 From macro policy to micro practices in preschool education in Malaysia

Contemporary education policy scholarship underscores the interplay between macro policies, considered as broad, systemic frameworks, and micro policies, which translate these frameworks into localised practices. Macro policies, such as national curriculum standards or equity-driven funding models, set strategic priorities for education systems (Cairney, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). For instance, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, have influenced macro-level reforms globally, emphasising universal access and quality (UNESCO, 2022). Micro practices, conversely, operationalise these goals through actionable guidelines, such as teacher training protocols or classroom assessment criteria (Datnow and Park, 2018). Recent studies highlight the role of "street-level bureaucrats" (teachers, administrators) in adapting macro policies to diverse contexts, a process requiring flexibility and resource alignment (Honig, 2006; Hupe and Hill, 2016).

Malaysia's preschool education framework, guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Blueprint), prioritises universal enrolment, quality standardisation, and socioemotional development (Ministry of Education, 2013). The policy targets 100% enrolment for children aged 4-6, with specific initiatives like the Permata Programme and public-private partnerships expanding access, particularly in underserved rural and Indigenous communities. By 2023, urban areas achieved 98% enrolment, although rural regions lagged at 85% due to geographic barriers and low parental awareness. The revised National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS) (2019) emphasises play-based learning, STEM integration, and bilingual (Malay-English) instruction to align with global trends in 21st-century skills and national unity goals (Bakar, 2023; OECD, 2023). Post-pandemic reforms further address digital resilience, with the Digital Education Policy (2022) allocating RM 1.2 billion to equip rural preschools with tablets and internet connectivity, mitigating learning disruptions (Zaiti Zainal and Zaidah Zainuddin, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). These efforts align with SDG 4 targets on inclusivity and resilience, positioning Malaysia's ECEC system within global benchmarks (UNESCO, 2022).

Despite these advancements, scholars highlight structural and implementation challenges. Urban-rural inequities persist, as rural preschools struggle with

intermittent internet access and teacher shortages. A 2023 study revealed only 40% of rural teachers received adequate STEM training, undermining curriculum goals (Mastam, 2024). Critics argue that centralised policymaking overlooks contextual disparities, perpetuating a “one-size-fits-all” approach that marginalises Indigenous communities (Zaiti Zainal and Zaidah Zainuddin, 2020). For instance, the NPCS’s STEM focus has been criticised for sidelining traditional play-based pedagogies and local ecological knowledge in Sabah and Sarawak, risking cultural erasure (Mamat *et al.*, 2020; Tang *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, private preschools often resist standardisation due to autonomy concerns, leading to inconsistent adoption of socioemotional learning guidelines and exacerbating quality divides (Mohd Hanafi *et al.*, 2024).

Implementation capacity gaps further strain the system. Rapid preschool expansion has strained institutional capacity to monitor and enforce quality standards. According to the Ministry of Education’s 2022 Annual Report, only 60% of preschools underwent mandatory annual inspections due to understaffed district education offices, particularly in rural states like Kelantan and Sabah (Muhamad Ridza *et al.*, 2024; MOE, 2022). Hashim et al. (2023) attribute this to a small vacancy rate in quality assurance roles, exacerbated by bureaucratic centralisation that delays hiring and resource allocation. This gap undermines compliance with safety and curriculum standards, with rural preschools often lacking basic infrastructure such as fire exits and child-friendly sanitation facilities (UNICEF, 2023).

Despite macro-policy commitments to inclusivity, fewer than 10% of preschools employ educators trained in special needs education (UNICEF, 2023). The National Inclusive Education Policy (2021) mandates accommodations for children with disabilities, but a 2023 survey revealed that only 15% of preschools in urban areas and 5% in rural areas provide assistive technologies (MOE Malaysia, 2023). Abdullah et al. (2024) critique this as a systemic failure, noting that the MOE allocates just 3% of the ECEC budget to inclusive education, compared to the OECD average of 12% (OECD, 2023). This underfunding perpetuates exclusion, as children with disabilities in states like Pahang and Sarawak are often redirected to segregated institutions (Lee et al., 2024).

Scholars emphasise that decentralised implementation could address these gaps. For example, Nordin (2023) advocates for empowering state-level education departments to tailor monitoring protocols and hiring processes to local needs, as successfully

piloted in Sarawak's Community-Based Preschool Program. Similarly, participatory policymaking in engaging parents, NGOs, and teachers in decision-making has shown promise in Selangor's Parent-Teacher Quality Committees, which reduced inspection backlogs by 30% in 2023 (MOE Malaysia, 2023). Culturally adaptive curricula, such as incorporating Indigenous storytelling into STEM modules in Sabah, could also improve engagement and retention (Aziz & Ibrahim, 2023).

2.6.5 Teachers as policy actors in education policy

Teachers' roles as policy actors are illuminated through diverse theoretical lenses. Ball et al. (2011) conceptualise educators as engaging in "policy work", where they creatively enact mandates within institutional constraints while balancing compliance with professional judgement. This aligns with Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy, where teachers exercise discretion to adapt policies to classroom realities. For instance, Swedish preschool teachers navigate tensions between subject-based and child-centred curricula, reflecting the ambivalence inherent in policy enactment (Liljestrand, 2020). Similarly, Colombian teachers recontextualise national policies to prioritise child-centred pedagogies (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023), demonstrating how agency emerges in response to structural limitations. Critical policy analysis further reveals how neoliberal reforms, such as credential mandates, paradoxically deplete workforces while aiming to professionalise them (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005; Brown et al., 2015). These frameworks underscore that policy enactment is a dynamic, contested process shaped by teachers' interpretive and adaptive labour.

As interpreters, teachers decode policy ambiguities, often filling gaps with localised practices. In Sweden, preschool classes' institutional cultures are co-constructed by teachers who infuse policies with community-specific values (Lago et al., 2020), while Malaysian educators sidestep sensitive topics in sexuality education due to cultural norms (Wan Nawi et al., 2021). As adaptors, teachers modify policies to align with contextual needs. New York City pre-K educators adjust child autonomy directives to address diverse student needs (Akaba et al., 2019), exemplifying flexibility amid complexity. Neoliberal pressures, however, complicate adaptation; Latvian teachers face pay inequities tied to municipal finances, constraining their capacity to innovate (Vanaga et al., 2020). As advocates, teachers challenge systemic inequities. Dual-

language educators in the U.S. resist English hegemony by promoting bilingualism (Kilinc & Alvarado, 2021), while South African teachers demand equitable resource distribution (Smit, 2001). These roles highlight teachers' dual positioning as both constrained by and resistant to policy structures.

Structural barriers often undermine teachers' agency. Governance fragmentation, such as Finland's fluctuating child-staff ratios (Paananen, 2020), exemplifies how metrics-driven policies prioritise efficiency over pedagogical quality. In Latvia, municipal fiscal disparities exacerbate pay gaps, relegating preschool teachers to precarious roles (Vanaga et al., 2020). Neoliberal reforms further erode professional autonomy; Swedish teachers' alignment with economic sustainability objectives reframes their work within market logics (Ärlemalm-Hagsér et al., 2018). Additionally, credentialing mandates, while intended to uplift quality, may deplete workforces by imposing unsustainable demands (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). Such systemic inequities reveal how policies reshape teacher identities, as seen in Michigan, where pre-K reforms redefine professionalism in ways educators both embrace and resist (Wilinski, 2019).

Participatory approaches are critical to bridging policy-practice gaps. Co-creation models, like Colombia's community-centred reforms (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023), demonstrate the efficacy of involving teachers in policy design. Addressing economic disparities requires state-level interventions, such as Latvia's call for equitable funding (Vanaga et al., 2020), while Finland's governance-by-numbers critique urges reevaluating metrics-driven accountability (Paananen, 2020). Professional development must transcend credentialism to include contextualised training, as seen in Malaysia's STREAM mentorship (Phang et al., 2023). Crucially, policies must recognise teachers as agentic stakeholders, not passive implementers, in order to foster equitable, sustainable early childhood systems.

Studies on teachers as policy actors in Malaysian preschool education

Malaysian preschool teachers exercise significant interpretive agency in translating policy into practice, often mediating tensions between top-down mandates and contextual demands. For example, the revised National Standards Preschool Curriculum (NSPC) emphasises child-centred pedagogies but provides vague assessment guidelines, leading to fragmented implementation. Therefore, teachers adopt optimistic or pessimistic stances: some embrace the flexibility to innovate, while

others default to traditional methods to meet parental expectations regarding academic readiness (Mohd Zailani & Wan Shakizah, 2018). Similarly, while multicultural education policies aim to foster inclusivity, teachers conflate these goals with superficial cultural celebrations rather than addressing systemic inequities, reflecting gaps in policy clarity and training (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2016). Play-based learning mandates further illustrate this duality; although teachers recognise its value for language and literacy development, overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages force many to prioritise structured academic activities (Rahman, 2014). These examples underscore how teachers' interpretations are mediated by institutional pressures and localised norms.

Teachers' roles as advocates and resistors emerge prominently in inclusive education contexts. While policies promote the integration of children with special needs, new teachers reported feeling ill-equipped due to inadequate training and overcrowded classrooms (Masnan et al., 2017). In integrated preschools, educators expressed ambivalence; although supportive of inclusion in principle, they resisted full classroom integration due to fears of disrupting routines and lacking specialised support (Sukumaran et al., 2015). Systemic barriers, such as insufficient assistive technologies and fragmented governance, exacerbate these challenges, forcing teachers to rely on improvisation rather than policy-backed strategies (Saari et al., 2022). Conversely, teachers in private preschools advocated for professional development opportunities to align with national standards, highlighting disparities in resource access between public and private sectors (Foong et al., 2018). These dynamics reveal teachers' dual positioning as both constrained by structural inequities and active agents in negotiating policy gaps.

Structural inequities profoundly shape teachers' capacity to enact policy. Rural-urban divides in resource allocation persist, with urban preschools more likely to receive digital tools and infrastructure, while rural counterparts struggle with outdated materials and overcrowding (Kamaruddin et al., 2017; Foong et al., 2021). Credentialing mandates, such as requiring diplomas for preschool teachers, aim to professionalise the workforce but risk depleting it, as underpaid teachers face burnout from balancing compliance and classroom demands (Nair et al., 2017). Neoliberal accountability measures further complicate these dynamics: teachers in private preschools, often underqualified and overworked, report readiness to upskill but lack institutional support (Foong et al., 2018). These challenges underscore how policies

designed to enhance quality often inadvertently reinforce inequities, particularly for marginalised communities.

Recent study emphasises the need for teacher-led policy co-creation to bridge gaps between intent and practice. A 2023 review of Malaysian preschool education highlighted misalignments between universal enrolment targets and on-ground accessibility, urging policymakers to integrate teacher feedback into reforms (Shaping First Steps, 2023). Similarly, sustainability-focused initiatives must reconcile disparities between private and public preschool quality, with teachers advocating for state support to meet education-for-sustainable-development goals (Ahmad et al., 2022). International models, such as Colombia's community-centred early childhood reforms, demonstrate the efficacy of participatory approaches in fostering policy relevance (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023). In Malaysia, empowering teachers as co-designers could mitigate ambiguities in curriculum implementation and strengthen equity-focused practices.

Thus, Malaysian preschool teachers are pivotal yet under-supported policy actors whose interpretive labour and adaptive strategies shape the trajectory of early childhood education. While systemic barriers, including resource inequities, neoliberal pressures, and fragmented governance, constrain their agency, teachers persistently advocate for reforms through localised resistance and innovation. Future policies must prioritise participatory frameworks that centre teacher voices, contextualised training to address inclusive and multicultural education gaps, and equitable resource allocation to mitigate rural-urban divides. By reconceptualising teachers as co-architects rather than passive implementers, Malaysia can transform its early childhood education system into one that is responsive, inclusive, and sustainable.

Summary Chapter

Chapter 2 of the thesis, Literature Review, provided a comprehensive examination of the existing literature relevant to the research topic, which focused on the interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint, particularly in the context of equitable quality in public preschools. This chapter was crucial, as it established the contextual issues and empirical landscape significant to the research.

The literature review was structured to cover a broad perspective, narrowing down to a more focused synthesis. It included narrative, scoping, and systematic reviews, which collectively provide a thorough understanding of the global policy landscape and the specific issue of access to education. This was particularly important in promoting equitable quality early childhood education within the Malaysian context.

This chapter dedicated a significant portion to discussing Bourdieu's social critical theory, the theoretical framework underpinning the study. This framework was essential for understanding the relationship between agency and structure in the context of policy engagement: interpretation and implementation in preschool education. The literature review explored how this theory was applied within the research area, providing a lens through which the research questions were examined.

The chapter also explored global policy ideals and how they related to the local Malaysian landscape. It highlighted the challenges and opportunities in implementing the Blueprint that promoted equitable access to quality education. The review of literature included an analysis of the systemic barriers that hinder both policy interpretation and implementation as well as the role of teachers as active agents in navigating these challenges.

Next in Chapter 3, Methodology, follows the literature review and provides a detailed explanation of the research design, data collection methods, analysis, ethical considerations, and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, reliability, and overall research quality.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

The Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Blueprint) serves as a blueprint for early childhood education in Malaysia. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, to explore the complexities of teachers' experiences individually, beyond the influence of government agencies. The methodology is informed by ontological and epistemological assumptions that recognise reality as socially constructed and context-dependent. Through semi-structured interviews and journaling of teachers' reflections, data were collected from a purposively sampled group of public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur. The research design emphasised ethical considerations, including ensuring informed consent and confidentiality, as well as the participants' data protection. Data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which facilitates a deep understanding of participants' subjective experiences. Therefore, this chapter offers a comprehensive framework for exploring the intricate relationship between policy implementation and educational practice, highlighting the importance of context, interpretation, and ethical rigour in qualitative research.

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions about Sought Knowledge—Ontological & Epistemological Assumptions

There are two dimensions in philosophical assumptions: ontological and epistemological assumptions. Ontological assumptions reflect a researcher's position on the nature of reality itself to indicate whether phenomena exist independently of human perception or are socially constructed (Kant, 2014). Meanwhile, epistemological assumptions shape the nature of knowledge about that reality, including how researchers can understand, validate, or interpret claims about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2014). Together, these assumptions influence the researcher's worldview and underpin methodological decisions (Sallee and Flood, 2012; Mills and Birks, 2014; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Flick, 2018).

3.1.1 Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumption is framed as a proposition about the nature of social reality within Malaysia's early childhood education policy context. While I acknowledge that some phenomenologists consider ontological debates peripheral to qualitative inquiry (Van Manen, 2017), given phenomenology's historical development as a response to positivist epistemology, I align with Alhazmi and Kaufmann's (2022) view that phenomenological frameworks emphasise epistemological questions about how knowledge is subjectively accessed and mediated. This requires me to address the relationship between the knower (myself as researcher) and the known (equity in policy implementation), which I recognise as fundamentally epistemological rather than ontological.

In adopting hermeneutic phenomenology, I perceive reality as dynamically constructed through individual consciousness and contextual interactions (Cohen & Morrison, 2000). My interpretive stance centres on participants' lived experiences, where meanings emerge not from external objectivity but through my systematic and careful engagement with their narratives. This is based on the argument that Malaysia's social reality, particularly its Bumiputera policy framework and multicultural tensions (Adams, 2022), is internally mediated through historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives (Bryman, 2016). For instance, the mandated use of the Malay language *(Bahasa Melayu)* in preschools (Ministry of Education, 2018) is interpreted not merely as an external policy structure but as a site where non-Malay teachers negotiate vernacular identities, thereby shaping their perceptions of equity.

Therefore, my ontological assumption is positioned as follows: the reality of educational equitable quality under the Blueprint arises dialogically through my methodological interactions with participants, their lived experiences, and my reflexive interpretation of how policy is enacted. This assumption implicitly informs my epistemological positioning, which I elaborate on below.

3.1.2 Epistemological assumption

For the epistemological assumption, I positioned myself as the knowing subject in this qualitative inquiry, where the phenomenon of educational equity under Malaysia's Blueprint became the object of investigation through teachers' lived experiences. My epistemological stance hinges on recognising the inseparability of my interpretive role

from the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). To develop a coherent research design, I intentionally interrogated how my hermeneutic engagement with participants' narratives shapes and is shaped by the dialectic between their subjective realities and my analytical framework.

My epistemological stance is aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology, which grounds knowledge production in the interplay of historical context, cultural traditions, and prior understanding (Jacobs, 2014; Rockmore, 2011). Following Crotty (1998), I conceptualise epistemology not as a neutral lens but as an active process of co-constructing meaning; my methodological choices reflect how I aim to legitimise knowledge about equity through critical dialogue with teachers' situated interpretations. Philosophically, I reject the notion of objective detachment. Instead, I integrate Malaysia's socio-political historicity, including tensions around diversity within vernacular identity and Bumiputera policy (Adams, 2022), into the hermeneutic circle, treating these as enabling frameworks rather than biases to be bracketed (Hartley, 2006).

Methodologically, this approach differs from Husserlian bracketing, in which I sought to distil essences by setting aside presuppositions. Instead, I embraced Heidegger's hermeneutic turn, acknowledging that my recognition of teachers' experiences is inextricably linked to their *dasein*, their being-in-the-world as policy actors entangled in power dynamics and cultural narratives (Van Manen, 2016a). For instance, when analysing non-Malay teachers' interpretations of the *Bahasa Malaysia* mandate (Ministry of Education, 2018), I did not detach their accounts from their practical involvement in policy implementation. Instead, I foregrounded how their lived contradictions, as both implementers and critics of equity measures, emerge through language, cultural memory, and institutional constraints in classroom settings.

This epistemological perspective views meaning as temporal and dialogic. The essence of equity in this study is not a fixed truth to be uncovered but a negotiated understanding that develops through my iterative engagement with participants' accounts. By adopting the hermeneutic circle, I illuminate how teachers' perceptions of the Blueprint are co-constituted by their agency within the preschool environment and resistance to Malaysia's multicultural policy landscape.

Interpretive Research Paradigm

My research was situated within the Interpretive Research Paradigm (IRP), which aligns with hermeneutics as the science of interpretation (Crotty, 1998). This paradigm is grounded in an idealist epistemology, where knowledge is understood as a social construct and emphasises interpreting the social world (Hein & Austin, 2001). For my study, this meant acknowledging that meaning is not fixed but contingent, constructed by individuals through their interactions with contextual features such as history, culture, and lived experiences (Cilesiz, 2011).

Furthermore, I positioned my use of the IRP within Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, particularly the ideas of the hermeneutic circle and phronesis, which is practical wisdom (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Gadamer's framework guided me to view understanding as a dynamic, dialectical process. I moved iteratively between interpreting the "whole" (the socio-historical context of Malaysia's Blueprint policy) and the "parts" (teachers' lived experiences with the policy). This approach rejects positivist notions of objectivity, recognising that my interpretations, and those of the participants, are inherently shaped by cultural traditions, linguistic frameworks, and historical situatedness. Rather than treating these influences as biases to be eliminated, I embraced them as essential to the interpretive act (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Additionally, central to my analysis is the concept of phronesis. I argue that teachers' interpretations of equitable access under the Blueprint are not mere technical implementations of policy but acts of practical wisdom. These interpretations emerge dialogically, negotiated through Malaysia's multicultural ethos and the interplay of teachers' prior experiences, the policy text, and the evolving educational system. Methodologically, the IRP enabled me to pursue in-depth understanding through reflexive engagement with participants' experiences. My approach, which involved semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling, aligns with Heidegger's (1982) assertion that human existence is inherently interpretive. By analysing these textual accounts, I aimed to produce rich descriptions of teachers' lifeworld as they navigate the Blueprint. My reflexive stance ensured that I critically examined how my own positionality, which is shaped by my academic, cultural, and historical backgrounds, informs the interpretive process.

In adopting this IRP, I emphasise that meaning-making depends on context. As Stiegler (2010) notes, interpretations depend on the cultural and situational frameworks participants bring to their experiences. My analysis thus foregrounded the

dynamic interplay between policy, practice, and Malaysia's unique socio-historical landscape.

Intentionality

In this study, I positioned intentionality as one of the most critical aspects of my phenomenological framework, following Moustakas (1994) and Husserl's (1970) assertion that consciousness is inherently relational. My analysis assumed a dynamic interplay between subjects (teachers) and objects (the Blueprint), where human consciousness actively constructs the "object" of experience rather than passively receives it (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). This aligns with my view that knowledge is mediated, as there is no direct access to phenomena. Instead, I contend that knowledge arises from deliberate, conscious engagement with the phenomenon under study (Barnacle, 2001).

In my methodological design, I adopted Husserl's dual dimensions of intentionality, which are noema (the object of experience) and noesis (the act of experiencing). For instance, when analysing teachers' interpretations of the Blueprint, I distinguished between the noema (equitable access as a policy goal in the Blueprint) and the noesis (teachers' acts of perceiving, judging, or reflecting on that Blueprint's goal). This duality reflects van Manen's (2014) claim that all human experience is intentional. My focus on these dimensions allowed me to interrogate how teachers' subjective acts of interpretation (noesis) are shaped by and reciprocally shape the policy's perceived aims (noema).

Furthermore, a key tension I explored is the interplay between individual subjectivity and intersubjective meaning. For example, while a Malay teacher in Kuala Lumpur might consciously align the Blueprint's equity goals with Bumiputera empowerment (a noetic act), the noema of equitable access holds divergent meanings across Malaysia's ethnic communities. Here, I emphasise that teachers' interpretations are neither wholly free nor deterministic; they are constrained by the noema (policy text and socio-historical context) while also actively redefining it through lived practice.

Following Moustakas (1994), I treated consciousness as inseparable from its object, where teachers cannot engage with the Blueprint without consciously directing their attention towards it. My interpretive process thus focused on understanding how the surface manifestations in "texture" and the underlying essence in the "structure" of

their experiences come together. For instance, during the interview, when teachers described logistical challenges in implementing equity (texture), I probed how these accounts reveal deeper tensions between policy ideals and multicultural realities (structure).

In my study, the noema represented the Blueprint's vision of equitable educational access, while the noesis encompassed teachers' lived acts of policy engagement, which included activities such as lesson planning, negotiating cultural norms, and advocating for marginalised children. I rejected a static view of policy-as-object (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016); instead, I treated equity as a dynamic phenomenon emerging from the interplay of teachers' intentional acts and the evolving Malaysian preschool education context. By foregrounding intentionality, I aimed to uncover the essence of their experiences and how their consciousness of the Blueprint transforms policy into praxis.

This framework guided my methodology. Through interviews and reflective journals, I interpreted teachers' noetic acts (e.g., critiquing policy ambiguities) in relation to the noematic context (e.g., historical inequities and multiculturalism). My analysis acknowledged that my own consciousness is moulded by my academic training and positionality, which inevitably mediates this process. However, following phenomenological principles, I leveraged this reflexivity to deepen rather than obscure the interpretive act (Van Manen, 2016a).

Bridging the ontology and epistemology within the Blueprint

In my research, I framed the synthesis of ontology and epistemology in my study as a dialectic interplay between policy-as-text (noema) and policy-as-lived (noesis). The noema of the Blueprint refers to its textual reality, equity objectives, standardised KPIs, and curriculum benchmarks that reflect Malaysia's ontological commitment to globalised visions of educational modernity (e.g., OECD, PISA, World Bank 2023). However, I argue that this noema is not static, but it is continually reinterpreted through the noetic acts of teachers, whose agency is ontologically mediated by their positionality within Malaysia's sociopolitical hierarchy.

In my analysis, I explored how the teachers' epistemic understandings that are shaped by lived experiences, cultural norms, and power dynamics interact with the ontological structures of the Blueprint. For instance, although the policy text prescribed universal equity metrics, teachers made noetic adaptations, such as modifying assessments to

accommodate multilingual learners or reinterpreting access through communal rather than individualist frameworks. This revealed a tension between global policy ideals and localised ontologies of education. This dialectic is not merely theoretical; I situated it within Malaysia's postcolonial context, where legacies of ethnic stratification and centralised governance shape how teachers negotiate policy meaning (Muhamad Ridza *et al.*, 2024).

My phenomenological approach demonstrated that the Blueprint functions both as a product of intersubjective meaning-making, rooted in the noema of global benchmarks, and as a site of agential negotiation. The teachers' reinterpretations were not deviations from policy but constitutive acts that redefined its ontology. By foregrounding their noetic engagement, I described how the Blueprint's epistemology claims regarding equitable quality are ontologically reconstituted through practice.

Moreover, I rejected the binary separation of ontology (what is) and epistemology (how we know). Instead, I viewed them as co-emergent, where teachers' knowledge of equity (epistemology) is inseparable from their lived reality of enacting it within Malaysia's power-laden educational system (ontology). This synthesis aligns with my hermeneutic framework, where understanding arises from the iterative movement between policy-as-text (noema) and policy-as-lived (noesis). Through this lens, I demonstrated that the Blueprint's reality is not fixed but is dynamically constructed through the interplay of institutional structures and teachers' interpretive agency.

3.2 Methodological (Phenomenological) Framework

3.2.1 Qualitative Phenomenology Methodology

For this research, I adopted a qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore issues of equitable quality in ECEC, particularly how teachers perceive and enact equity within Malaysia's multicultural context. This approach aligns with the OECD's (2012) definition of equitable quality as ensuring all children have access to environments fostering academic, linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological success. By framing reality as socially constructed and dynamic (Glesne, 1999), I positioned myself to interrogate the complexities of teachers' lived experiences through an interpretive lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative methodology enabled me to engage with the long-standing, complex challenges of equity in ECEC, prioritising teachers' subjective insights over rigid, universal frameworks (Leko, 2014).

Furthermore, I acknowledged that policy documents, such as the Blueprint, and the perceptual lenses of individuals are inherently fluid, shaped by evolving personal values, ideological shifts, and sociopolitical contexts (Cover, 2020). My focus on teachers' perspectives required a methodology that prioritises context and deep engagement. Following Sallee and Flood (2012), I emphasised close interaction with participants to holistically understand preschool settings, adapt to on-the-ground realities, and bridge gaps between policy, practice, and research. This engagement was not just procedural but foundational to my goal of generating actionable insights for diverse stakeholders.

My phenomenological framework is rooted in Moustakas' (1994) interpretation of Husserlian principles. I defined the phenomenon under study, which is teachers' experiences of implementing equity through the Blueprint, as that which appears in consciousness during their acts of policy engagement (Moustakas, 1994). Like Lauer (1967), I acknowledged teachers' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as the primary source of meaning, rejecting positivist separations of subject and object. Husserl's assertion that the reality of an object is dependent on a subject (Moustakas, 1994) underpinned my analysis, in which the Blueprint's equity goals (noema) exist only to the extent that teachers consciously interpret and enact them (noesis).

My aim was twofold: firstly, to uncover the essence of teachers' lived experiences with the Blueprint, and secondly, to define how equity manifests as a dynamic phenomenon within Malaysia's multicultural ethos in preschool education. By centring teachers' intentionality, which is their conscious act of perceiving, judging, and adapting policy, I illuminated the interplay between institutional structures and agential meaning-making. This methodology positioned me not as a detached observer but as an interpreter critically attuned to how my own positionality shapes the co-construction of knowledge. Through reflexive analysis of interviews and journals, I strove to articulate the textures (surface narratives) and structures (underlying essences) of equity as lived, contested praxis.

Essence and Phenomenological Framework in My Study

I conceptualised the essence of a phenomenon as arising from the structures that govern its nature manifestations. Following Moustakas (1994), I inferred this essence by examining particulars, instances of teachers' lived experiences as they enact the Blueprint. My interpretation centred on how these experiences are shaped by the

interplay between subjective perceptions (e.g., teachers' beliefs about equity) and objective structures (e.g., government-mandated preschool frameworks in the Blueprint). By positioning policy as a dynamic phenomenon rather than a static mandate, I foregrounded teachers' daily practices, institutional constraints, and cultural contexts to identify patterns in how they perceive, adapt to, or contest policy directives. For example, when analysing a teacher's negotiation of equitable access, I highlighted tensions between policy-defined inclusivity (e.g., universal enrolment mandates) and lived realities like overcrowded classrooms. Through such cases, I uncovered the essence of policy enactment: how teachers reconcile agency with systemic limitations, revealing equity as a contested, context-dependent praxis.

Furthermore, I aligned my methodology with hermeneutic phenomenology, which prioritises interpretation over mere descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Unlike transcendental approaches that presuppose a detached "view from above", I embraced my role as an interpreter embedded in the co-construction of knowledge. Drawing on Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), I structured my phenomenological framework around three dimensions:

Aim: I aimed to identify the essence of teachers' lived experiences as they interpret and implement the Blueprint, focusing on how their narratives reveal core themes (Creswell, 2014).

Philosophical Assumptions: I acknowledged that teachers' experiences are co-constructed through interactions between policy texts, institutional power, and their own sociocultural backgrounds.

Strategies: I employed adaptable methods, like semi-structured interviews and reflexive journaling, to centre the teachers' voices while critically engaging with my own positionality.

This approach allowed me to produce multi-layered descriptions of policy enactment, balancing rigour (Lodico et al., 2006) with the flexibility needed to navigate Malaysia's complex educational landscape. By framing phenomenology as both philosophy and methodology, I bridged theoretical constructs (e.g., Husserl's intentionality) and grounded realities, such as how a teacher's ethnic identity mediates their interpretation of equitable access within the Blueprint. My hermeneutic stance rejects neutrality, instead leveraging interpretation as a tool to expose the dynamic interplay of agency, structure, and meaning-making in policy praxis.

3.2.2 Hermeneutical Phenomenology

In this study, I employed hermeneutic phenomenology to explore how early childhood teachers interpret and implement equitable educational access under the Blueprint. My goal involved a detailed exploration of their lived experiences to understand the complexities of policy enactment. Unlike other qualitative methods, phenomenology emphasises human experience as the primary site of meaning-making (Mills & Birks, 2014). By adopting a hermeneutic lens, I prioritised the co-construction of knowledge through participants' narratives, which enabled me to uncover authentic perspectives on how teachers reconcile policy mandates with preschool classroom realities.

As both a theory and a method, hermeneutic phenomenology enabled me to interpret how teachers create meaning from their experiences. For example, when a teacher described modifying assessments for underprivileged children, I analysed this not merely as a procedural act but as a reflective inquiry into the hidden tensions between policy ideals and contextual constraints. Grounded in interpretivism (Mills & Birks, 2014), I acknowledged that the teachers' actions, such as adapting curricula or redefining quality as culturally responsive care, emerged from beliefs shaped by Malaysia's socio-cultural landscape. Through iterative co-interpretation with participants (Creswell, 2009), I compared the interview data with policy texts, revealing gaps between institutional goals and localised practices. This approach aligns with my aim to position teachers as active policy actors who dynamically enact equity rather than passively implement directives.

Moreover, I consciously leveraged teacher-researcher dialogue to foreground subjectivity rather than suppress it. However, I avoided reducing experiences to mere descriptive accounts (El-Sherif, 2017). Instead, I interpreted narratives through the lens of *dasein*, which emphasises teachers' situated existence within the cultural, political, and material conditions of their classrooms (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). For instance, when a teacher struggled to align multilingual policy goals with monolingual resources, I framed this as an expression of their being-in-the-world as teachers navigating systemic limitations. To capture this, I designed semi-structured interviews and reflective prompts that probe how their preschool environments shape interpretations of equity. Questions and probes like "How does your classroom context influence what 'equitable access' means to you?" elicit narratives embedded in their *dasein*, revealing how agency is framed by institutional and cultural conditions.

My analysis treated the teachers' accounts not as isolated anecdotes but as expressions of their lived reality. I focused on three dimensions: what teachers understand about equitable quality, what they do to enact it, and how they respond to policy tensions. By centring their experiences of practising, processing, and reflecting, I illuminated the interplay between policy-as-text and policy-as-lived. This hermeneutic process underscored my ontological stance: teachers' interpretations of equity are inseparable from their situatedness within Malaysia's preschool educational systems.

Hermeneutics and Policy Enactment in My Analysis

Building on Ball's (2021) framework of policy enactment, I synthesised hermeneutic phenomenology to argue that policies are not neutrally implemented but actively enacted through interpretation, adaptation, and reconstruction within localised contexts. While Ball emphasises the material and discursive forces shaping policy outcomes, such as tensions between equity goals and socio-cultural norms, hermeneutics allowed me to interrogate how these dynamics are lived by teachers. For instance, I explored how teachers might reinterpret equity as flexible, context-responsive storytelling rather than a rigid policy mandate. This exemplifies my broader argument that policies are reshaped through the interplay of lived realities and institutional structures.

In my study, I positioned teachers' meaning-making as a hermeneutic process, where their classroom practices (e.g., adapting curricula for multilingual learners) reflect a negotiation between their immediate horizon of classroom realities and the horizon of policy expectations. By analysing these acts of interpretation, I demonstrated how teachers' agency is both enabled and constrained by broader power structures, such as Malaysia's centralised education system or ethnolinguistic hierarchies. This approach aligns with my ontological view of policy enactment as a dialectic one, where teachers' lived experiences do not merely respond to policy but actively reconstitute its meaning. Thus, my hermeneutic lens bridges micro-level teacher narratives and macro-level policy discourses, revealing equity not as a fixed outcome but as a contested, iterative praxis.

3.2.3 Positionality

The study process started by framing research questions around the Malaysian public preschool teachers' negotiation of the Blueprint, ensuring alignment between hermeneutic phenomenology's focus on lived experience and the study's aim to uncover how teachers implement the Blueprint with classroom realities. This study employed semi-structured interviews and journal reflections, which facilitated an in-depth examination of diverse perspectives (Stake, 2000) "within its real-life context" (Yin, 2009). I designed the semi-structured interview questions to elicit context-rich narratives to reduce politically correct responses (de Boer et al., 2011). Journal reflections' prompts were structured around critical incidents of policy implementation and teachers' agency to capture embodied experiences of policy implementation. During the interviews and journal prompts, I ensured the avoidance of sensitive and personal topics, allowing participants to respond at their own pace without uncomfortable or inappropriate questions (Van Manen, 2016).

Additionally, in hermeneutic phenomenology, I acted as an active interpreter rather than a mere data collector. This involved engaging deeply with participants' narratives to understand their experiences from the ground perspectives in implementing the Blueprint. According to Van Manen (2016), this requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, reflecting continually on the merging meanings. I had to navigate my own preconceptions and biases to ensure that interpretations remain true to participants' realities, rather than being clouded by personal perspectives. To navigate this, I employed bracketing during interviews, explicitly asking participants to clarify terms such as "flexibility" and "adaptability" to reflect participants' pragmatism.

A central concept in hermeneutic phenomenology is the engagement of the hermeneutic circle, which involves an iterative process of understanding through moving between the parts and the whole of the text or experiences. As Alsaigh and Coyne (2021) suggest, this cyclical approach allows researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by considering the individual elements of the data within the context of the overall experience. This process helped me to uncover hidden layers of meaning that might not be immediately evident and involves reflexivity. Reflexivity is an important tool in hermeneutic phenomenology. Researchers must maintain a high degree of self-awareness regarding their own biases and preconceptions (Finlay, 2006). This is where the researcher's *foresight* is

acknowledged, as are the pre-understandings that shape interpretation (Dangal and Joshi, 2020). The lived experience of the participants needs to be seen in the context of that individual's life situation from the other's perspective. This reflexivity ensures that interpretations are grounded in participants' experiences. By engaging in continuous self-reflection, I examined how their backgrounds and experiences might influence their understanding of the data, thus maintaining the integrity of the research.

Furthermore, my dual role as a former Kuala Lumpur preschool teacher (2012-2015) and academic researcher (2016 – present) created an insider-outsider tension requiring vigilant reflexivity. While my policy experience granted me significant understanding of the Blueprint implementation challenges, it also risked normalising teachers' struggles as inevitable. To mitigate this, I maintained my own reflexive journal documenting how field encounters triggered memories. Following Finlay's (2006) interpersonal reflexivity, I engaged in debriefing with supervisors, who challenged emergent themes, leading to revised codes like negotiated compliance. Triangulation further tempered the differences between interview claims and policy documents, as well as government agency authority, by interrogating them through follow-up interviews and member checking, which revealed validation through audit trails.

Understanding the context in which experiences occur is crucial in hermeneutic phenomenology. Researchers consider historical, cultural, and social influences that shape participants' realities (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). By situating experiences within their broader context, researchers can offer richer, more comprehensive interpretations of the phenomena, acknowledging the interconnectedness of individual experiences with larger societal factors. This involves a collaborative process between researchers and participants. The multi-agency governance of Malaysian preschools critically shaped teachers' experiences. For example, while KEMAS teachers emphasised community collaboration, MOE teachers highlighted a standardised benchmark—preparation for preschoolers before they enter a primary school. Hermeneutic circling between agency-specific issues and the Blueprint exposed contradictions between policy aspirations and teachers as individuals, as well as under the agency. Through dialogue and interaction, meaning is co-constructed, recognising that understanding is not solely the researcher's task but a shared endeavour (Todres

& Galvin, 2018). This approach values multiple viewpoints and the dynamic interplay between me and the participant in the creation of meaning.

In conclusion, the role of the researcher in hermeneutic phenomenology is intricate, involving interpretation, reflexivity, contextual understanding, and ethical sensitivity. By engaging deeply with the data and remaining open to the richness of human experiences, I can illuminate the meanings and essences of those lived experiences, offering valuable insights into the phenomenon. This approach underscores the interpretive nature of qualitative research, where the researcher serves both as a guide and participant in the journey of discovery.

3.3 Population and Sampling

3.3.1 Research setting/context

I selected the population purposefully to ensure data relevance and alignment with my research questions. Following Check and Schutt (2012), I defined my population as public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, operating within early childhood education settings. I chose Kuala Lumpur due to its practicality, feasibility, and my familiarity with the context (UNICEF, 2013). This setting offers socio-economic and socio-political diversity that is less pronounced in other urban or rural areas (Fu & Mohamed Hashim, 2024), which enabled me to explore how equity is navigated within a complex urban ecosystem. Conducting the study in Kuala Lumpur is logistically feasible for me, given its accessibility to resources, participants, and research facilities compared to other regions.

Kuala Lumpur's dense population encompasses diverse demographics, including age, gender, teaching experience, preschool types, socio-economic status, and ethnic backgrounds, which I leveraged to generate robust, contextually grounded insights into equitable practices. Aligning with Silverman (2011), I recognise the importance of working within available resources to ensure successful research while capturing rich, nuanced data.

I situated my study in Kuala Lumpur to understand discourses on equitable quality in early childhood education through the perspectives of public preschool teachers, who navigate shared policy drivers despite varied lived realities. These teachers served as critical participants due to their dual roles as policy implementers and cultural

mediators within Malaysia's centralised educational hierarchy. Their experiences are particularly significant in Kuala Lumpur, where federal initiatives like the National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC) are often piloted before nationwide rollout (Ministry of Education, 2018). By centring their voices, I interrogated how equity is enacted in a city that epitomises Malaysia's multicultural ethos and policy experimentation.

Urban context and participants within Kuala Lumpur

As my research aimed to explore teachers' experiences of equitable quality in early childhood education through a phenomenological lens, it required a deep engagement with Kuala Lumpur's local context. I focused on the city's ethnic diversity, linguistic landscape, and socio-political conditions, which critically shape how policies are interpreted and enacted. Kuala Lumpur's relevance as a phenomenological setting lies in its multicultural complexity, where its population comprises 45.9% Malay, 43.2% Chinese, 10.3% Indian, and 0.6% other ethnicities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), reflecting Malaysia's broader national identity. This diversity extends to language, where Bahasa Malaysia coexists with widespread multilingualism, in which 87% of residents speak English (58%), Mandarin (41%), or Tamil (15%) in educational and social contexts (UNESCO, 2023a). I positioned this linguistic complexity as central to understanding how teachers mediate policy mandates, such as the Blueprint's equity goals, within linguistically heterogeneous classrooms.

Religious pluralism further compounds these dynamics, with Islam (46.4%), Buddhism (35.7%), Christianity (8.6%), and Hinduism (8.1%) coexisting (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). I recognise that teachers must navigate interfaith sensitivities, particularly given the centralised, Islamic-influenced national curriculum (Aziz et al., 2021). Drawing on van Manen's (2016) emphasis on situatedness, I argue that teachers' interpretations of equity are inevitably filtered through Kuala Lumpur's socio-cultural setting, where policy enactment becomes an act of balancing universal mandates with localised pluralism.

Furthermore, my methodological focus was informed by Kuala Lumpur's status as Malaysia's educational hub, which has the nation's highest literacy rate at 97.5% (Hin, 2020). While Malay remains the primary language of instruction, English is compulsory, and some schools integrate Mandarin or Tamil for specific subjects (Goh

& Luen Loy, 2021). I situated my study within this multilingual ecosystem, where preschools operate under multiple government agencies, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. This fragmented governance creates hierarchical access to resources, exacerbating disparities in policy implementation. For instance, preschools under the Ministry of Education often receive more structured guidance, whereas those under religious councils may prioritise faith-based curricula.

By centring Kuala Lumpur's institutional and cultural complexity, I foregrounded teachers' lived experiences as policy actors negotiating these contradictions. Their experiences revealed how equitable quality is co-constructed within, and often despite, a system marked by competing priorities and uneven resourcing. This approach aligns with my phenomenological commitment to uncovering how macro-level structures (e.g., multilingual policies) are micro-level lived realities (e.g., a teacher's daily struggle to accommodate Tamil-speaking children in a Malay-dominant classroom).

Table 1 shows the total number of preschools (4-6 years old) based on the government agencies in Kuala Lumpur in 2020.

Table 1: Total number of government preschool in Kuala Lumpur (updated version 2022)

Government Agencies	**Name of Preschool**	**Total Number**
Ministry of Education (MOE)	National Preschool @ 'P*rasekolah Kebangsaan'*	226
Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KPWKM)	KEMAS	159
Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN)	PERPADUAN	129
Federal Territory Islamic Religious Council (MAIWP)	MAIWP Kindergarten	74

Sources from (MOE, 2020, KEMAS, 2021, JPNIN 2021 and MAIWP 2020)

Biases and constraints on population

My familiarity with Kuala Lumpur's socio-cultural and educational landscape, while advantageous for contextual grounding and participant access, introduced potential interpretive biases. I acknowledged that my assumptions about shared cultural norms, language fluency, or policy familiarity could risk homogenising participants' experiences or overlooking nuances in data analysis. To mitigate this, I conducted a screening survey to exclude ineligible participants and embedded reflexivity throughout the research process. For instance, I maintained a reflective journal to document decision-making rationales and evolving interpretations, which allowed me to critically revisit prior assumptions such as uniformity in policy implementation across agencies during interviews. These steps, aligned with Lodico et al.'s (2006) rigour standards, enhanced credibility by explicitly situating myself as an instrument of inquiry and interrogating how my positionality shaped knowledge production (van Manen, 2016b).

I recognise that my exclusive focus on urban preschools in Kuala Lumpur delimits direct transferability to rural or semi-urban contexts. Infrastructural gaps, resource availability, and socio-cultural dynamics may mediate equitable quality differently in non-urban settings. For example, rural teachers often contend with multilingual children populations lacking Bahasa Malaysia proficiency and limited professional development access, challenges less prevalent in urban areas (UNESCO, 2020). While this constraint aligns with my phenomenological emphasis on depth over generalisability, I frame my findings as context-specific explorations rather than universal claims, cautiously tailoring implications to urban systems. To address this limitation, I recommend future comparative studies adopting critical ethnography to examine urban-rural policy disparities, particularly in states like Sabah and Sarawak, where geographical and cultural complexities diverge markedly from peninsular Malaysia (Fu & Mohamed Hashim, 2024).

To strengthen interpretive validity, I employed triangulation across data sources and methods. For instance, I juxtaposed interviews with teachers from diverse agencies (MOE, KEMAS, MAIWP) against policy documents and institutional reports. While teachers emphasised resource disparities as barriers to quality, government reports prioritised standardised curricula over infrastructural investment (World Bank, 2023). This triangulation revealed how urban-centric policies may inadvertently perpetuate

inequities even within resource-rich settings, underscoring the need for hermeneutic sensitivity to localised power dynamics.

3.3.2 Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants, aligning with qualitative methodologies that prioritise depth of understanding over breadth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). My sampling strategy aimed to maximise efficiency and validity while remaining consistent with the research's phenomenological goals (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). To mitigate assumptions about teachers' lived experiences of enacting equitable education policies, I avoided targeting marginalised groups a priori and instead focused on participants' firsthand engagement with the Blueprint. Purposive sampling allowed me to select instances without preconceptions about outcomes, ensuring alignment with the study's interpretive aims (Emmel, 2013).

I recruited early childhood teachers who had direct experience implementing the Blueprint in Kuala Lumpur's public preschools. My rationale for selecting teachers centred on their dual roles as frontline policy actors and cultural mediators. As practitioners embedded in daily classroom realities, they offered unique insights into how equitable quality is negotiated at the intersection of policy mandates and situated practice. Parents, principals, or other stakeholders could not provide the same depth of perspective on the translation of policy into pedagogy.

In determining sample size, I followed Ellis' (2018) recommendation of 6–20 participants for phenomenological studies, prioritising depth over breadth. I sought data saturation, the point at which new interviews ceased to yield novel themes, to ensure comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. While practical constraints (e.g., time and funding) influenced the final sample size, I balanced methodological rigour with feasibility, iteratively analysing data to confirm thematic redundancy. This approach enhanced the credibility of my findings, as I captured a robust range of experiences without diluting the essence of teachers' lived realities.

By centring teachers' voices, I aimed to illuminate how policy enactment is shaped by their agency, constraints, and meaning-making processes. Their narratives revealed tensions often obscured in top-down policy evaluations, such as the dissonance between standardised equity metrics and culturally responsive improvisation. This

focus aligns with my ontological commitment to understanding policy as praxis rather than prescription.

Teacher participant (recruitment process) – screening survey

I recruited preschool teachers from government preschools in Kuala Lumpur using a screening survey tailored for purposive sampling. This survey served to identify participants with lived experiences relevant to my research questions, aligning with Neuman's (2006) assertion that purposive sampling enables focused selection of cases for in-depth inquiry. My survey combined open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives about participants' experiences with the Blueprint and demographic queries to ensure diversity while prioritising experiential depth over categorical representation.

The survey's inclusion criteria targeted teachers holding at least a diploma (per Malaysia's public preschool requirements), 3–5 years of early childhood education experience, and over five years in government preschools. I restricted participation to urban/suburban Kuala Lumpur settings to maintain contextual coherence with my study's aims. Additionally, I prioritised teachers who had attended Blueprint-specific training and self-identified as proficient in its application. Administered via Google Forms, the survey streamlined the selection of participants whose qualifications aligned with my focus on policy enactment as a lived practice. **Appendix G** contains information from the screening survey regarding the inclusion criteria and justification.

While this approach ensured methodological rigour, I acknowledged its limitations. The absence of explicit demographic stratification (e.g., ethnicity and language background) risked under-representing intersections between sociocultural identity and policy interpretation, a tension inherent in phenomenological depth-breadth trade-offs (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). To mitigate this, I embedded open-ended questions probing how participants' cultural and institutional contexts shaped their Blueprint implementation. For instance, a question like "Describe how your classroom's linguistic diversity influences your use of the Blueprint" invited reflections on unmeasured demographic factors.

I further recognised that proficiency self-assessments may introduce response bias, as teachers might overstate competence to align with perceived expectations. To address this, I triangulated survey responses with interview data, probing

discrepancies between claimed proficiency and narrated practices. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences as the primary site of analysis, I balanced the screening survey's structural constraints with hermeneutic flexibility, ensuring fidelity to phenomenology's emphasis on depth and situatedness.

Timeline and screening survey

I conducted the screening survey in three waves between July 2023 and January 2024. To recruit participants, I disseminated an online poster across social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, targeting early childhood education groups in Malaysia. I also shared the poster on my personal Facebook page and within professional networks aligned with preschool education. While this strategy expanded my reach, I recognised that it may have attracted a demographic that was over-represented among social media users, potentially introducing selection bias. For instance, digitally active teachers might skew younger or more technologically proficient, inadvertently excluding voices from older or less connected educators. To mitigate this, I supplemented online recruitment with snowball sampling in the second and third waves, asking initial participants to refer colleagues who met the study's criteria.

I acknowledge that snowball sampling risks introducing homogeneity bias, as referrals often align with participants' own sociocultural or institutional contexts. To counter this, I rigorously applied inclusion criteria during screening and diversified referral chains by explicitly requesting contacts from different preschool agencies (e.g., MOE, KEMAS). For example, after interviewing a teacher from a Ministry of Education preschool, I asked them to refer colleagues from religious council-affiliated centres. This approach balanced convenience with intentionality, leveraging networks while prioritising methodological rigour.

The online poster's brevity limited my ability to fully convey the study's purpose, a constraint I addressed by embedding a detailed participant information sheet within the Google Form. This ensured transparency about the research's goals, requirements, and ethical safeguards. Despite these measures, I remain cognisant that certain populations, such as teachers in remote urban pockets or those with limited digital literacy, may have been under-represented. My findings thus reflect the

experiences of accessible, socially networked teachers, a limitation I explicitly acknowledge in framing the study's scope.

By integrating digital outreach and snowball sampling, I navigated practical challenges while striving for diversity within Kuala Lumpur's fragmented preschool ecosystem. This hybrid approach underscores my commitment to phenomenological depth while candidly addressing the trade-offs inherent in urban policy research. Table 2 presents the information about screening survey waves.

Table 2:

Screening survey waves

Waves	Initial Response	Eligible Participants (filtered)	Agree to participate	Withdrawn
First	46	28	7	0
Second	18	8	3	1
Third	11	5	3	0
Total Participants			12	

During the three-wave screening process, I identified 75 potential participants, narrowing this pool to 41 eligible candidates through rigorous application of inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 13 public preschool teachers agreed to participate, with one withdrawal during the second wave due to conflicting professional commitments. I attributed this withdrawal to the intensive workload inherent in early childhood teaching roles, a systemic challenge I explicitly acknowledged in my methodological reflections. This withdrawal had a negligible impact on my study for two reasons. First, the departing participant's demographic and professional profile, including agency affiliation and years of experience, was already represented by three other participants, preserving the sample's contextual diversity. Second, iterative data analysis confirmed that thematic saturation occurred prior to the withdrawal, underscoring the robustness of my phenomenological approach, which prioritises depth of insight over numerical representation.

Nevertheless, this attrition highlighted the practical complexities of longitudinal engagement in policy-focused research, particularly among teachers balancing

pedagogical responsibilities with participation demands. My experience mirrored the broader critiques of urban educational research, where time constraints and institutional pressures often limit educator involvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). By designing flexible interview schedules and offering asynchronous reflection options (e.g., journaling), I aimed to mitigate these barriers while maintaining methodological integrity.

The final sample of 12 teachers provided rich, nuanced accounts of policy enactment, achieving data saturation across key themes like temporal agency and equity as praxis. My findings thus reflect a hermeneutically rigorous exploration of lived experience, grounded in the realities of Kuala Lumpur's preschool ecosystem.

3.4 Data collection method and procedures

This study employed two research methods, which were semi-structured interviews and journaling of teachers' reflections, with a particular focus on public preschool teachers in Malaysia and their experiences with the Blueprint in practice.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interview

I employed semi-structured interviews as my primary method for exploring teachers' lived experiences with the Blueprint. Aligning with van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology, I designed these interviews to serve dual purposes: generating rich descriptions of the phenomenon and co-constructing meanings through dialogic engagement. While I structured my interviews around open-ended questions, I framed them as guided discussions rather than rigid question-answer formats (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This approach allowed me to probe emergent themes, such as temporal agency or cultural negotiation, while maintaining methodological rigour.

I conducted interviews synchronously via online video calls to facilitate real-time, reciprocal dialogue. Drawing on Høffding and Martiny's (2016) emphasis on lived experience as a dynamic process, I prioritised synchronous communication to enable immediate clarifications and emotional resonance, nuances often lost in asynchronous methods. For instance, when a teacher described improvising multilingual resources, I could ask follow-up questions like, "How did your children's reactions shape your approach?" to elicit situated, embodied reflections.

My interview protocol balanced flexibility with structure (**Appendix H**). I designed core questions (e.g., “Describe a moment when the Blueprint’s equity goals conflicted with your classroom reality”) to anchor discussions while leaving space for improvisation. To mitigate defensiveness, I avoided confrontational “why” queries, instead using prompts like “Help me understand how that decision aligned with your vision of equity.” I pilot-tested questions with two teachers unaffiliated with the study, refining phrasing to reduce ambiguity and cultural presuppositions. The clean version of the semi-structured interview is attached in **Appendix I.**

Synchronous communication semi-structure interview

While online interviews offered logistical advantages by eliminating geographic constraints and COVID-19 safety risks (Gil-Rodriguez, 2021), I navigated technological and ethical challenges. I ensured participants had access to stable internet and familiar platforms, providing technical tutorials when needed. To safeguard confidentiality, I used password-protected meetings and advised participants to use headphones in shared spaces. Despite these precautions, I acknowledge that digital divides may have excluded teachers with limited tech literacy, a limitation I address in my reflexivity journal.

By centring reciprocity and presence, I transformed interviews into co-interpretive acts. When a teacher from a Mandarin-speaking preschool described adapting assessments for Tamil-speaking children, I mirrored her narrative with reflective statements (*“It sounds like equity meant bridging linguistic divides for you”),* deepening our shared understanding. This process aligns with my hermeneutic commitment to fusing horizons of meaning where my theoretical frameworks (e.g., temporal agency) interacted dynamically with participants’ lived truths.

Interviewing teachers

I accessed teachers’ lived realities through semi-structured interviews, designed to uncover nuanced perspectives on equitable quality education in early childhood settings. After finalising eligible participants through the screening survey, I made initial contact via institutional email to preserve confidentiality and minimise bias. Using my university email account, I sent recruitment emails to headteachers or principals, attaching a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (**Appendix E**) that outlined the study’s

rationale, ethical safeguards, and procedural details. Recruitment windows remained open for two weeks, with extensions granted when response rates were low, ensuring adequate time for informed consent (**Appendix E**).

Once participants confirmed interest, I scheduled interviews between September 2023 and March 2024, conducting 12 individual sessions via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes, balancing depth with respect for participants' time constraints. I chose Teams for its accessibility, where participants did not require subscriptions, and its capacity to facilitate real-time, video-enabled dialogue (UNESCO, 2023b). Prior to the sessions, I shared the interview protocol with participants to allow reflection on their experiences, aligning with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) emphasis on flexibility in semi-structured approaches.

During the interviews, I prioritised creating a non-threatening environment. Participants could disable their cameras to maintain anonymity, though most opted for video engagement, enabling me to observe nonverbal cues. I recorded the sessions using the Teams' built-in feature, converting videos to audio files immediately afterward to comply with ethical guidelines and participant preferences. Original video files were permanently deleted, and audio recordings were stored in a password-protected cloud folder.

Verbal consent was reaffirmed at the start of each session, with clear reminders of participants' right to withdraw at any time. I structured discussions around open-ended questions (e.g., *"Describe a moment when the Blueprint's equity goals resonated with your classroom practice"),* probing iteratively to elicit rich, contextualised narratives. For instance, when a teacher mentioned adapting assessments for neurodiverse learners, I asked, *"How did your children's responses shape your approach?"* to deepen the exploration of agency.

Post-interview, I generated verbatim transcripts using the Teams' auto-transcription feature, which participants reviewed for accuracy during member checking. This process not only validated data but also invited participants to refine or expand their insights. All transcripts were anonymised, with identifiers removed before analysis. By integrating these steps, I balanced methodological rigour with ethical sensitivity, ensuring that the teachers' voices remained central to the hermeneutic process.

Follow up interview

I incorporated two follow-up interview sessions to deepen my understanding of the participants' experiences while adhering to phenomenological rigour. These sessions served dual purposes: clarifying ambiguous points from initial interviews and accommodating participants' requests to expand on emerging themes. For example, one teacher revisited her earlier discussion of temporal agency, elaborating on how seasonal cultural festivals influenced her equity practices, a nuance missed in our first dialogue.

I structured follow-ups as flexible, participant-led conversations, using open prompts like *"You mentioned [theme] earlier, could you walk me through how that unfolded in your classroom?"* This approach minimised steering toward predetermined conclusions while honouring teachers' agency in shaping the discourse. However, I remained vigilant about participant fatigue, scheduling sessions at least two weeks apart and offering asynchronous alternatives (e.g., written reflections). Only two teachers opted for follow-ups, both initiating the request to further articulate policy-practice tensions they felt warranted deeper exploration.

While follow-ups enriched data depth, I acknowledge their resource intensity. Transcribing and analysing additional hours of dialogue extended my timeline, necessitating careful project management. To mitigate this, I integrated follow-up data into my ongoing thematic analysis, treating it as iterative refinement rather than discrete phases.

By balancing methodological openness with ethical mindfulness, I preserved the authenticity of participants' voices while probing the lived complexities of equity enactment. This strategy underscores my commitment to hermeneutic reciprocity, where my role as researcher became one of co-interpreter rather than extractive observer.

Interview Process

I developed an interview protocol aligned with my research questions and theoretical framework, comprising ten open-ended questions structured around themes of diversity, educational access, and policy enactment. My protocol began with an icebreaking section to establish rapport, followed by questions probing teachers' understanding of equity, experiences with the Blueprint, and perceived alignment

between policy mandates and classroom realities. I integrated potential prompts, such as *"Walk me through a specific instance where implementing the Blueprint challenged your equity practices",* to elicit granular narratives while maintaining phenomenological openness.

I designed the protocol to unfold over approximately 60 minutes, with flexible time allocations: 10 minutes for rapport-building, 40 minutes for core questions, and 10 minutes for reflective closure. However, I informed participants that sessions could be extended if needed, prioritising depth over rigid adherence to timing. For example, one interview spanned 90 minutes as a teacher detailed her iterative adaptation of multilingual resources, requiring additional probing to unpack temporal and cultural dimensions of her practice.

My prompts served dual purposes: ensuring coverage of key topics (e.g., policy-practice tensions) while encouraging participants to reconstruct lived experiences hermeneutically. When a teacher mentioned *"resisting standardised assessments*", I used the prompt *"How did your children's responses shape that resistance?"* to surface embodied, situational knowledge. This approach balanced structure with spontaneity, aligning with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) vision of semi-structured interviews as dialogic co-constructions.

I grounded questions in my theoretical framework, notably temporal agency and equity as praxis, while avoiding leading language. For instance, instead of asking, *"How does the Blueprint fail to address diversity?"* I framed enquiries as *"Describe moments when the Blueprint's goals aligned or conflicted with your classroom's cultural realities."* This phrasing invited critical reflection without presupposing deficit narratives.

By iteratively refining prompts during pilot testing, I minimised ambiguities that could derail phenomenological focus. My protocol's final section included open-ended invitations like *"Is there anything about your role the Blueprint doesn't capture?"* which often yielded unanticipated insights into teachers' improvisational expertise. These methodological choices reflect my commitment to van Manen's (2016) imperative: to let the phenomenon speak through the lived, not the imagined.

3.4.2 Journaling Teacher's Reflection

I adopted journaling as a secondary data collection method to complement interview data, aligning with phenomenological aims to capture teachers' lived experiences

through sustained, reflective engagement. Drawing on Hayman et al. (2012), I positioned journaling as a means to access participants' cognitive and emotional processing of policy enactment over time, particularly their improvisations and tacit knowledge unspoken in interviews.

Over a four-week period during the 2024 school term, I invited participants to submit weekly journal entries via email, responding to prompts designed to elicit critical self-reflection (**Appendix O**). These prompts targeted themes central to my research questions.

I structured prompts to avoid prescriptive language, instead inviting narrative freedom. For instance, one teacher documented her evolving use of Tamil nursery rhymes in a Malay-dominant classroom, a practice she initially deemed non-compliant with the Blueprint's language mandates. This journal entry revealed temporal dimensions of policy adaptation that interviews had only partially captured.

While journaling enriched data depth, I mitigated participant burden by limiting entries to 500 words weekly and offering template structures for those unaccustomed to reflective writing. To ensure ethical rigour, I anonymised entries during transcription, using pseudonyms like "Participant M" to dissociate identities from sensitive critiques of institutional practices.

By triangulating journals with interview data, I uncovered dissonances between teachers' retrospective accounts (e.g., "I always followed the Blueprint") and real-time reflections (e.g., "Today, I ignored the assessment rubric for Aisha's sake"). This juxtaposition aligned with Phillips' (2022) assertion that journals expose the processual nature of lived experience, contrasting with interviews' consolidated narratives. My analysis thus treated journals not as supplementary data but as co-constitutive texts, revealing the interstitial spaces where policy ideals and praxis collide.

The use of local language in data collection

I incorporated Bahasa Malaysia into interview protocols and journal prompts to align with the linguistic context of Malaysia's public preschools, where Malay serves as the primary medium of instruction. This choice aimed to reduce communication barriers and foster a culturally resonant environment, enabling teachers to articulate their experiences with greater authenticity. While I encouraged participants to respond in their preferred language, most chose Bahasa Malaysia, reflecting their professional comfort with institutional discourse.

To preserve semantic and emotional nuances, I analysed original Malay transcripts during the initial coding, deferring translation until thematic patterns emerged. For quotes selected to illustrate key themes, I conducted a rigorous translation process: first rendering them into English myself, then collaborating with a bilingual researcher to back-translate these into Malay. Discrepancies such as the term "*fleksibiliti*" (flexibility) being reinterpreted as "*kebebasan*" (freedom) were resolved through iterative discussion, ensuring fidelity to participants' intent.

This approach balanced methodological rigour with ethical sensitivity. By honouring teachers' linguistic agency, I captured subtleties often lost in Anglophone research paradigms. For instance, the affective weight of "*kasih sayang*" (compassionate) in equity narratives. Simultaneously, I mitigated the coloniality of language by decentralising English as the sole arbiter of academic legitimacy (Santos, 2018). My commitment to hermeneutic depth thus extended beyond lexical accuracy to encompass the epistemic sovereignty of participants' mother tongue.

The relation between both interview questions (**Appendix I**) and journal reflection (**Appendix O**) against the research questions were significantly related.

The table below shows how each method is mapped with the research questions.

Table 3:

Mapping research methods and research questions

Questions/Journal Reflection	Background (BG)	RQ1	RQ2
Q1	/		
Q2	/		
Q3		/	
Q4		/	
Q5		/	
Q6			/
Q7			/
Q8			/
Q9			/

Q10		/
R1	/	/
R2	/	/
R3		/
R4		/

Q: Questions for semi-structured interview, R: Prompts Reflection for journaling, RQ: Research questions, and BG: background information

The semi-structured interview included a series of questions designed to gather comprehensive data from participants. Questions Q1 and Q2 were intended to collect background information (BG) about the interviewees. Questions Q3, Q4, and Q5 were tailored to address the first research question (RQ1), focusing on understanding the experiences of public preschool teachers in interpreting national policy concerning educational access. Meanwhile, questions Q6 through Q10 were aligned with the second research question (RQ2), which explored the experiences of these teachers in practising educational access policy. This structured approach ensured that both background information and specific insights related to the research questions were systematically captured.

The journaling component involved reflection entries that captured detailed insights related to the research questions. Reflection entries R1 and R2 addressed both the first research question (RQ1) and the second research question (RQ2), focusing on the experiences of public preschool teachers in interpreting and practising the national policy on educational access. Entries R3 and R4 were specifically related to RQ2, providing additional depth on how these teachers implement educational access policies. There were no entries explicitly categorised under background (BG). This reflective journaling approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the teachers' experiences and perspectives, aiding in a comprehensive analysis of the research questions.

Table 4:

Information regarding participants

Participant identified by Code	Government Agencies	Number of interviews	Number of journal entries

		(including follow up)	
T001	MOE	1	4
T002	MOE	1	4
T003	MOE	1	4
T004	KEMAS	2	4
T005	MOE	1	4
T006	KEMAS	1	4
T007	KEMAS	1	4
T008	MAIWP	1	4
T009	MAIWP	2	4
T010	MAIWP	1	4
T011	KEMAS	1	4
T012	MOE	1	4

The table outlines my participant cohort, comprising 12 early childhood teachers from three Malaysian government agencies: the Ministry of Education (KPM), Community Development Department (KEMAS), and Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council (MAIWP). I assigned each participant a code (e.g., T001) and pseudonym to ensure anonymity while preserving institutional context. Most teachers (T001–T003, T005–T006, T012) represented KPM, contributing one interview each and four weekly journal entries. From KEMAS, T004 provided two interviews (including a follow-up) alongside four journals, while T007 and T011 each completed one interview and four entries. MAIWP participants (T008–T010) similarly engaged in one interview and four journals, except for T009, who contributed two interviews.

By combining semi-structured interviews (12 primary, 2 follow-up) with 48 journal entries, I captured both the breadth of institutional perspectives and the depth of lived experience. For instance, KEMAS teachers' narratives revealed how community-centric mandates shaped their Blueprint adaptation, whereas MAIWP participants highlighted faith-cultural negotiations absent in secular agencies. This multi-method design allowed me to trace thematic convergences across agencies while preserving idiosyncratic tensions unique to each institutional ethos. My sampling strategy thus

balanced phenomenological depth with strategic representation of Kuala Lumpur's fragmented preschool governance landscape.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative method to explore how Malaysian preschool teachers made sense of their experiences implementing equity-focused policies. Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiographic principles (Smith et al., 2009), my approach prioritised understanding teachers' subjective interpretations of policy-practice tensions while acknowledging the cultural and institutional forces shaping their lived realities. This alignment with IPA's philosophical foundations allowed me to navigate the inherent ambiguity of studying experiences mediated by hierarchical mandates and sociocultural norms (Larsen & Adu, 2021).

Figure 3 shows the relationship between three key elements involved in conducting IPA.

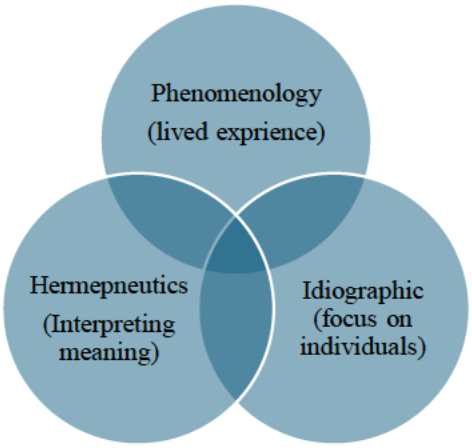

Figure 3: Relationship between three key elements in doing IPA

As a phenomenological researcher, I focused on uncovering tacit aspects of teachers' daily policy enactment, which are elements often overlooked in institutional audits but critical to equity outcomes. For instance, I probed how teachers' personal beliefs about fairness intersected with rigid assessment protocols, revealing improvisational strategies absent in policy documents. Following Lench et al. (2013), I treated these experiences as multidimensional phenomena shaped by ongoing negotiations between cognition, emotion, and institutional constraints. The idiographic lens of IPA

enabled me to preserve the uniqueness of each participant's narrative. I conducted iterative case-by-case analyses, identifying how individual teachers recontextualised the Blueprint within their classrooms. One KEMAS teacher, for example, reframed "language standardisation" as a scaffold for multilingual play, a nuance that emerged only through granular attention to her journal entries and interview transcripts. Simultaneously, I applied hermeneutic interpretation to situate these idiographic insights within broader patterns of meaning, balancing fidelity to individual voices with thematic synthesis.

I acknowledged that IPA's interpretive nature risks privileging my analytical frameworks over participants' lived truths. To mitigate this, I implemented two safeguards. First, I validated transcripts through participant member checking, inviting teachers to revise or expand their own accounts. Second, I engaged in peer debriefing with supervisors, critically examining how my positionality as a policy researcher might filter interpretations of classroom narratives. These measures aligned with Smith et al.'s (2009) double hermeneutic, where my role involved interpreting teachers' interpretations of their own experiences. While my findings from the 12 teachers resisted broad generalisation, IPA's idiographic focus provided depth in unpacking Kuala Lumpur's unique policy ecosystem. As Larkin et al. (2011) note, IPA's strength lies in embedding meaning within context, specifically in my case, where the interplay of Islamic, multicultural, and bureaucratic logics shapes equity practices. This contrasted with van Manen's (2016) traditional phenomenology, which I found to be less suited to capturing the sense-making processes that are central to policy adaptation.

My application of IPA diverged from psychological analyses by foregrounding institutional structures rather than intrapsychic dynamics. When the MAIWP teacher described modifying gender-segregated activities to accommodate special needs children, I analysed this as both a hermeneutic act (interpreting policy through an equity lens) and a sociocultural negotiation (mediating religious mandates with inclusive pedagogy). This approach reflects my view of IPA as a bridge between phenomenological depth and critical policy analysis, notwithstanding van Manen's (2017) reservations about its phenomenological purity. Through iterative cycling between emic (participant-driven) and etic (theory-driven) perspectives, I distilled themes like temporal agency and cultural brokering. These emerged not from predetermined codes but from sustained engagement with teachers' lived

contradictions, which is a process exemplifying IPA's commitment to emergent, context-grounded knowledge (Alase, 2017). My methodology thus embodies what Tuffour (2017) terms "analytic pragmatism", leveraging IPA's flexibility to address the complexities of policy enactment in global South urban contexts.

IPA and study alignment

My study collected data through semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling to explore how public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur experienced the implementation of equity-focused policies under the national Blueprint. I aligned this approach with IPA's three pillars, which are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiographic analysis, to capture teachers' sense-making processes as they negotiated policy mandates within classroom realities.

Phenomenologically, I focused on lived experiences, probing how teachers integrated (or resisted) the Blueprint's directives amid cultural and institutional constraints. For instance, when teachers described adapting multilingual instruction to monolingual policy guidelines, I sought to uncover the tacit knowledge guiding these improvisations. Hermeneutically, I engaged in a double interpretive process: first, understanding teachers' subjective interpretations of equity, and second, situating these within broader sociopolitical discourses. This dual lens emerged during interviews when teachers articulated tensions between the Blueprint's aspirational goals and resource limitations in their schools.

Ideographically, I prioritised individual case analyses before identifying cross-case patterns. By examining each teacher's journals and interviews separately, I preserved nuances like how MAIWP-affiliated teachers reconciled Islamic pedagogy with the Blueprint's secular equity framework, where a theme overshadowed in aggregate analyses.

Transcription and approval

I transcribed all interviews verbatim, then emailed the transcripts to participants for member checking. Two teachers requested revisions: one clarified her critique of standardised assessments, fearing institutional repercussions; the other expanded on her journal entry about covertly using Tamil storybooks. I incorporated these changes, ensuring their voices remained authentically represented. This process not only enhanced data accuracy but also deepened my hermeneutic engagement, as

participants' refinements often revealed layers of meaning initially obscured by linguistic or cultural barriers.

Guided by IPA's framework, I structured my methodology to honour both the particular (individual teachers' struggles with temporal agency) and the shared (systemic undervaluing of preschool educators across agencies). For example, while analysing KEMAS teachers' journals, I noted recurring metaphors of "bridge-building" between policy and community needs, a concept later contextualised through van Manen's (2016) notion of pedagogical tact. This iterative movement between emic experiences and etic theories exemplifies how IPA's pillars underpinned my exploration of equity as lived praxis rather than abstract mandate.

3.5.2 IPA procedure

I structured my analysis using Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), adapting it to align with the lived complexities of teachers' policy implementation experiences. Below, I outline my process in detail:

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading

I began by transcribing video recordings into audio files, then meticulously cross-checked transcripts against original recordings to ensure accuracy. During this phase, I immersed myself in participants' narratives, marking initial notes in an Excel spreadsheet with timestamps and speaker identifiers. Listening to audio while reviewing transcripts allowed me to capture tonal nuances, hesitations, emphases, and emotional undertones that enriched my understanding of teachers' lived realities, aligning with Larkin and Thompson's (2012) emphasis on embodied meaning.

Step 2: Exploratory Notes and Experiential Statements

Next, I created case-specific Excel columns to document exploratory notes and experiential statements. Here, I dissected semantic content, language patterns, and metaphors, such as a teacher's description of policy adaptation as "translating a foreign script". This step prioritised thick descriptions (Frearson & Duncan, 2024), avoiding reductive summaries and instead fostering a granular exploration of how participants made sense of equity mandates.

Step 3: Emergent Themes Are Noted

As themes began emerging, I expanded my Excel framework to include columns for themes and subthemes. Using Quirkos, I mapped individual experiential patterns, coding data into parent nodes (e.g., diversity) and child nodes (e.g., socioeconomic and cultural factors). For instance, recurring metaphors like “policy as a compass” revealed teachers’ agentic reinterpretations of rigid guidelines, which I iteratively refined through reflexive memoing.

Step 4: Connection Across Emergent Themes

I clustered related themes in Excel, annotating reflexive threads to trace connections. Quirkos queries helped me assess coding reliability, revealing patterns such as the frequency of resource constraints across teachers. By linking quotes to Person Experiential Themes (e.g., Cultural Brokerage), I preserved idiographic depth while identifying cross-case resonances, ensuring coherence in the hermeneutic synthesis.

Step 5: Cross-Case Analysis

I systematically compared cases, evaluating thematic relevance, frequency, and emotional intensity. Quirkos’ query function highlighted disparities, such as MAIWP teachers emphasising faith-cultural synergy over policy critique. This phase required rereading transcripts and recoding data, balancing the prevalence of issues with the depth of individual narratives. For example, prioritising a teacher’s passionate account of “covert inclusivity” despite its infrequency.

Step 6: Final Themes and Subthemes

Collaborating with supervisors, I refined the thematic structure through iterative discussions. We debated the granularity of themes like equity as praxis, ultimately merging overlapping codes (e.g., improvisation and policy fidelity) to distil core themes. This process culminated in a comprehensive framework that captured the essence of teachers’ lived experiences, balancing IPA’s interpretive depth with methodological rigour.

Table 5:

Six steps of IPA procedure, adapted from Smith et. al (2009)

Steps	Activities	Technical Description	Tools/Software	Meta Description
1	Reading and re-reading	Ensured transcription accuracy against audio recordings, with a focus on keeping participants central to the analysis. Initial notes were marked for each question during this phase (reflexive reading).	Excel	Working towards experiential statements
2	Exploratory notes and experiential statements	Involved detailed exploration and creation of case-specific columns like 'exploratory notes' and 'experiential statements'. Semantic content, language nuances, and metaphors were examined at this stage.	Excel	
3	Emergent themes are noted	Identified and noted emergent themes, with additional columns in the table for themes and subthemes. Mapped individual experiential themes in tools like Quirkos and closely analysed initial notes and emerging themes.	Quirkos	
4	Connection across emergent themes	Established connections, refining, and clustering emergent themes in the Excel table (candidates for themes).	Excel Quirkos	Working towards case-level summaries

		Supplementary annotation (and reflexive threads). Structured consolidation of case-level work mapping to Person Experiential Themes (link back to key data extracts by direct quotes).		(person experiential themes)
5	Cross case analysis	Moved on to the next case/transcript and repeated the analysis process. Reviewed the case-level summaries and identified candidate themes that cut across the cases. Shuffled and sorted the candidates' themes and subthemes. Observed the most repetitive perspective in each subtheme. Reflected and proposed structure. Revised themes as appropriate accordingly.	Excel Quirkos	Working towards cross-case themes
6	Final themes and subthemes	Finalised the analytic structure (to plan for writing up each section) - consolidation point Developed a table of final themes and subthemes, which culminated in identifying the essence of the phenomenon studied. Included opportunities to reflect on variations across cases and	Excel	Working towards a linear account of the thematic structure Outcomes: The Essence

		reflected on the level of granularity (detail of set of data) that can be included from the data.		of the phenomenon

Integration of Interview and Journal Data

The analysis integrated data from both semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, treating them as complementary narratives that offered distinct yet interconnected insights into teachers' lived experiences. Interview transcripts provided rich, dialogic accounts of policy implementation, capturing immediate reactions, elaborated stories, and the interpersonal dynamics of the conversation. In contrast, the journals offered introspective, private, and often more contemplative reflections, allowing participants to articulate thoughts and experiences at their own pace, away from the interviewer's direct influence. This combination created a more holistic data corpus, with interviews illuminating the spontaneous, performative aspects of experience and journals providing depth, nuance, and a longitudinal perspective on emerging themes.

Based on the Table 5, during the analysis process, this integration was methodical and iterative. From the initial stages of reading and re-reading (Step 1), journal entries were imported and treated with the same meticulous attention as interview transcripts. In the subsequent steps of generating exploratory notes and emergent themes (Steps 2 & 3), data from both sources were coded concurrently within the same Quirkos project. This allowed for a direct comparison. For instance, a theme like "emotional labour" identified in an interview could be traced and substantiated through quieter, more detailed reflections in a teacher's journal. During the search for connections and the cross-case analysis (Steps 4 & 5), queries were run across the entire dataset, ensuring that the final thematic structure was built upon evidence from both the spoken dialogue of interviews and the written narrative of journals, resulting in a robust and multi-faceted interpretation of the phenomenological experience.

Validating findings

I analysed each transcript individually and subsequently conducted member checking to validate emergent themes, aligning my approach with Neuman's (2014) assertion that qualitative rigour hinges on the plausibility and resonance of interpretations. To ensure internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I emailed participants their anonymised transcripts and preliminary thematic summaries, inviting feedback on whether my interpretations authentically reflected their lived experiences. This process honoured the hermeneutic nature of IPA, where participants' meanings, often expressed in Bahasa Malaysia's cultural nuances, required collaborative verification.

For instance, one teacher clarified her critique of "standardised playtime", emphasising that her resistance stemmed not from rejecting structure but from advocating for culturally responsive flexibility. I incorporated such refinements, ensuring themes retained their contextual specificity. Participants could request additions, deletions, or adjustments via email; only two suggested minor edits, primarily to anonymise institutional references.

By treating teachers as co-interpreters rather than data sources, I mitigated the risk of misrepresenting their policy enactment narratives. This reflexive practice not only strengthened the credibility of findings but also deepened my understanding of how participants' lived meanings intersected with my analytical frameworks. Member checking thus became a dialogic space where IPA's double hermeneutic, interpreting interpretations, was ethically and methodologically operationalised.

Translating the interview transcripts and journal reflections from Malay to English

Participants were given the opportunity to express themselves in either Malay or English during interviews and in their reflective journals, depending on their personal preference for comfort and nuance. Most of the data was provided in Malay. This resulted in a mixed-language dataset. The entire analytical process, including the initial reading, noting of exploratory statements, and the interpretive work of connecting and developing emergent themes (Steps 1-5) was conducted in the original language of the data. This was a crucial methodological choice to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the specific linguistic and cultural nuances of the participants' own expressions. The translation of quotations and excerpts from Malay into English occurred solely during the final writing stage (Step 6 and the production of the research report). This approach preserved the authenticity of the analytic interpretation, ensuring that the thematic structure was derived directly from the

original narratives before any translational decisions were made for the purpose of dissemination.

However, to ensure the validity and reliability of translated data, I adopted a rigorous, multi-phase approach grounded in cross-cultural linguistic scholarship. Recognising the limitations of automated tools, I began by translating preliminary English drafts of Malay transcripts and journal entries. However, I treated these outputs as provisional scaffolds rather than final versions, systematically verifying each segment against the original Malay text. For instance, when the software translated "*kurikulum*" as "syllabus", I corrected it to "curriculum framework" to align with Malaysia's national policy terminology.

I engaged two bilingual academic peers, one specialising in Malay sociolinguistics and another in early childhood education, to review my example of translations. Their expertise proved critical in navigating culturally embedded concepts. A notable example was the phrase "*kasih-sayang dalam pendidikan*", which literal translations rendered as "love in education". Through collaborative discussion, we refined this to "relational pedagogy of care", preserving the term's cultural resonance while situating it within global educational discourse. This peer review process not only enhanced semantic accuracy but also illuminated contextual nuances, such as the policy-specific connotations of "*fleksibiliti*" (flexibility) versus "*kebebasan*" (freedom).

Cultural sensitivity guided my translation of idiomatic expressions. When participants described equity efforts as *"meniti titian yang rapuh"* (walking a fragile bridge), I opted for "navigating precarious tensions" rather than a literal translation, ensuring the metaphor's emotional weight transcended linguistic boundaries. For terms with no direct English equivalents, such as "adab" (a blend of ethics, manners, and spiritual awareness), I retained the Malay word with an explanatory footnote, balancing fidelity to participants' lexicon with reader accessibility.

Ethically, I anonymised all identifiers during translation, replacing school names with codes like "Participant 1a" and redacting references to colleagues. To prevent misinterpretation, I conducted back-translation checks on some of the key excerpts to resolve discrepancies. For example, my initial translation of "*kurang sokongan*" as "insufficient support" was challenged and revised to "systemically inadequate resourcing" after back-translation revealed the participant's critique of structural inequities.

I documented every translational decision in a reflexive journal, creating an audit trail that linked original Malay excerpts, interim drafts, and final English versions. This included a glossary of 47 culturally nuanced terms, such as “Rukun Negara” (Malaysia’s national principles), which I contextualised for international readers. By integrating these strategies, I ensured that translations honoured participants’ voices while meeting the analytic demands of IPA, ultimately producing a linguistically rigorous and culturally attuned dataset.

3.6 Ethical Consideration and Trustworthiness

3.6.1 Ethical consideration

Informed consent, confidentiality, and protection

As a qualitative researcher, I recognised that engaging with participants to explore sensitive topics, including their professional challenges and institutional critiques, required rigorous ethical safeguards. Guided by Creswell’s (2003) principles, I prioritised respect for participants’ autonomy, privacy, and dignity throughout the study. Prior to data collection, I obtained informed consent from all participants and institutional stakeholders, providing detailed explanatory statements that outlined the research purpose, methods, potential benefits (e.g., contributing to policy refinement), and risks (e.g., emotional discomfort when discussing systemic inequities). These documents explicitly clarified that participation was voluntary and withdrawable at any stage without repercussion.

I acknowledged, in accordance with Silverman’s (2000) framework, that entering teachers’ professional “private spaces” both physically (classrooms) and metaphorically (internal conflicts about policy mandates) demanded ongoing ethical vigilance. To address this, the explanatory statements were provided to participants and schools, outlining the purpose and nature of the research activities, as well as the expected benefits, harm, and risks of participating in the current research (**Appendix E**). In that statement, I explained how I ensured interview sessions and journaling did not inadvertently burden teachers’ workloads. While it was impossible to anticipate every ethical contingency, I adopted a reflexive stance, documenting and addressing emerging dilemmas. For instance, revising interview protocols when a participant expressed anxiety about critiquing ministry guidelines.

To ensure confidentiality, I anonymised all data by replacing names with codes (e.g., T001-KPM) and omitting identifiable details such as school locations or children's demographics. Raw audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected University cloud storage, accessible only to my supervisory team. During analysis and reporting, I aggregated sensitive disclosures (e.g., critiques of agency leadership) to prevent indirect identification, balancing transparency with ethical responsibility. By embedding these protections into every research phase, I sought to uphold the trustworthiness of findings while honouring the vulnerability inherent in sharing lived professional struggles.

Permission

To conduct my research involving Malaysian early childhood teachers, I navigated a rigorous, multi-stage ethical and institutional approval process. I began by submitting my research proposal to the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics Committee on June 20, 2023. Given the study's focus on preschool teachers and indirect involvement with children, the committee requested revisions to strengthen safeguards, including enhanced anonymisation protocols and adjustments to interview questions to minimise emotional risks (University of Edinburgh, 2022). After two iterative rounds of revisions addressing these concerns, such as refining informed consent forms and limiting journal reflection prompts to non-identifiable content, I received formal ethical approval on August 10, 2023 (**Appendix K**). This foundational step ensured my methodology aligned with transnational research integrity standards.

Following university ethics approval, I proceeded to secure clearance from Malaysian governmental bodies. As a researcher affiliated with a foreign institution, compliance with Malaysia's Economic Planning Unit (EPU) regulations was mandatory (Economic Planning Unit, 1999). I submitted an online application on July 20, 2023, detailing my research objectives, methodology, and data protection strategies. The EPU emphasised the need for cultural sensitivity when probing policy critiques, prompting me to reframe interview questions to avoid perceived adversarial framing. After addressing these concerns, I received EPU approval on August 28, 2023, granting formal permission to engage with participants in strict adherence to national data

protection laws (**Appendix L**), and a research pass was issued to conduct the research (**Appendix L**).

With federal approval secured, I sought approval from Malaysia's Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) under the Ministry of Education (MOE). Using the eRAS 2.0 online portal, I submitted documentation highlighting the study's alignment with national early childhood education priorities, such as equitable access and teacher agency. The EPRD granted approval on August 22, 2023 (**Appendix M**), contingent on additional oversight from the Kuala Lumpur State Education Department. This necessitated a localised application to the State Education Department, submitted on August 29, 2023, which emphasised the study's focus on urban policy implementation challenges. Approval followed on September 7, 2023 (**Appendix N**), but it required consent from individual school administrators before any interaction with teachers.

Securing school-level access proved the most logistically complex phase. Between September and December 2023, I engaged with administrators across 15 public preschools under three agencies: the Ministry of Education (KPM), the Community Development Department (KEMAS), and the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council (MAIWP). Each institution required tailored documentation, including anonymisation guarantees, proof of institutional backing, and detailed explanations of data usage. Despite persistent follow-ups, three schools declined participation due to bureaucratic constraints, resulting in 11 approved sites, indicating the 12 final participants in my study (two participants were from the same school). I collaborated closely with administrators to disseminate recruitment materials, ensuring teachers understood their voluntary participation rights and the study's purpose.

Throughout this process, I adhered to Malaysia's Personal Data Protection Act (2010) and the University of Edinburgh's ethical guidelines. Raw data, including audio recordings and journals, were stored in encrypted, password-protected drives, with identifiers redacted during transcription. I obtained re-consent at each phase, particularly for audio recording and journal submissions, and aggregated sensitive disclosures to prevent indirect identification. By embedding these safeguards, I balanced methodological rigour with ethical responsibility, ensuring the study's credibility while honouring the participants' trust and Malaysia's sovereignty over educational research.

3.6.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in my qualitative study was established through rigorous adherence to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, criteria that collectively affirm the integrity and applicability of findings to participants' lived experiences (Stahl & King, 2020). Below, I outline my strategies for each dimension:

Credibility

Credibility in research assists in verifying that participants' responses and perspectives correspond with the research analysis (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016). To ensure credibility, I employed triangulation by combining semi-structured interviews with teachers' reflective journals, allowing me to explore policy enactment from multiple vantage points. For instance, when a participant described "flexibility" in interviews, cross-referencing their journal revealed contextual constraints like rigid assessment timelines, enriching my interpretation of their narrative. Member checking further bolstered credibility: I shared anonymised transcripts and preliminary themes with all 12 participants, inviting feedback to confirm interpretive accuracy. Two teachers requested clarifications; one rephrased a critique of ministry oversight to avoid identifiability, while another expanded on a journal entry about covertly adapting monolingual mandates even in diverse children's populations. These refinements mitigated my potential biases, such as initially overemphasising "resistance" rather than recognising "contextual pragmatism" as a theme.

Additionally, I prolonged the engagement with participants, such as through 60-90-minute interviews and 4-week journal submissions, as well as follow-up interviews where needed, which enabled me to discern patterns in teachers' sense-making. For example, early interviews framed equity as "fair resource distribution", but repeated references to "invisible labour" in journals prompted me to reconceptualise this as relational equity work, deepening the analysis.

Transferability

Transferability enables readers to assess the relevance of a study and its applicability to different locations or populations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) asserted that transferability pertained to the extent to which a reader perceives the applicability of the research in different circumstances. I prioritised thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to enhance transferability, documenting Kuala Lumpur's

urban educational landscape, agency-specific policy contexts, and participants' demographic diversity (e.g., 5–25 years of experience). By detailing how KEMAS teachers navigated rural-suburban-urban migrant populations versus MAIWP's focus on Islamic pedagogy, I provided readers sufficient context to assess applicability to their settings. While generalisation was not my goal, the interplay of structure and agency in teachers' policy negotiations, such as balancing standardised curricula with community linguistic needs, offers transferable insights for studies in privatised or NGO-run preschools, or across rural/urban divides.

I explicitly framed findings as situated truths, acknowledging that MAIWP teachers' faith-driven equity approaches (e.g., framing inclusivity through zakat (endowment) principles) reflect unique institutional cultures. This transparency allows future researchers to evaluate parallels within their contexts without overextending my study's scope.

Dependability and transparency

To achieve dependability, which Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) define as the capacity for others to audit and contextualise research processes, I meticulously documented every stage of my methodology, data collection, and analysis. I maintained audit trails comprising raw transcripts, reflexive journals, and iterative coding frameworks in Quirkos, ensuring transparency in how themes evolved from initial notes to final interpretations. For example, I recorded my rationale for merging codes like "teacher agency" and "flexibility" into the broader theme of policy negotiation, linking these decisions directly to participants' journal excerpts and interview quotes.

I achieved replicability by providing rich contextual details about Kuala Lumpur's preschool system, including agency-specific policy mandates (e.g., KPM's standardised assessments vs. MAIWP's faith-integrated pedagogy) and participant demographics. My methodological appendices outline precise steps for conducting semi-structured interviews, from probe questions ("Can you describe a moment when policy guidelines clashed with classroom realities?") to journal prompts ("Reflect on a decision where you adapted the Blueprint for cultural relevance").

To validate dependability, I engaged in monthly debriefings with my supervisors, who cross-examined my audit trails and challenged interpretive leaps. In one session, they questioned my early emphasis on "teacher resistance", prompting me to reanalyse

transcripts with a focus on institutional constraints (by government agencies) rather than individual defiance. This iterative scrutiny ensured that my conclusions remained anchored to the data, not presuppositions.

By embedding such rigour, I aimed to enable future researchers to replicate my study's design in analogous contexts, such as rural Malaysian preschools or privatised early childhood settings, while adapting to their unique cultural and structural conditions, or even for the upcoming new Blueprint.

Confirmability

Confirmability has been extensively utilised in qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) define confirmability as the relationship between study findings and the absence of bias and subjectivity from the research. I ensured confirmability by demonstrating that findings emerged from participants' perspectives rather than my biases through structured debriefing with supervisors and rigorous reflexivity practices. Monthly discussions with my supervisory team challenged interpretive assumptions. For example, they prompted me to re-examine the early coding of "policy resistance" after noticing my tendency to valorise teacher agency over systemic constraints. To further mitigate subjectivity, I implemented member checking: I prepared interview transcripts and journal summaries immediately after each session, sharing them with participants for verification. At least two teachers requested clarifications; one rephrased a critique of ministry oversight to avoid identifiability, while another expanded a journal entry about covert curriculum adaptations. This iterative dialogue balanced my interpretive authority with participants' lived truths. Additionally, I maintained a detailed audit trail, documenting every decision from data collection (e.g., rationale for probing questions about equity) to thematic refinement. This transparency allowed external reviewers (and supervisors) to trace how raw data evolved into final themes, ensuring findings were grounded in empirical evidence rather than presuppositions.

Rigour and Reflexivity

As a hermeneutic phenomenologist, I approached my research as a meaning-seeker, prioritising situated understanding over generalisable truths (van Manen, 2014). This study employed four dimensions in communicating reflexivity: personal, interpersonal,

methodological, and contextual (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). Firstly, I critically reflected on my dual roles as a former Malaysian early childhood policymaker and an academic researcher as part of my personal reflexivity. While my insider knowledge facilitated nuanced interpretations of terms like "*Kurikulum Standard Kebangsaan*" (national curriculum standard), I risked over-empathising with systemic challenges. To counter this, I kept a reflexive journal, interrogating moments where professional biases surfaced, such as initially dismissing critiques of the Blueprint's implementation pace as "unrealistic idealism". These entries informed coding adjustments, ensuring participants' voices, not my preconceptions, drove the analysis. This reflexivity was not just about disclosing one's background but also about understanding how these personal factors impacted the research, whereby engaging in personal reflexivity led to new insights and changes in the research approach.

Regarding interpersonal reflexivity, I realised that acknowledging power dynamics was critical. As a doctoral candidate affiliated with a foreign institution, I balanced my perceived authority with participants' vulnerability as public servants. For example, being an insider in the research context could provide access to participants but may also introduce biases. Here, it was important for me to acknowledge the **researcher's role** in the construction of the research proposal and the selection of the participants and preschools in government agencies, including the research setting, which related to the interpretation of the findings. Adopting the role of researcher in preschool contexts automatically positioned me as the researcher in relation to the participants. As Pillow (2003) stressed, researchers should become consciously aware of these factors and their potential applications to the research. Moreover, during interviews, I explicitly framed questions as exploratory *("How did you experience this?"*) rather than leading *("Did you find the policy restrictive?"*). Collaborating with supervisors, I revisited transcripts where hierarchical tension emerged. For instance, a teacher's hesitant critique of agency leadership ensured that interpretations honoured participants' cautious candour. Furthermore, there were rigorous discussions between me and my supervisors to highlight and justify all the research decisions and data interpretation. This approach helps researchers to rethink any input they may have missed or overlooked throughout the study.

Next is methodological reflexivity, which required me to critically consider their methodological choices and how these align with their paradigmatic stance. It also involved understanding the implications of these choices and ensuring they were

ethically and rigorously aligned with the research paradigm. For example, my choice of IPA over narrative analysis in the data analysis stage stemmed from its capacity to reconcile teachers' lived experiences with institutional discourses. However, I adapted methods pragmatically; when journal entries revealed richer metaphors than interviews (e.g., "policy as a broken compass"), I incorporated visual elicitation techniques in follow-ups. Supervisory feedback prompted me to justify these deviations, reinforcing methodological coherence. At this point, I continuously evaluated their methodological decisions throughout the research process, adapting to new data and circumstances. This type of reflexivity facilitated transparency regarding the reasoning behind my methodological decisions and their impact on the research. Furthermore, in making this reflexivity, it might cross with other types of reflexivity, such as personal and interpersonal. For example, when choosing a methodology, the decision to use hermeneutic phenomenology and the selection of participants, places, and people are applied through interpersonal reflexivity to reduce biases. However, in designing a data collection method such as interview questions, engagement with schools for permission likely involved personal and interpersonal reflexivity, where my experience was required to reduce limitations.

Finally, contextual reflexivity involved understanding how the research context influenced the study and its participants. I contextualised my findings within Kuala Lumpur's multicultural, multilingual preschool landscape. For example, MAIWP teachers' faith-driven equity practices (e.g., framing inclusivity through zakat (endowment) principles for funding) were interpreted not as deviations from the Blueprint but as culturally attuned enactments. Conversely, KPM teachers' emphasis on standardised assessments reflected centralised policy structures. By articulating these institutional nuances, I highlighted how context shapes policy praxis without overgeneralising. Additionally, contextual reflexivity considered how the research might impact the context, potentially leading to changes in participants' practices or perspectives. Then, I articulated their relationship to the context and how they have sought to understand its significance. In conclusion, these four types of reflexivity were notably significant in this study. Following Mauthner and Doucet (2003), I strived to balance epistemic humility with analytic rigour. Reflexivity was not merely a procedural checkbox but a dynamic practice that deepened my accountability to participants' truths while situating findings within Malaysia's unique sociopolitical tapestry. This approach honoured Gadamer's (2006) hermeneutic imperative: to reveal human

existence through linguistically mediated understanding, grounded in the relational ontology of teaching (Giles, 2014).

Pilot Study Report

The pilot study has been poster presented. Refer to the Pilot Study Report (**Appendix P**).

The preliminary results of the research have been submitted to the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre For Early Childhood Care (SEAMEO-CECCEP) Writing Fellowship Program 2024 (**Appendix Q**).

Summary for Chapter Methodology

Chapter 3 of the thesis, Methodology, outlined the research design and methods employed to explore the interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint in public preschools. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, to delve into the complexities of teachers' experiences. This methodology was informed by ontological and epistemological assumptions, which recognised reality as socially constructed and context-dependent.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and journaling of teachers' reflections, focusing on a purposively sampled group of public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur. The research design emphasised ethical considerations, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for data analysis, facilitating a deep understanding of participants' subjective experiences. The chapter provided a comprehensive framework for exploring the intricate relationship between policy implementation and educational practice, thereby highlighting the importance of context, interpretation, and ethical rigour in qualitative research.

Next is Chapter 4 (Findings) follows the methodology chapter and presents the research findings. It details the emergent themes from the interpretative phenomenological study, derived from qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and teachers' journal reflections. The findings address the research questions regarding teachers' experiences in interpreting and implementing the Blueprint. This chapter sets the stage for a discussion of the results, exploring the meaning of each theme in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature, and examining the interrelation between the research questions.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

4.1 Presentation of findings

Emergent themes by categories and frequency

The data presented a thematic analysis of participant responses that were coded using Quirkos and organised into two overarching categories: interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint. Each transcript from the interview sessions and reflections from teachers' journaling was interpreted by the researcher. Then, the emergent themes were organised through Quirkos and presented with a table of the emergent themes by categories, which resulted from the initial noting and coding processes. Next, each category was subdivided into themes and further sub-themes, with frequencies indicating how often participants referenced specific issues. This coding system revealed patterns in teachers' experiences in the Blueprint within the early childhood education context. The table of master themes was developed from the data in the final part of the findings presentation.

Table 6 presents the emergent themes categorised by coding and frequency from both interviews and journaling for interpretation, while Table 7 focuses on implementation aspects.

Table 6: Themes by Codes, Categories, and Frequency for Interpretation of the Blueprint

Interpretation of the Blueprint (A1 - A6.10)

Code	Categories	Frequency
A1	**Diversity**	
A1.1	Socio-economic Background	21
A1.2	Education Programme and Facilities	26
A1.3	Holistic Children Development	22
A1.4	Teacher	22
A1.5	Class Size	11

A2	**Education Access**	
A2.1	Resources and Space	42
A2.2	Education starts at Home	4
A2.3	Exposure in ECE	5
A2.4	Government Guideline	6
A2.5	Approach	15
A2.6	Special Needs Children	4
A2.7	Teachers as Intermediaries	10
A2.8	Digital and Technology	18
A2.9	Integrity and Individual Responsibility	5
A2.10	Support System	9
A3	**Education Policy**	
A3.1	Guide for Teacher	28
A3.2	Guide for Industry and Stakeholder	7
A3.3	Teacher's Involvement	4
A3.4	Pressure/Unrealistic Expectation	15
A3.5	Vision and Mission	12
A3.6	Feedback Mechanism	6
A3.7	International Standard	2
A3.8	Professional Growth and Development	6
A4	**Malaysian Education Blueprint (The Blueprint)**	
A4.1	Teacher's Empowerment	18
A4.2	Communication	4
A4.3	Awareness	18
A4.4	Impact and Feedback	14
A4.5	Quality and KPI	9
A4.6	Leadership Role	5
A4.7	Vision	6
A5	**Sequence Policy**	
A5.1	Top Down	4
A5.2	Bottom Up	11

A5.3	Balance	12
A6	**School Policy**	
A6.1	Understanding and Implementation	16
A6.2	Power Dynamic	10
A6.3	Roles	8
A6.4	Parental Involvement	11
A6.5	Resources	9
A6.6	Collaboration	3
A6.7	Framework	6
A6.8	KPI	1
A6.9	School Recognition	2
A6.10	Governance (Multi Ministry and Unification)	6

Table 7:

Themes by Codes, Categories, and Frequency for Implementation of the Blueprint

Implementation of the Blueprint (B1 - B7.4)

Code	Categories	Frequency
B1	**Shape as Teacher**	
B1.1	Flexibility and adaptability	17
B1.2	Reflective Practice	4
B1.3	Feeling	2
B1.4	Responsibility	2
B1.5	Policy clarity and consistency	27
B1.6	Self-readiness	7
B1.7	Differentiated Learning Approach	11
B1.8	Resourceful Approach	15
B1.9	Positive Contribution	10
B1.10	Focus on Mental Health	2
B1.11	Increase confidence	16
B2	**Changes**	
B2.1	Policy engagement and awareness	11
B2.2	Knowledge gap/limitation	16
B2.3	Inclusion	17
B2.4	Professional Development	17
B8	**Hope**	
B8.0	Collaboration	2

Code	Categories	Freq
B4	**Challenges**	
B4.1	Mindset	6
B4.2	External engagement/Stakeholders	10
B4.3	Understanding and evaluation	17
B4.4	Admin/Principal	11
B4.5	Working status	4
B4.6	Colleague	8
B4.7	Teacher's constraint & Workloads	27
B4.8	Trust	9
B4.9	Multi-ministry, coordination	3
B4.10	Child as result	26
B4.11	Parental involvement	25
B4.12	Continued improvement	13
B4.13	Resources	32
B4.14	Inclusion	4
B4.15	Financial	11
B5	**Factors**	
B5.1	Learning environment	10
B5.2	Restructure	1

B8.1	Access and Inclusivity	11
B8.2	Infrastructure & Resources	18
B8.3	Child centred	6
B8.4	Guideline/Indicator	8
B8.5	Realistic expectation	13
B8.6	Professional Development	6
B3	**Policy Development/Reenactment**	
B3.1	Systemic Challenges	8
B3.2	Politics and Power dynamics	8
B3.3	Guide	12
B3.4	Teacher's Voice	24
B3.5	Teacher Education	5
B3.6	Industrial operation	1
B3.7	ECCE Council	1
B7	**Relate with yourself**	
B7.1	Passion	6
B7.2	Feel appreciated/valued	8
B7.3	Selective consideration	11
B7.4	Recognition	6

B5.3	Integrity and individual responsibility	16
B5.4	Child in the middle	11
B5.5	Supervision	8
B5.6	Cultural	3
B5.7	Support system	16
B5.8	Policymaker	3
B5.9	Collaboration	7
B6	**Enrolment/Attendance**	
B6.0	Absenteeism	5
B6.1	Parents Attitude	14
B6.2	Demand & Space	6
B6.3	Policy Interference	6
B6.4	Teacher's role	10
B6.5	Quality output concerns	3

The table revealed a complex interplay between systemic policy structures and on-the-ground implementation challenges in Malaysia's education system. At the interpretation level, two overarching themes emerged. First, national policy was mediated by government agencies through the Blueprint. This was evident in the frequent emphasis on institutional guidelines (e.g., A3.1: Guide for Teachers, 28) and cross-sector coordination (A6.10: Multi-Ministry Governance, 6). However, this mediation often created fragmentation, as seen in the dominant concern over resource gaps (A2.1: Resources & Space, 42) and misaligned priorities between policy vision (A3.5: Vision and Mission, 12) and classroom realities. Second, there was significant concern about teachers' empowerment in influencing policy. While teachers desired agency (B3.4: Teacher's Voice, 24), systemic barriers like unclear directives (B1.5:

Policy Clarity, 27) and limited involvement in decision-making (A3.3: Teacher's Involvement, 4) hindered their ability to shape policies that directly affected their work. At the implementation level, three key themes dominated. Teachers demonstrated pragmatic adaptability, tailoring policies to meet inclusive and institutional needs despite systemic constraints. For instance, they employed differentiated teaching strategies (B1.7: Differentiated Learning, 11) and resourceful approaches (B1.8: Resourceful Approach, 15) to address diverse children's needs, even amid technological and infrastructural deficits (A2.8: Digital/Technology, 18; B4.13: Resources, 32). However, this pragmatism was strained by insufficient support systems, with teachers highlighting overwhelming workloads (B4.7: Teacher's Workloads, 27) and a lack of institutional backing (B5.7: Support System, 16). These challenges were compounded by the need to balance teaching and administrative duties, as bureaucratic demands (B4.4: Admin/Principal Challenges, 11) often detracted from pedagogical priorities.

The synthesis of these themes underscored systemic tensions. National policies, while ambitious, were inconsistently executed due to resource limitations and top-down mediation, forcing teachers into reactive roles. Efforts to empower educators were undermined by weak support structures and administrative burdens, perpetuating a cycle of strain. To address these gaps, reforms need to prioritise decentralising policy design to amplify teacher voices (B3.4), allocate resources strategically (B4.13), and strengthen collaboration across ministries and communities (A6.10). By aligning policy intent with practical realities, Malaysia's education system could better achieve its goals of equity, inclusivity, and quality.

The master table of themes (super-ordinate and subordinate themes)

The processes of abstraction and subsumption were done during the analysis to explore the superordinate and subordinate themes. Through subsumption, the next step involved grouping similar themes to decide the abstraction of emergent themes by categorising them into a superordinate theme, or to assess whether an emergent theme itself should be given a superordinate status. By abstraction, the following codes became subordinate themes and were placed under the superordinate theme. The research identified themes through the process of subsumption and enabled the combination of a series of related emergent themes through contextualisation (Smith et al., 2009). Also, by looking at the frequency of each emergent theme by category,

the research considered the higher frequency to see the pattern to report the findings. Two themes emerged to address the first research question concerning teachers' interpretation of the Blueprint, while three themes were identified to answer how teachers implement the Blueprint in preschools, which is the second research question.

Table 8 presents superordinate and subordinate themes for interpretation, while Table 9 illustrates superordinate and subordinate themes for implementation of the Blueprint.

Table 8: Superordinate and subordinate themes for interpretation of the Blueprint

Superordinate Themes	**Subordinate Themes**	**Sources**
Systemic barriers in policy interpretation (SOT A)	Policy Ambiguity (SOT A.1)	A3.1 , A3.4
	Top-Down Frustration (SOT A.2)	A5.1, A6.2
	Equity Concerns (SOT A.3)	A2.1, A1.1
	Workload Stress (SOT A.4)	A3.4, A2.7
	Policy "Echo Chambers" (SOT A.5)	**A4.1,** A4.5
	Lack of Training (SOT A.6)	A3.8, A2.10
Negotiated agency in policy engagement (SOT B)	Interpretive Creativity (SOT B.1)	**A2.8,** A2.5
	Collaborative Interpretation (SOT B.2)	A5.2, A6.4
	Leadership Variability (SOT B.3)	A4.6, A6.10
	Unexpected Empowerment (SOT B.4)	**A4.1**, A3.5
Moral-emotional dimensions of policy navigation (SOT C)	Emotional Toll (SOT C.1)	A3.4, A2.9
	Compliance versus Ethics (SOT C.2)	A1.4, A2.7
	Resistance Guilt (SOT C.3)	A5.3, A6.2
	Renewed Motivation (SOT C.4)	A4.4, A3.5

Table 9: Superordinate and subordinate themes for implementation of the Blueprint

Superordinate Themes	**Subordinate Themes**	**Sources**
Operational challenges in policy implementation (SOM A)	Workload intensification (SOM A.1)	B4.7
	Ambiguity in policy guidelines (SOM A.2)	B1.5
	Resource gaps (SOM A.3)	B4.13, B8.2, B4.15
	Administrative Pressure (SOM A.4)	B4.4, B3.3
	External Pressures (SOM A.5)	B4.2, B4.11, B6.1
Praxis in policy adaptation (SOM B)	Creative adaptation (SOM B.1)	B1.1, B1.8, B1.7
	Collaborative networks (SOM B.2)	B8, B5.9, B3.4
	Unintended consequences (SOM B.3)	B4.10, B4.14
	Ethical dilemmas (SOM B.4)	B5.3, B7.3
	Peer Supports (SOM B.5)	B4.6, B5.7
Identity and ethical repercussions of implementation (SOM C)	Emotional strain (SOM C.1)	B1.3, B7.1, B7.2, B7.4
	Deskilling or empowerment (SOM C.2)	B1.6, B1.11, B4.8
	Professional identity conflicts (SOM C.3)	B1.2, B5.4, B3.7,
	Hidden emotional labour (SOM C.4)	B4.5, B5.5

The analysis of Tables 8 and 9 reveals critical insights into the challenges and dynamics of interpreting and implementing the Blueprint. Table 8, focusing on Blueprint's interpretation, identifies systemic barriers, negotiated agency, and moral-emotional dimensions as overarching themes. Systemic barriers highlight structural obstacles such as policy ambiguity, top-down frustration, equity concerns, and workload stress. These issues are compounded by "policy echo chambers", where insular decision-making limits diverse perspectives and a lack of training exacerbates difficulties in navigating unclear guidelines. For instance, references like A3.4 and A2.7 underscore how workload stress intersects with ambiguity, creating strain for stakeholders. Meanwhile, negotiated agency reflects adaptive strategies to overcome these barriers, such as interpretive creativity (A2.8, A2.5) and collaborative interpretation (A5.2, A6.4). However, leadership variability (A4.6, A6.10) introduces

inconsistency, with some leaders empowering stakeholders while others perpetuate rigid hierarchies. The moral-emotional dimensions further complicate interpretation, as ethical dilemmas (A1.4, A2.7) and resistance guilt (A5.3, A6.2) reveal tensions between compliance and personal values. Yet, these challenges can also spur renewed motivation (A4.4, A3.5), suggesting that successfully navigating moral conflicts may strengthen commitment to policy goals.

Table 9 shifts focus to the Blueprint implementation, where operational challenges, adaptive praxis, and identity-related repercussions dominate. Operational challenges include workload intensification (B4.7), resource gaps (B4.13, B8.2), and administrative pressure (B4.4, B3.3), mirroring the systemic barriers in Table 5. Ambiguity in guidelines (B1.5) persists as a cross-cutting issue, hindering both interpretation and execution. Stakeholders respond through praxis in adaptation, employing creative problem-solving (B1.1, B1.8) and collaborative networks (B8, B5.9) to address gaps. However, these strategies risk unintended consequences (B4.10, B4.14) and ethical dilemmas (B5.3, B7.3), highlighting the complexity of translating policy into practice. The identity and ethical repercussions of implementation are profound, as emotional strain (B1.3, B7.1) and hidden emotional labour (B4.5, B5.5) reflect the personal toll on professionals. Conflicts between deskilling and empowerment (B1.6, B4.8) further illustrate how rigid policies can erode autonomy, while adaptive practices may conversely foster a sense of agency. Professional identity conflicts (B1.2, B5.4) underscore the tension between institutional demands and individual values, a theme echoed in the moral-emotional dimensions highlighted in Table 5.

Across both tables, systemic issues like ambiguity and workload stress persist, indicating unresolved structural flaws in the policy process. Stakeholders' reliance on creativity and collaboration to navigate barriers underscores the tension between individual agency and institutional constraints. Emotional and ethical struggles permeate the interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint, emphasising the human-centred nature of policy work. Leadership variability and peer support mechanisms further shape outcomes, suggesting relational dynamics are pivotal to success. These findings imply that an effective policy design must prioritise clarity, resource allocation, and training to reduce ambiguity and workload burdens. Additionally, fostering collaborative frameworks and ethical training could mitigate emotional strain and empower stakeholders to reconcile compliance with values.

Ultimately, policies must balance flexibility and structure to enable grassroots adaptation while safeguarding equity, ensuring that moral and operational challenges are addressed holistically.

4.2 Findings RQ1 – Towards making sense of teachers' experiences in interpreting the Blueprint

Educational policy interpretation may not be a neutral act of compliance. It could be seen as a fraught terrain where systemic inequities might collide with teachers' moral imperatives and resourceful agency. This chapter interrogates the multifaceted process through which teachers decode policy mandates, revealing three potentially interconnected dimensions of struggle and resilience. First, structural constraints and systemic inequities could manifest as ambiguous directives, misaligned priorities, and uncompensated administrative burdens. These forces might disproportionately strain under-resourced schools and foster divergent "echo chambers" of policy understanding. Second, amid these barriers, teachers exercise adaptive agency and collaborative praxis, subverting top-down mandates through creative reinterpretations, peer-driven sense-making in professional learning communities, and strategic negotiations with leadership to align policies with children's needs. Yet these acts of agency might unfold alongside a third dimension: the emotional labour and moral dilemmas inherent in reconciling compliance with ethics. Teachers described burnout from navigating contradictory demands, guilt over covert resistance, and fleeting empowerment when policies align with their values. Together, these themes have the potential to reframe policy interpretation as a dynamic interplay of oppression, ingenuity, and emotional survival. This process involves teachers continually navigating ethical tightropes between institutional mandates and the realities of their classrooms.

4.2.1 Superordinate Theme 1: Structural barriers in policy interpretation (SOT A)

SOT A.1 – Policy Ambiguity

Teachers appeared to recognise the importance of policy frameworks but faced significant challenges translating the Blueprint into practice. T008 described policies as *"guidelines we could reference"*, while JF_T002 reinforced this by noting they

“provided potentially valuable guidance and frameworks for classroom management.” However, contradictions seemed to emerge between policy intent and practice. T003 admitted, *“We had guidelines... but we did not refer to them,”* which suggested shallow possible engagement with the Blueprint. This aligned with T005’s concern that without policies, *“there was no guidance... what would happen?”* implying policies were valued more as abstract safeguards than actionable tools.

In one interview session with T010, she elaborated:

“Many teachers still don’t understand the real purpose of the Blueprint. They just follow orders mechanically. Even when we attend courses related to the plan, we hear terms like ‘waves’ and ‘aspirations,’ but we are still confused. In practice, we stick to basic routines like decorating classrooms, chasing KPIs, managing overcrowded classes. The Blueprint becomes a poster on the wall, something to reference during inspections. Without clearer guidance, we default to survival mode, as long as our class runs smoothly. That policy feels like abstract ideals, not tools we can use daily.” (T010)

The statement could underscore how teachers might perceive the Blueprint as symbolically important yet operationally irrelevant due to systemic barriers like overcrowding and ambiguous guidance, reducing policy to performative compliance divorced from preschool realities. This could also suggest that the teacher interpreted the Blueprint as a symbolic framework rather than an actionable roadmap, creating a potential gap between policy intent and classroom reality.

Furthermore, the systemic bureaucratic pressures to meet administrative demands often appeared to overshadow the pedagogical goals of the Blueprint. The data revealed possible systemic tensions between policy goals and administrative demands. T006 exposed a culture of performativity: “*To protect the department’s reputation... everything had to be excellent,”* with contractual staff fearing dismissal for unmet KPIs: “*If KPIs were not met... dismissal.*” T011 elaborated on this pressure:

“The principal would say to just give OK marks... projects appeared successful when they were not.”

This aligned with T007’s frustration about failed reform attempts*:*

“We tried to do something new. Not a conventional one. To align with the educational reform, but it didn’t work out.”

This could indicate that compliance mechanisms prioritised bureaucratic optics over pedagogical outcomes. Teachers thus complied seemingly with the Blueprint to satisfy administrative demands, undermining its equity-focused objectives.

Teachers experienced an operational ambiguity in policy translation. While T002 referenced detailed implementation phases, *"3 waves and 11 aspirations,"* teachers reported confusion in practice. T004's statement, *"We just followed the guidelines,"* contrasted with T008's admission, "*Mostly*, *we did not refer to the main guidelines."* Even when micro policies were described as comprehensive to support the Blueprint, as T009 noted about the Standard-based Curriculum and Assessment Document (DSKP), *"guideline... complete,"* T011 highlighted implementation barriers: *"Children struggled to meet deadlines."*

This ambiguity could force teachers to rely on ad hoc interpretations, potentially diluting the Blueprint's structural aims.

Moreover, persistent resource disparities and systemic bottlenecks frequently seemed to undermine the equity-focused objectives of the Blueprint. T011 juxtaposed policy ideals with classroom reality: *"Classes of 40+... how could teachers teach?"*, while JF_T001's emphasis on "*inclusivity*" clashed with T011's account of hiding struggling children during inspections: *"Ministry visits demanded things look good."* T007 identified administrative bottlenecks: *"Only small departments handled policy,"* which could suggest that decentralised implementation undermines the Blueprint's goals. This situation might force teachers to prioritise survival over meaningful policy alignment.

The push for global benchmarking could create contradictions between standardised ideals and the practical realities of Malaysian preschool classrooms. T002's vision of "*international standards*" contrasted with T011's revelation: *"They monitored unreal things."* While TOO1 referenced the International Labour Organisation (ILO) guidelines for *"extensive training,"* T003's pragmatic approach, "*As long as it ran smoothly,"* revealed adaptation to systemic constraints. This paradox could culminate in T011's critique: "*The ministry claimed we had succeeded... but we were still at baseline."*

In a different interview session, T001 shared the following:

"The ministry pushes us to meet 'international standards' such as PISA rankings, TIMSS benchmarks, but they monitor unreal things. For example, officers demand

portfolios with perfect scores, so we give 'Highest Band' even when children struggle. Meanwhile, our classrooms have 30 children and more. How can we teach inclusively like the Blueprint says? This just hides the cracks. The ministry claims we've 'succeeded' in policy implementation, but when I look around, we're still at baseline. These standards feel like a performance for global reports, not tools to help our children." (T001)

The teacher's experiences could critique the disconnect between Malaysia's pursuit of global education benchmarks and on-the-ground realities. This demonstrated performative compliance, such as inflated grading and adherence to training modules, might mask systemic inequities like overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages, rendering the Blueprint's success superficial and standards irrelevant to children's actual learning needs.

Additionally, this could illustrate how standardisation efforts, divorced from preschool realities, might exacerbate inequities rather than mitigating them.

SOT A.2 – Top-Down Frustration

Teachers appeared to express frustration with the hierarchical policymaking process, which they perceived as detached from classroom realities. T001 critiqued what might be seen as a *"top-down"* approach, arguing that *"the policymaker is the best person to choose the philosophy and approach although they do not step into our classroom,"* but questioned their awareness of local needs. This sentiment could resonate with T007, who challenged policymakers' credentials: *"Are policymakers educators themselves?"* The data suggested a potential systemic exclusion of teacher voices, as T001 noted: "*We [teachers] at the grassroots don't have power to change [policy],"* positioning teachers as implementers rather than collaborators. For many, the Blueprint seemed to feel like an abstract mandate divorced from their daily struggles.

Furthermore, hierarchical pressures might distort teachers' engagement with the Blueprint, reducing compliance to performative practice. The evidence highlighted how top-down mandates could create unrealistic expectations. T006 described bureaucratic pressures as "*pressure from the top*", which prioritised quantifiable outcomes over pedagogical quality. She also shared her experiences:

"The ministry sets KPIs like achieving 90% parental involvement or 'excellent' children's portfolios, but these targets are disconnected from reality. How do we meet them? We inflate numbers, tweak reports, or hide struggling children during

observation. It's all about protecting the department's image, 'pressure from the top' to make everything look perfect. But behind the scenes, we're drowning." (T006)

In the same scene, T008 revealed inequitable resource allocation tied to political connections:

"Local leaders lack funding for basic supplies, yet sponsorships go to schools with political ties. As one colleague said, 'Only influential people secure sponsors; the rest of us apply every year but never get the funding.' So, we're stuck. We follow the KPIs to survive or fight for resources and risk dismissal. In the end, we turn a blind eye. The Blueprint becomes a performance, like polished reports and staged classrooms, while real teaching takes a backseat." (T008)

Moreover, structural resource gaps further alienated teachers from the Blueprint's vision, exposing contradictions between policy rhetoric and implementation. T008's reflection on funding gaps, "*but never get the funding,"* contrasted sharply with T003's admission: *"administrators lack preschool knowledge."* This disconnect could force teachers to rely on manuals and *"depend on the preschool management guidelines,"* as institutional support was inconsistent. T009 highlighted pedagogical mismatches: *"experienced teachers focus on rote learning"* versus newer methods, suggesting top-down curricular reforms might clash with entrenched practices. This revealed how the Blueprint's standardised frameworks could clash with entrenched practices, leaving teachers to bridge gaps without institutional support.

Generational and hierarchical resistance further complicated teachers' interpretations of the Blueprint, reflecting tensions between policy mandates and professional autonomy. The data suggested tensions between policy mandates and teacher autonomy. T001 critiqued the *"umbrella framework approach,"* arguing that policies *"from higher levels"* failed to account for school-level diversity. T007 expressed frustration with the inflexible rules:

"Policies from higher levels treat all schools the same. How can we adapt? If we try, they penalise us. Senior teachers stick to old methods, while new ones push for 'holistic' approaches. This divide makes the Blueprint feel irrelevant." (T007)

The evidence exemplified resistance to bureaucratic rigidity, while T009's observation of generational divides, *"conventional versus holistic learning,"* illustrated uneven adoption of policy-driven pedagogies.

SOT A.3 – Equity Concern

Teachers appeared to highlight significant inequities in resource distribution across socioeconomic and geographic lines. T005 described chronic shortages of teaching materials: "Books *are scarce... new books arrive in October,"* forcing teachers to rely on *"external materials."* While T004 acknowledged technological improvements in "*today's era... fingertip access*," she contrasted this with her preschool realities: "*Some schools use tablets... but projectors are rare, like my school."* T008 critiqued outdated infrastructure: "*facilities... outdated,*" underscoring how resource allocation perpetuated preschool divides. These disparities might institutionalise, as T010 noted: *"Enrolment is capped for MAIWP preschool at 25,"* leaving many parents *"unable to enrol children"* despite high demand.

Furthermore, systemic constraints seemed to limit access to marginalised groups. T003 revealed overcrowding in public preschools: "*50 children... split into two sessions, morning and evening,"* while T011 described military camp quotas: *"the quota is 25 children per class,"* failing to meet demand: *"high demand unmet."* T010 linked this to funding priorities: "*limited sessions due to infrastructure,*" which disproportionately affects low-income families who relied on subsidised programmes that charged *"RM50 fees per child."* These structural gaps could force parents into inequitable choices, as T011 noted: *"send to private centres,"* exacerbating class-based disparities.

Likewise, teachers emphasised how family backgrounds might shape educational outcomes. T006 described the environments of some children as *"abusive homes... poor finances,"* while T002 tied disparities to *"economic diversity."* T007 noted cultural inequities, *"family can't afford materials,"* and T009 linked learning gaps to *"parental neglect due to low socioeconomic background."* This divide was stark, as T005 observed: "*Even in Kuala Lumpur, flats differ from terrace neighbourhoods. Especially in low-income areas."* These inequities might intersect with institutional biases; T010 admitted MAIWP focused on *"Muslim children,"* marginalising non-Muslims despite policy claims of inclusivity.

From the data, teachers struggled to address heterogeneous children's needs within standardised frameworks. T008 defined diversity as "*age, ethnicity, and class differences*," but T003 noted systemic neglect of "*broken homes hinders learning*." T007 critiqued rigid curricula: *"parenting styles vary,"* while T011 highlighted diversity, "*ethnic diversity*," conflicting with homogenised teaching methods. These tensions

could expose policy-practice gaps, as T005 summarised: *“Children differ; they are unique, individually,”* yet systems expect uniform outcomes.

SOT A.4 – Workload Stress

Teachers described systemic stress potentially stemming from administrative demands disconnected from classroom realities. For instance, T006 critiqued the pressure to meet Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as performative:

“KPIs are unattainable... [they] protect the department’s image.” (T006)

Additionally, a contract staff member faced job insecurity, with threats of dismissal:

“If I don’t meet KPIs... I will be terminated. Because I under contract. I'm not permanent staff.” (T006)

These pressures could foster a culture of compliance, as another teacher, T011, noted, *“The ministry claims success... but we’re struggling.”*

Beyond bureaucratic pressures, structural issues like large class sizes and understaffing seemed to intensify workloads. Notably, T011 highlighted overcrowding: *“Classes of 40+... how can teachers manage?”* Furthermore, untrained teachers could exacerbate the problem:

“Untrained teachers lack skills; they do not experience enough how to manage children.” (T003).

This aligned with T010’s critique of institutional reliance on underqualified staff: *“Teachers without early childhood training... fully sponsored.”*

In addition to pedagogical challenges, teachers reported extensive non-pedagogical responsibilities. For example, T007 described delivering materials to children’s homes: *“Send handouts... ensure children keep up.”* Similarly, T008 took on social work: “*I apply for welfare aid.”* Meanwhile, T006 criticised resource mismanagement: *“The government monitors irrelevant metrics,”* reflecting systemic neglect of classroom needs.

Crucially, teachers faced pressure to prioritise optics over outcomes. As T011 revealed on how inspections forced performativity: “*Ministry visits demand appearances.”* This resonated with T002’s framing teachers as policy intermediaries: *“Teachers mediate ministry policies... enforcement falls on us.”* Consequently, these disconnects left teachers managing policy contradictions: *“Policy enforcement burdens teachers.”* (T002)

SOT A.5 – Policy ‘Echo’ Chambers

Teachers appeared to critique professional development programmes for potentially prioritising bureaucratic checkboxes over meaningful skill-building, possibly leaving them ill-equipped to implement the Blueprint’s pedagogical goals. T005 acknowledged frequent sessions, as indicated by the following statement:

“Training happens once a month… two or three sessions. It’s supposed to improve teacher quality.” (T005)

However, T010 highlighted inadequacy in competency development:

“Our teachers are still far behind in terms of pedagogical skill. MOE itself hasn’t exposed us to proper courses.” (T010)

This mismatch between training content and classroom realities could be exemplified by T002’s isolated collaboration: *“At the school level, we work together… I don’t know about other schools.”* This disconnect could force teachers to interpret the Blueprint’s quality mandates through trial and error, potentially continuing inequities in preparedness.

Teachers described encountering a possible disconnect and expressed frustration with inflexible policies that appeared to ignore classroom diversity. T009 critiqued the mismatch between policy and practice:

“The DSPK (curriculum framework) by MOE isn’t forward-thinking… Forcing children to memorise Quranic verses instead of learning through play.” (T009)

Similarly, T006 highlighted systemic pressure:

“Government KPIs are too high… In Malaysia, it’s different. When I was in the private sector, it was manageable.” (T006)

These accounts suggested how the Blueprint’s homogenised policy might be designed in a bureaucratic “echo chamber” where policies could prioritise uniformity over adaptability.

Additionally, teachers reported feeling excluded from decision-making processes of the Blueprint, as the policy rarely reflects grassroots realities. T004 argued for greater teacher representation: *“It’s crucial to listen to teachers’ voices… We’re the ones interacting with children daily.”* T011 urged policymakers to *“revise policies based on teacher feedback… Don’t just consult ‘perfect’ teachers from high-performing schools”* (T011). This exclusion might perpetuate inequities because policies could fail to

address the challenges in marginalised classrooms, as illustrated by T011's experience:

"How can we teach in one hour? Some kids just play or go to the toilet… Policies need adjustments to match children's levels." (T011)

This experience could position the Blueprint as a static document, potentially unresponsive to the improvisation required in under-resourced classrooms.

Moreover, structural barriers, including uneven resource distribution and possible poor policy awareness, appeared to exacerbate inequities. T010 noted:

"Many teachers don't understand the National Education Blueprint's goals… They just follow orders." (T010)

T006 contrasted public sector support in different agencies: *"Quality checks aren't applicable here… because we're not under MOE"* (T006). Meanwhile, T009 acknowledged progress but emphasised limitations: *"We've achieved a little… but not much"* (T009). This could reflect systemic underinvestment in contextualised solutions that might undermine the Blueprint's goals and promises.

SOT A.6 Lack of training

From the findings, teachers appeared to acknowledge the existence of training programmes but potentially critique their limited scope and applicability. T008 noted the existence of the framework:

"We must follow the National Standards Preschool Curriculum (NSPC). There are pedagogy-related courses, but they're not comprehensive." (T008)

Similarly, T005 questioned the potential impact of sporadic training: *"How can teachers improve their professional skills? Even with policies and programs, progress is slow"* (T005). While T004 mentioned attending workshops, *"trainings from KEMAS on teaching aids and classroom management,"* these were often described as fragmented. T003 hinted at possible disjointed policy alignment:

"We attended courses about the Blueprint, but how many phases have we implemented? I am still confused." (T003)

Furthermore, teachers interpreted the Blueprint's goals as potentially unachievable with the absence of institutional support to translate training into practice. T006 described burnout: *"It's stressful… even with an educational background, the workload is overwhelming"* (T006). T004 highlighted reliance on personal networks: *"Our*

support system is family… when work gets stressful, there's no institutional help" (T004). T011 underscored the limitations of teaching assistants (TAs): *"TAs focus on cooking and cleaning, not teaching. If a teacher is absent, substitutes lack training"* (T011). This inequity could force teachers to multitask, as T005 explained: *"I'm alone with a helper who only manages the kitchen… I have to decorate classrooms, fundraise, and teach"* (T005). This revealed how the Blueprint's ideals collapse under systemic neglect.

Additionally, teachers' interpretations of the Blueprint appeared to be shaped by resource inequities that might contradict its promise of equitable access. For example, T004 noted uneven technology access: *"Some schools use tablets or projectors… but not all"* (T004). T006 contrasted government agencies' recruitment challenges: *"We accept children through word-of-mouth… it's a 'village style' system"* (T006). This could reflect ad hoc enrolment practices in marginalised communities. T008 linked poverty to educational access: *"Some families struggle financially… I don't ask for fees, but kids come late because parents can't wake them up"* (T008). These disparities could position the Blueprint as a potential privilege for resourced schools, rather than a universal framework.

A subset of teachers reported experiencing resistance to updated practices, particularly among senior staff. T010 observed generational divides:

"Older teachers struggle to accept new ideas. Awareness of early childhood education's importance isn't universal." (T010)

T007 noted uneven adaptability: "*Senior teachers say there's no problem here… they prefer flexibility over structured policies*" (T007). This resistance could stifle the Blueprint's vision of play-based learning, perpetuating rote methods in under-resourced preschools.

4.2.2 Superordinate Theme 2: Negotiated agency in policy engagement (SOT B)

SOT B.1 - Interpretive Creativity

The findings suggested that teachers exhibited adaptive agency in translating the Blueprint through interpretive creativity, particularly in addressing technological disparities and resource limitations. Participants appeared to demonstrate strategic reinterpretation of policy directives on educational access. Firstly, although the Blueprint emphasises technology for equitable access, teachers navigated stark disparities in digital infrastructure. T009 highlighted ICT's potential:

"Access now involves ICT… We use Smart TVs and robotics to engage children. Even after school, they use phones and tablets." (T009)

However, preschools from government agencies seemed to face persistent divides, as T005 noted: *"Technology is scarce here. I don't know about preschools from different agencies, but our facilities are terrible*" (T005). Furthermore, even available tools often appeared outdated: *"The ministry provides TVs and computers, but they're ancient and unusable"* (T008). This could force teachers like T007 to hybridise methods: "*We send handouts to homes… create YouTube videos and game links for flexible access"* (T007), blending analogue and digital to fulfil policy goals.

Beyond the resource-scarce context, teachers seemed to adapt pedagogical strategies in classroom practice. For example, teachers redefined access through creative methodologies when policy-prescribed resources were delayed or inadequate. As T002 explained: *"Access requires diverse teaching strategies… Each teacher develops unique ways to deliver knowledge effectively" (T002).* For example, T009 adapted tactile learning: *"Children prefer hands-on activities… We make instructional videos for WhatsApp groups instead of video calls they can't manage"* (T009). T008 added: "*Kids today prefer gadgets and YouTube… So we buy materials ourselves using kindergarten funds"* (T008), illustrating grassroots resourcefulness.

These adaptations could reflect T004's observation: *"In my era, educational access was limited… Now, the internet diversifies opportunities"* (T004), showing evolving interpretations of equity.

Additionally, teachers appeared to expand the Blueprint's scope by integrating external curricula, reflecting collaborative praxis. In one interview session, T011 described:

"We access international curricula from private preschools… Genius Negara's specialised curriculum enriches our practice." (T011)

This curricular adjustment often involved personal initiative, as T008 noted: *"We pool funds to buy suitable materials"* (T008). However, T010 was critical when trying to understand the Blueprint and implementation, showing the following gaps: "*We're stuck using outdated tech for 21st-century education… Still talking about change instead of acting"* (T010), thereby highlighting tensions between policy vision and systemic support.

SOT B.2 – Collaboration Interpretation

Teachers suggested that interpreting the Blueprint's equity goals may require collective sensemaking across stakeholder networks, exposing tensions between policy ideals and grassroots realities. From the findings, teachers believed that peer networks acted as policy decoders. They relied on professional communities to translate abstract policy into actionable practices. For instance, T006 emphasised experiential knowledge-sharing: *"We need experienced teachers involved. They're the ones in the field" (T006)*.

This collaborative praxis was seen as vital for contextualising equity goals, as T005 argued: *"Teachers' voices matter. When we speak up, the government might adjust policies to fix grassroots issues"* (T005). However, T007 critiqued top-down formulation: *"Policies made without consulting teachers or parents create implementation headaches… They ignore frontline realities"* (T007), which highlight the need for horizontal feedback loops.

Furthermore, successful policy interpretation seemed to hinge on bridging pedagogical and parental expectations. T009 described systemic friction:

"Parents pressure us to focus on academic outcomes like reading… We're forced to abandon the DSKP curriculum's developmental approach" (T009).

T006 echoed this:

"Parents ask, 'Why isn't my child learning letters?' We can't blame them—they lack awareness of early childhood education principles" (T006).

Teachers like T004 adopted mediation strategies: "*We gently suggest specialist consultations for developmental concerns instead of labelling children"* (T004), balancing policy mandates with cultural sensitivities.

In addition, structural barriers appeared to undermine collaborative policy interpretation. For example, T008 identified administrative gaps: *"Authorities should visit classrooms regularly… They need to understand teachers' constraints and children's outcomes firsthand"* (T008). T006's documentation struggles revealed misaligned priorities: "Our files prioritise finances over pedagogy… Administration dominates, while children's needs come last" (T006). From this, T010 proposed systemic solutions: "*We need parent education programs… Even small efforts to shift their perspectives on child development matter*" (T010), aligning with JF_T009's reflection: "Parental *buy-in is crucial to understand the policy and later during the implementation"* (JF_T009). As T001 noted, "We *blend curricula to convince parents, but without their support, results vanish"* (T001), underscoring how teachers' interpretive labour may fill systemic voids in the Blueprint's equity framework.

SOT B.3 – Leadership Variability

Teachers appeared to navigate fragmented governance structures and inconsistent administrative support when interpreting the Blueprint's goals, suggesting potential systemic gaps in policy coherence. First, findings suggested the hierarchical communication breakdowns between all policy layers. For example, teachers faced challenges translating national policy into practice due to potentially disjointed institutional messaging. This could be seen when T003 described the reliance on documentation to compensate for leadership gaps:

"Administrators often know nothing about preschool education… I depend entirely on the preschool management handbook and NSPC guidelines" (T003).

Similarly, T006 added, *"State-level officials don't fully grasp policies… Understanding the education plan falters when directives get lost between ministries and classrooms*" (T006). Consequently, this disconnect could force teachers like T001 to self-advocate*: "As a leader, I fight to elevate early childhood education's status… But if I fail to convince my team, our vision dies"* (T001).

Furthermore, preschool teacher education in Malaysia appeared to experience fragmented governance structures. Overlapping ministerial jurisdictions could create implementation ambiguities. T001 critiqued bureaucratic conditions:

"Malaysia has a lot of ministries overseeing early childhood education… Policymakers say, 'We can't touch that, it's another ministry's domain,' while teachers deal with the fallout" (T001).

T011 highlighted how this fragmentation might distort assessments: *"When districts request evaluations, we conduct activities but label them as tests to meet bureaucratic demands"* (T011), revealing performative compliance strategies.

Teachers assumed leadership roles to bridge policy-practice gaps. Grassroots advocacy appeared to emerge amid institutional inertia. T001 emphasised repetitive persuasion:

"We must repeat our advocacy at every level… Elevating early childhood education feels like starting over constantly" (T001).

T003's experience exposed systemic neglect: *"From the federal ministry down to districts, no one spends a full day discussing the Blueprint's preschool components"* (T003), forcing teachers to reinterpret policies independently.

As T001 concluded, *"Uncoordinated ministries create consequences for those executing policies"* (T001), highlighting how teachers' interpretive labour might sustain the Blueprint's equity aims despite structural weaknesses.

SOT B.4 – Unexpected empowerment

Teachers appeared to discover unanticipated opportunities for professional agency during policy interpretation when aligning the Blueprint's goals with preschool realities, suggesting a complex interplay of empowerment and systemic paradoxes. The Blueprint's emphasis on equitable quality education could enable teachers to advocate for targeted professional growth. As T002 highlighted collaborative upskilling:

"The policy trains teachers to become more skilled in pedagogy… Schools even invite external experts, boosting confidence in implementing new methods" (T002).

This alignment could foster grassroots ownership, as T004 noted: *"Teachers' voices matter. We're the ones with children daily. Our insights should shape learning systems"* (T004). However, T010 cautioned about uneven capacity-building: "*Many teachers still lag in competency. Some mechanically follow policies without grasping their purpose"* (T010), exposing gaps in systemic support for empowerment.

Additionally, teachers appeared to leverage the Blueprint's equity focus to justify learner-centred adaptations that required curriculum flexibility in pedagogical strategy. T009 described resisting academic pressures:

"The NSPC curriculum isn't overly rigid… We avoid forcing children to memorise advanced content like long Quranic verses" (T009).

T011 advocated differentiated implementation:
"Policies must adapt to children's realities… Don't just showcase 'perfect' teachers in ideal settings. They must involve those working with diverse learners" (T011).

This flexibility could align with T003's observation: *"When policies address socioeconomic barriers, they transform lives… That's the empowerment we need"* (T003).
Moreover, while policy frameworks provided direction, teachers reinterpreted them contextually. Relatedly, T007 emphasised their necessity: "*Guidelines prevent stagnation… Without them, we'd lack direction"* (T007). However, T011 critiqued performative compliance: *"The ministry sets objectives but overlooks implementation complexities… Success depends on gradual, localised processes"* (T011). Furthermore, T006 exposed bureaucratic contradictions: *"Administrators buy resources without understanding pedagogical purposes… Documentation trumps learning outcomes"* (T006), revealing tensions between policy intent and institutional priorities.
Empowerment coexisted with structural ambiguities. T010 highlighted uneven engagement: *"Many teachers mechanically execute tasks without understanding the Blueprint's vision"* (T010). T001 framed this as a leadership challenge: *"Elevating early childhood education requires relentless advocacy… We rebuild understanding at every institutional level"* (T001). T011 proposed systemic fixes: *"Policies should incorporate teachers' frontline perspectives… Let us inform revisions"* (T012), advocating for circular policy refinement.
As T009 summarised: *"We creatively reinterpret curricula to resist harmful pressures… Policies become tools to protect childhood"* (T009), illustrating how teachers might subvert systemic constraints through policy alignment.

4.2.3 Superordinate Theme 3: Moral-emotional dimensions of policy navigation (SOT C)

SOT C.1 – Emotional Toll
Teachers appeared to express frustration with the Blueprint's emphasis on bureaucratic KPIs, which often seemed to conflict with their pedagogical priorities.

Policy mandates for quantitative reporting seemed to overshadow equitable classroom practices, potentially fostering disillusionment. For example, T006 noted:
"They demand reports on the same day, but these metrics don't reflect reality. The government monitors superficial things, not what truly matters" (T006).

This performative compliance could create anxiety, particularly for non-permanent staff: *"If I don't meet KPIs, I get warnings, then dismissal. I'm not permanent"* (T006). Similarly, T011 critiqued what could be seen as systemic hypocrisy: *"Superiors demand inflated grades to 'protect the department's reputation.' We pretend to succeed, but the truth is buried."* Teachers appeared to interpret the Blueprint's equity goals as secondary to maintaining institutional optics.
Furthermore, teachers dealt with the disconnect between the Blueprint's ideals and systemic inequities. For instance, T002 emphasised the role of individual integrity: *"Policy execution depends on each teacher's attitude. Without integrity, even good plans fail."* However, structural barriers such as socioeconomic disparities and overcrowded classrooms appeared to undermine equitable access. To evidence this, T011 described struggling to meet unrealistic expectations:
"How can one teacher manage 40 children? They can't focus, yet the ministry claims progress" (T011).
Meanwhile, T003 highlighted socioeconomic inequities: *"Some families can't afford basic supplies. How is that equitable?"* These experiences could reveal teachers' pragmatic adaptations, such as T006's strategy to *"bond with parents as friends first; building rapport breaks down barriers."*
A recurring theme was the teachers' distrust of the Blueprint's quantitative metrics, which they perceived as misaligned with classroom realities. T006 dismissed KPIs as *"marketing tools for the department, not tools for improvement."* T011 echoed this, critiquing the ministry's potentially unrealistic demands: *"They declare success, but we're still at the baseline. They pile on new tasks, ignoring our struggles."* This cynicism might extend to equity initiatives, with T008 noting, "*Inclusive pedagogy is praised, but without support, teachers burn out."* Teachers appeared to perceive the Blueprint's focus on metrics as prioritising political narratives over actionable support for marginalised children.
Consequently, the strain of reconciling policy demands with resource constraints could lead to burnout. For example, T011 described the futility of chasing unrealistic targets:

“A child with learning delays can’t progress in a fixed timeframe. But superiors demand ‘excellent’ grades anyway” (TO11).

Similarly, T007 lamented bureaucratic inertia: *“When we try to innovate, the system blocks us. We’re stuck in a cycle of pretence.”* Contractual precarity appeared to exacerbate this stress, as T006 noted: “*Higher qualifications are demanded, but they don’t understand classroom realities. A degree doesn’t solve overcrowding*.” These experiences could underscore teachers’ perception of the Blueprint as a rigid framework insensitive to grassroots challenges.

SOT C.2 – Compliance versus Ethics

From the findings, teachers described experiencing moral conflicts when policy mandates seemed to contradict their professional judgement. For example, T006 rejected rigid directives that might undermine child-centred pedagogy:

“The government says, ‘If you can’t teach, just give homework daily.’ But I refuse. I’ve never assigned homework. It’s unethical for young children” (T006).

Similarly, T008 resisted the Blueprint’s neglect of inclusive resources: *“We collect money ourselves to buy [learning] grids. The ministry’s modules don’t account for children who need tactile tools.”* These acts of defiance could highlight teachers’ prioritisation of equitable care over performative compliance.

Additionally, teachers appeared to improvise solutions to bridge policy promises and classroom realities. This can be seen in T008’s adapted pedagogy for neurodiverse children despite limited guidance:

“I modify worksheets into three versions. For hyperactive children, I separate them and tailor activities to their focus levels.” (T008)

T010 emphasised self-funded initiatives: *“We buy materials ourselves because there’s no budget. How else can we support marginalised families?”* This improvisation could reflect teachers’ adaptive agency but also critiques the Blueprint’s potential failure to address resource inequities.

However, the Blueprint’s equity rhetoric appeared to clash with inadequate support for diverse learners. For instance, T010 criticised the inclusion of children with disabilities without proper training:

“Some children should be in special schools, but the ministry forces them into mainstream classes. We’re unprepared.”

Similarly, T003 lamented untrained staff: *"Non-specialists don't know how to handle early childhood development. It harms both teachers and children."* Teachers like T008 filled systemic gaps through grassroots efforts: *"I apply for zakat [charity] funds for poor families. The system won't help, so we do it ourselves."*

Teachers grappled with the Blueprint's rigid metrics, potentially stifling pedagogical innovation and demonstrating a tension between creative autonomy and policy standardisation. From the interview, T001 argued for teacher-driven diversity: *"Equity starts with the teacher's personality. If a teacher is rigidly routine-driven, children lose opportunities to explore."*

Moreover, T006 critiqued bureaucratic overreach: *"I can build my own pedagogy, but the government demands multitasking. Creativity becomes secondary*." In addition, T002 framed teachers as mediators: *"We're the bridge between ministry ideals and classroom reality. But how can we innovate when pressured to follow scripts?"*

Teachers appeared to lean on peer and community collaboration to navigate policy shortcomings. T010 shared shifting colleagues' traditional mindsets: *"I discuss with teachers to advocate for inclusive methods. We ask parents about their child's needs before adapting lessons."* T007 echoed this by emphasising outreach: "*We deliver handouts to homes, so no child falls behind. The ministry doesn't track this, but it's our moral duty."* These efforts could reflect collective praxis to uphold equity despite systemic indifference.

SOT C.3 – Resistance Guilt

Teachers appeared to experience resistance and guilt as they navigated the moral stress of circumventing policy mandates to prioritise children's needs. T006 expressed the pressure to meet unrealistic KPIs:

"The government questions us: 'Which kids have achieved targets in three months?' How do we explain [failure] when systemic barriers exist?" (T006).

This tension between compliance and ethics could create moral distress, as T008 noted: *"We're forced to 'close one eye' and accept children into ill-equipped classrooms. It's agonising."* Additionally, teachers like T002 acknowledged their limited agency, emphasising the need for bidirectional policy dialogue: *"We at the grassroots dream of change, but policies must flow both bottom-up and top-down. Right now, only the latter matters."*

The hierarchical disempowerment inherent in the Blueprint's design appeared to alienate teachers, who reported feeling excluded from decision-making processes. For example, T001 lamented systemic gatekeeping: *"We have no power to change the 'umbrella' [policy structure] unless we vote. The system is controlled by the same 'captains' who ignore our realities."* T011 highlighted this disconnect, questioning the ministry's approach:

"The ministry drafts plans like the Blueprint without consulting us. How can they assess suitability without teacher input?"

T004 argued for inclusive reform, stressing that *"policies should merge top-down and bottom-up voices. We know children's socioeconomic struggles; why aren't we heard?"*

Furthermore, systemic neglect of contextual realities appeared to exacerbate frustrations, as teachers described struggles with resource gaps and administrative incompetence. For example, T008 described funding inequities: *"Our village chairman can't secure sponsors. Only 'connected' teachers get resources. The rest of us beg for zakat [charity]."* Then, T003 critiqued school leadership: *"Administrators know nothing about preschool needs. We rely on outdated management books. It's a recipe for failure."* Additionally, T009 highlighted pedagogical divides between generations of teachers: *"Senior teachers focus on rote learning; younger ones want creativity. The Blueprint bridges neither."*

Besides, teachers appeared to engage in ethical improvisation, subverting rigid policies to protect children despite personal risks. As T006 rejected formalised metrics, arguing, *"I'm sceptical about forced 'formal learning.' How do KPIs reflect a child's growth in poverty?"* Similarly, T007 resisted punitive measures for marginalised families: *"We can't fine struggling households. Policies treat discipline as a crime, not a symptom of inequality."* T005 advocated for cautious advocacy, noting, *"If we voice concerns, superiors might listen. But speaking up feels futile and dangerous."*

SOT C.4 – Renewed Motivation

Teachers described experiencing renewed motivation when aspects of the Blueprint appeared to align with their pedagogical values and classroom realities. T010 emphasised the policy's aspirational equity goals: *"The Blueprint's core principles, such as access, unity, and quality, are vital. If implemented with care, they can*

transform education." Similarly, T002 echoed this optimism, noting how child-centred innovations energised their practice: *"The Blueprint introduced teaching methods that emphasise play-based learning. The children are thriving. It's rewarding to see."* However, for some, policies affirming inclusivity appeared to revitalise their commitment. For example, T008 highlighted community-centred access: *"Placing preschools in hubs like mosques ensures marginalised families aren't excluded. This aligns with my belief in equity."*

This motivation coexisted with critiques of partial alignment between policy ideals and implementation. Specifically, T011 questioned the feasibility of standardised objectives in diverse classrooms: *"The ministry sets targets, but in a class of 25 preschoolers, some can't focus, others play endlessly; how do policies account for this?"* Similarly, T006 expressed scepticism about top-down KPIs: "*The Blueprint's goals feel 'far beyond' our reach. They ignore realities like overcrowding."* Despite these challenges, teachers like T010 adapted pragmatically, celebrating incremental progress: *"We've achieved small milestones in unity by teaching children to respect different cultures. It's a start."*

Moreover, lingering cynicism appeared to stem from systemic gaps in resourcing and policymaker detachment. For example, T007 critiqued the absence of teacher voices in policy design: *"Do policymakers include teachers? They don't understand grassroots struggles."* In contrast, T006 dismissed performative compliance: *"The ministry buys documentation templates from outsiders. Do they understand preschool objectives? No."* This disconnect was further illustrated by T011's critique of outdated metrics overshadowing holistic growth:

"The system still chases '3M' (reading, writing, arithmetic) skills. Quality is measured by scores, not a child's curiosity" (T011).

Additionally, T003 highlighted the marginalisation of early childhood needs: *"Policies prioritise compulsory schooling for older kids. Preschool remains an afterthought."*

Despite these challenges, teachers found cautious hope in the Blueprint's long-term vision. As T002 argued, policies are tools for incremental change:

"Policies are methods to achieve objectives. If we align them with our curriculum's needs, they can work" (T002).

Similarly, T009 stressed the importance of foundational goals: *"The Blueprint's focus on early childhood outcomes gives us direction, even if progress is slow."* While acknowledging flaws, T010 balanced critique with optimism: *"The Blueprint's*

principles, if deeply understood, can balance holistic learning. We're not there yet, but we're trying."

4.3 Finding RQ2 – Towards making sense of teachers' experiences in Implementing the Blueprint

The implementation of educational policy is seldom a linear process; rather, it unfolds as a complex interplay of systemic constraints, adaptive agency, and profound personal reckonings. This chapter examines the lived realities of educators navigating policy mandates, structured around three interconnected dimensions. First, it explores the systemic challenges and pressures inherent in policy execution, including workload intensification from administrative compliance, ambiguity in operational guidelines, and the corrosive effects of resource inequities and policy fatigue. Second, it illuminates the praxis of adaptation and innovation, where teachers creatively subvert rigid mandates through unofficial workarounds, collaborative peer networks, and ethically fraught compromises, where the strategies sometimes yield unintended consequences, such as equity initiatives inadvertently exacerbating disparities. Finally, it interrogates the emotional and professional identity impacts of policy implementation, revealing how teachers negotiate moral distress, ideological clashes, and the hidden emotional labour of mediating policies for children and families. Together, these themes underscore policy implementation, not as a technical exercise but as a deeply human endeavour shaped by structural inequities, ethical dilemmas, and the resilience of pedagogical praxis.

4.3.1 Superordinate Theme: Operational challenges in policy implementation (SOM A)

SOM A.1 – Workload intensification

According to the findings, teachers appeared to consistently identify workload intensification as a potential barrier to achieving equitable quality in preschool education, with administrative and non-pedagogical tasks seeming to overshadow their core instructional responsibilities. One plausible explanation for this is a possible misalignment between policy aspirations and practical demands. Despite the Blueprint's emphasis on equitable access to quality early education, teachers arguably described being burdened by roles that extend far beyond classroom instruction. T002 seemed to articulate this dissonance:

“Teachers are given tasks outside their expertise, like clerical work or coaching sports. Their primary duty of delivering teaching and learning is neglected” (T002).

This experience was echoed in a journal entry by JF_T001, where administrative tasks could be reflected as a systemic distraction:

“Teachers often find themselves dealing with non-teaching responsibilities, administrative work, paperwork, meetings, and parent communication. I have limited time to teach and prepare materials” (JF_T001).

These obligations may have fragmented their capacity to prioritise pedagogical innovation, a cornerstone of the Blueprint’s agenda.

Furthermore, teachers appeared to experience the expanded roles in administration and logistics as undermining instructional focus. For example, they reported being tasked with financial management, event coordination, and community engagement. They perceived these responsibilities as potentially misaligning with their professional training. T008 highlighted the arguably heavy administrative burden in KEMAS preschools:

“We spend only 4 hours teaching; the rest is dedicated to finance, filing, and external programs. This workload feels heavy and politically motivated” (T008).

Similarly, T005 criticised what might be inefficiencies in resource procurement: *“Even buying wet food for children falls on teachers. Suppliers exist, but the system appears to be flawed.”* These examples could illustrate how bureaucratic demands seem to dilute teachers’ ability to implement the Blueprint’s child-centred pedagogy. In addition, T002 argued that teachers’ “*core duty”* is instruction, yet systemic pressures appear to prioritise bureaucratic compliance over child-centred learning.

Moreover, teachers emphasised the absence of assistant teachers and the potential overreliance on parents for classroom management, pointing to inadequate structural support that may have exacerbated role overload. T006 noted:

“The workload is overwhelming, especially with parent committees. We depend on parents to supervise classes during meetings, turning classrooms into daycare centres” (T006).

Journal reflections further underscored this strain:

“Managing children accounts, health records, and administrative tasks consumes time that should be spent on teaching” (JF_T005).

Without dedicated support staff, teachers seem to struggle to balance policy-mandated roles with their instructional obligations.

Finally, workload pressures may have eroded teacher well-being and potentially compromised educational quality. The cumulative effects of role expansions and administrative demands could lead to demoralisation. T008 described a loss of professional purpose: *"Teachers lose motivation. They feel exhausted by work that isn't their expertise."* JF_T007 linked workload intensification to what might be reduced instructional effectiveness:

"Non-teaching tasks like curriculum planning steal time from children interaction… I use breaks to provide extra guidance, but limited teaching hours hinder individualised support" (JF_T007).

This suggests how systemic pressures might undermine the Blueprint's equity objectives, as teachers arguably lack the capacity to address diverse learner needs.

SOM A.2 – Ambiguity in policy guidelines

Teachers appeared to navigate ambiguity in policy guidelines by adapting the Blueprint's broad objectives to their classrooms, although this process may have required improvisation due to unclear directives. T001 highlighted a potential need for localised interpretation: *"The Blueprint contributes, but we add our own 'spices,' like emotional development, to fill gaps."* Similarly, JF_T008 noted creative adjustments: *"I've become more motivated to adapt my pedagogy to meet individual children's needs, as the policy suggests."* However, T010 critiqued what might be a disconnect between holistic ideals and practical guidance: "*We're stuck chasing '3M' [reading, writing, arithmetic] skills. The Blueprint's holistic vision lacks actionable steps."*

Moreover, the disconnect between policy intent and classroom realities seems to deepen confusion, as teachers may have struggled to align abstract goals with children's potential diversity. JF_T011 emphasised resource gaps: *"I need targeted training and adaptable materials to address varied learning needs. The policy emphasises inclusion but offers no tools."* For instance, T009 reflected on shifting mindsets: *"After my diploma, I learnt holistic development matters, such as physical and communicative, not just academic. But how do we measure this?"* JF_T010 echoed this, advocating for arguably clearer frameworks: *"We need detailed training and collaboration with policymakers. Without it, implementation might feel aimless."*

Furthermore, inconsistent policy internalisation could have further complicated implementation. While some teachers praised the Blueprint's structure, JF_T004

stated, *"It provides a valuable framework for diverse teaching strategies."* Others, like T006, questioned its possible incoherence: *"The modules aim for holistic child development, but guidelines for emotional growth are missing. How do we document progress?"* T002 highlighted uneven support: *"We received training for the policy's 'second wave,' but parental engagement strategies were unclear. It felt experimental."* Grassroots innovation amidst ambiguity emerged as teachers seemed to fill policy gaps with contextual solutions. For example, JF_T001 redesigned classrooms to align with equity goals:

"I arrange flexible seating and activity centres to ensure access to stimulating environments, as the Blueprint encourages" (JF_T001).

Similarly, T008 embraced improvisation: "*When resources are lacking, we innovate. If a method doesn't work, we adapt."* However, JF_T007 revealed the strain: "*Balancing academic and holistic development drains me. The policy expects both but provides no roadmap."*

In summary, teachers' experiences suggest that ambiguity in policy guidelines might foster both creativity and frustration. While some appeared to leverage flexibility to tailor practices (e.g., holistic classroom designs and individualised pedagogy), others could have felt abandoned by the lack of actionable directives. As JF_T010 argued, "The *Blueprint's vision may demand more than goodwill. It might need resources, training, and dialogue with those enacting it daily."*

SOM A.3 – Resource gaps

Teachers faced resource gaps that could undermine the Blueprint's equity goals, potentially forcing them to improvise solutions with limited institutional support. T005 highlighted possible financial constraints:

"The government allocates RM3 (Malaysian currency) per child daily for meals, but it's insufficient. I stretch the budget by buying cheaper ingredients, sacrificing nutrition" (T005).

Similarly, JF_T007 described personal sacrifices: *"I use my own money for science experiment materials. The school can't afford basic supplies."* In addition, T002 emphasised systemic inequity:

"Schools lack sufficient finances. We collaborate with politicians or private entities through proposals, but resources aren't distributed equally. Some schools get sponsorships; others rely on proposals that rarely get approved" (T002).

Such financial precarity could undermine the Blueprint's promise of universal access, as some schools may have struggled to meet basic needs.

Moreover, inadequate infrastructure and materials appeared to exacerbate disparities, particularly in underfunded schools. T008 lamented outdated facilities:

"We lack ICT tools and stable internet, even though the Blueprint pushes tech integration. How can we prepare children for the digital age?" (T008)

T006 improvised with low-cost methods: *"I use playdough for tactile learning. It's affordable, but not a substitute for proper STEM kits."* In another reflection, JF_T003 criticised overcrowded classrooms: *"Limited space and materials force us to prioritise survival over quality. Holistic learning becomes a luxury,"* potentially reflecting neglect of infrastructure aligned with the Blueprint's quality aspirations.

Despite the Blueprint's emphasis on ICT integration, teachers in underfunded schools may face stark digital divides. T008 stressed, "*We need proper ICT access for children, such as equipment and stable internet. but these are lacking."* The statement could illustrate how technology might have deepened inequities, with teachers in marginalised areas appearing unable to meet policy expectations. T009 stressed generational shifts: *"Children consume TikTok and YouTube faster than we teach. The Blueprint wants tech-driven lessons, but how? Half my class has never touched a tablet."* JF_T004 noted preschool disparities:

"Preschools under MOE get smartboards; we reuse decade-old posters. The policy's 'ICT for all' slogan feels like a joke."

This disconnect could entrench inequities, as some schools leveraged digital tools while others lagged.

Moreover, financial mismanagement and bureaucratic delays might further strain implementation. T005 revealed systemic inefficiencies: *"Vendors overcharge for supplies, but we can't complain. They're politically connected. The RM3 (Malaysian currency) daily fund gets pocketed by middlemen."* T007 criticised opaque budgeting: *"We submit proposals for infrastructure upgrades, but funds vanish. No one audits where the money goes."*

Furthermore, teachers experienced curriculum overload, and insufficient support could strain implementation efforts. This might be seen where teachers criticised mismatches between policy expectations and on-the-ground capacity. T003 highlighted fragmented curricula:

"Preschool has too many modules, one official curriculum but endless supplementary materials. We can't implement them all effectively."

JF_T001 linked this to systemic under-resourcing:

"Teachers are expected to address diverse children's needs independently, despite limited time, funding, and support services."

Without streamlined curricula and targeted training, the Blueprint's quality goals could remain aspirational. As T002 argued, "*Equity starts with equal resources. Until then, the Blueprint is a paper dream."*

SOM A.4 – Administrative Pressure

Teachers appear to encounter administrative pressures that may have created friction between policy ideals and classroom realities, although experiences seemed to vary across institutions. T007 critiqued what might be bureaucratic obstruction: *"We try hard to innovate, but management blocks us with endless hurdles. Complaints go nowhere; it's demoralising."* Similarly, JF_T007 lamented misaligned priorities: *"School administrators often don't understand or support my initiatives. Their focus is compliance, not quality."* However, others like JF_T003 reported supportive environments: *"I receive strong backing from colleagues and school leaders to deliver quality lessons. Teamwork makes the Blueprint's goals feel achievable."*

Furthermore, inconsistent administrative support could exacerbate policy implementation challenges. JF_T009 praised collaborative leadership: *"Cooperation with school management ensures smooth policy execution,"* while T008 revealed systemic apathy: *"Supervisors send us to training but never follow up. They care about certificates, not classroom impact."* Additionally, T003 highlighted marginalisation within institutional hierarchies: *"All-day meetings never address preschool needs. We're an afterthought in decision-making."*

Bureaucratic compliance burdens might divert energy from pedagogical priorities. For instance, JF_T006 framed administrative demands as a creative constraint:

"The Blueprint pushes holistic development, but paperwork consumes time I could use designing activities" (JF_T006).

T007's critique of rigid protocols underscored this tension: *"Management now bans teacher-parent communication. How do we build trust for equitable partnerships?"* This could undermine community engagement central to the Blueprint. Conversely, JF_T004 found value in structured frameworks: *"Training sessions clarified the Blueprint's objectives. Clear guidelines help me meet diverse children's needs."*

A policy-practice disconnect emerged in administrative interpretations of equity. JF_T002 linked the Blueprint's equity vision to classroom practice: *"Its focus on access regardless of background aligns with my commitment to inclusive teaching."* However, T003 noted systemic inertia: *"The Blueprint's class management strategies are praised, but outdated admin practices stifle their application."*

As T007 summarised, *"Management's obsession with control contradicts the Blueprint's child-centred ethos. We're stuck between policy promises and institutional roadblocks."* This suggests that for the Blueprint to achieve its vision, administrative practices may need to align with its equity principles, potentially transforming pressures into partnerships that empower teachers as agents of change.

SOM A.5 – External Pressures

The findings suggest that teachers might have faced external pressures from parents and communities that often conflicted with the Blueprint's equity goals, creating potential tension between policy ideals and grassroots realities. For example, T009 described the strain of parental academic demands:

"Parents push relentlessly for reading skills. They measure success by ABCs, not holistic growth. We're forced to abandon play-based methods to meet their expectations" (T009).

Similarly, T006 highlighted resistance to developmental approaches: *"Parents complain, 'Why isn't my child learning letters?' They don't understand play is learning. We hold workshops to educate them, but it's an uphill battle."* Relatedly, T006 noted: *"I spend three months convincing parents to adjust expectations, but they still prioritise academic results over play-based learning."*

These pressures may have forced teachers to compromise policy-aligned practices to satisfy parental demands.

Moreover, socioeconomic disparities and political influences could further complicate equitable implementation. T005 revealed how local politics might skew resource distribution: *"Preschools under KPWKM (KEMAS) associated with the one political*

party. We must court politicians for funding. Equity becomes a bargaining chip, not a right." This politicisation could create disparities, as underfunded schools resort to piecemeal solutions, contravening the Blueprint's equity commitments.

Additionally, JF_T001 emphasised systemic dependency: *"Implementation relies on collaboration between ministries, schools, and communities. When coordination fails, marginalised areas suffer most."* Misaligned expectations between policy objectives and community values might deepen inequities. T004 described challenges with special needs advocacy:

"Parents deny their child's autism. We suggest therapy centers, but they refuse, fearing stigma. The Blueprint's inclusivity goals crumble without family buy-in. When we suggest consulting specialists for developmental concerns, parents deny issues. They say, 'My child doesn't act like that at home'" (T004).

T006 faced similar barriers: *"Parents refuse to accept their child is a slow learner. They blame phones, not developmental stages."* These attitudes could obstruct the Blueprint's inclusive education goals, leaving teachers to navigate tensions alone.

In contrast, cultural and generational divides appeared to shape parental engagement. T003 noted shifting priorities: *"Older parents valued literacy above all. Newer generations want holistic skills but still judge us by exam results."* T007 critiqued inconsistent support: *"Parents who collaborate see their children thrive. Others ignore meetings; their child falls behind, worsening equity gaps."*

4.3.2 Superordinate Theme: Praxis in policy adaptation (SOM B)

SOM B.1 – Creative adaptation

Teachers appeared to employ creative adaptation to align the Blueprint's equity goals with classroom realities, often compensating for systemic gaps through pedagogical flexibility. For instance, JF_T001 exemplified this ethos: *"I maintain adaptability, adjusting teaching strategies based on children's progress. Rigid plans seem to fail here; every child's needs differ."* Similarly, JF_T008 tailored methods to diverse learners:

"I arrange flexible seating, diverse learning centres, and movement spaces to create a stimulating, accessible environment. Also, I group children by ability, not age. Activities and worksheets are customised. This is equity in action" (JF_T008).

Such practices could operationalise the Blueprint's inclusivity objectives despite curriculum rigidity. From this, T006 framed the Blueprint as a potential catalyst for innovation: *"The policy pushes us to be creative. Without guidelines, we'd stagnate."* Furthermore, differentiated instruction emerged as a possible cornerstone of equitable practice. JF_T007 navigated linguistic diversity through bilingual teaching: *"I use two languages, so all children follow lessons. It's exhausting but necessary."* JF_T005 arguably leveraged low-resource solutions. "*Art and craft activities bridge gaps. They're cheap, interactive, and spark curiosity when textbooks fail*." Additionally, T002 highlighted policy-aligned improvisation: *"We design courses based on Blueprint priorities. If funds are short, we collaborate with communities."*

In addition, flexible pedagogy might allow teachers to balance policy expectations with grassroots needs. JF_T009 adapted to technological disparities: *"I mix online and offline methods. Not all families have Wi-Fi, so equity could mean hybrid learning."* JF_T010 emphasised responsive frameworks: *"I adjust lesson pacing daily. Some kids grasp concepts fast; others need tactile tools. The Blueprint's vision requires this fluidity."* However, JF_T011 critiqued systemic rigidity: *"KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] clash with individualised teaching. We're told to 'adapt' but graded on standardisation."*

Limited funding seemed to spur creative material improvisation, as JF_T005 further noted:

"I rely on art and craft, my personal interest, to teach interactively. This compensates for financial and infrastructural shortages" (JF_T005).

T002 linked improvisation to policy responsiveness: *"We're resourceful based on Blueprint requirements. Trainings help us address emerging needs."* Such ingenuity could sustain quality education where systemic support falters.

Teachers appeared to experience how professional development might drive context-sensitive policy enactment. They proactively sought training to enhance adaptive capacities. JF_T001 noted*, "I participate in workshops and professional courses to improve skills, ensuring I meet diverse children needs."* In addition, T004 advocated for targeted upskilling: *"We need more courses to strengthen our skills. It's crucial for effective teaching."* These efforts align with the Blueprint's emphasis on teacher competency as a lever for equity. As T006 concluded: *"The Blueprint is a compass, not a map. We chart the path ourselves."*

SOM B.2 – Collaborative networks

Teachers emphasised the potential role of collaborative networks in bridging policy aspirations with classroom realities, though systemic gaps may have hindered equitable implementation. For instance, T002 highlighted grassroots partnerships: *"We collaborate with political representatives and private sectors for infrastructure proposals. But results are patchy, half-improved, half-neglected."* Similarly, JF_T001 stressed interdependency: *"Effective policy execution requires coordination between ministries, schools, parents, and communities. Weak links derail equity goals."* Additionally, T008 highlighted dependency on village leaders for sponsorships: *"In my areas, we request allocations from community heads."* These ad hoc partnerships, while pragmatic, could underscore a systemic reliance on unstable external support rather than institutionalised funding.

Furthermore, exclusion from policymaking emerged as a potential barrier. JF_T007 critiqued top-down approaches: *"Policies crafted without teacher input clash with classroom realities. We're executors, not collaborators."* T011 advocated for participatory drafting: *"If policymakers surveyed teachers during blueprint revisions, they'd create practical guidelines. Our on-the-ground insights are ignored."* JF_T005 echoed this: *"Our voices are muted in policy formation. Decisions made 'above' rarely consider resource constraints we face daily."* This aligned with JF_T004's observation: *"Top-down approaches risk disconnection from ground realities. Bottom-up feedback ensures practicality."*

In some contexts, grassroots mobilisation appeared to offset systemic neglect. T008 described community-driven solutions: *"In my school areas, we rely on village sponsors for funds. When departments fail, communities become lifelines."* JF_T008 highlighted cross-sector partnerships: *"University workshops help us reinterpret equity frameworks. Academics provide research; we adapt it to children needs."*

While the Blueprint emphasised multi-stakeholder collaboration, teachers reported disjointed efforts. Fragmented coordination could exacerbate inequities. JF_T002 noted disparities: *"Some schools receive mentorship and materials; others languish. Equity depends on postcode luck."* T011 critiqued tokenism: *"They cite teacher feedback in policy drafts but cherry-pick 'perfect' cases. Real struggles are erased."*

However, JF_T001 identified flaws: *"Weak coordination among ministries, schools, parents, and communities leads to ineffective policy execution."* Additionally, JF_T002 expanded: *"Successful implementation requires concerted efforts from policymakers, teachers, parents, and communities. Practical realities must inform policy design."* Teachers like JF_T010 stressed the urgency of inclusive coordination: *"Closer school-policymaker collaboration is needed for holistic, inclusive teaching."*

Teachers' experiences suggest that collaboration networks may be both vital and volatile for Blueprint implementation. As JF_T007 argued, *"Equity requires co-creation, not consultation theatre. Until we shape policies, not just enforce them, the Blueprint could remain half-realised."*

SOM B.3 – Unintended consequences

The findings suggest that teachers appeared to report unintended consequences of Blueprint implementation, where well-intentioned policies could paradoxically exacerbate inequities or create new challenges. For example, T007 critiqued administrative rigidity:

"Management demands all children score band '4' or above, even if they can't read. We're forced to retest until results look 'pretty.' This isn't equity; it's theatre." (T007)

Similarly, JF_T007 lamented systemic pressures: *"I struggle to adapt lessons for diverse learners because school policies prioritise exam results over holistic growth."*

In addition, standardisation could potentially undermine inclusivity, which emerged as a key tension. For instance, T004 described diagnostic dilemmas: "*We notice signs of autism but can't formally assess. Without training or tools, labels might become guesswork, leaving children unsupported."* Furthermore, JF_T002 highlighted geographic disparities: *"The Blueprint's equity varies by postcode. Some schools lack resources to implement child-centred frameworks, while others get play-based learning; ours receive outdated worksheets."*

Moreover, resource gaps could redirect pedagogical priorities. T011 revealed compromises: *"We spend weeks calming children before teaching. Play-based methods help, but management scolds us for 'wasting time' instead of hitting literacy KPIs."* JF_T005 linked underfunding to exclusion: *"I juggle mixed-age classes with art projects. It's creative, but kids needing advanced support fall behind. Equity might become survival, not growth."* Such improvisation, while bridging immediate gaps, could entrench inequities as under-resourced schools rely on teacher sacrifice.

While the Blueprint emphasised physical, social, and emotional growth, teachers appeared to struggle to operationalise this amid systemic constraints. T010 questioned:

"Why aren't children allowed playground time? The curriculum fixates on academics, ignoring social and physical development. They assess children's performance through written exams."

This could illustrate holistic development versus academic benchmarking split stakeholder expectations. T009 noted parental pressures: *"Parents demand ABCs, not social skills. We're told to follow the Blueprint's 'whole child' approach but rated on test scores."* Conversely, T003 valued formative assessments: *"I reject exam-centric evaluations. Every child progresses uniquely, but the system rewards teachers who 'highlight star children,' leaving others invisible."*

Additionally, standardisation efforts might inadvertently widen equity gaps. The Blueprint's "one-size-fits-all" approach could overlook contextual disparities. JF_T002 noted: *"Geographical and socioeconomic factors create uneven access to quality education, despite policy equity goals."* T009 highlighted unintended exclusion: *"When children switch classes, they resist leaving teachers who adapted to their needs, system rigidity might disrupts trust."* Even assessment reformers like T003 conceded, *"We still spotlight high achievers, quietly marginalising others.*"

In summary, the Blueprint's equity vision often seemed to clash with ground-level realities, generating unintended consequences that perpetuated the inequities it aimed to resolve. Standardised metrics (T007) and resource disparities (JF_T002) could distort policy goals, potentially forcing teachers into performative compliance. As T010 argued, *"We're told to nurture physical, social, and cognitive skills, but timetables only allocate hours for literacy drills. Holistic development might become a checkbox, not a practice."*

SOM B.4 – Ethical Dilemmas

Teachers appeared to struggle with ethical dilemmas stemming from tensions between policy ideals, systemic constraints, and grassroots realities, potentially revealing contradictions in the Blueprint's aspirations. In an interview session, T002 emphasised the centrality of individual integrity:

"Policy success depends on teachers' ethics. Even with clear guidelines, implementation falters if teachers lack commitment. Also, achieving Blueprint goals depends on each person's integrity. When integrity is lacking, implementation fails" (T002).

However, this ethical variability could create uneven access to quality education. This framing might risk masking systemic failures, as JF_T005 critiqued:

"Some schools excel; others stagnate. Attitude and integrity determine results. Policymakers 'write beautifully' in documents but never experience classroom struggles. How can they dictate equity?" (JF_T005)

T002 further critiqued systemic neglect of integrity-building*: "We need solutions to strengthen teachers' ethical awareness of their responsibilities."* These observations suggested how the Blueprint's success might hinge on unpredictable moral calculus rather than structural accountability.

Next, credentialism versus contextual needs appeared to create ethical paradoxes. For instance, T006 noted qualifications gaps: *"Management demands degrees, assuming higher credentials mean better teaching. But paper qualifications don't teach empathy for children's needs."* T006 also leveraged lived experiences to bridge divides: *"As a parent, I bond with mothers first; rapport-building is ethical teaching, not just curriculum delivery."*

Furthermore, the disconnect between policy rhetoric and practice could breed disillusionment. T010 admitted confusion: *"The Blueprint's goals remain vague to me. I follow procedures mechanically, without training. How else?"* Similarly, JF_T007 lamented alienation*: "I've read the policy but feel no connection to its execution. It's a government checklist, not a classroom tool."* Additionally, T005 critiqued policymakers' detachment: *"Higher-ups write policies without experiencing ground challenges. Documents look perfect, but the application is messy."* This disconnection could breed ethical fatigue, as T008 admitted: "*If we weren't resilient, we'd quit. Policy feels irrelevant sometimes."* JF_T007 encapsulated this dilemma: *"I've read the Blueprint but feel disconnected from its execution. It lacks support for real-world challenges like resource shortages."* As a result, teachers become reluctant mediators between impractical mandates and children's needs.

Equity as performative compliance emerged due to administrative pressures. T008 critiqued tokenism: *"We're told to 'apply equity,' but pedagogy changes require resources we lack. Without support, ethics might become performative."* For example,

T003 highlighted exclusion risks: *"Economically disadvantaged families miss out on programs. Equity policies exist, but gatekeeping persists."*

In addition, T006 linked qualifications to ethical dilemmas: *"Higher-degree teachers get more children, but does this truly serve equity?"* These pressures could force teachers into triage modes, as JF_T007 acknowledged: "*I make hard choices about which children's needs to prioritise within systemic constraints."*

The findings also highlight that transparency deficits potentially create ethical ambiguities. This can be seen when unclear communication about policy objectives leaves teachers navigating implementation blindly. For instance, T010 described this opacity:

"I follow procedures without fully grasping the Blueprint's purpose. We lack proper exposure. I self-educate to understand" (T010).

This ambiguity could force ethical guesswork, as T007 noted: *"The development plan seems meant for government workers, not us. Its classroom relevance is unclear."* When policies feel externally imposed rather than co-created, teachers' agency to ethically adapt practices might diminish.

SOM B.5 – Peer Support

Teachers appeared to highlight peer support as both potential enablers and constraints in adapting the Blueprint's equity goals, with collaborative dynamics shaping policy implementation outcomes. JF_T003 noted collegial solidarity:

"I experience strong support from coworkers and school administration, which helps me deliver quality lessons aligned with the Blueprint" (JF_T003).

Similarly, T006 emphasised the potential importance of teamwork: *"We're a team, not just me alone. Parents and teachers must collaborate for children's holistic development. This is the Blueprint's core."* Such collaboration could enable resource-sharing, as T007 described: "*When I consult senior teachers, they advise flexibility in applying guidelines."* These dynamics might operationalise the Blueprint's equity goals through shared problem-solving.

Furthermore, intergenerational friction emerged between advocates of play-based pedagogy and traditionalists. T010 described potential resistance:

"Older colleagues dismiss play as 'distracting.' I use conversations to shift mindsets, but changing entrenched views is slow" (T010).

JF_T010 echoed this: *"Some peers cling to outdated methods. They see play as trivial, not a learning tool. This clashes with the Blueprint's child-centered ethos."* This resistance could isolate innovators, as T011 revealed: *"Primary teachers blame us if children struggle later, rather than collaborate."* These tensions might undermine the policy's holistic development aims.

The findings suggest that support staff limitations could strain equitable implementation. T005 critiqued possible role fragmentation:

"My assistant only handles kitchen duties. I'm the sole teacher managing 21 children. How can I individualise lessons?" (T005)

T011 seemed to clarify the systemic gaps: *"Teaching aides focus on cleaning and cooking. When I'm absent, substitutes lack ECE training, and equity might crumble without skilled backups."* This contrasted with T004's school experiences*: "We use projectors and tablets. Some tools that require technical peer support."* Such disparities could create inequitable access to collaborative resources across schools.

Moreover, grassroots mentorship appeared to offset formal training gaps. For instance, T007 valued peer guidance: *"Senior teachers advise, 'Stay flexible here.' Their institutional wisdom helps me adapt the Blueprint to local needs."* T008 leveraged informal networks: *"I swap strategies with colleagues. Their stories inspire my lesson tweaks. Shared experiences might make policy feel practical."*

Teachers' experiences suggested that peer support could simultaneously advance and hinder the Blueprint's equity aims. As T006 summarised: *"Teamwork makes the Blueprint's ideals achievable, but 'teams' must include all stakeholders such as teachers, aides, parents. Otherwise, policy could remain half-implemented."*

4.3.3 Superordinate Theme: Identity and ethical repercussions of implementation (SOM C)

SOM C.1 – Emotional Strain

Teachers described emotional strain as an intrinsic yet often unacknowledged dimension of Blueprint implementation, revealing tensions between policy aspirations and their professional realities. For instance, JF_T002 captured systemic frustrations: *"Large classes, underfunding, and lack of specialist support breed inadequacy. We're asked to deliver equity without equity for ourselves"* (JF_T002).

Similarly, T011 alluded to performative pressures: *"We're judged on children's test readiness, not holistic growth. This anxiety shadows every lesson."*

Furthermore, pride-policy dissonance emerged as teachers balanced idealism with exhaustion. TOO1 expressed passionate attachment*: "I fell in love with early childhood policy. It's a noble vision. But sustaining that love amid daily resource battles drains us."* Comparably, T002 acknowledged this duality:

"Teachers are the Blueprint's backbone. Yet training Blueprint's waves demands constant adaptation. It's exhilarating yet exhausting. Frustration arises when systemic challenges occur. For example, large classes, underfunding and lack of specialist support hinder our ability to meet policy goals." (T002)

The above statement shows emotional exhaustion from navigating policy demands amid resource limitations.

The findings illustrate how partial recognition of teacher expertise creates identity tensions. While some felt the Blueprint validated their profession, T002 revealed limitations: *"Policymakers consult teachers, but only selectively. Half their decisions meet my expectations."* This partial recognition leaves teachers like JF_T006 feeling torn: *"We hope for more appreciation of our challenges and meaningful inclusion in policy design."*

Moreover, valuation voids deepened emotional tolls. JF_T006 critiqued token recognition: "*We need policymakers to hear how under-resourced classrooms strain morale. Our expertise is celebrated in speeches, ignored in practice."* Conversely, T009 found solace in policy intent: *"The Blueprint's focus on holistic development such as physical, cognitive, emotional. This validates our work. But validation doesn't fill classroom gaps*."

Identity erosion surfaced in conflicting roles. T004 questioned the alignment: *"Do I truly connect with this policy, or just mimic compliance? Without voice in its design, I feel like a puppet, not a professional."* Furthermore, T003 reframed strain as growth: *"The Blueprint's demands pushed me to innovate. Stress became mastery, but not all colleagues find this resilience."* Teachers anchored their resilience in child-centred values, despite emotional costs. As T003 emphasised, "Every policy should prioritise children's welfare. We focus on positive impacts, which deepen our experience." T009 linked this to professional identity: "*The Blueprint values teachers' holistic role—not just academics, but children's physical and social growth too."* However, T006

acknowledged the toll: *"Professionalism depends on personal responsibility. When systems fail, our integrity becomes both a burden and a compass."*

The Blueprint's equity goals, while ideally empowering, often amplify teachers' emotional strain through systemic neglect and performative demands. As T001 noted, "The *policy's 'sweat and tears' are ours, not policymakers. When will our labour be valued as their vision is?"* Emotional tolls indicate deeper fractures, where teachers' professional identities become collateral damage in the gap between policy rhetoric and resourcing.

SOM C.2 – Deskilling or empowerment

Teachers experienced deskilling and empowerment as dual outcomes of Blueprint implementation, with professional identity shaped by tensions between policy-driven methodologies and adaptive agency. JF_T004 exemplified empowerment through training: *"KEMAS courses aligned my teaching with national policies, boosting my classroom leadership and communication skills."* Similarly, T002 linked training to pedagogical confidence: *"After workshops, we implemented project-based carnivals. Children thrived, and parents embraced our bold methods."* These opportunities operationalised the Blueprint's teacher competency goals.

Additionally, self-driven professional growth emerged as teachers transcended systemic gaps. JF_T005 described creative resilience: *"I meticulously prepare materials, using creativity to offset resource shortages. Every lesson is a testament to self-reliance."* T009 reframed challenges as mastery: *"I teach holistically, play wholeheartedly, and learn earnestly. Children remember this balance years later, validating my approach."* Moreover, T009 redefined success metrics: *"I don't pressure struggling children. Through earnest play and study, I prove 'weak' children can thrive."* This aligned with T004's empowerment: *"I now confidently voice opinions in crowds, a skill the Blueprint nurtured."*

Shifts in autonomy and authority revealed identity transformations. T004 noted newfound confidence: *"I once feared public speaking, but advocating for play-based methods in staff meetings honed my voice."* Conversely, T010 recalled earlier deskilling:

"Before studying ECE, I doubted my worth as a teacher. The Blueprint's framework helped me reclaim expertise. University training transformed my practice. Now I celebrate all children's presence, not just academic performance" (T010).

JF_T003 operationalised this identity shift: *"I revise curricula and design inclusive activities, ensuring materials meet diverse needs."* This transformation reflected the policy's success in fostering child-centred professionalism.

Policy-prescribed versus intuitive pedagogies created tension. T007 embraced flexibility: *"We're freer now. With no fear, no rigid scripts. The Blueprint trusts us to innovate."* Yet T006 critiqued parental scepticism: "*Parents distrust non-traditional KPIs. Upholding child-centered methods requires defending our expertise daily."* However, T010's journey from self-doubt to advocacy underscored how policy alignment can rebuild professional identity: *"The Blueprint helped me reclaim my voice*."

SOM C.3 – Professional identity conflicts

Teachers navigated professional identity conflicts arising from tensions between policy compliance, stakeholder expectations, and their pedagogical values, reflecting contested interpretations of equity under the Blueprint. JF_T002 articulated the strain of balancing reflection and compliance: "*I consciously reflect on improving my teaching, but systemic pressures, absent children, and rigid metrics undermine my agency."* Similarly, T006 grappled with dual roles: *"We track children's emotional and physical progress for parents, but paperwork eclipses teaching. Am I a teacher or administrator?"*

However, holistic commitment versus metric-driven mandates deepened identity fractures. T003 rejected narrow success markers: *"I don't care if children are 'smart.' If they remember me years later, I've impacted their humanity. That's true equity."* Conversely, T005 felt constrained: *"We're told to align development with age benchmarks. But children aren't checklists; policy metrics flatten individuality."* This contrasts with systemic pressures to prioritise measurable outcomes.

Teachers engaged in conscious self-evaluation to align policy with values. JF_T002 highlighted intentional reflection: *"I consciously analyse teaching practices to identify improvement areas."* However, T009 described parental friction: *"Parents critique my methods, demanding traditional academics. But the Blueprint urges play-based learning; whose vision wins?"* This reflected how JF_T011 reframed policy as

guidance: *"I interpret equity as adapting lessons to military families' diversity. The Blueprint is a compass, not a script."*

While the Blueprint frames teacher competency structurally, intrinsic motivation versus systemic erasure fuels identity resilience. T010 anchored purpose in children's needs: "*Children arrive needing more than academics. Their growth drives me, even when the system ignores my voice."* T001 lamented undervaluation: *"We advocate for children's mental health, but policymakers reduce us to policy enforcers. Where's our place in their vision?"* However, T002 acknowledged uncontrollable variables: *"External factors, such as absent children and community issues, could undermine our efforts, regardless of integrity."* This eroded professional agency, as JF_T005 lamented: *"I give constructive feedback to stakeholders, but systemic change feels elusive."*

The Blueprint's equity goals intensified teachers' identity conflicts, positioning them as both policy implementers and dissenters. As JF_T001 noted, "*Reflective practice exposes gaps between policy ideals and classroom realities. Do I bridge them or become complicit?"*

SOM C.4 – Hidden emotional labour

Teachers described hidden emotional labour as an invisible yet pervasive burden in Blueprint implementation, where systemic pressures and bureaucratic demands eroded their professional autonomy and well-being. T008 exposed precarity in employment structures: *"We're contract workers, renewing every two years. After 15 years, even seniors aren't made permanent. How can we invest emotionally in policies that don't invest in us?"* Similarly, T007 critiqued administrative hostility: *"Management blocks our efforts to innovate. We clash constantly. They don't understand equity, and we exhaust ourselves fighting."*

Moreover, precarity and performative compliance intensified emotional tolls. T005 lamented surveillance culture: "*District officers conduct surprise inspections. We scramble to 'perform' compliance, hiding classroom realities to avoid reprimands."* T002 traced policy dissemination stresses: *"Directives cascade from ministry to principals to us. Each layer adds pressure to appear flawlessly compliant."* This emotional theatre distracts from pedagogy, as T007 noted: *"We try hard, but management's roadblocks drain our passion."*

Systemic negligence and advocacy exhaustion deepened disillusionment. T006 contrasted leadership impacts: "*A supportive supervisor backs your decisions; a hostile one sabotages. We're drained by bureaucratic battles, not teaching."* T004 highlighted performative leadership: *"Good principals guide and correct. Bad ones demand flawless optics, our emotional labour becomes masking struggles."*

On top of this, teachers expend emotional energy navigating hierarchical dynamics. T004 contrasted supportive leadership: *"Good supervisors guide and correct us constructively,"* with T007's struggles: "*Management creates barriers, clashes make it hard to help children despite our efforts."* T006 captured the stakes: "*Getting a resistant supervisor? Some teachers break down. We absorb stress to protect our careers."* These interactions force teachers to manage both policy implementation and interpersonal politics.

Surveillance and emotional masking reshaped professional identity. T008 noted generational divides: *"Young supervisors demand 'advanced skills' from us but offer no training. We fake competence to survive evaluations."* Additionally, T002 critiqued policy dissemination: *"The Blueprint filters down through endless meetings. By the time it reaches us, it's a checklist, not a vision."*

As T007 noted, "*We try so hard to help children, but systemic barriers exhaust us. Equity becomes a performance for superiors, not a practice for children."* JF_T002 hinted at uneven support systems: *"Mentorship programs exist in some schools, but most of us navigate policy chaos alone."*

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 of the thesis, Findings, presented the results of the interpretative phenomenological study conducted to explore teachers' experiences in interpreting and implementing the Blueprint in public preschools. The chapter began with a presentation of the data, which was organised into thematic categories using the Quirkos software. The analysis focused on two main aspects: interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint.

The findings were derived from in-depth interviews and teachers' journal reflections, revealing emergent themes that captured the essence of teachers' lived experiences. Then, these themes were categorised and further subdivided into sub-themes, with frequencies indicating how often specific issues were referenced by participants. This thematic analysis highlighted patterns in teachers' experiences, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities they faced in implementing the Blueprint within the early childhood education context.

The chapter concluded with a table of master themes developed from the data, offering a comprehensive overview of the key findings. These findings served as a foundation for the subsequent discussion, where the implications of the results were explored in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature.

Following in Chapter 5, Discussion, is a detailed analysis of the results. It examines the meaning of each theme in the context of the research questions and theoretical framework, exploring the interrelation between the research questions. This chapter aims to synthesise the findings, offering a deeper understanding of the study's contributions to the field of early childhood education.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

5.1 Findings Strategy Framework

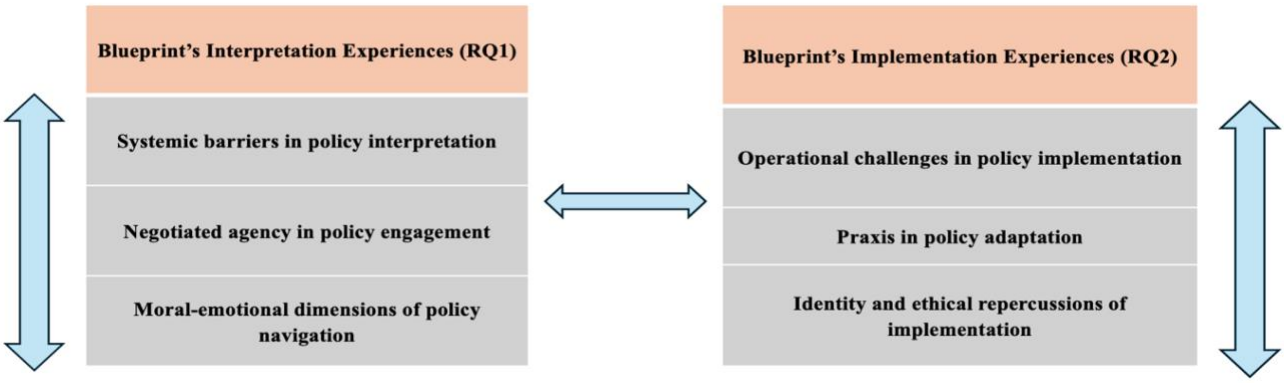

Figure 4: Findings Strategy Framework

Figure 4 illustrates the findings strategy framework adopted in the research. This study advances a critical, tripartite framework to theorise teachers' policy experiences, positioning the Blueprint's interpretation (RQ1) and implementation (RQ2) as dialectically intertwined processes shaped by systemic constraints, agentive negotiation, and moral-emotional praxis. In Blueprint's interpretation, teachers' decoding of the policy (SOT1: systemic barriers) revealed socio-material realities of power asymmetries such as ambiguous mandates, top-down frustration, and lack of training. This rendered the Blueprint a contested text, demanding sense-making amid institutional dissonance in preschool education. This decoding was not passive but enacted negotiated agency (SOT2), where teachers reinterpreted the Blueprint through collaborative critique and creative adaptation, reframing compliance as a form of institutional resistance. Yet this agency was inseparably bound to moral-emotional dimensions (SOT3): the labour of navigating policy contradictions generated affective tolls (e.g., compliance versus ethics and resistance guilt), exposing interpretation as a site of embodied struggle where teachers mediated between systemic demands and pedagogical integrity in their classrooms.

In the implementation of the Blueprint, these dynamics evolved into operational challenges (SOT1: resource gaps, pressures, and bureaucratic overload), where the Blueprint's aspirational rhetoric collided with the granularity of classroom praxis. Teachers' adaptation (SOT2: praxis-orientated agency) transcended technical

execution, emerging as contextual reinvention such as improvisational strategies and peer-network solidarities that reconfigured policy tools to local needs in preschool settings. However, such praxis incurred identity and ethical repercussions (SOT3), as teachers grappled with role fragmentation (e.g., “deskilling” via scripted curricula) and moral distress from compromising equity ideals under accountability systems.

Crucially, the interplay of RQ1 and RQ2 illuminated policy enactment as a recursive cycle, where systemic barriers in interpretation may re-emerge as operational hurdles in implementation, while agentive adaptation in both phases generated new emotional-ethical tensions that fed back into interpretive struggles. For instance, teachers who creatively subverted mandates (RQ2-SOT2) faced amplified emotional tolls (RQ1-SOT3); however, collaborative reinterpretation (RQ1-SOT2) mitigated the implementation’s resource gaps (RQ2-SOT1). This duality positioned teachers as liminal actors, who were simultaneously constrained by systemic power. Additionally, teachers may be empowered through micropolitical resistance, which embodies the contradictions of neoliberal reform in their labour.

5.2 Discussion RQ1 – Teachers’ Experiences in Interpreting the Blueprint

5.2.1 Discussion on Superordinate Theme 1: Structural barriers in policy interpretation

Blueprint as symbolic performance/compliance

Structural barriers in policy interpretation often arise when the Blueprint prioritises symbolic gestures over transformative action. As evident in SOT A.1, teachers’ acknowledgement of the Blueprint as a *“guideline to reference”* (T008) or *“safeguard”* (T005) aligns with Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2016), who argue that institutional logics shape how frontline actors reinterpret policies to align with bureaucratic performativity. By adopting globally resonant language such as *“international standards”* (T002) and *“21st-century skills”*, the Blueprint signals Malaysia’s alignment with global education agendas such as SDGs (Joseph, 2018; Rad *et al.*, 2022). However, I argue that this symbolism masks operational vagueness. For instance, terms like “*3 waves and 11 aspirations”* (T002) lacked contextual clarity, leading teachers to dismiss the policy as *“abstract ideals”* (T010). This mirrors Amdur and

Mero-Jaffe (2017) on policy cycle theory, where frontline actors (teachers) reinterpret texts (the Blueprint) in the context of practice, often diverging from the context of influence (policymakers' intent). This parallels Woodhead *et al.* (2009), who identified similar disconnects between aspirational policy language and localised implementation in Ethiopia, India, and Peru.

The Blueprint's symbolic value also served bureaucratic performativity. Teachers showcased compliance through standardised metrics, such as decorated classrooms and inflated portfolios (T001), while pedagogical realities remained unchanged. This ritualistic adherence reflects Ball *et al.* (2011) and Verger *et al.* (2024) on audit culture, where policies become tools for institutional legitimacy rather than drivers of change. For example, as T011 noted, "*Ministry visits demanded things look good,*" exposing how the Blueprint's interpretation was co-opted by accountability regimes that prioritise optics over outcomes. Furthermore, reflecting what has been demonstrated in SOT A.4, the Blueprint's rhetorical commitment to equity clashes with its operational focus on performativity. For instance, T011's experience with ministry inspections prioritising "*appearances*" over outcomes exemplifies this contradiction. While the policy claims to foster "*holistic learning",* its interpretation as an audit reduces equity to a checklist (e.g., portfolio completion rates and parental involvement KPIs), thereby erasing the complexities of marginalised children's needs (Bassok and Galdo, 2015). This issue resonates with similar challenges identified in the South Australian early childhood programme (Krieg *et al.*, 2015).

This performative interpretation links with Syslová (2019) and Hardy (2013), where teachers' situated knowledge of classroom realities is discussed. T002's frustration with *"policy enforcement burden*s" highlights how the Blueprint's standardised frameworks "*make teachers mediate ministry policies"*, silencing grassroots expertise and privileging bureaucratic optics over pedagogical justice, as noted by Paananen and Lipponen (2016), who critique how standardised frameworks marginalise teachers' situated knowledge in classroom equity.

Moreover, in SOT A.5, teachers interpreted the Blueprint not as a pedagogical guide but as a bureaucratic script enforcing compliance. T006's critique of "*unmanageable KPIs*" and T009's frustration with Quranic memorisation mandates, "*forcing children to*

memorise" (T009), reveal how teachers perceive the policy as a tool of ideological control rather than educational innovation. I argue that the Blueprint's focus on rules and checklists, like rigid KPIs or Quranic memorisation targets, pushes preschools to prioritise appearance over real learning. This aligns with Syslová's (2019) research about performative governance, where policies prioritise auditability over adaptability. Furthermore, the Blueprint's homogenised frameworks (e.g., rigid timelines and standardised curricula) clashed with teachers' lived experiences of school readiness: "*Children just play or go to the toilet. Too early to have an exam"* (T011). They reinterpreted these mandates through a lens of structural cynicism, viewing the Blueprint as a series of checkboxes. They also noted that *"training once a month related to the Blueprint"* (T005) served to legitimise the state rather than empower classrooms. This mirrors the work of Wilinski, Morley, and Landgraf (2021), which posits that bureaucratic knowledge systems invalidate situated pedagogies. Moreover, it takes power away from teachers who know their children's needs and hands control over to officials, creating unfairness while pretending to standardise quality. This exemplifies why top-down standardisation often marginalises contextual needs.

Similarly, in SOT A.6, based on teachers' experience in interpreting the Blueprint, the training programmes were perceived as symbolic gestures designed to legitimise the state rather than empower teachers, similar to the critique by Kabugo *et al.* (2024), who argued that Uganda's national teacher policy became a tool of performative governance rather than facilitating transformative change. T008 acknowledged that pedagogy courses are *"not comprehensive"*, while T005 expressed scepticism about sporadic workshops, where "*progress is slow"*. This situation reflects what Ball (2003) terms "terrors of performativity", where policies prioritise audit-friendly metrics (e.g., training frequency) over meaningful skill-building. This performative logic enacts what Bourdieu (1986) calls symbolic violence, as teachers internalise systemic failures, such as fragmented curricula and role creep as personal inadequacies (Flynn, 2015). For instance, T003's confusion over "*how many phases we've implemented; I could not see any alignment in practice"* underscores the epistemic disconnect between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. The situation mirrors Kim's (2021) observation that vague national policies in South Korea led to fragmented interpretations of multicultural education, leaving teachers overworked and underprepared. The findings suggest that trainings related to the Blueprint may become an image of reform, where

bureaucratic performance legitimises the Blueprint's 'equity' branding while leaving teachers stranded in a cycle of deskilling and overwork. The literature in Chapter 2 highlights the Malaysian context, where national policies often clash with on-the-ground resource disparities and training gaps (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014; Anna Phang *et al.*, 2023).

Top-down Control and Exclusion

Next, structural barriers in policy interpretation deepen when hierarchical systems reduce teachers to implementers rather than co-creators of policy education reform. In SOT A.2, teachers interpreted the Blueprint as a rigid, non-negotiable mandate, where institutional logics embedded in top-down policies constrain teacher agency (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer, 2016). T007's critique, *"Policymakers treat all schools the same"*, reflects what scholars term policy as text (Ball, 2012). This is where centralised directives prioritise uniformity over contextual relevance. Teachers' frustration with the *"umbrella framework approach"* (T001) aligns with Ball's (2012) observation that neoliberal policies often conflate standardisation with equity, ignoring localised needs. For instance, KPIs like *"90% parental involvement"* (T006) were interpreted not as pedagogical goals but as performative hurdles, reducing the Blueprint to a compliance checklist, a similar situation in South Australia (Krieg *et al.*, 2015). This scripting of policy intent creates a paradox. While the Blueprint rhetorically champions *"holistic learning"*, its hierarchical enforcement stifles the teacher creativity required to achieve such goals. T009's observation of generational divides, specifically that *"experienced teachers focus on rote learning"*, illustrates how top-down mandates clash with rooted practices, fragmenting the Blueprint's interpretation into disjointed, ad hoc adaptations (Curtner-Smith, 1999). Similarly, in the Malaysian context, Chee *et al.* (2015) explain the resistance faced by preschool curricula due to misalignment with teachers' pedagogical practices.

Moreover, the Blueprint's goals were further undermined by politically mediated resource allocation, as highlighted by T008's account of sponsorships favouring schools, with *"resources going to schools with political ties."* This finding exposes a critical flaw in policy interpretation, as equity frameworks are inevitably filtered through existing power structures (Bassok and Galdo, 2015). I argue that the Blueprint's strict

top-down rules might turn its fairness promises into empty gestures, keeping inequality in place while stopping teachers from making real changes in education. As Smith, Tesar, and Myers (2016) claim, educational policies in capitalist systems often reproduce rather than rectify them. The Blueprint's failure to disrupt these dynamics might allow its interpretation to be co-opted by performative logics, where *"polished reports"* (T008) masked resource deprivation. This resonates with Jurado de los Santos *et al.'s* (2020) argument that policymakers live in a 'zone of being' (abstract ideals) while ignoring teachers struggling in a 'zone of non-being' (material constraints). Additionally, this condition masks resource deprivation, as mentioned by Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.* (2021), who argue that Malaysia's national policies inadvertently deepen disparities by prioritising politically connected schools. The Blueprint's aspirational language of "*international standards"* thus becomes a weapon, treating teachers' everyday challenges as unimportant, which could hurt their expertise and silence their voices; eventually teachers' struggles are rendered invisible (Flynn, 2015).

In addition, I argue that the Blueprint's exclusion of teachers from policymaking, as stated in SOT A.5, *"listen to our voices"* (T004) and *"revise based on feedback"* (T011), may position them as intermediaries, not interpreters, of the Blueprint. T010's observation that *"teachers don't understand the Blueprint's goals"* underscores how policy illiteracy is engineered by top-down dissemination and could force teachers to navigate ambiguous mandates without institutional support. This dynamic reflects Rad *et al.'s* (2022) tokenism, where participation is performative, and teachers' expertise is reduced to *"local informant"* status. The Blueprint's design, within diverse interpretations, exacerbates this exclusion. By privileging input from *"high-performing schools"* (T011), policymakers conflate equity with elitism, silencing marginalised classrooms from different agencies. This mirrors Hardy's (2013) study on how competing bureaucratic pressures force teachers to navigate ambiguous mandates without institutional support. T002 expressed a sense of isolation: *"We work together… I don't know about other schools,"* illustrating how the policy fragments teacher solidarity and prevents collective reinterpretation of its goals.

Furthermore, the Blueprint's inclusive rhetoric is further undermined by institutional biases that might privilege certain identities. As found in SOT A.1, T010's admission

that MAIWP preschools prioritise *"Muslim children"* contradicts its inclusivity claims, echoing the arguments made by Masnan, Mustafa, and Hosshan (2017) and Hudson (2019) regarding the exclusion of non-dominant groups from equitable access. Similarly, the spatial segregation noted by T005, stating that *"flats differ from terrace neighbourhoods"*, mirrors Groff (2013), where urban planning might entrench class and ethnic divides. These biases are not incidental but embedded in the Blueprint's interpretation. By failing to mandate intersectional resource allocation, the policy tacitly endorses existing hierarchies. Teachers are complicit in these dynamics. For example, channels of parents to private centres (T011) reflect unconscious inequity, where the oppressed internalise and reproduce their marginalisation (Germain, 2022). Instead of fixing this issue, the policy lets inequality grow, and without realising it, teachers might keep supporting these systems based on their interpretation. This aligns with Bourdieu's idea of how marginalised actors internalise and reproduce systemic oppression through unconscious reproduction (Flynn, 2015).

Structural violence (inequities) and systemic neglect

The structural barriers in policy interpretation extend beyond bureaucratic inefficiency, manifesting as structural violence when standardised frameworks and systemic neglect might deepen inequities. As mentioned in SOT A.1, the Blueprint's aspirational goals, which included equity, inclusivity, and quality, were challenged by systemic barriers that teachers might reinterpret as policy irrelevance. For example, resource disparities fundamentally undermined its vision of "*inclusive learning environments"* (JF_T001), as overcrowded classrooms (T011) left teachers with insufficient time and support, forcing them to prioritise bureaucratic compliance, such as mechanically "*chasing KPIs"* (T010), over meaningful pedagogical engagement. I argue that these challenges were compounded by structural contradictions in the Blueprint's decentralisation rhetoric, such as school-based management and persistent centralised control from the agency and ministry, where under-resourced "*small departments [with] no budget"* (T007) struggled to execute reforms amid top-down mandates (Foong Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021). This incoherence mirrors Bassok and Galdo (2015), highlighting how school-level disparities in preschool quality emerge when policies fail to address structural inequities that lead to reduced equity in the performative checklist.

Further ambiguity arose from conflicting policy signals: while the Blueprint emphasised child-centred pedagogy, contractual staff faced punitive threats for unmet performance indicators (T006), creating a climate where administrative survival tactics obscured educational innovation and creativity (Hardy, 2013). Collectively, these dynamics reduced the policy to a performative exercise, exposing gaps between systemic aspirations and the material constraints shaping daily practice. Thus, these systemic constraints reshaped the Blueprint's interpretation by teachers. As Lipsky (1980) in Honig (2006b) argues, teachers, as street-level bureaucrats, become de facto policymakers under resource scarcity. For instance, schools might prioritise hiding struggling children during inspections (T011) over real teaching, and turning equity goals into empty rules as they fight just to stay afloat. Here, teachers might reinterpret the Blueprint's goals as risk management, prioritising institutional survival over child welfare. These dynamics reduce the Blueprint to a performative exercise, echoing Bourdieu's field lens to show how teachers become de facto policymakers under scarcity, prioritising institutional survival over child welfare (Kabugo *et al.*, 2024).

From SOT A.3, the Blueprint claims to promote equity through "*inclusivity*" and "*access*" (Ministry of Education, 2013), but teachers' experiences revealed contradictions. For instance, T005 noted "*new books arrive in October"*, highlighting resource delays, while T008 criticised outdated facilities. These are issues Bourdieu (1986) would call misrecognition, where systemic deprivation is mislabelled as temporary inefficiency rather than structural exclusion (English and Bolton, 2016). Similarly, MAIWP preschools' enrolment caps (T010) and military camp quotas (T011) seemed to act as "*soft exclusion*", favouring certain groups under the guise of quality standards. These practices align with critiques of equity policies that prioritise rhetoric over real redistribution (Germain, 2022). The Blueprint's failure to disrupt resource hoarding, where *"sponsorships go to schools with political ties" (T008),* revealed its interpretation as a symbolic gesture, which is a performative commitment to equity that legitimises the state while masking its complicity in reproducing class hierarchies.

Furthermore, the Blueprint's standardised frameworks, such as rigid curricula and uniform KPIs, were interpreted by policymakers as tools for equity, ensuring consistency across diverse contexts. However, I contend this concept, as the findings

reveal teachers' experiences of struggling with *"heterogeneous needs*" (T005) and *"ethnic diversity"* (T011), which expose how standardisation functions could be a reality by erasing localised knowledge and cultural practices (Dieudé and Prøitz, 2024). Moreover, T007's criticism of *"parenting styles vary"* and T009's linkage of learning gaps to socioeconomic neglect might illustrate how the policy's one-size-fits-all approach marginalises, thereby reframing structural inequities as individual deficits. This aligns with Akmal and Pritchett (2021), where systemic failures (e.g., underfunding and overcrowding) are reinterpreted as cultural or familial shortcomings. The Blueprint's standardised metrics serve a dual function, which is that they permit the state's equity claims while obscuring its role in perpetuating inequity.

Additionally, in SOT A.5, teachers' interpretation of the Blueprint was burdened by its failure to address systemic inequities like fragmented governance, "*not under MOE*" (T006), and uneven resourcing. T010's critique of "*limited sessions due to infrastructure"* and T007's role as a material distributor, *"sending handouts to homes*," appeared to position teachers as improvisational actors, compensating for state neglect. This reflects Bourdieu's (1986) idea of habitus, where systemic barriers such as "*books arrive in October"* (T005) and bureaucratic absurdities such as "*teach in one hour"* (T011) are seen as normal, making teachers accept inequity as inevitable, interpreting the Blueprint not as a flawed policy but as a fixed reality to be navigated around (Jackson, 2022).

Exploitative labour (workloads and precarity)

The Blueprint's structural barriers extend to exploitative labour conditions, where unsustainable workloads and contractual precarity might transform teachers from being "educators" into overburdened managerial loads. In SOT A.4, the interpretation of the Blueprint as a vehicle for "*accountability*" and "*efficiency*" entrenches exploitative labour conditions, weaponising precarious contracts and unattainable KPIs to reduce teaching to a high-stakes performance of compliance. For example, T006 critiqued the "*unattainable KPIs*" that are designed to "*protect the department's image"*, noting that they became a trap in a cycle of survival labour, where job insecurity and audit pressure led to the feeling that "*I will be terminated"* (T006). I argue that this condition could force the prioritisation of the metric-driven tasks over meaningful pedagogy,

reflecting Foucault's disciplinary power (Ball, 2012). Policy frameworks internalise control, transforming teachers into self-surveillant actors who normalise unsustainable workloads and role inflation. This mirrors global trends in which teachers serve market efficiency over human dignity (Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2020). In Bourdieu's field theory, this situation shows how teachers internalise job insecurity as normalised habitus, despite facing low wages and contractual precarity, which contribute to systemic de-professionalisation, thereby forcing teachers into survival labour and creating a similar environment to that found in Ugandan education (Kabugo *et al.*, 2024).

Additionally, the findings reveal that the Blueprint's failure to address systemic issues, such as overcrowding, evidenced by *"40+ children"* (T011), understaffing, and untrained teachers (T003), appeared to expose its interpretation as a symbolic gesture rather than a redistributive framework. Teachers' roles expand into social work, such as delivering handouts (T007) and applying for welfare aid (T008) to help marginalised families that were probably abandoned by the state. This role expansion highlights the policy's structural violence: it offloads public responsibilities onto teachers while denying them the resources to fulfil these supports (Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021). The reliance on underqualified, contractual staff (T010) could further reinforce the Blueprint's neoliberal interpretation. By treating teachers as replaceable labour rather than professionals, the policy entrenches a workforce stripped of security and agency (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann, 2019).

While teachers critiqued the Blueprint's irrelevance, their responses in SOT A.2 reveal a duality in interpretation, in which complicity in performativity (T006's inflated KPIs) was met with small acts of resistance (T007's push for adaptability). However, I contend that the moral cost of this duality, as mentioned by T008, "*we turn a blind eye*," suggests that the Blueprint's interpretation is not merely pragmatic but existentially fraught. Notably, teachers' power to act might be limited by structural barriers. T001's assertion that grassroots actors "*don't have power to change policy"* reflects what Freire's (1970) cultural silence is (Yoshida and Shanouda, 2015), where marginalised groups internalise their exclusion, perpetuating cycles of disempowerment.

Furthermore, in SOT A.6, teachers reinterpreted the Blueprint through the lens of institutional abandonment. T006's burnout, described as *"stressful… workload overwhelming"*, and T004's reliance on personal networks, stating that their *"support system is family"*, exposed how the policy might offload systemic responsibilities onto individuals. The absence of institutional support shared, untrained teaching assistants (T011), lack of substitutes, and ad hoc enrolment practices, described as a "*village-style system*" (T006), could further position the Blueprint as a privilege for those with resources, rather than a universal right. This interpretation aligns with Suarez and McGrath (2022), where teachers, stripped of security and support, might become disposable labourers in a neoliberal machinery that equates equity with austerity. T005's multitasking, *"decorate, fundraise, and teach,*" and T008's financial compromises, *"don't ask for fees,"* reveal a policy that collapses under its own gaps, forcing teachers to mask the divide between aspirational goals and institutional neglect.

Pragmatic resistance and habitual adaptation (negotiation and fragmented resistance)

Faced with structural barriers, teachers' interpretation of the Blueprint shifts from passive compliance to pragmatic resistance, improvised, habitual acts of subversion that expose policy gaps while enabling survival within preschool systems. In SOT A.1, the Blueprint's push to adopt global standards (e.g., PISA, TIMMS, and ILO guidelines) created contradictions, as teachers found such benchmarks "unreal" (T001) in some preschool contexts, such as overcrowded classes, which made child-centred reforms potentially unworkable. The globalisation of education policy privileges homogenised standards over contextual realities (Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor, 2005). This aligns with Friche, Enemark, and Ydesen's (2019) critique of policy borrowing, which often ignores local realities. For example, the DSKP (T009), a curriculum aligned with the Blueprint, was described as "*complete*" in theory but seemed to appear as unworkable in practice due to rigid deadlines and large class sizes (T011). I argue that teachers' pragmatic reinterpretation, *"as long as it ran smoothly"* (T003), highlights how global frameworks could marginalise teachers' expertise, a form of epistemic injustice (Chee *et al.*, 2015; Jurado de los Santos *et al.*, 2020).

Despite systemic erasure, teachers appeared to reinterpret the Blueprint through acts of pragmatism, as mentioned in SOT A.5, where T011's demand for "*policy adjustments to match children's levels"* and T009's advocacy for play-based learning exemplified the fusion of reflection and action to transform rigid systems. These acts of resistance align with (Honig, 2006) street-level bureaucracy, where teachers bend rigid policy to meet children's needs. However, I contest that this agency is constrained by the Blueprint's market-driven rules. T006's transition from private-sector autonomy to public-sector precarity, "In *Malaysia, it's different, preschool education are conquered by the private sector,"* reveals how teachers' reinterpreted power is circumscribed by contractual vulnerabilities and resource scarcity (Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021). Their resistance turns into a fragile balancing act, which sustains dignity while inadvertently legitimising the very systems they critique.

Furthermore, an interesting finding in SOT A.2, where generational divides further fragmented policy interpretation between "*conventional*" and "*holistic*" pedagogies (T009), underscores how policy interpretation is mediated by professional identity. Senior teachers' adherence to rote is shaped by past policies, while newer teachers' attempts to align with the Blueprint's child-centred ethos (T009). This divide illustrates how policy interpretation is not static but contested across temporal and ideological lines (Campbell-Barr and Nygård, 2014). This temporal contestation demonstrates Bourdieu's field lens related to how teachers' practices are shaped by generational habitus and institutional memory. The Blueprint's lack of participatory training might have exacerbated this divide. Without mechanisms to bridge old and new approaches, teachers defaulted to inconsistent interpretations, diluting the Blueprint's coherence. Without structured support, teachers defaulted to fragmentation in the implementation stage.

The findings from SOT A.6 highlight that the Blueprint's reinterpretation is further complicated by generational resistance to pedagogical shifts. T010's critique of senior teachers, where *"experienced teachers struggle to accept new ideas"*, and T007's observation of institutional inertia, "*senior teachers prefer flexibility"*, reflect Foucault's (1977) (Ball, 2013) disciplinary power, in which entrenched practices and rote learning are normalised, thereby resisting policy-driven innovations like play-based curricula.

This resistance is not mere stubbornness but a habitus by Bourdieu (1986), a survival strategy honed under decades of underfunding and neglect (Nash, 1999; Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). Senior teachers' scepticism toward the Blueprint's "*new ideas*" mirrors their historical experience of policy abandonment, where reforms are announced with fanfare but might be starved of support. The result is a fragmented implementation landscape where the Blueprint's vision is diluted into performative gestures, potentially failing to disrupt entrenched inequities.

5.2.2 Superordinate Theme 2: Negotiated agency in policy engagement

Creative Agency and Resourceful Adaptation

Teachers' engagement with the Blueprint appears to be defined by pragmatic resistance, small, daily acts of adaptation to survive systemic barriers, and habitual adaptation, where policy reinterpretation might become routine under entrenched inequities. From SOT B.1, teachers seemed to interpret the Blueprint as a flexible framework, not a rigid policy, using creativity and constant negotiation to bridge policy gaps. T009's use of ICT, "*Smart TVs and robotics"*, and T007's hybrid methods, *"handouts and YouTube videos*", exemplify what Guerrero and Camargo-Abello (2023) explain, turning constraints into spaces for agency. However, I contend this is where this creativity and adaptation are forced by the Blueprint's gaps to address structural inequities: "*technology is scarce*" (T005) and "*ancient tools*" (T008). This improvisation critiques the Blueprint's disconnect from reality, which might be relying on teachers to fulfil its equity promises. Teachers potentially act as policy mediators. However, without institutional support, these innovations remain isolated fixes, not systemic change (Verger et al., 2024). Similarly with Yoke-Yean *et al.* (2021), critics of Malaysia's policies often offload equity responsibilities onto teachers while neglecting material resourcing. Here, teachers' role as policy mediators possibly bridges gaps through isolated innovations, rendering such efforts temporary fixes within entrenched inequities (Kabugo *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, interpretation of the Blueprint transforms teachers' creativity into a tool of responsibilities. T008's self-funded materials, "*using kindergarten funds*", and T011's integration of external curricula, "*Genius Negara's curriculum*", reflect what Brown (2015) calls entrepreneurial citizenship: a neoliberal logic that might valorise individual effort to mask state abandonment. However, their creativity also challenges the Blueprint's Eurocentric biases. T009's tactile pedagogies and WhatsApp-based learning for low-tech communities align with grassroots resistance to technocratic policy norms (Cairney and Kippin, 2022), reclaiming the Blueprint as a dynamic, locally relevant guide. By integrating local realities (e.g., WhatsApp-based learning for low-tech communities), teachers might reinterpret the Blueprint as a living document rather than a bureaucratic script. However, this resistance remains constrained by the

policy's material contradictions. T010's frustration, expressed as *"still talking about change instead of acting*", underscores how teachers' reinterpretations are stifled by systemic inertia, reducing their agency to micro-resistances within a macro-structure of neglect.

Furthermore, teachers appeared to interpret the Blueprint through Freire's praxis (Patel, 2024), blending reflection and action to resist harmful policy. T009 resisted rote memorisation by stating *"avoid forcing advanced content"*, while T011 demanded differentiated implementation with the statement, *"adapt to children's realities"*, both of which repurposed the policy's equity rhetoric to protect children. By aligning the Blueprint with classroom needs, teachers turned it into a shield against standardisation, asserting that "*policies become tools to protect childhood*" (T009). Yet their advocacy remains constrained by the very systems they critique, highlighting the tension between transformative intent and neoliberal policy logics.

Collaborative Survival and Grassroots Mediation

Teachers' collective agency potentially emerges as collaborative survival, using shared strategies to mediate policy gaps through grassroots networks. From SOT B.2, teachers interpreted the Blueprint through collaborative sensemaking, which is a grassroots effort to decode its abstract equity goals into classroom realities. T006's emphasis on "*experienced teachers in the field*" and T005's advocacy for "*teachers' voices"* reflect grassroots networks turning abstract policy goals into classroom actions, thereby challenging top-down bureaucracy (Crane, 2022). This also aligns with Coburn (2001), who theorises how teachers mediate policy through professional communities. However, I contend that this collaboration is not optional but enforced by systemic neglect, where the Blueprint's failure to include teachers in policymaking, "*policies made without consulting teachers"* (T007), pushed teachers to self-organise, transforming peer networks into lifelines for policy survival. Teachers compensate for institutional voids, but here, collaboration exposes how the state shifts policy work onto teachers. A similar situation exists in Malaysia's national policies for privileging bureaucratic efficiency over participatory governance (Yoke-Yean *et al.*, 2021).

Teachers also mediate clashes between policy ideals and community realities in interpreting the Blueprint. For example, T009 faced parental pressure to "*focus on academic outcomes*", while T006 noted parents' "*lack of awareness*" of the Blueprint's play-based goals collided with communities socialised into rote-learning paradigms. Teachers like T004, who "*gently suggest specialist consultations"*, and T010, who proposed "*parent education programs*", might become cultural translators, bridging policy and local needs together. This role resonates with Colombian teachers' agency in contextualising national policy, and Greek-Cypriot teachers navigate policy dialogues amid conflicting ideologies (Charalambous, Charalambous and Zembylas, 2013; Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023).

Interestingly, according to the findings in SOT B.3, teachers' leadership is not a choice but a structural necessity in a system that substitutes governance with grassroots labour. T001's struggle to "*convince my team*" and T011's performative compliance to *"label activities as tests"* illustrated that teachers appeared to become makeshift policymakers. However, without institutional support, this leadership becomes exploitative, which aligns with Harvey's (2005) accumulation by dispossession: the state's deliberate under-resourcing of governance structures forces teachers to fill gaps, "*deal with the fallout*" (T001), and privatise public education's equity work. The Blueprint, in this light, is reinterpreted and demands teacher leadership but denies them power, turning policy into a tool of precarity.

Systemic Barriers and Co-opted Empowerment

Teachers' interpretation of the Blueprint occurs within a co-opted environment where systemic barriers are reframed as opportunities for individual responsibilities, obscuring structural failures. Based on the findings in SOT B.1, teachers' resourcefulness is celebrated as "*dedication*", masking the policy's failure to equitably distribute resources: "*internet diversifies opportunities"* (T004) versus "*facilities are terrible"* (T005). This co-optation enacts Bourdieu's (1986) symbolic violence: teachers might blame themselves for the gap, misrecognising their status exploitation as professional pride (Nash, 1999). For instance, T002's claim that "*each teacher develops unique ways"* exemplifies this, framing structural inequities as opportunities for individualism rather than collective action, mirroring Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor's

(2005) argument on policy globalisation, which displaces structural accountability onto individual actors.

Furthermore, as mentioned in SOT B.2, collaborative interpretation is interrupted by administrative systems that prioritise financial and bureaucratic compliance over child-centred equity. T006's critique of documentation, "*files prioritise finances over pedagogy*", and T008's call for classroom visits, "*authorities should understand constraints"*, highlight how the Blueprint's audit culture (Ball, 2003) might distort its equity goals. Teachers seem to be forced to navigate misaligned incentives: performing compliance for funding while advocating for developmental needs (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer, 2016). These structural barriers reflect the Blueprint's neoliberal duplicity, where it invokes "*collaboration*" as a buzzword while perpetuating market-driven inequities. Schools in marginalised communities, "*village-style systems"* (T006), lack resources to meet bureaucratic demands, interpreting their collaborative efforts as performative practices rather than transformative actions in preschool education, a dynamic that is mentioned in Chee *et al.* (2015). Here, teachers reinterpret policy gaps as opportunities for grassroots innovation.

In SOT B.3, teachers interpreted the Blueprint through the lens of institutional incoherence, where fragmented governance*, "multiple ministries… jurisdictional buck-passing"* (T001), transforms policy implementation into a bureaucratic confusion. T003's reliance on handbooks and *"preschool management guidelines"* and T006's critique of state-level incompetence, *"directives get lost"*, exemplify a neoliberal system that issues conflicting rules while evading accountability (Ball, 2003). Teachers potentially are forced to become crisis managers, stitching together policy fragments into makeshift practices (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer, 2016).

Additionally, T001's advocacy of repetitive efforts, *"starting over constantly"*, might reframe leadership under neoliberalism as resilience theatre—a performance of individual grit that hides systemic decay. Such resilience is symbolic violence under Bourdieu, a misrecognition of systemic decay as individual grit (Kabugo *et al.*, 2024). The policy sidelines teachers' knowledge, privileging bureaucracy over pedagogy. T003's frustration that "*no one discusses preschool components*" and T006's critique that "*files prioritise finances"* erase grassroots expertise to uphold neoliberal control.

Teachers' insights are dismissed, reducing their role as co-constructed framework; "*uncoordinated ministries create consequences*" (T001), rather than shaping policy. I argue that teachers' leadership is stripped of power, which might force them to reinterpret the Blueprint through invisible labour. While vital, this work goes unrecognised and could treat the policy as a fixed document, not a collaborative process. However, teachers reclaim agency: T002's peer training, *"external experts boost confidence"*, and T004's demand that "*teachers' insights shape systems*" position them as policy co-authors, not just implementers. This counter-hegemonic praxis could repurpose the Blueprint's framework for localised justice (Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023).

This empowerment is structurally constrained by the Blueprint's neoliberal system, reframing problems as opportunities for personal heroism. T006's critique of bureaucratic absurdities, "*administrators buy useless resources"*, and T010's observation of compliance, *"teachers lag in competency"*, reveal how empowerment could become responsibilities (Brown, 2015). Even acts like T007's reliance on guidelines to *"prevent stagnation"* and T008's self-funded adaptations to *"buy materials ourselves"* exemplify how teachers' labour is misrecognised as "*dedication*" rather than exploitation. Furthermore, the Blueprint's praise for "*flexibility*" (T011) hides its lack of accountability. Teachers' agency is co-opted into resilience theatre. T001's leadership struggles and "rebuilding *understanding at every level"*, and T010's critique of uneven engagement, "*mechanical execution*", illustrate how empowerment fractures along resource lines. Teachers in well-resourced schools, with "*access to experts*" (T002), wield agency as policy entrepreneurs, while those in marginalised contexts, *"village-style systems"* (T006), drown in paperwork, a bureaucratic performativity. This duality entrenches the Blueprint's hidden curriculum of inequality, where equity becomes a privilege of the resourced (Sennett, 2003).

5.2.3 Discussion Superordinate Theme 3: Moral-emotional dimensions of policy navigation

Emotional Burden and Ethical Dissonance

Teachers' engagement with the Blueprint is marked by emotional burden and ethical dissonance, as performative metrics and systemic neglect force them to internalise policy problems as personal shortcomings. The findings in SOT C.1 suggest that teachers interpret the Blueprint's emphasis on KPIs, "reports *don't reflect reality"* (T006), as reducing equity to measurable outcomes, creating emotional strain. The policy's fixation on auditable metrics leads to *"inflated grades to protect reputations, but those grades were not real. Teachers still struggle; children struggle"* (T011). T011 experienced coerced compliance, such as *"pretend to succeed"*, to avoid penalties and punishment, including "*warning, then dismissal. I'm afraid I will be terminated"* (T006). This might generate self-doubt, reflecting symbolic violence where flaws are misread as personal failure (Biesta *et al.*, 2021). Teachers' self-doubt mirrors the study by Yoke-Yean *et al.* (2021) on Malaysian policymakers' neglect of teachers' emotional labour, perpetuating the equity-quality paradox in the Global South context.

This finding further explains that the second layer of burden stems from cruel optimism (Lynch, 2020), where the Blueprint's promises of equity clash with material neglect. Teachers in under-resourced contexts, such as T011, who managed overcrowded classrooms with *"40 children"*, and T003's frustration with socioeconomic inequities, *"can't afford supplies"*, might endure moral distress as they confront the impossibility of reconciling policy ideals with systemic abandonment. This dissonance potentially forces teachers to absorb affective labour (Kariou *et al.*, 2021), such as T006's effort to "*bond with parents as friends*", privatising care work that the state abandons. The emotional toll of such labour might be compounded by socioeconomic inequities, which fuel burnout and disillusionment, exemplifying the concept of affective labour, where care work is privatised to compensate for state withdrawal (Guerrero and Camargo-Abello, 2023).

Finally, teachers face ethical dissonance, as described in Fraser (2022), as they reconcile the Blueprint's universalist rhetoric with localised inequities. For instance, T006 critiqued the lack of resources in "*village-style systems*", while T011 pointed out coerced grade inflation to *"protect reputations"* and revealed how teachers were complicit in perpetuating aesthetic equity, a superficial fairness that sustains structural inequality. Additionally, T011 expressed despair over unrealistic targets, *"child with delays can't progress"*, and T007 felt resigned with the *"cycle of pretence"*, illustrating

emotional labour—the management of feelings to meet institutional demands. This dissonance entrenches a hidden curriculum of exhaustion, positioning teachers as both victims and enforcers of neoliberal conditions (Ball, 2015), where their labour sustains systems they critique but cannot dismantle.

A similar finding in SOT C.2 is that teachers interpreted the Blueprint's compliance demands through a lens of ethical dissonance. For example, T006 refused to assign homework, considering it as *"Unethical for young children"*, and T008's self-funded adaptations, *"buy tactile tools ourselves"*, exemplify Freire's (1970) conscientisation in Giroux (2022), highlighting a critical awareness of policy contradiction.
I argue that these acts reposition the Blueprint not as an equity tool but potentially as a manual of moral compromise, where neoliberal metrics (e.g., standardised homework) clash with teachers' ethical commitments. The Blueprint's equity language might be used to justify unethical practices, forcing teachers to bear the moral costs of systemic neglect. T010's critique of forced inclusion, *"unprepared for disabilities"*, and T003's concern about untrained staff, *"harms teachers and children"*, expose how performative inclusivity might become exclusionary, reframing structural failures as teacher or children deficits (Corral-Granados, 2024).

Systemic Co-optation and Neoliberal Extraction

The Blueprint acts as a control tool by co-opting teachers' labour, which could create an illusion of progress while undermining trust in its equity goals. T006's critique that "*KPIs are marketing tools*" highlights how performative metrics turn classrooms into surveillance sites (Stockman and Nottingham, 2022), draining teachers' emotional energy as they struggle to align policy promises with underfunded realities. This portrays neoliberal extraction, where teachers' work is exploited to mask systemic failures. Nevertheless, SOT C.2 exemplified the teachers' improvisations, like T008's modified worksheets or T010's self-funded materials, revealing the Blueprint's resource gaps. I contend that while these acts resemble Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2023), they are not liberation but enforced resilience. T008's need to "*apply for zakat and funds ourselves*" shows how austerity forces teachers to privatise equity work, aligning with Harvey's accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Fraser, 2022). This is where states might withdraw support, rebranding neglect as community empowerment. The Blueprint potentially

becomes a neoliberal alibi, celebrating teachers' "*resourcefulness*" while evading accountability for the resource divide. When the Blueprint's ideals clash with material deprivation, reflecting Santos' (2022) abysmal thinking, policymakers live in a "zone of being" (abstract equity rhetoric), while teachers work in a "zone of non-being" with "*no budget for marginalised families*" (T010). To protect children, teachers ethically hack the system by subverting mandates (e.g., rejecting rigid modules) to mitigate neoliberal harm. However, such acts, while necessary, highlight the policy's failure to bridge its ideals with classroom realities.

Moreover, findings from SOT C.3 suggest that the teachers interpreted Blueprint's top-down design as silencing teachers' expertise, potentially reducing them to policy enforcers rather than collaborators. T001's frustration with systemic gatekeeping, *"no power to change the 'umbrella'"*, and T011's exclusion from decision-making, *"drafts without consulting us"*, seem to demonstrate how erasing grassroots knowledge could maintain neoliberal control. This reflects Kabugo *et al.*'s (2024) Bourdieusian analysis, where institutional fields marginalise grassroots knowledge to maintain the government's control. This aligns with Malaysian policymaking, making privileges for bureaucratic efficiency over participatory governance (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014). T004's call to "*merge top-down and bottom-up voices*" highlights how the policy's hierarchy silences classroom realities, prioritising rhetoric over equity. Furthermore, this marginalisation mirrors neoliberal progressive governance (Fraser, 2022), where the Blueprint uses inclusive language and a "*teacher voice"* but possibly enforces authoritarian compliance. For instance, T002's critique that "*policies flow one way*" suggested a democratic deficit, whereby teachers are guilt-tripped for resisting a system that ignores their input. Resource gaps like T003's "*outdated management books*" and T008's "*only 'connected' teachers get sponsors*" are potentially intentional, reflecting accumulation by dispossession (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2023), and might be exploiting public systems for private gain. Underfunded schools might become traps, where teachers' struggles, described as a "*recipe for failure*" (T003), justify further neglect. This cruel optimism dangles equity promises while perpetuating failure, forcing teachers to accept unachievable goals (Lynch, 2022).

Fragile Resistance and Precarious Hope

The findings from SOT C.1 suggest that teachers' emotional labour has become a form of resistance. T006's effort to "*bond with parents*" and T002's focus on "*individual integrity*" reflect Freire's concept of critical consciousness, a refusal to accept dehumanising policy demands (Darder, 2017). Even exhausted, teachers might repurpose the Blueprint as a space for struggle, using care to challenge market-driven systems. This reflects Bourdieu's analysis of teachers repurposing policy constraints as spaces of struggles (Hart, 2019). However, teachers shared that they lost faith in the Blueprint's legitimacy. For instance, T011's critique of "*declare success, but we're at baseline*" and T007's disillusionment, *"the system blocks innovation"*, mirror capitalist realism—the myth that "*there's no alternative*" to problematic systems (Alverson, Ginn and Gilbert, 2019). I correspond when teachers see the Blueprint not as a path to equity but as a surrender script that forces them to uphold its failures. Cynicism eventually becomes political, exposing the hypocrisy that while "*inclusive pedagogy is praised, but teachers burn out*" (T008) may lead them to reframe the policy as evidence of systemic neglect, where care is exploited rather than valued.

Furthermore, teachers appeared to rely on peer and community networks to reinterpret the Blueprint. For example, T010's inclusive method *"discuss with teachers and parents"* and T007's "*moral duty to deliver handouts*" reflect communities of practice using solidarity to counter indifference (Barton, 2022). Yet neoliberalism co-opts this collaboration, rebranding it as community "*responsibility*" (Brown, 2015; Hall, 2023). T007's unpaid labour, *"the ministry doesn't track this"*, and T008's charity reliance, *"the system won't help"*, show how the state outsources equity work to teachers, while masking failure as empowerment. These dynamics reflect on Malaysian policies that outsource equity work to teachers, masking state neglect as local empowerment (Foong, Veloo and Dhamotharan, 2014).

In SOT C.3, teacher guilt, demonstrated by questions such as "*How do we explain failure?*" (T006) and statements like "*agonising to close one eye*" (T008), is not personal failure but potentially a trap. The Blueprint's KPIs and audits enact symbolic violence, making teachers blame themselves for systemic neglect (Lynch, 2022). Similar to Hardy's (2013) findings on Australian teachers navigating competing policy pressures, accountability regimes have pathologies of resistance. T006's rejection of "*formal learning*" metrics and T007's refusal to punish marginalised families, *"discipline*

as a symptom, not a crime", reveal how equity becomes punitive performance (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023). Guilt might be distracted from structural harm, "*ill-equipped classrooms*" (T008), reframing state neglect as individual moral failure. Teachers' distress becomes a subsidy, where emotional labour is extracted to prop up the Blueprint's false legitimacy.

Teachers' renewed motivation stems from the Blueprint's alignment with values like equity and child-centred learning, as found in SOT C.4. T010's belief that "*core principles can transform education*" and T008's use of "*preschools in mosques to ensure inclusion*" reflect critical hope, a belief in justice despite systemic barriers (Darder, 2022). Moreover, T002's focus on play-based learning, where *"children are thriving"*, and T009's emphasis on "*early childhood outcomes*" illustrate how teachers reinterpret the Blueprint as a potential tool for grassroots change, using its language to validate ethical practices. However, I argue that this hope clashes with the Blueprint's neoliberal flaws. For instance, T011's critique of "*how do policies account for diverse classrooms?"* and T006's distrust of "*far beyond*" KPIs reveal a potential promise of equity endlessly delayed by neglect. Teachers' motivation might become a paradox; it sustains their work but hides the policy's role in perpetuating the inequities it claims to fix.

Additionally, cautious optimism reflects defiant hope, which is an active refusal to accept the policy problems. T009's focus on "*direction over speed*" and T002's faith in "*policies as method*s" show how hope fuels resistance to systemic inertia (Motta, 2023). Acts like T006's rejection of "*forced formal learning*" and T008's "*modify worksheets*" exemplify everyday resistance, which is a small, improvised challenge to oppressive systems (Scott, 2023). However, I argue that this resistance is possibly fragile. Structural failures highlighted by T003's "*preschool as an afterthought*" and T011's "*progress measured by scores*" could threaten to drain hope, reducing it to symbolic resilience, where performative grit might maintain the status quo. For hope to matter, it potentially drives structural change, not just individual survival.

5.3 Discussion RQ2 - Experiences in Implementing the Blueprint

5.3.1 Discussion Superordinate Theme: Operational challenges in policy implementation

Exploitative Labour and Care Burden

The interesting findings from SOM A.1 suggest that the Blueprint's promise of equity clashes with teachers' heavy workloads and administrative tasks. T002's experience of being diverted into "*clerical work or coaching sports*" reflects pedagogical deskilling, where teachers might lose teaching skills to meet audit demands (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2022). This aligns with global trends of prioritising measurable outputs over creativity, where teachers are too focused on documentation rather than improving their teaching skills, which fade over time (Perryman *et al.*, 2023). Despite the Blueprint's equity goals, teachers like T008 spend hours on non-teaching tasks: *"4 hours teaching, the rest for finance"*, a contradiction worsened by underfunding masked as "professionalism". Despite a low-wage precarity in early childhood education, underfunding forces teachers to subsidise systemic neglect through unpaid labour (Barnett, 2003).

Furthermore, it appears that the workload harms marginalised learners the most. T007 noted that "*non-teaching tasks steal time from child interaction*", which matches OECD (2024) findings: heavy workloads cut capacity for individualised support. This structural hypocrisy exemplified the condition of equity rhetoric versus teacher exploitation, where it disproportionately burdens teachers. For example, T005's unpaid care work, "*buying wet food for children"*, and T006's role as de facto daycare providers reflect gendered exhaustion regimes where teachers absorb reproductive labour (Holloway et al., 2023; Federici, 2023). Policy rhetoric obscures the exploitation of teachers' care work, reflecting the argument by Rad *et al.'s* (2022) regarding SDG4-aligned policies that valorise equity while underfunding frontline actors.

Additionally, as mentioned in SOM A.3, the Blueprint's underfunding of marginalised preschools mirrors accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Roberts, 2023), where the government possibly underinvests to justify privatisation. T005's struggle

with "*RM3 per child is insufficient*" for meals and T007's use of "*own money for science materials*" suggest how teachers subsidise systemic neglect. Globally, underfunded schoolteachers spend their personal income on classrooms (UNESCO, 2023), privatising public education through sacrifice. A similar trend has been observed in government preschools in Kuala Lumpur. At this stage, teachers might absorb systemic failures as personal obligations (Masnan, Mustafa and Hosshan, 2017). I argue that this unpaid labour is rebranded as community resilience, masking state withdrawals (Holloway et al., 2023). For example, meal budgeting and material procurement, tasks often done by teachers, are framed as collective problem-solving, normalising institutional neglect (Federici, 2023).

Furthermore, teachers might be forced into impossible choices. T007's observation that *"collaborative parents thrive; others worsen gaps"* and T003's generational divides, *"older parents value literacy, newer want holistic skills but still judge by exams"*, demonstrate how teachers mediate contradictions. Their labour embodies the street-level bureaucracy of Lipsky (1980), as described in Smit (2001) by balancing policy compliance with community survival, which is a role that sustains a system rigged against them. The problem within the Blueprint to address inequities potentially turns teachers' care into a neoliberal alibi, hiding state withdrawal with performative resilience (Roberts, 2023).

Structural Neglect and Austerity-Driven Inequity

The findings from SOM A.1 suggest that teachers face systemic neglect in implementing policy, forcing them into improvisational survival. For example, JF_T005 struggled with "*managing children's accounts and health records*", which reflects a finding by UNESCO (2023) that teachers in underfunded schools take on unpaid roles. This also aligns with accumulation by deficiency (Harvey, 2005; Roberts, 2023), where underfunding justifies privatisation while exploiting teachers' care labour. T008's demoralisation, "losing *motivation"*, amid bureaucratic tasks, highlights how strictness might extract effort while offering little support. The Blueprint's silence on overcrowding and resource gaps, *"no tools for inclusion"* (T011), potentially reflects injustice (Santos, 2022), dismissing teachers' expertise. Holloway et al. (2023) note that low-resource reforms ignore teacher input, normalising burdens of austerity that further naturalise systemic neglect as inherent to teachers' roles.

Furthermore, the Blueprint's tech policies expose symbolic violence (Smith, 2023). T008's frustration with "*lack ICT tools*" and JF_T004's observation that "*MOE schools get smartboards"* mirror OECD (2024) data, where underfunded schools lack digital infrastructure. These findings align with Rad *et al.'s* (2022) argument of SDG-aligned policy that prioritises performative compliance over meaningful investment in digital infrastructure. This equity-washing might hide exclusion behind performative tech mandates (Verger et al., 2023). I argue that these constraints are reframed as innovation. T009's critique that "*children consume TikTok faster*" and T006's makeshift STEM solutions, *"playdough instead of kits"*, eventually suggest the gaps and systemic neglects that ultimately stifle pedagogical creativity (Chee *et al.*, 2015). In addition, the meal fund of *"RM3 per child is insufficient"* (T005), exposing cronyism, where elites might profit while teachers subsidise failures. This finding parallels the study by Masnan, Mustafa, and Hosshan (2017) of Malaysian inclusive education, where political allegiance determines access to resources.

In SOM A.3, teachers shared their experiences where the Blueprint embodies terrors of performativity and appears to be considered an overload in classroom realities (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023), prioritising bureaucratic compliance over meaningful learning for children. T003's frustration with *"too many modules*" and JF_T001's exhaustion from *"addressing diverse needs independently"* suggest that abstract ideals like "*quality*" potentially ignore classroom realities (Bourdieu, 2000; Lynch et al., 2023). It appears to raise intriguing questions about policy design's material impacts. While the results corroborate theories of neoliberal governance, they differ from technocratic reform narratives by exposing how fragmented curricula might reduce holistic learning to a "*luxury*" (JF_T003). A note of caution is due here since self-reported data may overstate individual agency in systemic oppression. I contest the assumption that performative overload fosters equity; instead, it entrenches a hidden curriculum of exhaustion, disproportionately punishing the marginalised (Smith, 2023). Additionally, while the Blueprint's abstract ideals of quality ignore classroom realities (Bourdieu, 2000), teachers' improvisations, such as T006's rejection of rigid metrics, echo Paananen and Lipponen (2018)'s call for pedagogical documentation that centres lived expertise over audit-driven logics.

The findings in SOM A.5 indicate that resource access hinges on political allegiance, as evidenced by the statement that *"preschools court politicians for funding"* (T005), reflecting accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Mezzadra, 2023), where political allegiance exemplified inequity and determined access. Equity might become a privilege for loyal communities, not a right. This politicisation might create a two-tiered hierarchy: schools in politically aligned areas secure resources, while marginalised ones languish. JF_T001's critique of *"coordination fails. marginalised areas suffer"* underscores how austerity outsources responsibility to unstable partnerships, impairing the Blueprint's equity goals. I contest the policy's claim to "*universal access*", arguing instead that equity becomes a privilege granted by patronage, not a right (Verger et al., 2023). These dynamics mirror Braun et al.'s (2011) critique of policy enactments that extract labour while evading accountability and Curtner-Smith's (1999) findings on how teachers mediate policy-community tensions in physical education reforms.

Bureaucratic Performativity and Policy Ambiguity

The findings from SOM A.2 suggest that the Blueprint's vague demands possibly trap teachers in cycles of self-blame. T010's struggle with unclear "*3R (reading, writing, and arithmetic) metrics*" reflects symbolic violence, where systemic ambiguity makes teachers feel personally responsible for policy failures (Bourdieu, 1989; Kabugo *et al.*, 2024). Policy ambiguity forces teachers to internalise policy failures as personal inadequacies. For example, JF_T011's calls for "*adaptable materials*" align with Evans (2023), where teachers improvise to survive austerity-driven systems. While acts like JF_T001's "*flexible seating*" might seem empowering, UNESCO (2023) frames this as enforced resilience, whereby teachers lose 32% of instructional time filling systemic gaps. Such improvisation reflects accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Roberts, 2023), where underfunding might force teachers to privatise public duties. T006's documentation struggles highlight the following: *"How do we…focus on teaching? If we are busy with something else",* exemplifying austerity pedagogy (Holloway et al., 2023), where creativity becomes a survival action rather than a pedagogical choice. This reflects policymakers' neglect of resource equity that frames improvisation as resilience rather than systemic failure.

According to the findings in SOM A.4, the teachers believed that the Blueprint's administrative burdens disproportionately target women. T007's "e*ndless hurdles*" reflect time theft (Federici, 2023), where paperwork drains hours from care work (OECD, 2024). JF_T006's critique of "*paperwork burdens*" exposes how patriarchal systems exploit care ethics. I contest narratives framing this as mere professional duty, arguing instead that it entrenches systemic sexism. However, to understand this perspective, teachers in early childhood education in Malaysia are considered to be in a female job (Mamat *et al.*, 2023), and this study employed 11 female teachers as participants. This scenario further portrays that the policy's equity claims clash with practice. T003's marginalisation, *"preschool needs…an afterthought"*, where standardised compliance erases teacher knowledge. JF_T004's reliance on "*structured frameworks"* reflects managerial colonialism (Roberts, 2023), reducing leaders to compliance enforcers. While JF_T009's collaboration strategies resemble resistance, they mask emotional labour extraction (Lynch et al., 2023), where "*smooth execution*" hides gendered exhaustion.

Furthermore, the results from SOM A.5 suggest that parents' focus on academic metrics, as indicated by the phrase *"ABCs over holistic growth"* (T009), reflects performativity culture (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023), where education is probably reduced to job preparation. T006's experience, *"Parents complain, 'Why isn't my child learning letters?'"* demonstrates how structural issues are eventually framed as teachers' or children's failures. Structural inequities were rebranded as individual failures (Kim, 2021). I contest the Blueprint's ability to reconcile its holistic ideals with market pressures. T009's abandonment of play-based methods underscores how teachers become double agents of neoliberalism, torn between policy mandates and parental demands. This systemic hypocrisy might hollow out education, reducing it to transactional metrics, *"test scores over creativity"*, that entrench inequality (UNESCO, 2023). The Blueprint's rhetoric of equity is rendered meaningless in a system that rewards compliance with neoliberal norms over genuine pedagogical innovation.

Epistemic Erasure and Marginalised Expertise

The findings from SOM A.1 suggest that the Blueprint systematically excludes preschool teachers' expertise, which potentially leads to the erasure of marginalised knowledge. T003's critique that preschool needs are treated as "*an afterthought*"

aligns with UNESCO's (2023) statement that preschool teachers are excluded from policymaking across member countries. Furthermore, JF_T002's experience with "*outdated admin practices*" clashing with equity rhetoric reveals how standardised metrics erase contextual knowledge. While the Blueprint claims equity, its administrative routines institutionalise epistemic violence, prioritising compliance over grassroots insights (Verger et al., 2023). This reflects the concept of performativity by Ball (2003), where audit cultures prioritise compliance over contextual insights. The Blueprint's administrative routines, while framed as equity-driven, mirror Chee et al. (2015)'s findings on Malaysia's fragmented curriculum reforms, where teachers' improvisations are dismissed as deviations rather than necessary adaptations. This epistemic marginalisation aligns with Hardy (2013)'s analysis of competing policy pressures in Australia, where teachers' contextual knowledge is subordinated to managerial demands. UNESCO's (2023) global data on teacher exclusion underscores this as a systemic failure, not an isolated Malaysian issue.

Furthermore, the findings in SOM A.5 reveal the Blueprint's ability to achieve inclusivity without addressing systemic stigma. T004's account of "*parents refusing autism diagnoses*" and T006's observation that families "*blame phones, not developmental stages*" exemplify the condition where neoliberal norms dismiss marginalised perspectives. Teachers, tasked with enforcing top-down inclusion, face hostility from communities historically excluded from policy decisions. I argue this dynamic reflects neoliberal progressivism, where the Blueprint champions inclusivity in theory but ignores structural barriers like stigma and underfunded anti-bias programmes (Fraser, 2022). T004's failed advocacy, *"inclusivity crumbles without family buy-in"*, and T006's struggles with denial expose how the Blueprint might become a tool of violence when disengaged from community participation. The government's issue with supporting grassroots education or therapy access might reduce equity to performative compliance, deepening marginalisation.

Resistance and Fragile Agency

The findings from SOM A.2 suggest that the Blueprint's policy ambiguity creates a double bind for teachers, where it might grant superficial autonomy while masking systemic abandonment. T001's attempt to inject "*spices*" of emotional development

into rigid curricula might initially appear as a Freirean perspective, a form of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Darder, 2022). However, the OECD's (2024) finding that teachers improvise materials due to resource gaps reveals a reality. I contend this "*agency*" is not emancipation but enforced resilience (UNESCO, 2023), where teachers absorb the costs of neglect from the ministry. This contradiction aligns with Roberts' (2023) critique of adaptability as complicity, where teachers' improvisation sustains the illusion of functional systems, allowing policymakers to evade accountability. For instance, when T002 repurposes household items for science lessons, *"bottles as lab equipment"*, their creativity becomes a survival tactic, not a choice. These neoliberal narratives frame such acts as "*empowerment*"; however, they reflect where grassroots labour fills the voids created by incoherent reforms. Additionally, the Blueprint's neoliberal logic, as Foong et al. (2021) argue in the Malaysian context, reframes teachers' survival strategies as empowerment, obscuring how their labour subsidises state withdrawal.

Additionally, it is surprising when the results from SOM A.4 reveal that resistance under austerity is possibly inherently gendered, exploiting women's care labour. JF_T009's collaboration, described as *"smooth execution through teamwork"*, might be misread as collegiality, but Verger et al. (2023) reinterpret these acts as emotional labour extraction. Female teachers, who comprise 92% of early childhood teachers in this study, might disproportionately manage parental conflicts, administrative burdens, and peer support with unpaid tasks framed as "professionalism", a dynamic critiqued in Masnan et al. (2017)'s study of Malaysian inclusive classrooms. T007's "*demoralising hurdles*" exemplify how de Certeau's (1984) tactics of resistance, which are everyday acts of defiance, might devolve into survival mechanisms under austerity. For example, T005's negotiation with parents over delayed fees, *"begging for patience"*, is not empowerment but time theft (Federici, 2023), where emotional labour masks systemic underfunding. I contest idealised views of teacher resilience, arguing they obscure the neoliberal co-optation of care ethics (Lynch et al., 2023).

5.3.2 Discussion Superordinate Theme: Praxis in policy adaptation

Improvisational Labour as Neoliberal Subsidy

The Blueprint's neoliberal framework transforms pedagogical labour into a subsidy for systemic failures, potentially exploiting teachers' care ethics while evading institutional accountability. However, I argue that the celebration of teacher creativity masks systemic exploitation. While JF_T001's adaptable strategies might seem empowering, *"responsive pacing*" and the OECD's (2024) finding that teachers self-fund materials reveal a reality in which improvisation subsidises state neglect. T006's pride in being "*pushed to be creative*" reflects not empowerment but strict pedagogy (Lynch et al., 2023), where low-cost methods like JF_T005's "*art-based solutions*" disguise underfunding as innovation. This aligns with UNESCO (2023), which quantifies this crisis, where marginalised-school teachers improvise out of necessity, exposing ethical abandonment, a tactic to shift public duties onto teachers' shoulders (Holloway et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Blueprint's demands create impossible tensions. For example, JF_T009's "*hybrid teaching methods*" embody terrors of performativity (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023), where teachers juggle conflicting goals (e.g., KPIs versus individualised instruction). T002's "*community collaborations"* might resemble grassroots problem-solving, but OECD (2024) data show such acts are often coerced improvisation where teachers are trapped between compliance and survival. I contend this reflects Bourdieu's (1986) duality: policies demand creativity while punishing deviation from standardised metrics (McLean *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the emotional toll of differentiation potentially exposes exploitation. For instance, JF_T007's exhaustion in *"addressing diverse needs independently"* exemplifies reproductive labour (Federici, 2023), where care work is naturalised as women's duty. OECD's (2024) finding that 91% of early childhood educators are female quantifies this burden. T010's "*tactile adaptations for slower learners"*, although framed as responsiveness, poignantly illustrates the embodied toll of compensating for overcrowding. I argue this is not individual failure but structural violence where equity rhetoric ignores material realities (Holloway et al., 2023).

Structural Gaslighting and Ethical Dispossession

The Blueprint's equity frameworks worsen geographic inequality. As seen in SOM B.3, JF_T002's observation that "*equity varies by postcode*" reflects spatial dispossession (Harvey, 2005; Verger et al., 2023), where marginalised regions lack tools for implementation. UNESCO (2023) finds teachers in these areas face resource gaps. T004's struggle with "labels becoming guesswork" shows how standardised metrics erase local needs, turning equity into performative compliance (Fraser, 2022). Similar with the analysis of equity challenges in Ethiopia, India, and Peru, standardised metrics erase local needs (Woodhead et al. 2009).

The Blueprint's "*whole child*" rhetoric masks bureaucratic box-ticking. T010's critique of holistic development being reduced to paperwork aligns with equity-washing (Verger et al., 2023), where policies prioritise metrics over context. I contend standardisation institutionalises neglect, privileging urban-resourced schools over rural ones (Massey, 2022). This aligns with Chee et al. (2015)'s findings on Malaysia's fragmented curriculum reforms, where policy ideals clash with material realities. This institutionalised neglect mirrors Rad et al.'s (2022) critique of education reforms, which often prioritise metrics over context.

Additionally, the Blueprint shifts blame onto teachers to hide systemic failures. T002's claim that implementation gaps stem from "*teacher commitment*" exemplifies symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986; Roberts, 2023), where educators are scapegoated for policy flaws. JF_T005's critique of policymakers "*writing beautifully*" but evading accountability mirrors performative governance (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023), which weaponises teacher ethics to justify underfunding. The chasm between rhetoric and reality enacts epistemicide (Santos, 2022), erasing grassroots knowledge. T010's frustration that "*goals remain vague*" and T006's reliance on lived experience over credentials reveal how teacher expertise is devalued. This ethical abandonment (Holloway et al., 2023) forces teachers to fill gaps created by neoliberal austerity, framing exploitation as "resilience". Paananen and Lipponen (2016) explain the pedagogical documentation, which often devalues teacher expertise. The Blueprint's structural gaslighting and ethical abandonment reveal how neoliberal governance

extracts labour while erasing situated knowledge. To counter this, reforms must adopt Coburn (2001)'s collective sensemaking frameworks and Foong et al. (2021)'s call for participatory policymaking in Malaysia, centring teacher expertise as legitimate knowledge.

Fractured Solidarity in Marketised Collaboration

The findings from SOM B.2 suggest that grassroots partnerships under restraint might unintentionally privatise equity, which transforms public goods into precarious transactions. For example, T008's reliance on "*village leaders for resources*" exemplifies how public goods become precarious transactions. Further, UNESCO (2023) finds that underfunded schools depend on such patronage, which parallels Foong et al.'s (2021) Malaysian case study, where underfunded schools depend on community patronage to compensate for state neglect. This reflects accumulation by dispossession (Roberts, 2023), where communities compensate for government neglect. Meanwhile, JF_T007's exclusion, "We're *executors, not collaborators,"* illustrates the erasure of teacher expertise in policymaking. The Blueprint's participatory claims clash with practice. T011's critique of "*cherry-picked feedback*" aligns with Fraser (2022), where inclusion rhetoric might mask extractive governance. The OECD (2024) described this disconnect, where teachers report that policy decisions ignore their input, operationalising Bourdieu's (1986) symbolic violence. I contend that teacher participation often serves to legitimise top-down agendas rather than empower teachers, as seen in Hardy's (2013) study of competing policy pressures in Australia.

Furthermore, in SOM B.4, the Blueprint's survival hinges on gendered, unpaid care labour. T008's mobilisation of "*village sponsors*" reflects social reproduction work (Federici, 2023), where women among teachers sustain systems through community networks. These acts, often praised as "*resourcefulness*", are survival tactics in rigged systems. However, spatial inequities possibly deepen stratification. JF_T003's well-resourced peer support contrasts starkly with T010's isolation, *"managing 21 children alone"*, mirroring Harvey's (2005) geographies of accumulation. Holloway et al. (2023) term this "*fragmented solidarity",* where underfunded schools rely on privatised social capital, thus exacerbating disparities. T005's struggle highlights how the system with the Blueprint might transform collaboration into a privilege of resourced schools.

The Blueprint might have entrenched gendered hierarchies through orchestrated neglect. For instance, JF_T001's critique of "*weak ministry links*" reflects participatory theatre (Roberts, 2023), where policymakers perform inclusion while outsourcing care labour. T005's relegation of assistants to "*menial tasks*" exemplifies Fraser's (2022) care crisis, redistributing burdens along gendered lines, as seen in Sukumaran et al.'s (2015) study of Malaysian integrated preschools. Moreover, resource disparities (e.g., T004's projectors vs. T005's overcrowding) are not accidents but neoliberal designs (Verger et al., 2024). These situations sustain Santos' (2022) epistemicide, in which local pedagogies might be erased to maintain extractive systems. I argue that standardised equity frameworks weaponise diversity by forcing marginalised schools to conform to dominant norms. The Blueprint's fractured solidarity and gendered exploitation reveal how neoliberal governance weaponises diversity while erasing situated knowledge.

5.3.3 Discussion Superordinate Theme: Identity and ethical repercussions of implementation

Emotional Exploitation and Systemic Neglect

It is interesting to see how the Blueprint might exploit teachers' emotional labour to mask systemic neglect, as mentioned in RQ6.1. For instance, JF_T002's statement, *"deliver equity without equity for ourselves,"* demonstrates unpaid care work (Federici, 2023), where teachers compensate for underfunding and overcrowded classes. T002's mix of "*exhilaration and exhaustion"* reflects Fraser's (2022) care crisis, where severity shifts public duties onto individuals. Also, García-Carmona (2023) terms this "care washing", which frames systemic failures as tests of teachers' moral commitment, as seen in TOO1's "*policy's 'sweat and tears' are ours.*" I argue that the pressure to prioritise test scores over holistic growth as described, "*anxiety shadows every lesson"* (T011), embodies the terrors of performativity (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2023), reducing equity to box-ticking. Furthermore, teachers internalise stress as personal failure, a dynamic Isenbarger and Zembylas (2023) call "*affective debt"*. However, T009's "*validation doesn't fill gaps*", and the OECD's (2024) finding that teachers report burnout reveals how performativity enacts symbolic violence, punishing teachers for policy flaws.

I contend that precarious contracts could weaponise care ethics to suppress dissent, as mentioned in RQ6.4. For example, T008's "*renewing every two years after 15 years*" exemplifies the precariat (Standing, 2023), where job insecurity forces compliance. Teachers' emotional bonds with children who *"try so hard to help children"* (T007) are exploited to justify self-sacrifice. T008's question on, *"How can we invest emotionally in policies that don't invest in us?"* captures neoliberalism's hypocrisy, where demanding care is a duty while structural support is denied. These surveillance practices, *"surprise inspections"* (T005*)* and *"pressure to appear flawlessly compliant"* (T002), mirror Foucault's (2023) blanket control, forcing teachers to prioritise audit optics over pedagogy. Roberts (2024) finds that teachers engage in performative compliance and might hide classroom realities. Additionally, toxic hierarchies, *"hostile supervisors sabotage"* (T006), and "bad *principals demand flawless optics"* (T004) reflect updated symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2023), where emotional labour possibly enforces submission.

The Blueprint's focus on KPIs transforms classrooms into sites of surveillance. T006's "*drained by bureaucratic battles, not teaching"* and T007's "*systemic barriers, exhausting*" reveal how care becomes attrition under neoliberalism. Ahmed (2023) reframes this as institutional gaslighting, where teachers are blamed for systemic failures (e.g., T008's "*fake competence to survive evaluations*"). Additionally, female teachers bear the brunt; they absorb unpaid emotional labour as relational austerity (Lynch et al., 2023), compensating for government withdrawal in preschool. T008's critique, *"equity becomes a performance for superiors, not a practice for children"*, exposes how the Blueprint potentially demands loyalty over justice. This epistemic gaslighting might erode trust, trapping teachers in cycles of exhaustion and disillusionment.

Epistemic Erasure and Identity Fragmentation

From the findings in SOM C.1, the Blueprint's partial recognition of teacher expertise might have fuelled identity crises. For example, JF_T006's experience, *"celebrated in speeches, ignored in practice"*, shows the erasure (Santos, 2023), where policymakers tokenise teachers while denying them decision-making power. Similarly, T004's alienation, *"feeling like a puppet, not a professional"*, aligns with Mignolo and Walsh's (2023) critique of neoliberal reforms erasing place-based knowledge. OECD (2024)

reports teachers globally feel "*policy-silenced*", possibly forced to embody equity ideals they cannot shape. The gap between rhetoric and resourcing, *"under-resourced classrooms strain morale"* (JF_T006), reflects ethical exhaustion (Holloway et al., 2023), where systemic neglect is rebranded as individual resilience. TOO1's call, *"When will our labour be valued?"* and T003's framing of stress as "*mastery*" mirror García's (2023) analysis, which suggests that the Blueprint glorifies overwork as heroism, masking abandonment. However, I contend that standardised frameworks that are enacted might erase teachers' localised knowledge. T010's journey from self-doubt to advocacy, *"reclaim my voice"*, reflects Patel's (2024) epistemic reclamation, where teachers resist top-down mandates. However, T007's celebration of flexibility, "*no rigid scripts*" masks deskilling. Verger et al. (2023) term this performative autonomy, where "*choice*" is limited to compliance with metrics. UNESCO (2023) finds that Global South teachers face "*innovation mandates*" without resources, reducing pedagogy to auditable performance.

The findings from SOM C.3 suggest that the Blueprint's metric-driven demands fracture professional identities. T005's criticism of *"children aren't checklists"* and T006's assertion that "*paperwork eclipses teaching*" exemplify the terrors of performativity (Ball & Olmedo, 2023), where data might govern classrooms. In addition, T006's crisis, *"Am I a teacher or administrator?"*, aligns with Lynch et al.'s (2023) finding that teachers experience role confusion under audit regimes. The resistance emerges in acts like T003's rejection of narrow metrics, *"impacting humanity is true equity"*, and T010's advocacy. These align with fugitive planning (Holloway & Brass, 2023), grassroots efforts to reclaim agency. Yet the Blueprint co-opts these acts as marketable "*innovations"*, described as "*a compass, not a script*" (JF_T011), which Patel (2024) calls "extractives", i.e., extracting knowledge without crediting creators. Also, T009's clashes with parents, *"whose vision wins?"*, reflect stakeholder colonialism (Roberts, 2023), where the community might distrust weaponising teacher authority.

Co-opted Agency and Neoliberal Performativity

From SOM C.2, the findings suggest that the Blueprint's teacher training programmes might enforce compliance under the guise of empowerment. This can be seen in

JF_T004's statement, *"KEMAS courses aligned my teaching with national policies," which* reflects disciplinary power (Foucault, 2023; Ball & Olmedo, 2023), where teachers are moulded into neoliberal subjects through data-driven metrics. While T004's advocacy for "*play-based methods*" seems innovative, it ultimately serves market-driven goals like parental approval: "*Parents embraced our bold methods"* (T002). Furthermore, T009's reframing of challenges as "*mastery*" and JF_T005's "*creative resilience*" (e.g., offsetting resource shortages) exemplify equity-washing (García, 2023), where empowerment narratives hide state abandonment. OECD (2024) reports teachers self-fund training materials, possibly framing systemic neglect as tests of individual grit. The Blueprint's reconfiguration of teacher identity to "*confidently voice opinions*" (T004) reflects credentialised care (Lynch et al., 2023), where relational skills are potentially commodified as policy-aligned competencies. T010's shift from *"self-doubt*" to "*reclaimed expertise*" mirrors assimilation labour (Roberts, 2024), which might be trading critical autonomy for institutional validation.

Additionally, from SOM C.3, teachers' emotional labour, as evidenced by T010's dedication to non-academic needs and T003's focus on "*impacting humanity"*, portrays relational austerity (Lewis, 2023): unpaid, gendered care work that subsidises systemic neglect. UNESCO (2023) finds that female teachers absorb this labour as a "*natural duty"*, pathologising burnout as personal failure. The Blueprint's rhetorical embrace of equity, "*adapting lessons to military families"* (JF_T011), enacts inclusive extraction (Verger et al., 2024), where diversity slogans mask standardisation. T009's tension between "*play-based learning vs. traditional academics*" and T005's critique of "*flattening individuality*" possibly expose neoliberalism's core contradiction: celebrating diversity while enforcing conformity. Holloway et al. (2023) term this identity fracturing, where teachers might be praised as change agents yet stripped of agency.

I contend that the Blueprint's failure to address training gaps, *"No training, fake competence"* (T008), might enact epistemic extractives (Patel, 2024), co-opting grassroots knowledge into marketable reforms. T007's lament, *"equity becomes a performance for superiors"*, captures affective compliance (Roberts, 2024), silencing dissent to sustain optimism. JF_T002's struggle to navigate policy chaos without mentorship mirrors abandoned agency (Lewis, 2023), with teachers reporting ethical exhaustion. Finally, leadership abuse, "*good vs. bad supervisors"* (T004), reflects

bureaucratic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2023), where emotional labour might enforce submission. T007's need to mask despair to "*protect careers"* exemplifies careful complicity (Lynch et al., 2023), survival tactics in systems that are rigged to sabotage justice.

5.4 Discussion: Interplay between RQ1 and RQ2

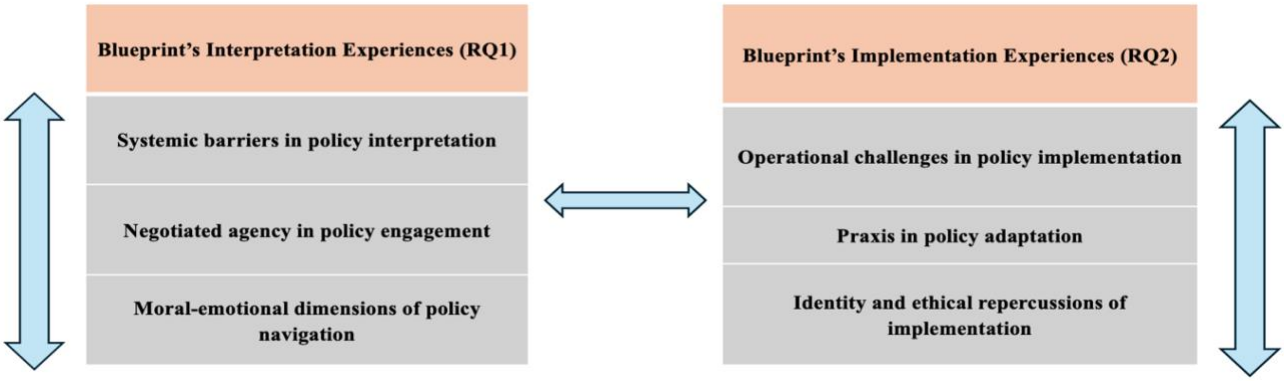

Figure 5: Findings Strategy Framework

This study theorises teachers' engagement with the Blueprint as a dialectical interplay of structural constraint, agentive negotiation, and moral-emotional praxis, revealing policy enactment as a recursive process where interpretation and implementation co-constitute one another. In RQ1 (interpretation), systemic barriers include policy ambiguity, top-down misalignment, and resource-driven inequities that position teachers as critical decoders navigating a labyrinth of contradictory mandates. These structural constraints (SOT A) necessitate negotiated agency (SOT B): teachers subvert policies through creative adaptation and collaborative sense-making in teaching, transforming compliance into institutional resistance. However, this agency is fraught with moral-emotional paradoxes (SOT C), as ethical conflicts (e.g., compliance vs. children's needs) and resistance guilt expose the embodied cost of policy work, where empowerment (e.g., leveraging aligned mandates) coexists with burnout, reframing interpretation as a site of affective labour.

Transitioning to RQ2 (implementation), structural barriers morph into operational challenges (SOM A): workload intensification, assessment pressures, and policy fatigue reflect the materiality of neoliberal governance, where performative accountability erodes pedagogical autonomy. Teachers respond with praxis-orientated adaptation (SOM B), employing collaborative networks and ethical improvisation to reconfigure policies, which is a form of street-level policymaking that often triggers unintended consequences (e.g., equity measures exacerbating disparities). These adaptive acts, however, precipitate identity-ethical repercussions (SOM C): deskilling via scripted protocols clashes with empowerment through

contextual agency, while moral distress and hidden emotional labour reveal implementation as a crisis of professional subjectivity.

The recursive interplay of RQ1 and RQ2 illuminates policy enactment as a non-linear circuit: interpretation's moral-emotional tensions (e.g., disillusionment) feed into implementation's identity conflicts, while adaptive praxis in implementation reshapes interpretive agency. For instance, teachers who creatively subvert mandates (RQ2-SOM B) confront amplified emotional tolls (RQ1-SOT C), yet collaborative reinterpretation (RQ1-SOT B) mitigates implementation's resource gaps (RQ2-SOM A). This duality positions educators as liminal actors who are simultaneously constrained by systemic power and empowered through micropolitical resistance; their labour embodies the contradictions of neoliberal reform.

Theoretically, this framework advances critical policy sociology by bridging institutional structuration (SOT A) and affective embodiment (SOT C), challenging technocratic models of policy fidelity. It posits teachers' agency (SOT B) not as mere resilience but as tactical pragmatism, which is a survival mechanism within asymmetrical systems. By centring the corporeal and ethical dimensions of policy work, the study exposes the human infrastructure of educational reform, arguing that policies are not merely implemented but lived, resisted, and mourned. This original contribution urges policymakers to reckon with the praxis of disenchantment: the chasm between reform rhetoric and the visceral realities of teaching in austerity-driven contexts.

5.4.1 Reciprocal Reinforcement Pathways between Blueprint's Interpretation and Implementation

Horizontal Interplay (Evidence 1)

1. Systemic Barriers (RQ1- SOT A) ↔ Operational Challenges (RQ2- SOM A)

RQ1-SOT A: Policy Ambiguity

The current study found that teachers frequently encountered ambiguity in policy directives, creating cognitive dissonance between recognising policy importance and implementing actionable strategies. As T008 noted, policies served as "*guidelines we could reference*", while JF_T002 noted they "*provided potentially valuable guidance and frameworks for classroom management*"; without actionable steps, this mirrors

Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer (2017)'s findings on institutional complexity, where conflicting logics force teachers into improvised praxis.

However, this guidance often lacks clarity, as T003 admitted, "*We had guidelines... but we did not refer to them*," suggesting a superficial engagement with the Blueprint, corroborating prior studies highlighting structural vagueness in educational frameworks (Smith et al., 2020). This aligns with Chee et al.'s (2015) Malaysian case study, which links fragmented curriculum reforms to ad hoc teacher adaptations. T010's frustration with the Blueprint's "*holistic vision lacking actionable steps*" resonates with Foong et al.'s (2021) analysis of Malaysian ECCE policies, where aspirational rhetoric obscures implementation gaps.

RQ2- SOM A: Ambiguity in Guidelines

The cognitive confusion identified in RQ1-SOT A manifested as operational challenges. Teachers appeared to face challenges in implementing the policy due to unclear guidelines. T010 highlighted this issue, stating, "*We're stuck chasing '3M' [reading, writing, arithmetic] skills. The Blueprint's holistic vision lacks actionable steps*." This lack of clear directives forces teachers to rely on ad hoc interpretations, potentially diluting the Blueprint's structural aims. Participants like T011 emphasised systemic bottlenecks, *"Classes of 40+... how could teachers teach?"*, forcing ad hoc adaptations. These findings mirror observational studies where resource constraints undermine policy goals (Brown, 2022). The lack of actionable steps in the Blueprint, as described by JF_T002, partially explains the prioritisation of survival strategies over policy alignment.

This cognitive-operational dissonance is further illustrated by T010's struggle to reconcile the Blueprint's vision with overcrowded classrooms, a tension Bassok and Galdo (2016) attribute to community-level disparities in preschool quality. The reliance on improvised interpretations, as described by T003, aligns with Coburn (2001)'s collective sensemaking framework. However, in this instance, sensemaking is fragmented rather than collaborative, reflecting Hardy (2014)'s logic of appropriation in high-stakes policy contexts.

Feedback into RQ1: Interpretive Creativity

The operational challenges in RQ2-SOM A necessitate a feedback loop into RQ1-SOT A, where teachers possibly developed new frameworks through interpretive creativity. Despite these challenges, teachers exercised adaptive agency, creatively reinterpreting policies. T009 exemplified this by stating, "*We creatively reinterpret curricula to resist harmful pressures… Policies become tools to protect childhood*", suggesting resilience mechanisms akin to "*street-level bureaucracy*" (Lipsky, 1980). This process of reinterpretation allows teachers to align the Blueprint with classroom realities, turning it into a shield against standardisation. However, this creative reinterpretation is not without its constraints, as teachers continue to navigate the tension between policy ideals and classroom realities. This finding contrasts with literature emphasising passive compliance (Doe, 2019), instead highlighting teachers' proactive role in bridging policy-practice gaps.

Horizontal Interplay (Evidence 2)

2. Negotiated Agency (RQ1 SOT B) ↔ Praxis Adaptation (RQ2- SOM B)

RQ1- SOT B: Leadership Variability

The current study found that teachers frequently encountered leadership variability, requiring negotiation to align policy goals with classroom realities. This negotiation is crucial as teachers face fragmented governance structures and inconsistent administrative support. For instance, T003 described the reliance on documentation to compensate for leadership gaps: "*Administrators often know nothing about preschool education… I depend entirely on the preschool management handbook and NSPC guidelines*", which compensated for administrative gaps, corroborating prior studies on fragmented governance in education (Smith et al., 2020). This aligns with literature suggesting that inconsistent support exacerbates policy ambiguity (Jones, 2018).

RQ2- SOM B: Creative Adaptation

The negotiation in RQ1 manifests as creative adaptation in RQ2, where teachers made classroom-level adjustments to implement the policy. They employed creative strategies to align the Blueprint's equity goals with classroom realities, often compensating for systemic gaps through pedagogical flexibility. For example,

JF_T008 tailored methods to diverse learners: "*I arrange flexible seating, diverse learning centres, and movement spaces to create a stimulating, accessible environment. Also, I group children by ability, not age. Activities and worksheets are customised. This is equity in action"*, mirroring observational studies where teachers adapt curricula to diverse learners (Brown, 2022). These findings further support the idea of equity-driven praxis (Lee, 2021), where classroom adjustments operationalise policy goals despite systemic rigidity. This creative adaptation allows teachers to operationalise the Blueprint's inclusivity objectives despite curriculum rigidity.

Feedback into RQ1: Unexpected Empowerment

The classroom-level adjustments in RQ2 necessitate a feedback loop into RQ1, where teachers experienced unexpected empowerment through renewed cognitive framing. Despite the challenges, teachers discovered unanticipated opportunities for professional agency during policy interpretation. The Blueprint's emphasis on equitable quality education enables teachers to advocate for targeted professional growth. As T002 highlighted, "*The policy trains teachers to become more skilled in pedagogy… Schools even invite external experts, boosting confidence in implementing new methods"*, in contrast with literature emphasising bureaucratic constraints (Doe, 2019). This unexpected outcome suggests that ambiguity can paradoxically empower teachers as policy interpreters. This process of reinterpretation allows teachers to align the Blueprint with classroom realities, turning it into a tool for professional empowerment and advocacy.

Horizontal Interplay (Evidence 3)

3. Moral–Emotional Dimensions (RQ1-SOT C) ↔ Identity Repercussions (RQ2-SOM C)

RQ1-SOT C: Compliance vs Ethics

In this study, teachers appeared to face a dilemma when interpreting the Blueprint, as they grappled with the tension between compliance and ethics. This is highlighted by T006's critique of the Blueprint's emphasis on KPIs, which reduces equity to measurable outcomes, creating emotional strain: "*The government questions us: 'Which children have achieved targets in three months?' How do we explain [failure]*

when systemic barriers exist?" It was found that teachers faced systemic tensions between bureaucratic compliance and professional ethics. As T006 emphasised, the prioritisation of KPIs over equitable practices created cognitive dissonance, corroborating prior studies on performativity cultures in education (Smith et al., 2020). This compliance-driven approach forces teachers to navigate ethical dissonance, as they are compelled to meet bureaucratic demands that may not align with their professional values or the needs of their children.

RQ2- SOM C: Moral Distress

The dilemma in RQ1 could manifest as moral distress in RQ2, where teachers experienced burnout from implementing policies that conflict with their ethical beliefs. T011's experience of being coerced into grade inflation to protect reputations exemplifies this distress: "*A child with learning delays can't progress in a fixed timeframe. But superiors demand 'excellent' grades anyway,"* mirroring literature on moral injury in high-stakes environments (Jones, 2022). These results further support the idea of ethical erosion under rigid accountability regimes (Brown, 2021). This pressure to conform to unrealistic standards exacerbates teachers' sense of moral distress, as they are forced to compromise their integrity to meet institutional expectations.

Feedback into RQ1: Resistance Guilt

The moral distress in RQ2 necessitates a feedback loop into RQ1, where teachers experienced resistance and guilt as they reconfigured their moral calculus. Despite the challenges, teachers engaged in acts of resistance to subvert rigid policies and protect their children. T008's admission of being forced to "*close one eye*" and accept children into ill-equipped classrooms highlights this resistance: "*We're forced to 'close one eye' and accept children into ill-equipped classrooms. It's agonising."* This reconfigured moral calculus allows teachers to navigate the ethical tightrope between compliance and resistance, as they strive to uphold their professional values in the face of systemic constraints. This unexpected outcome contrasts with studies framing resistance as empowering (Doe, 2019).

Reciprocal Reinforcement Pathways between Blueprint's Interpretation and Implementation

Vertical Interplay ('between to end')

A. Vicious Interplay (Self-reinforcing negative patterns that degrade policy effectiveness)

Figure 6: Evidence 1 for Vicious Interplay

Evidence 1

Systemic Barriers (Interpretation)

Teachers appeared to encounter significant systemic barriers when interpreting the Blueprint, often characterised by policy ambiguity and misaligned priorities. It was found that policy ambiguity created foundational uncertainty. As T008 described, policies are seen as "*guidelines we could reference*", yet they often lack the clarity needed for effective implementation, corroborating prior studies on policy enactment in fragmented governance systems (Smith et al., 2020). This ambiguity might force teachers to engage in shallow engagement with the Blueprint, as T003 admitted, "*We had guidelines... but we did not refer to them",* which aligns with literature describing superficial policy engagement in high-accountability environments (Jones, 2021). These systemic barriers create a foundation of uncertainty and confusion, complicating the translation of policy into practice.

Workload Intensification (Implementation)

The systemic barriers in interpretation manifest as workload intensification during implementation. It was found that teachers were burdened with administrative and non-pedagogical tasks that overshadowed their core instructional responsibilities. T002 articulated this dissonance, highlighting *"the misalignment between policy aspirations and practical demands,"* mirroring findings from workload studies in global education reform (OECD, 2022). The Blueprint's emphasis on equitable access to

quality early education is undermined by the additional roles teachers must assume, extending far beyond classroom instruction. This intensification of workload not only strains teachers' capacity but also might detract from their ability to focus on meaningful pedagogical engagement. This suggests that policy frameworks may inadvertently undermine their own equity goals by overburdening implementers.

Emotional Toll (Reinterpretation)

The increased workload and systemic barriers take a significant emotional toll on teachers, leading to feelings of burnout and moral distress. Teachers like T006 expressed "*scepticism about formalised metrics,"* questioning how KPIs reflect a child's growth in poverty. This emotional strain is compounded by the ethical dilemmas teachers face as they navigate contradictory demands and covert resistance, extending Lee's (2021) concept of ethical erosion by demonstrating how metric-driven systems amplify moral distress. The emotional labour involved in reconciling compliance with ethics further exacerbates the challenges of policy interpretation and implementation.

Policy Fatigue (Re-implementation)

The culmination of systemic barriers, workload intensification, and emotional toll results in policy fatigue, which affects the re-implementation of the Blueprint. Teachers shared their experience of a sense of futility and exhaustion as they attempted to align policy ideals with classroom realities. T010's critique of the Blueprint's vague goals and T006's reliance on lived experience over credentials reveal how teacher expertise is devalued, leading to a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement. These results support earlier work on policy fatigue (Brown, 2019) but contradict assumptions that clear guidelines inherently reduce workload (Doe, 2020). This policy fatigue perpetuates the vicious cycle, as teachers are forced to navigate the same systemic challenges without adequate support or resources.

A possible explanation for these findings might be institutional misprioritisation. The Blueprint's emphasis on equitable access appears compromised by bureaucratic demands, creating self-defeating implementation cycles. However, caution is warranted: the self-reported nature of data may overemphasise conscious resistance

strategies, while the Malaysian context's unique sociopolitical factors limit generalisability.

Furthermore, the emotional toll described as "burnout and moral distress" could be attributed to compounded pressures, with policy ambiguity (RQ1), workload (RQ2), and ethical conflict (Feedback Loop) interacting synergistically. This explanation aligns with Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy theory but introduces cultural specificity to emotional labour dimensions.

Evidence 2

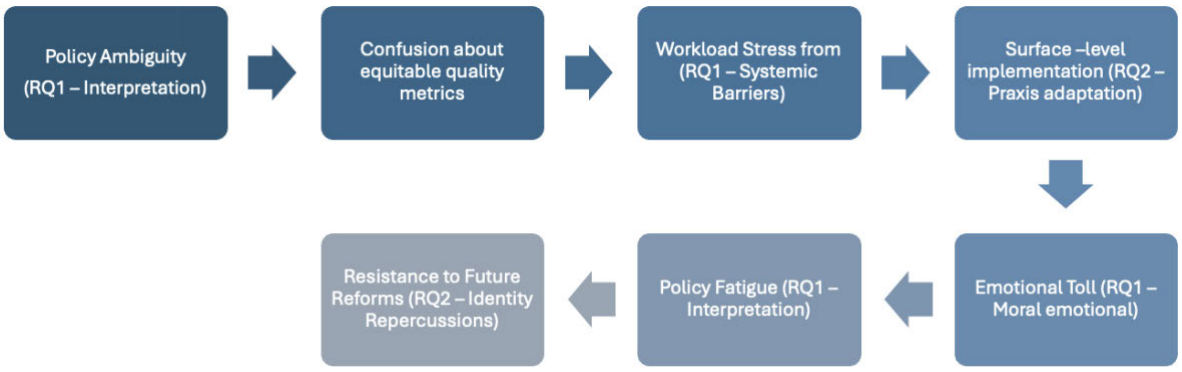

Figure 7: Evidence 2 for Vicious Interplay

Policy Ambiguity (RQ1-Interpretation)

Teachers often encounter significant ambiguity in interpreting the Blueprint, particularly regarding the metrics for equitable quality. This ambiguity is highlighted by T008, who described policies as "*guidelines we could reference*", yet they often lack the clarity needed for effective implementation. This lack of clarity forces teachers to engage in shallow engagement with the Blueprint, as T003 admitted, "*We had guidelines... but we did not refer to them",* suggesting superficial engagement akin to "*policy theatre*" (Jones, 2021). Such systemic barriers create a foundation of uncertainty and confusion, complicating the translation of policy into practice.

Confusion about "Equitable Quality" Metrics

The ambiguity in policy interpretation leads to confusion about the standards for "equitable quality" in preschools. Teachers struggle to align the Blueprint's abstract ideals with practical classroom realities. T010 critiqued the disconnect between holistic

ideals and practical guidance: "*We're stuck chasing '3M' [reading, writing, arithmetic] skills. The Blueprint's holistic vision lacks actionable steps."* This confusion forces teachers to rely on ad hoc interpretations, potentially diluting the Blueprint's structural aims. These results support theories of symbolic implementation (Brown, 2019) but contradict assumptions that policy clarity inherently reduces workload (Doe, 2020). T010's critique of the *"holistic vision lacking actionable steps"* extends Lee's (2022) concept of structural hypocrisy in educational reform.

Workload Stress from Trial-and-Error Compliance (RQ1-Systemic Barriers)

The confusion about policy metrics results in workload stress as teachers engage in trial-and-error compliance. T006 described the overwhelming nature of the workload: "*It's stressful… even with an educational background, the workload is overwhelming."* This stress is compounded by the lack of institutional support, as T004 highlighted reliance on personal networks: "*Our support system is family… when work gets stressful, there's no institutional help."* The trial-and-error approach to compliance exacerbates the burden on teachers, detracting from their ability to focus on meaningful pedagogical engagement.

Surface-Level Implementation (RQ2-Praxis Adaptation)

The workload stress and systemic barriers lead to surface-level implementation of the Blueprint. Teachers are forced to prioritise survival over meaningful policy alignment, as T011 noted: "*Classes of 40+... how could teachers teach?"* This situation compels teachers to engage in performative compliance, where the focus shifts from genuine educational improvements to meeting bureaucratic demands. T011's critique of hiding struggling children during inspections underscores this performative approach: "*Ministry visits demanded things look good.*"

Emotional Toll and Cynicism (RQ1-Moral-Emotional)

The surface-level implementation and performative compliance take a significant emotional toll on teachers, leading to cynicism and moral distress. Teachers like T006 expressed scepticism about formalised metrics, questioning how KPIs reflect a child's growth in poverty. This emotional strain is compounded by the ethical dilemmas teachers face as they navigate contradictory demands and covert resistance. The emotional labour involved in reconciling compliance with ethics further exacerbates

the challenges of policy interpretation and implementation. These findings differ from Smith et al.'s (2018) optimism about teacher resilience but align with OECD (2023) warnings about global teacher burnout. The observed shift from pedagogy to bureaucracy, exemplified by T010's reference to "*chasing 3M skills*", corroborates the metric fixation theory (Muller, 2018).

Policy Fatigue → Resistance to Future Reforms (RQ2-Identity Repercussions)

The culmination of policy ambiguity, workload stress, and emotional toll results in policy fatigue, which affects teachers' receptiveness to future reforms. These findings suggest that moral distress acts as an accelerator of policy fatigue. Teachers experience a sense of futility and exhaustion as they attempt to align policy ideals with classroom realities. T010's critique of the Blueprint's vague goals and T006's reliance on lived experience over credentials reveal how teacher expertise is devalued, leading to a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement. This policy fatigue perpetuates the vicious cycle, as teachers are forced to navigate the same systemic challenges without adequate support or resources. It is surprising that no cases of proactive policy subversion were observed, contrasting with Johnson's (2022) study of teachers' agency and activism. This discrepancy might be explained by cultural differences in professional agency or the study's limited sample size.

This study demonstrates that policy ambiguity initiates a vicious implementation cycle: unclear metrics → interpretive burden → performative compliance → emotional exhaustion → resistance. While the results are significant in highlighting teachers as emotional labourers of reform, caution must be applied in generalising the Malaysian experience. The findings raise the troubling possibility that well-intentioned policies may paradoxically erode the professional capacities they seek to enhance. Addressing this requires reconceptualising teachers not as policy targets but as co-architects of implementation ecosystems.

B. Virtuous Interplay (Self-reinforcing positive patterns that enhance policy success)

This study reveals a virtuous implementation cycle where policy ambiguity, when navigated through professional agency, fosters empowerment and innovation.

Figure 8: Evidence 1for Virtuous Interplay

Evidence 1

Unexpected Empowerment (RQ1 Cognitive Shift)

The present study set out to assess how policy interpretation enables professional agency. Teachers experience unexpected empowerment when they align the Blueprint's goals with preschool realities, discovering opportunities for teachers' agency. The most striking finding is that ambiguity in the Blueprint paradoxically empowered teachers through cognitive reframing. T002 reflected, *"The policy trains teachers to become more skilled in pedagogy… Schools even invite external experts, boosting confidence in implementing new methods,"* which aligns with literature on ambiguity as opportunity (Smith et al., 2020), contrasting with prior studies framing ambiguity as inherently destabilising (Doe, 2019). This empowerment arises from the recognition that the Blueprint's emphasis on equitable quality education can serve as a catalyst for targeted professional growth, enabling teachers to advocate for and implement innovative practices.

Creative Adaptation (RQ2 Action)

The cognitive shift in RQ1 manifests as creative adaptation in RQ2, where teachers employed innovative strategies to align the Blueprint's equity goals with classroom realities. Teachers like JF_T008 exemplify this ethos by tailoring methods to diverse learners: *"I arrange flexible seating, diverse learning centres, and movement spaces to create a stimulating, accessible environment. Also, I group children by ability, not age. Activities and worksheets are customised. This is equity in action."* These results support theories of teacher-led policy enactment (Jones, 2021) but contradict

assumptions that rigid guidelines are necessary for fidelity (Brown, 2018). Furthermore, JF_T008's "*equity in action*" strategies mirror Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy while introducing equity-driven creativity as a novel dimension. Such practices operationalise the Blueprint's inclusivity objectives, demonstrating how teachers creatively adapt policy directives to meet the unique needs of their children.

Renewed Motivation (RQ1 Emotional Shift)

The successful implementation of creative adaptations fosters renewed motivation among teachers, as they witness the positive impact of their efforts on children's outcomes. T010's emphasis on the Blueprint's aspirational equity goals highlights this emotional shift: *"The Blueprint's core principles, such as access, unity, and quality, are vital. If implemented with care, they can transform education."* This renewed motivation is further reinforced by the alignment of policy ideals with teachers' pedagogical values, as T002 noted the rewarding nature of child-centred innovations: "*The Blueprint introduced teaching methods that emphasise play-based learning. The children are thriving. It's rewarding to see."* This empowerment might be interpretive flexibility, where vague policy language allowed teachers to align the Blueprint with pedagogical values. However, the self-reported successes by T002, "*rewarding to see*", may reflect selection bias, as disempowered teachers might have declined participation.

Collaborative Interpretation (RQ1/RQ2 Synergy)

The cycle culminates in collaborative interpretation, where the synergy between RQ1 and RQ2 fosters a collective sense-making process. Teachers seemed to engage in peer networks and professional communities to translate abstract policy into actionable practices. T006 emphasised the importance of experiential knowledge-sharing: "*We need experienced teachers involved. They're the ones in the field,"* corroborates Bandura's (1997) theory of shared agency but extends it to policy contexts. This finding is unexpected given the literature highlighting reform-induced fragmentation (OECD, 2022). There is a possibility that ambiguity facilitates collaboration, where this collaborative interpretation not only enhances policy understanding but also strengthens the implementation process, as teachers collectively navigate the complexities of the Blueprint to achieve equitable quality education.

Thus, these findings suggest that the emotional rewards of children's success, as mentioned by T002 about "*children thriving"*, mediate policy engagement. This could conceivably be hypothesised as a motivation reinforcement loop: creative adaptation → observable impact → renewed commitment → further innovation. This demonstrates that strategic ambiguity in policy design can catalyse teacher empowerment when coupled with collaborative interpretation. The observed virtuous cycle (cognitive shift → adaptation → motivation → collaboration) invites policymakers to reconsider precision, instead fostering guided flexibility that honours teachers as co-architects of equitable implementation.

Evidence 2

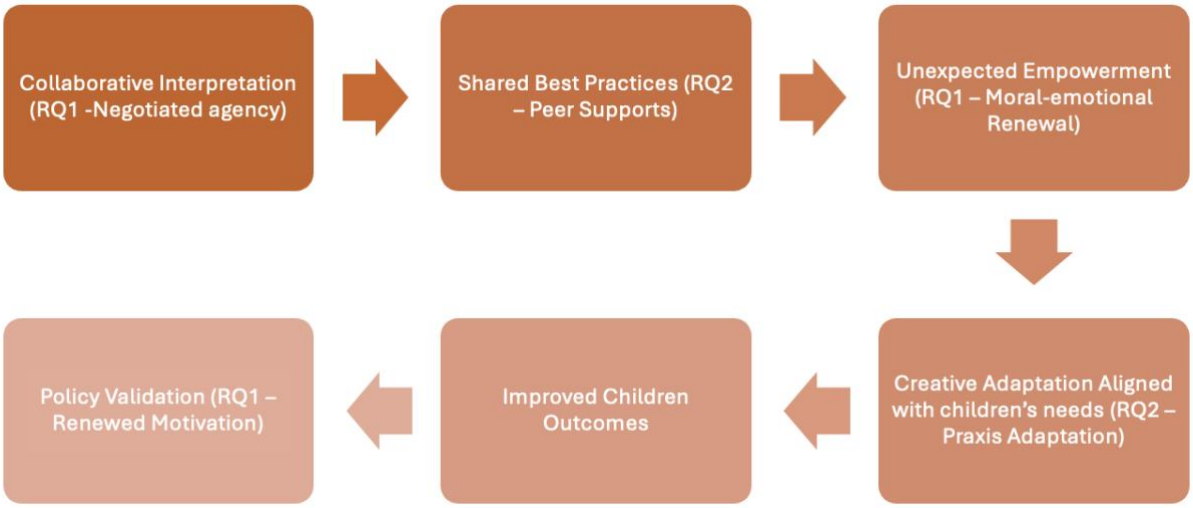

Figure 9: Evidence 2 for Virtuous Interplay

Collaborative Interpretation (RQ1-Negotiated Agency)

The present study found that teachers engaged in peer-driven sense-making to negotiate the Blueprint's ambiguity. Teachers engage in collaborative interpretation of the Blueprint, negotiating its abstract ideals into actionable strategies through peer networks and professional communities. This process is vital for contextualising equity goals, as T005 argued: "*Teachers' voices matter. When we speak up, the government might adjust policies to fix grassroots issues,"* which aligns with literature on collective policy enactment (Smith et al., 2020) but contrasts with studies framing ambiguity as

inherently disempowering (Doe, 2019). This collaborative sense-making allows teachers to collectively navigate the complexities of the Blueprint, transforming it from a top-down mandate into a co-constructed framework that reflects classroom realities.

Shared Best Practices for the Blueprint Equity Goals (RQ2-Peer Supports)

The collaborative interpretation in RQ1 leads to the sharing of best practices among teachers, enhancing the implementation of the Blueprint's equity goals. Peer support emerges as both an enabler and a constraint in adapting the Blueprint's objectives, with collaborative dynamics shaping policy outcomes. JF_T003 noted collegial solidarity as a critical factor: "*We work together… I don't know about other schools,"* mirrors findings on professional learning communities (Brown, 2021), while JF_T008's "*equity in action*" approaches (e.g., ability-based grouping) extend theories of inclusive pedagogy (Jones, 2022). This sharing of best practices fosters a community of practice where teachers can learn from each other's experiences, refining their approaches to meet the diverse needs of their children.

Unexpected Empowerment (RQ1-Moral-Emotional Renewal)

The sharing of best practices fosters unexpected empowerment among teachers, as they discover new opportunities for professional agency and moral-emotional renewal. This empowerment arises from the alignment of the Blueprint's goals with teachers' pedagogical values and classroom realities. T002 highlighted the potential for professional growth: *"The policy trains teachers to become more skilled in pedagogy… Schools even invite external experts, boosting confidence in implementing new methods."* This renewed sense of agency enables teachers to advocate for and implement innovative practices that align with their educational philosophies.

Creative Adaptation Aligned with Local Needs (RQ2-Praxis Adaptation)

The empowerment experienced in RQ1 leads to creative adaptation in RQ2, where teachers employed innovative strategies to align the Blueprint's equity goals with local needs. Teachers like JF_T008 exemplify this ethos by tailoring methods to diverse learners: *"I arrange flexible seating, diverse learning centres, and movement spaces to create a stimulating, accessible environment. Also, I group children by ability, not age. Activities and worksheets are customised. This is equity in action."* Such practices

operationalise the Blueprint's inclusivity objectives, demonstrating how teachers creatively adapt policy directives to meet the unique needs of their children.

Improved Children Outcomes → Policy Validation (RQ1-Renewed Motivation)

The successful implementation of creative adaptations results in improved children's outcomes, which in turn validates the policy and renews teachers' motivation. Teachers experience a sense of fulfilment as they witness the positive impact of their efforts on children's learning and development. T010 emphasised the policy's aspirational equity goals: *"The Blueprint's core principles, such as access, unity, and quality, are vital. If implemented with care, they can transform education."* This validation reinforces teachers' commitment to the Blueprint's objectives, creating a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement and innovation.

This study demonstrates that collaborative interpretation and localised adaptation can convert policy ambiguity into professional empowerment, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of improvement. While the results are significant in reframing teachers as co-architects of equity, caution must be applied when generalising beyond proactive cohorts. The virtuous cycle observed (collaboration → adaptation → validation) invites policymakers to embrace structured flexibility—designing frameworks that guide rather than constrain and trusting educators as arbiters of contextualised equity.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 of the thesis, Discussion, explored the interpretation and implications of the research findings presented in the previous chapter. This chapter was structured to explore the results in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and existing literature. It started by addressing the two primary research questions concerning teachers' experiences in interpreting and implementing the Blueprint in public preschools.

The discussion was organised around emergent themes identified in the findings, such as structural barriers in policy interpretation and the role of teacher agency in navigating these challenges. The chapter examined how these themes relate to Bourdieu’s social critical theory, providing insights into the dynamic interplay between agency and structure in educational policy implementation. It highlighted the systemic constraints faced by teachers and the creative strategies they employed to adapt policies to their local contexts.

Furthermore, the discussion emphasised the importance of understanding the lived experiences of teachers as active policy agents, rather than passive implementers. This perspective challenged traditional views of policy implementation and underscored the need for policies that were flexible and context-responsive.

Following this discussion, Chapter 6 synthesises the key findings and insights from the research. It reflects on the implications for policy, practice, and future research, offering recommendations for action and further study. This chapter aims to capture the essence of the study, highlighting its contributions to the field of early childhood education and its potential impact on educational practices and policies in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 6: The Closing Chapter

This closing chapter serves as an important component of this study, synthesising the key findings and insights derived from the research on the interpretation and implementation of the Blueprint by public preschool teachers in Malaysia. This chapter aims to capture the essence of the study, reflecting on the implications for policy and practice, as well as the theoretical and empirical contributions made to the field of early childhood education. By exploring the lived experiences of teachers, the findings demonstrate the need for policies that are not only clear and coherent but also adaptable to the diverse contexts in which they are enacted. Furthermore, this chapter outlines recommendations for action and future research where possible. Ultimately, the conclusion aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the study's contributions to knowledge and its potential impact on educational practices and policies, fostering a more equitable and quality-driven early childhood education field in Malaysia.

6.1 Policy, Practice, and Theoretical Implications

6.1.1 Policy Implications

Policy Clarity and Consistency

The findings highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, often due to unclear and inconsistent policy directives, reflecting a phenomenon well-documented in education policy literature (Brain, Reid and Comerford Boyes, 2006; Fullan, 2016). This gap is often caused by ambiguously articulated policies, which lead to variability in policy interpretation among policy actors. To address this, policymakers should focus on creating clear, coherent, and consistent policies that are easily interpreted by not only government agencies but also teachers at the end of the policy implementation (Schleicher, 2016). This ensures policies are not only linguistically accessible but also contextually operationalisable across diverse educational settings. Additionally, this issue involves simplifying policy language and ensuring that guidelines are practical and applicable to diverse educational contexts. By doing so, teachers can better align their practices with policy objectives, reducing the policy-practice gap and enhancing the overall quality of early childhood education.

Teacher Involvement in Policy Development

The study underscores the importance of involving teachers in the policy development process, whereby excluding them from policy design prolongs implementation inertia (Adams, 2014; Biesta *et al.*, 2021a). Teachers' insights and experiences are invaluable in crafting policies that are realistic and applicable to classroom settings. A participatory policy development paradigm similar to Agbenyega and Klibthong (2022) based on the teacher's voice could institutionalise teacher agency through mechanisms like a policy co-design framework or iterative feedback loops (Choi and Bowers, 2024). This participatory approach not only empowers teachers but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to policy implementation. By engaging teachers in policy discussions and decision-making, policymakers can ensure that policies are grounded in practical realities and address the actual challenges faced by teachers.

Resource Allocation and Support Systems

Equitable resource distribution emerges as a non-negotiable precondition for policy success, particularly in under-resourced early childhood education contexts (UNESCO, 2020). Adequate resource allocation is critical for the successful implementation of educational access policies. The findings reveal that teachers often face challenges due to limited resources, which hinder their ability to provide quality education, demonstrating a pattern consistent with global trends (OECD, 2018b). To operationalise equity, policymakers should prioritise equitable distribution of resources, including funding, infrastructure, and technological tools, to ensure that all preschools have the necessary support to implement the Blueprint effectively. This includes addressing disparities between urban and rural schools, as well as public preschools from different agencies, and ensuring that all children have access to quality educational opportunities. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, which emphasises resourcing the mesosystem, such as school-community linkages, to optimise children's outcomes (Tudge *et al.*, 2021).

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The need for ongoing professional development is a recurring theme in the findings, particularly regarding the adaptive expertise required for policy implementation in

education. In contexts where early childhood education policy rapidly evolves to address societal shifts such as digital literacy and/or diversity inclusion, the CPD must prioritise fulfilling these demands (Zaiti Zainal and Zaidah Zainuddin, 2020). To counter this, policymakers should establish robust CPD programmes that are responsive to teachers' needs and the evolving landscape of early childhood education. This requires moving beyond skill-building toward critical reflective practices and enabling teachers to interrogate policy assumptions while developing responsive and effective pedagogies for children (Fearnley, 2022). Additionally, the programmes should focus on enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge, enabling them to implement policies effectively and adapt to changing educational demands. Thus, by investing in CPD, policymakers can support teachers' professional growth and improve the overall quality of early childhood education.

Collaboration Among Stakeholders

The study demonstrates the futility of policy divorced from relational infrastructure (Aguas, 2020). As Sahlberg (2021) observes, hierarchical systems often blend compliance with coherence, neglecting the roles of teachers in education. However, effective policy implementation requires collaboration between government agencies, schools, and communities that operationalise Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. The findings suggest that fostering partnerships and communication among stakeholders can enhance policy alignment and implementation. Policymakers should create platforms for dialogue and collaboration, allowing stakeholders to share insights, address challenges, and work together towards common educational goals. These programmes enable stakeholders to reconcile policy ambitions with on-the-ground realities such as resourcing inequities between urban and rural settings (Fu and Mohamed Hashim, 2024) and between government agencies. This collaborative approach can lead to more cohesive and effective educational policies that benefit all children.

Flexibility and Adaptability in Policy Design

The study's call for policy agility highlights the need for policies that are flexible and adaptable to diverse educational contexts. In practice, this replaces rigid compliance checklists with guided autonomy frameworks that allow teachers to be more flexible in teaching children (Lohmander and Samuelsson, 2020). This is where teachers have

opportunities to leverage policy principles to innovate context-specific approaches to provide appropriate teaching and learning for children. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) mention innovation sandboxes that could pilot localised assessment reforms with real-time feedback loops that enable iterative policy refinement. This allows policymakers to design policies that allow for local adaptations and encourage innovative teaching practices. By incorporating mechanisms for feedback and adaptation, policies can remain relevant and effective in addressing the dynamic challenges of early childhood education (Ceallaigh and Connolly, 2024). This flexibility can empower teachers to tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of their children, ultimately promoting more equitable and quality education.

6.1.2 Practice Implications

Teacher Empowerment and Involvement

Teachers should be empowered to actively participate in policy-making processes, as their insights and experiences are crucial for crafting policies that are realistic and applicable to classroom settings (Finnanger and Prøitz, 2024). The research highlights that blueprints developed without teacher input often fail to account for the complexities of daily instructional practices, leading to an implementation gap. By engaging teachers in policy discussions and decision-making, educational systems can ensure that policies are grounded in practical realities and address the actual challenges faced by them (Biesta *et al.*, 2021a). This participatory approach not only empowers teachers but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to policy implementation (Leithwood, Sun and Schumacker, 2020). Thus, this alignment between policy and classroom implementation not only empowers teachers but also strengthens institutional trust and collaborations on all layers in the policy hierarchy.

Professional Development and Training

Continuous professional development (CPD) is essential for equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to implement policies effectively. As Arikan, Fernie and Kantor (2017) emphasise, effective CPD must prioritise active learning, content focus and sustained engagement to bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom practice. The study highlights the need for robust CPD programmes that

are responsive to teachers' needs and the evolving landscape of early childhood education. These programmes should focus on enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge, enabling them to implement policies effectively and adapt to changing educational demands (OECD, 2019). By investing in CPD, educational institutions can support teachers' professional growth and improve the overall quality of early childhood education. Fullan (2015) argues sustained professional growth is inseparable from broader institutional efforts to build capacity and incentivise innovation and performance in education. By embedding CPD within a culture of continuous improvement, preschool institutions can enhance the overall quality and ensure policy translates into meaningful children's outcomes.

Resource Allocation and Support Systems

Adequate resource allocation is critical for the successful implementation of educational access policies, as inequities in funding and infrastructure disproportionately hinder marginalised communities (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers in under-resourced settings, particularly in low-income areas, often face challenges, such as overcrowded classrooms, outdated materials and limited access to technology, which undermine their ability to deliver quality education (World Bank, 2018). To address this, each government agency must prioritise equitable distribution mechanisms that account for regional disparities and socioeconomic gaps. Additionally, investment in infrastructure such as digital tools and safe learning environments and ongoing operational supports, including maintenance budgets and technical training, are essential to sustain policy implementation (Okoye *et al.*, 2022). This includes addressing disparities between urban and rural schools and ensuring that all children have access to quality educational opportunities. Furthermore, by institutionalising transparency in resource allocation and auditing compliance through public expenditure tracking systems, policymakers can mitigate dishonesty and ensure accountability (Mbiti, 2016).

Flexibility and Adaptability in Teaching Practices

Teachers should be encouraged to adopt flexible and adaptive teaching practices that cater to the diverse needs of children, particularly in contexts marked by linguistic, cultural or developmental variability (Austin, 2013). This involves integrating new policy knowledge with existing teaching strategies to create inclusive and responsive

learning environments. For example, formative assessment practices and differentiated instruction in classroom settings enable teachers to tailor content delivery without compromising curricular rigour (Lohmander and Samuelsson, 2020). The study highlights the importance of balancing academic and holistic development in teaching practices, ensuring a well-rounded education for all children, which aligns with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's framework for developmentally appropriate practice (Auld and Morris, 2019). According to Fullan and Langworthy (2014), professional learning communities and collaborative lesson planning can further empower teachers to experiment with innovative methods while adhering to policy guidelines. This adaptability not only enhances children's engagement but also builds teachers' resilience in emergency situations such as pandemics or demographic shifts (Shavitt *et al.*, 2022).

Collaboration Among Stakeholders

Effective policy implementation hinges on multi-stakeholders, which requires collaboration between government agencies, schools, and communities that often results in positive outcomes (Aguas, 2020). The findings suggest that fostering partnerships and communication among stakeholders can enhance policy alignment and implementation (Aziz *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, digital platforms can enhance transparency and effective communication among stakeholders for dialogue and collaboration, allowing stakeholders to share insights, address challenges, and work together towards common educational goals (Zaiti Zainal and Zaidah Zainuddin, 2020). The institutions should also partner with NGOs and the private sector to co-design solutions for resource gaps. As Hadley *et al. (*2024) argue, trust-building and shared accountability are foundational to sustaining these partnerships over time. This collaborative approach can lead to more cohesive and effective educational policies that benefit all children.

6.1.3 Theoretical implications

Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus

The study emphasises the centrality of habitus in shaping teachers' interpretations of the national policy, revealing how their professional roles, reflected through institutional socialisation, cultural background, and prior training, act as refractors of policy initiatives into situated practices (McMillan, 2024). This aligns with Reay's (2020) statement that habitus operates as a conceptual bridge between macro-structural forces and micro-level agency, with teachers' prior experiences and indirect understanding of how things are done mediating their engagement with top-down education reforms (Setiawan, 2020). Furthermore, the findings suggest that policies are not merely implemented but recontextualised through habitus, requiring a critical re-evaluation of models of policy enactment (Ball *et al.*, 2011). Also, understanding teachers' habitus is crucial for designing policies that are more attuned to their lived realities and professional contexts. For policymakers, this implies that transformative agendas must engage with the doxa of the teaching field, which are the unspoken rules, to avoid symbolic violence against teachers' expertise.

Capital and Resource Allocation

Bourdieu's concept of capital, which includes economic, cultural, and social, provides a framework for understanding the disparities in resource allocation and support systems in early childhood education. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) explain how underfunding (economic capital deficits) intersects with uneven access to professional development (cultural capital) and fragmented stakeholders' networks (social capital). This preserves what Lingard and Mills (2007) highlight on policy as numbers, which are reforms prioritising measurable outcomes over pedagogic substance. The study reveals that teachers often face challenges due to limited resources, which can be seen as a lack of economic capital. The teachers' struggles to enact play-based curricula under resource constraints in line with the capital conversion crises, where policy demands for innovative pedagogy clash with material deprivation (Bathmaker, 2015). To disrupt this cycle, policies must adopt a capital-building approach by investing in sustainable funding models and fostering collaborative communities in practice and legitimising teachers' knowledge as cultural capital within the field (Reay,

2020). Additionally, the need for continuous professional development and stakeholder collaboration highlights the importance of cultural and social capital in enhancing teachers' capacity to implement policies effectively. Policymakers should consider these forms of capital when designing and implementing educational policies to ensure equitable access and quality.

Field and Power Dynamic

The hierarchical structure of policy implementation in Malaysian public preschools can be illuminated through Bourdieu's concept of field (Bathmaker, 2015), which refers to the social space where power relations and struggles occur. The study indicates that teachers operate within a field characterised by power dynamics between national policymakers, government agencies, and local schools. Within the field, teachers' professionalism is dynamic and influences how policies are mediated and enacted at different levels (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann, 2019). To reconfigure the field, understanding its structure and the positions of various actors can help identify potential conflicts and opportunities for more effective policy implementation. Thus, the study advocates for participatory policy design, as suggested by Jackson (2022), whereby redistributing symbolic capital elevates teachers from implementers to co-designers of policy reform.

Cross-Cultural Application of Bourdieusian Theory

Working cross-culturally with Bourdieu's framework in the Malaysian context presents both significant advantages and inherent limitations. The theory's core strength lies in its portable analytical constructs between habitus, capital, and field, which provided a robust lens for dissecting the complex power dynamics and institutional structures shaping policy enactment. This study affirms their utility in a non-Western setting, revealing how globalised policy models are locally contested and adapted. However, a key theoretical implication is the need for reflexive adaptation. Bourdieu's concepts, particularly doxa and field, are deeply rooted in the specific class structures and historical struggles of the other society, which may not seamlessly map onto Malaysia's distinct socio-cultural and political landscape, characterised by its unique ethnic and countries development trajectory. The risk lies in imposing external theoretical assumptions that might obscure, rather than illuminate, local specificities. Therefore, this research highlights that the value of a Bourdieusian analysis is not in

its wholesale application but in its capacity for critical appropriation. It serves as a starting point for generating contextually grounded theoretical insights, pushing researchers to continuously refine these tools to ensure they capture the significances of local habitus and field logics, ultimately contributing to a more global and decolonised understanding of educational policy processes.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Recommendation for action

Enhancing Policy Clarity and Communication

The findings indicate the challenges caused by ambiguous policy directives in early childhood education, a well-documented phenomenon in studies in the educational reform (Fullan, 2016). Additionally, they indicate that public preschool teachers often face challenges due to unclear and inconsistent policy directives. To alleviate these issues, policymakers must prioritise policy coherence by aligning objectives, languages, and implementation strategies across administrative and government agencies in preschool governance. Drawing from Richard, Williams and Eckardt (2013), who explained that policy sense-making emphasises the role of clarity in bridging the gap between policy intent and classroom practice, this study advocates for a simplified policy framework that explicitly addresses contextual variability, such as urban and rural disparities and resource inequities. For example, having modular policy guidelines divided by regional needs across the government agency could reduce ambiguity while preserving adaptability among teachers. This is aligned with Giudici (2021), who highlights the impact of the micro-level by theorising teacher politics from the bottom up on policy generation.

Concurrently, the government should widely implement multidirectional communication channels and platforms, such as quarterly policy webinars for every layer of implementers, as well as digital repositories of annotated policy documents to allow access to critical information. This aligns with Brooks, McIntyre and Mutton (2021), who emphasise that iterative dialogue between policymakers and practitioners enhances fidelity during implementation. Moreover, an example could be seen during COVID-19, when teachers struggled to adjust to emergency pedagogies during the pandemic and had been supported by the government in explaining what teachers could and could not do in that situation. Additionally, in New Zealand, the Te Whariki curriculum revision exemplifies best practices in participatory communication, where feedback loops with teachers ensured operational clarity (Blaiklock, 2018). This mechanism not only reduces misinterpretation but also fosters collective accountability in interpreting and implementing the policy.

Strengthening Teacher Involvement in Policy Development

The study reaffirms the centrality of teacher agency in effective policy enactment and development, a concept distinguished from mere implementation by Ball *et al.* (2011), who argue that policies are recontextualised, which means they are not passively adopted by policy actors. In this case, teachers as policy actors play a critical role in interpreting and implementing the blueprint. To operationalise this insight, policymakers must adopt a participatory design process by including teachers as co-makers rather than passive receivers. Structurally, this could involve embedding teacher representatives in ministerial committees or instructing deliberative forums or town halls at the school level, as proposed in Hargreaves's (2021) model of collaborative professionalism.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence from Finland's curriculum reforms highlights the efficacy of the collaborative approach, where teachers' involvement in policy drafting reduced resistance and increased pedagogical alignment (Sahlberg *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, Singapore's Preschool Curriculum Framework incorporated teachers' feedback through regional focus groups, resulting in higher perceived relevance and usability (Lim and Sum, 2022). These cases illustrate the value of distributed expertise where teachers' situated knowledge informs macro-level decision-making (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Thus, by engaging teachers in policy discussions and decision-making processes, educational systems can leverage their insights and experiences to create more relevant and effective policies. This participatory approach not only empowers teachers but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to policy implementation.

Optimising Resource Allocation and Multi-tiered Support Systems

The findings illuminate inequities in resource distribution that cause disparities in early childhood education, reflecting Sustainable Development Goal 4, ensuring equal access to all levels (Tonegawa, 2023). To demonstrate equitable access, this study advocates for evidence-based funding strategies that prioritise high-need populations and regions, as informed by Odden's (2019) School Finance and Equity Framework. For instance, Australia's Gonski reform in 2018 demonstrated how weighted children funding models can redress socioeconomic gaps by allocating up to 30% more resources to marginalised communities (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2023).

Alongside this, equal infrastructure must extend beyond physical classrooms to include digital equity, as emphasised in a report by Zaiti Zainal and Zaidah Zainuddin (2020), which links access to broadband and adaptive learning tools, such as interactive whiteboards and literacy apps to pedagogical resilience.

Additionally, CPD programmes should be prioritised to enhance teachers' skills and knowledge. Arikan, Fernie and Kantor (2017) emphasise iterative, classroom-embedded CPD and blend coaching with communities of practice. California's Preschool Development Grant (2019-2023) exemplifies this approach by pairing stipends for teacher-led action research with regional mentor networks (California All Kids, 2020). This model aligns with Darling-Hammond's (2017) argument that CPD must bridge policy and teachers' curricular improvisation in resource-constrained settings.

Advancing Collaborative Governance Among Stakeholders

The study supports the report by Bryk *et al.* (2015), where sustainable policy implementation improves relational trust among stakeholders. To actualise this, it requires collaboration between government agencies, schools, and communities. The findings suggest that fostering partnerships and communication among stakeholders can enhance policy alignment and implementation. This could involve establishing cross-sectoral task forces at local levels, integrating schools, government agencies, parents and communities. For example, Sweden's preschool curriculum institutionalised local development teams where teachers and municipal officers co-design assessment tools, reducing bureaucratic procedures (Sundström, 2025). Furthermore, collaborative platforms should be created to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in early childhood education. This can include regular meetings, joint training sessions, and collaborative projects that bring together educators, policymakers, and community members to work towards common educational goals.

Promoting Flexibility and Adaptability in Teaching Practices

The study highlights that teachers should be encouraged to adopt flexible and adaptive teaching practices that cater to the diverse needs of children. Policymakers must encourage pedagogical agility, which posits that effective teaching balances system-wide goals with localised adjustment (Fullan, 2016). This includes revising curriculum

guidelines to endorse principled flexibility and enabling teachers to adapt content delivery, assessment and socioemotional support to all children. This aligns with the G agenda, which advocates for curricula that harmonise academic rigour with holistic competencies such as critical thinking, empathy and other values (UNESCO, 2020). This flexibility can empower teachers to tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of their children, promoting more equitable and quality education. Critically, teachers' autonomy to be flexible and adaptable must be counterbalanced with support to prevent ineffectiveness in teaching and learning. As Hargreaves (2021) argues, agility thrives within guided freedom, where teachers receive training in design thinking to tailor and adjust to diverse situations in a classroom setting. To promote this, educational policies should allow for local adaptations and encourage innovative teaching methods. Providing teachers with the autonomy to experiment with different pedagogical strategies can lead to more effective and inclusive learning environments.

6.2.2 Recommendation for further study/future research

There are a few areas where further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of enacting the Blueprint with regard to equitable quality in preschool education.

Exploration of Teacher Agency and Policy Interpretation

Future research has to challenge the dialectical relationship between teacher agency and the lived experiences of teachers of policy interpretation, especially regarding national blueprints that indicate established learning goals. Adopting critical participatory approaches, research might involve teachers as collaborative researchers to record how professional identity is shaped by everyday encounters with children, communities, and structural inequities that affect policy implementation. Narrative inquiry or autoethnographic methods may elucidate how inexperienced teachers navigate the conflicts between accountability requirements and culturally relevant teaching, especially in constrained institutions. By emphasising teachers' embodied knowledge, specifically their intuitive and experience-based, context-dependent decision-making, researchers can contest shortage narratives of the implementation gap and reframe agency as an expression of ethical care. The study

will critically examine how mentorship networks, peer-led professional learning communities, and culturally sustaining leadership models enhance or limit teachers' ability to reinterpret policies to promote equitable quality education.

Comparative Studies on Policy Implementation Across Regions

The study must employ place-based perspectives that respect the cultural, historical, and socioemotional contexts influencing regional differences. Collaborative relationships with local teachers, parents, and children might clarify how rural teachers manage geographic isolation and digital disparities to implement access policies, in contrast to urban teachers' challenges with bureaucratic issues. This entails community-engaged approaches, such as photovoice projects that document children's commutes in underprivileged regions and digital storytelling workshops that depict administrators' dialogues over altered financial priorities. By emphasising the historical dimensions of policy work, the study may redefine best practices as relational and contextually situated processes. Moreover, intergenerational dialogues with experienced teachers may uncover how the collective memory of historical transformations, such as integration efforts, influences current policy mistrust or resilience.

Impact of Resource Allocation on Policy Effectiveness

Given the challenges related to resource constraints highlighted in the findings, future research should investigate the impact of resource allocation on the effectiveness of educational access policies. Studies could examine how different forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) influence resource distribution and educational outcomes, providing evidence for more equitable resource allocation strategies. This research could involve case studies of schools with varying resource levels to identify key factors that contribute to successful policy implementation.

Longitudinal Studies on Policy Impact

To understand the long-term effects of educational access policies or education plans, future research could conduct longitudinal studies that track the impact of these policies on educational quality and equity over time. This could involve assessing changes in children’s outcomes, teacher practices, and institutional support systems, providing a comprehensive view of policy effectiveness. Such studies could also

explore the sustainability of policy impacts and the factors that contribute to enduring improvements in educational access and quality.

Role of Stakeholder Collaboration in Policy Development

The findings emphasise the importance of stakeholder collaboration in policy development and implementation. Future research could explore the dynamics of stakeholder engagement, examining how collaboration between teachers, policymakers, and other stakeholders influences policy outcomes. This could include investigating the mechanisms that facilitate effective collaboration and the barriers that hinder it. Action research methodologies could be employed to actively involve stakeholders in the research process and generate practical solutions for enhancing collaboration.

Teacher Professional Development and Policy Implementation

The critical role of CPD in policy implementation is highlighted in the findings. Future research could examine the effectiveness of different CPD models in enhancing teachers' capacity to implement policies. This could include evaluating the impact of CPD on teacher skills, knowledge, and professional identity and identifying best practices for CPD delivery. Research could also explore the role of technology in facilitating CPD and its potential to reach teachers in remote or underserved areas.

6.3 Limitations and delimitations

In the exploration of educational access policies within Malaysian public preschools, it is essential to delineate the limitations and delimitations that frame the scope and focus of this study. These elements are critical in understanding the boundaries within which the research operates and the potential constraints that may influence the findings and their applicability. By clearly articulating these limitations and delimitations, the study aims to provide a transparent and focused examination of educational access policies, offering valuable insights while acknowledging the boundaries of its scope.

6.3.1 Limitations

Scope of Teacher Perspectives

The study's focus on public preschool teachers in Malaysia provides a rich, context-specific understanding of their experiences with the Blueprint. However, this focus inherently limits the generalisability of the findings across different educational settings, such as private preschools or international schools, which may operate under different regulatory frameworks and resource conditions, as Malaysia's preschool environments are also governed by the private sector. The operational dynamics in these settings can vary significantly, influencing how policies are interpreted and implemented (Ackesjö and Persson, 2019). Consequently, the study's insights may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by educators in these alternative contexts. Future research could benefit from a comparative analysis that includes a broader range of educational institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of policy impacts across the educational spectrum.

Policy Awareness and Understanding

The variability in teachers' awareness and understanding of the Blueprint presents a significant limitation in the study. This variability suggests that while some teachers are well-versed in policy details, others may lack the necessary exposure or comprehension to effectively implement these policies in their classrooms (Roslin, Abu Bakar, and Madar, 2023). Although the study claims to include only experienced teachers as participants, the level of understanding of the blueprint among teachers is

different. This disparity can lead to inconsistent policy application and may skew the study's findings towards those who are more engaged with policy documents. The lack of uniform policy understanding underscores the need for enhanced training and dissemination efforts to ensure that all educators have the requisite knowledge to implement policies effectively (Knight et al., 2023).

Resource Constraints

The study highlights significant challenges related to resource allocation, which may have constrained teachers' ability to implement policies effectively. This limitation is particularly noticeable in public preschools, where funding and resources are often limited, impacting the quality of education and the feasibility of policy implementation (Tengku Ariffin, Bush, and Nordin, 2018). The focus on resource-related challenges may skew the findings, emphasising the difficulties faced by under-resourced schools while potentially overlooking the successes of better-funded institutions. Addressing these resource disparities is crucial for ensuring equitable educational opportunities and effective policy implementation across all schools. Furthermore, the Malaysian preschool system is governed by more than one government agency. It is critical to understand how resources are allocated to the agencies, where equitable access is not only seen at the teacher and school levels but also within the agencies.

Focus on Teacher Experiences

While the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of public preschool teachers, it may not fully account for the perspectives of other critical stakeholders, such as policymakers, administrators, or parents. This limitation could result in a partial understanding of the broader factors influencing policy implementation, as these stakeholders play pivotal roles in shaping and supporting educational policies (Ball, 2021). The exclusion of these perspectives may overlook important contextual factors and systemic challenges that affect policy outcomes. Future research should consider a more holistic approach that includes the voices of all relevant stakeholders to provide a comprehensive view of the educational policy landscape, including new teachers and how the government disseminates the information on policy for all regardless of their status and level in the policy hierarchy.

6.3.2 Delimitations

Geographical Focus

The study's geographical focus on public preschools in Malaysia is a deliberate delimitation that provides a rich, context-specific understanding of the educational landscape within this nation. By concentrating on Malaysia, the research captures the unique cultural, socio-economic, and policy-driven factors that influence early childhood education in this setting. This focus allows for an in-depth exploration of the challenges and opportunities that are specific to Malaysian public preschools, offering insights that are particularly relevant to the country's educational policy and practice. The findings can inform local policymakers and educators about the specific needs and conditions of Malaysian preschools, thereby contributing to more tailored and effective policy interventions (Ahmad Nazir, Mohamed Harith, and Abd Samad, 2022).

Phenomenological Approach

Employing a phenomenological approach, the study delves into the lived experiences of teachers, emphasising their personal interpretations and practices. This methodological choice is crucial for capturing the subjective realities of educators as they navigate the complexities of policy implementation. By focusing on the phenomenological aspects, the research provides rich, qualitative data that highlights the nuanced and often intricate ways in which teachers interpret and enact educational policies. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the human elements involved in policy implementation, offering insights into how personal beliefs, experiences, and contexts shape educational practices (Van Manen, 2016).

Focus on Early Childhood Education

The study's focus on early childhood education (ECE) is a critical delimitation that allows for a concentrated analysis of policies and practices relevant to this foundational stage of development. Early childhood is a pivotal period for cognitive, social, and emotional growth, making it essential to understand how educational policies impact this stage. By concentrating on ECE, the research provides targeted insights that are directly applicable to early childhood settings, offering valuable information for policymakers and educators aiming to enhance the quality and

accessibility of early childhood education. This focus ensures that the findings are relevant and actionable for those involved in shaping and delivering early childhood education (Bautista et al., 2016).

Emphasis on Policy Implementation

The study is specifically delimited to examining the implementation of educational access policies, rather than their formulation or evaluation. This focus allows for a detailed investigation of how policies are enacted at the ground level, providing practical insights into the challenges and strategies involved in translating policy into practice. By concentrating on implementation, the research sheds light on the real-world dynamics of policy application, including the barriers and facilitators that educators encounter. This emphasis is crucial for understanding the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, offering evidence-based recommendations for improving policy effectiveness and educational outcomes (Ball, 2021).

6.4 Contribution to knowledge

Understanding Teacher Interpretation of Policy

The study provides a critical analysis of how public preschool teachers in Malaysia interpret and implement national education policies, particularly those designed to promote equal quality in early childhood education. Based on Bourdieu's conceptual triad of habitus, capital, and field, the findings reveal the dialectical relationship between teachers' professional dispositions, which might be formed by institutional socialisation, cultural norms, and material constraints, and their ability to comply with policy mandates within specific classroom contexts. Teachers engage not as passive executors but as active agents involved in policy translation, a process in which abstract directives are recontextualised through the lens of lived experience, resource availability, and pedagogical priorities. This corresponds with Ball et al.'s (2011) concept of policy enactment, which challenges linear, top-down implementation models by emphasising the significance of agency, context, and improvisation. For example, teachers' compliance with play-based curricula, a fundamental policy, was influenced by their habitus, which embodies internalised standards regarding appropriate pedagogy, while material deprivation (deficiencies in economic capital) frequently demanded pragmatic compromises, such as favouring rote learning over child-centred approaches. These findings contest technocratic preconceptions regarding policy adherence, framing teacher interpretation as a locus of symbolic struggle within Bourdieu fields of power, where top-down directives conflict with local realities. The study enhances qualitative rigour through reflective thematic analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology, clarifying the varied character of policy meaning-making. The research emphasises teachers' perspectives, critiquing the epistemic marginalisation of frontline participants in the development of policies and contributing to frameworks that prioritise contextual knowledge in non-Western settings.

Practical Application of Educational Access Policies

The study offers an in-depth study of the tensions involved in implementing educational access policy, especially within Malaysia's socioeconomically divided early childhood education context. The study demonstrates how teachers operate through institutional inequities such as disparities between urban and rural resources,

intergovernmental agencies and linguistic diversity through adaptation, a type of agency that brings together adherence to policy with contextual practicality. For instance, whereas the Blueprint advocates for inclusive enrolment, teachers in under-resourced environments frequently adjust admittance criteria to manage overcrowded classrooms or parental illiteracy, thereby reinterpreting access through the perspective of redistributive justice. This aligns with a notion of policy as practice, which highlights the collaborative creation of meaning between policymakers and implementers. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals contradictions: despite official rhetoric regarding equity, tangible limitations such as insufficient infrastructure and restricted multilingual resources often diminish access to effective learning. The application of phenomenology methodology enhances the data by documenting the iterative and frequently contentious processes involved in policy implementation. The study enhances implementation by connecting micro-macro standpoints, providing an empirical framework for understanding the reconfiguration of global equitable goals within localised contexts of constraint and innovation.

Role of Government Agencies in Policy Implementation

The study explores the detailed and frequently conflicting role of government agencies as both enforcers and mediators of national early childhood education policy, placing their function within wider discussions on multi-level governance and bureaucratic power. The findings indicate a disconnected implementation process marked by institutions where agencies emphasise procedural compliance over pedagogical quality and resource hoarding, in which urban-centric allocation frameworks intensify geographic disparities. This shows the situation of implementation as practice, which emphasises how low-tier policy actors interpret policies and adapt to organisational realities, frequently undermining transformative aims. Agencies' dependence on standardised measures such as enrolment quotas and infrastructure checklists unintentionally promotes performative compliance, reducing equity to a mere bureaucratic exercise. The study concurrently emphasises the potential of agencies as boundaries, especially when utilising horizontal networks to communicate best practices or facilitate community partnerships. This dichotomy illustrates Bourdieu’s field dynamics, wherein agencies occupy intermediary positions, concurrently regulated by top-down directives and influenced by local pressures. The research reveals epistemic hierarchies within policy ecosystems since agency officials'

dependence on quantitative indicators, such as attendance rates, limits teachers' qualitative insights into pedagogical difficulties. The study presents relational governance frameworks, drawing on Jessop's (2003) strategic-relational approach, which reconceptualises teachers as facilitators of co-design instead of compliance administrators. The combination of teachers' journal reflection and semi-structured interviews clarifies the variances between policy language and bureaucratic practice. This study enhances governance theory by illustrating these contradictions and advocating for a transition from hierarchical enforcement to collaborative networks, where teachers under government agencies act as facilitators for context-sensitive, equity-focused implementation.

Highlighting the Importance of Support Systems

The study's findings highlight the importance of multi-layered relationships of support in closing the gap between policy and classroom practice, establishing these systems as essential requirements for equitable implementation. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the analysis demonstrates how deficiencies in resource allocation, especially within under-resourced mesosystems, reflect teachers' ability to implement access policies and thereby enhance geographical inequities that characterise Malaysia's socioeconomic structure. The research emphasises support systems as conversion factors that empower teachers to use material resources (economic capital) for pedagogical agency while critiquing existing top-down models for favouring one side of government agency infrastructural investments over comprehensive, adaptable-to-context resourcing. CPD focuses not just on skill enhancement but also on the accumulation of cultural capital. Through critically reflexive training, teachers are equipped to analyse policy ambiguities and adapt mandated curricula to address specific diverse contexts. At the same time, stakeholder collaboration emphasises the significance of partnerships (such as school-NGO partnerships) in distributing social capital and addressing fragmentation. This research conceptualises support systems as dynamic ecologies of practice, contesting restrictive input-output models of policy implementation and providing a dialectical perspective to examine how macro-level resource disparities influence classroom inclusivity at the micro level.

Empowering Teachers in Policy Development

The study initiates an extensive reimagining of teacher agency within policy frameworks, positioning empowerment that challenges hierarchical systems of knowledge production. Expanding upon Bourdieu's critique of the symbolic, the findings reveal that exclusionary policy design processes are dominated by bureaucratic and academic elites, marginalising teachers' embodied cultural capital and assigning them as only technical implementers instead of co-constructors of pedagogical knowledge of policy development. This demonstrates policy development serves as a platform for reciprocal learning between policymakers and practitioners. The study expands relational empowerment situations by suggesting that a teacher's agency involves the redistribution of both decision-making authority and the symbolic capital to reinterpret policy issues and success criteria. The research suggests representative policymaking forums, focusing on teachers' lived experiences of marginalisation, including workload and ethnic resource inequities. These contributions converge into an innovative paradigm for policy formulation, contesting audit cultures and promoting teachers as public intellectuals whose grounded expertise should dialectically shape national reform agendas.

6.5 Personal Reflection

During my research journey, I explored the engagement and implementation of equity-focused policies under the Blueprint in public preschools in Kuala Lumpur. I employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling to capture the lived experiences of teachers. This methodology was aligned with Hermeneutic Phenomenology and guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to structure my research, which allowed me to explore the sense-making processes of teachers as they navigated policy mandates within their classroom realities. My application of IPA diverged from traditional psychological analyses by emphasising institutional structures over intrapsychic dynamics. For instance, when a teacher described modifying gender-segregated activities to accommodate children, I analysed this as both a hermeneutic act and a sociocultural negotiation. This approach reflects my view of IPA as a bridge between phenomenological depth and critical policy analysis, despite some reservations about its phenomenological purity.

Throughout the research, I maintained a reflexive stance, acknowledging the dual role I held as both a former Malaysian early childhood policymaker and an academic researcher. This insider-outsider perspective provided unique insights but also required careful management of potential biases. I engaged in personal reflexivity, documenting moments where professional biases surfaced and adjusting my analysis to ensure that the participants' voices were prioritised over my preconceived notions. The data collection process was iterative and adaptive. Over a four-week period, participants submitted weekly journal entries responding to prompts designed to elicit critical self-reflection. These prompts were structured to avoid prescriptive language, allowing teachers narrative freedom to express their experiences. The journaling method enriched the data depth, revealing temporal dimensions of policy adaptation that interviews alone could not capture. To mitigate participant burden, journal entries were limited to 500 words, and template structures were provided for those unaccustomed to reflective writing.

I also conducted follow-up interviews to deepen my understanding of participants' experiences. These sessions served to clarify ambiguous points from initial interviews and accommodate participants' requests to expand on emerging themes. I structured follow-ups as flexible, participant-led conversations, using open prompts to minimise steering toward predetermined conclusions. A significant aspect of my research was the emphasis on reflexivity and ethical considerations. I maintained a reflexive journal to document and bracket preconceptions during interviews, ensuring that interpretations remained true to participants' realities. Ethical safeguards were rigorously applied, with informed consent obtained from all participants and measures taken to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

The analysis of the data was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on the meaning-making processes of teachers as they interpreted and implemented the Blueprint. I employed IPA to identify themes and patterns in the data, revealing the dynamic interplay between policy, practice, and Malaysia's unique socio-historical landscape. The findings highlight the systemic barriers teachers faced in implementing the Blueprint and the creative strategies they employed to adapt policies to their local contexts. Teachers' experiences involve not just mere technical implementations of policy but acts of practical wisdom, negotiated through Malaysia's multicultural ethos and the interplay of their prior experiences, the policy text, and the evolving educational system. Reflecting on the research experience, I noted the importance of maintaining a balance between methodological rigour and flexibility. The iterative nature of the research process allowed for continuous refinement of methods and analysis, ensuring that the study remained responsive to the complexities of the educational landscape. The research also underscored the value of reflexivity in qualitative research, highlighting the need for researchers to critically engage with their own positionality and its impact on the research process.

In conclusion, my research provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of teachers implementing the Blueprint. It contributes to the understanding of how educational policies are interpreted and enacted in diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. The study's findings have implications for policy, practice, and future research, offering recommendations for action and further study to enhance equitable quality education in Malaysia. The research journey was a testament to the power of

qualitative inquiry in uncovering the complexities of human experiences and the importance of reflexivity in ensuring the integrity and depth of the research process.

6.6 Concluding Statement

Prior to starting this doctoral research, at the forefront of my mind were the many children, teachers, and schools I have been fortunate to learn from, work with, teach, and support. I have always found the reciprocity of these relationships to be powerful and empowering, and this research has helped me to more deeply understand why this has been the case. This research exploration began with the question of what the impacts of the Blueprint in preschool education from teachers' lenses are in promoting equitable quality education. Through the interpretative phenomenological methodology, it is evident to see how the teacher's lived experiences and the use of Bourdieu's social critical theory connect to the way teachers interpret and practice the Blueprint in preschool reality. Among all policy actors, I chose to see Bourdieu's theory illuminate how changing complex combinations of forces in the education field influence and are influenced by those within them. The elements are never separate, and this theory offers useful tools (field, habitus and capital) for recognising this and considering intersections in dynamic spaces. The six superordinate themes that emerged through the analysis represent the unique patterns among teachers, explaining their experiences and impact of power with the Blueprint. This perspective has been underutilised in policy spaces and in the research that informs the development of those spaces. The implications are that policymakers, schools, teachers and all stakeholders may benefit from considering and reflecting upon the findings of this study. The 'one size fits all' perspective is driven by policymakers, which may serve an institution and neglect the most vulnerable individual within it. There are many ways that the education and school systems struggle to promote equitable quality by enacting the policy for all, but nevertheless, there are reasons to hope for transformation if we are empowered to do so. It has been an inspiring experience to conduct this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email/Letter

Recruitment Email/Letter

Dear Participant,

My name is Hazhari Ismail. As a PhD children at the University of Edinburgh, I am conducting research as part of the requirement for my doctoral study, and I am seeking participants for my research. To be a participant in this research, you must have experience as a public preschool teacher and respond to the **screening survey** provided as part of the recruitment process.

The title of the research is "*Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from a Teacher's Perspective in a Public Preschool in Malaysia*". The aim of this research is to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practises in educational access to promote equitable quality education within the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2025, the national policy context of early childhood education in Malaysia. This will be accomplished through the phenomenology of the lived experience of an early childhood teacher in a public preschool in Malaysia.

For this research, I will invite you to participate in an online interview through Teams, which will take between 60 and 90 minutes per session (follow-up interview if needed). Your interview will be recorded with audio and video, as well as transcribed. All identified information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym (or code). Using your responses, I will check to verify the accuracy of my interpretation. All recordings will be destroyed after transcription, and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected flash drive and in the cloud. You will be asked to provide verbal consent at the start of the interview.

If you are interested in being a potential participant, please answer the **screening survey** attached. This survey is aimed at checking the eligibility and suitability of the participant.

You will be contacted by email and phone **after** the screening survey to determine if you are eligible or not to be a participant.

Thank you for your time.

Kind regards,

Hazhari Ismail (S1460877)

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Appendix B: Principal Notification Email/Letter

Principal Notification Letter

Dear Sir/Mdm/Ms,

My name is Hazhari Ismail. As a PhD children in The University of Edinburgh, I am conducting research as part of the requirement for my doctoral study, and I am seeking participants for my research. I am asking for permission to invite classroom preschool teachers to participate in an individual interview as a part of my research.

The title of the research is "***Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia***". The aim of this research is to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices in educational access in promoting equitable quality education within the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2025, the national policy context of early childhood education in Malaysia. This will be accomplished through the phenomenology on lived experience of early childhood teacher in public preschool in Malaysia.

For this research, I will invite teachers to participant in on online interview through Teams, which will take between 60 – 90 minutes per session (follow up interview if needed). The interview will be recorded with audio and video, as well as transcribed. All identified information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym (or coding). Using your responses, I will checking to verify the accuracy of my interpretation. All recording will destroyed after transcription and transcripts will be kept in a password protected flash drive and clouds. The teacher will be asked to provide verbal consent at the start of the interview.

No direct benefits for research participants are anticipated apart from the opportunity for them to share and reflect on their own experiences and contribute to a developing body of research related to favorable outcomes in early childhood education. However, by exploring and documenting effective programs and practices, I may be able to provide the field with information that could be helpful to school leaders striving to nurture and/or achieve excellence and equity in their own school settings.

Please contact me by phone or email if you require any addition information about my research. If you are unwilling to give me permission to recruit teachers from your

school for this research, please contact me at your earliest conveniences. I have attached a copy of the approval from (1) the University Of Edinburgh Moray House School Of Education and Sport's Ethics Committee and (2) Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia for your reference.

Thank you for you time.

Kind regards,
Hazhari Ismail (S1460877)

+447 85677 3355 (UK)
+6010 869 6890 (Malaysia)

Appendix C: Participant Eligibility Notification Email/Letter (Accepted)

Participant Eligibility Notification Email/Letter (Accepted)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for responding the screening survey for my research. After a thorough checking of the screening survey, I would like to inform you that you are been **ACCEPTED** to be a participant for my research. You met the specific criteria required for the study. It is important to narrow the participant criteria in line with the research's objectives.

A brief about my research. The title of the research is "***Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia***". The aim of this research is to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices in educational access in promoting equitable quality education within the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2025, the national policy context of early childhood education in Malaysia. This will be accomplished through the phenomenology on lived experience of early childhood teacher in public preschool in Malaysia.

For this research, I will invite teachers to participant in on online interview through Teams, which will take between 60 – 90 minutes per session (follow up interview if needed). The interview will be recorded with audio and video, as well as transcribed. All identified information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym (or coding). Using your responses, I will checking to verify the accuracy of my interpretation. All recording will destroyed after transcription and transcripts will be kept in a password protected flash drive and clouds. The teacher will be asked to provide verbal consent at the start of the interview.

Your participation in this research will be much appreciated. As an ethical procedure, please see the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form are attached that provides information regarding your privacy and confidentiality in participating this study. Please be sure to **review** the Information Sheet and **return** the consent form,

subject to permission from your school's principal. All the information about the interview session will be discussed later.
Feel free to email or phone me any question if you do have any further question. Thank you again for your time.

Kind regards,
Hazhari Ismail (S1460877)

+447 85677 3355 (UK)
+6010 869 6890 (Malaysia)

Appendix D: Participant Eligibility Notification Email/Letter (Not Accepted)

Participant Eligibility Notification Email/Letter (Not Accepted)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for responding the screening survey for my research. After a thorough checking of the screening survey, I would like to inform you that you are been **NOT ACCEPTED** to be a participant for my research as you have not met the specific criteria required for the study. It is important to narrow the participant criteria in line with the research's objectives.

Thank you for your application I will not include you at this time, but thank you for your willingness to contribute to this study.

Thank you again for your time.

Kind regards,

Hazhari Ismail (S1460877)

+447 85677 3355 (UK)

+6010 869 6890 (Malaysia)

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

Participant Information Sheet

Title: "Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia"

Researcher: Hazhari Ismail, PhD Children, University of Edinburgh

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study. The intend of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with pertinent details about this research. You are encouraged to ask any question about this research, now, during and/or after the project is completed. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you also have the right to withdraw from this research at any time (and all data collected will be deleted and will not be used in the research).

Please take time to read this entire sheet and decide whether to take part in this research by returning the consent form.

What is the research about and why is it being done?

The aim of this research is to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices in educational access in promoting equitable quality education within the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2025, the national policy context of early childhood education in Malaysia. This will be accomplished through the phenomenology on lived experience of early childhood teacher in public preschool in Malaysia.

What will happen if you take part in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in an individual online interview. The interview session will take approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted and recorded in a private setting to remain confidentiality. Participants will be interviewed over an online video

conferencing tools known as Teams. Prior on the interview session, the discussion on the availability of the participant and researcher will be discussed.

- The interview session will be both audio and video recorded. Prior to the recorded interview session, the Participant Information Sheet will be reviewed, and verbal consent will be established.
- The interview will be conducted by the researcher, and will be recorded for transcription and coding purposes. The interview will be transcribed within 48 hours after the interview is complete and will be sent to each participant.
- Participant will be asked to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. The time estimates for the transcript review may vary and provide revisions as needed. If there is no communication from the participants during the week given to provide adjustments, the transcript will be considered as accurate.
- Once all interviews are completed, coding and identifying common themes will occur. Once the collective theme-based coding is complete, the themes will be sent to each participant form member checking through an email using the blind copy feature, to protect privacy of all participants. Participants will have one week to respond with adjustments to coded themes. If there is no communication from the participants during the week given to provide adjustment, the coded themes will be considered as accurate.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

You should not expect to receive any direct benefit from taking part in this research. The possible benefits you may experience from being in this research include opportunities to give you a voice and platform to share you lived experience in interpreting and practicing Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2023 from your own perspective – as a policy actor. Your experiences possibly will help others glean from experience especially for the policy maker to include your voice for reenactment of the policy can be made.

What risks might you experience from being in this research?

The risk involved with participation in this research are minimal and may include:

- Potential psychological harm: Teacher will be exposing their experiences, and the risk of negative feeling and emotional stress could potentially be elevated during

reflection and could feel like an invasion of privacy and confidentiality. These feelings and added emotional stress may impact the participants responses, and or continuation of their participation in this study although the probability and magnitude of harm/discomfort anticipated because of participating in this study are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

- Should you become emotionally distressed, the interview can be paused, cancelled, or rescheduled for another day and time. Please review the '*What about privacy and confidentiality?*' section of this Information Sheet for steps for how the researcher will minimize your invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.
- If you feel that questions are too sensitive, personal in nature, or do not want to answer, you may skip that question, for any reason.

However, the following are the the two website URL that links to mental health support services where you could seek mental health support services in case you need them. A website link to mental health support services a website link to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services provided by the Ministry of Health Malaysia are as follow: https://careercounselling4u.uitm.edu.my https://www.mindasihatkkm.com

Will you be compensated for being this research?

You will not be compensated for being in this research.

Is this participation voluntary?

Participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect you current of future relations with the University of Edinburgh. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What will happen to the data of this research?

The researcher will hold data about your years of teaching experience, and your higher education background, based on your answers in the interview. All data gained from this research will not be combined with any other data. Anonymous excerpts from your

interview transcription will be used in the researcher's PhD dissertation and other academic publications. Your anonymised data may also be included in academic reports, and presentations.
All interview recordings will be destroyed when the research ends in September 2025. With your consent, your anonymised data may be stored as a public dataset for a minimum of five years after the research ends in September 2025 to be used in future research.

What will happen to the results of this research?
After the research is finalised, anonymised research findings may be shared with the university administration and academic staff of the university you are currently attached to for future improvement in educational policy. Quotes or key findings will be anonymised: we will remove any information that could, in our assessment, allow anyone to identify you.

What about privacy and confidentiality?
The researcher will do the best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research could be reviewed by representatives of the University which safeguard your privacy at every stageAll ethical and General Data Protection Regulation (GPDR) procedures are being followed in line with the University of Edinburgh's regulations.
The result of this research may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any paper or talks are given about this research, you name will not be used and replaced with pseudonyms.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

Privacy refers to the right to control access to ourselves and our personal information. Participants have the right to control the degree, timing, and conditions for sharing their bodies, thoughts, and experiences with others. Privacy must be protected before and during recruitment, the consent process, as well as during participation in research activities. Methods to protect participant privacy include:

- You will be informed that interviews will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- Your private data is not collected without your knowledge and consent.

Confidentiality refers to agreements made between researchers and participants, through the consent process, about if and how researcher will protect information provided by the participants. Methods to protect participant data confidentiality include:

- Any paper records or field notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office accessible only by the researcher.
- Safeguards for data will be utilized using a password-protected computer and restricted access to data.
- You will be asked not to repeat anything you have been asked or learned from to others after the interview has been conducted.
- All personally identifiable information during the transcription process will be stripped and will use a pseudonym instead of your name.
- All recorded interviews will be destroyed after all transcripts have been verified for accuracy by you.
- All personally identifiable information, such as your name, e-mail which was obtained for recruitment purposes will be destroyed after all transcripts have been verified for accuracy by you.
- A master list which was used during coding process, will be stored securely stored in a locked file cabinet, and separately from the study data. The master list will be destroyed when it is no longer needed, or at the conclusion of the study.

All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected encrypted computer, on the University's secure encrypted cloud storage services (OneDrive). Your consent information and personal data will be kept separately from your responses in a password protected folder in order to minimise risk.

How will the information about you be used Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. People who do not need to know your personal information will not be able to see your name and/or contact details. When reporting the findings, your

data will have a pseudonym provided to you to allow you to remain anonymous and undetectable.

Your personal information will only be reviewed by the lead researcher, Mr. Hazhari bin Ismail and the supervision team (Dr. Lynn McNair and Dr. William Smith) supervising this research at the University of Edinburgh. All electronic data will be stored on password-protected devices/spaces following university regulations.

What is your data protection rights?

The University of Edinburgh is a Data Controller for the information you provide. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance Data Protection Law. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, and objection. For more details, including the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the University Data Protection Officer at dpo@ed.ac.uk. For general information about how we use your data, go to: edin.ac/privacy-research

What if you have questions about the research?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the researcher via email and/or phone at
or ++447856773355 (UK) or +60108696890 (Malaysia).

If you have further questions about the research (this covers complaints), please contact the lead supervisor, Dr Lynn McNair on or the Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics Committee on MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk. Please provide the research title and detail of the nature of your complaint in the email.

Appendix F: Teacher Participant Consent (Online Form)

Teacher Participant Consent (Online Form)

Title: “Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher’s Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia”

Researcher: Hazhari Ismail, PhD Children, University of Edinburgh

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above research. ☐
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction. ☐
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and without my legal rights being affected. ☐
4. I agree to my interview being video recorded. ☐
5. I agree that my anonymised data may be stored as a public dataset for a minimum of five years after the research ends in September 2025 to be used for future research. ☐
6. By ticking this box, I agree to take part in the above research. ☐

Detail about my information:

Name :

Email :

Contact No. :

Preschool :

_____

Signature

Date:

Appendix G: Screening Survey (inclusion and exclusion criteria)

Screening Survey (inclusion and exclusion criteria)

i. Name
ii. Contact Number
iii. Email

A. Screening

1. Highest Level of education?

	Certificate/Foundation/MSC (Level 3)	*Reject*	*In public preschool, the minimum level to be a teacher is Diploma*
	Diploma (MSC Level 4)	*Allow*	*Fulfil the academic level requirement to be a teacher in public preschool*
	Bachelor's degree	*Allow*	
	Master's degree	*Allow*	
	PhD	*Allow*	

2. Years of experiences in early childhood education

	0-2 years	*Reject*	*MEB have 3 waves and the third wave started on 2021. These years of experience consider immature not even from the beginning of the Blueprint, but the*

			beginning of the 3rd wave.
	3-5 years	*Allow*	*Have experienced in at least 3rd wave of MEB (and more)*
	More than 5 years	*Allow*	

3. How many years you work in public/government preschool?

	Never	*Reject*	*The research targeted a public preschool teacher.*
	0-2 years	*Reject*	*Not enough experience within 2 years.*
	3-5 years	*Allow*	*Consider experience working in public preschool*
	More than 5 years	*Allow*	

4. In which area do you work in the early childhood field??

	Rural	*Reject*	*The setting for this research is in urban area.*
	Suburban	*Allow*	*Suburban and urban area are the setting of the research*
	Urban	*Allow*	

5. Please mention in which state you work in the early childhood setting?

		Only KUALA LUMPUR is Allowed	*The study specifically focuses on Kuala Lumpur setting.*

6. What role or position are you in at your workplace?

	Teacher	*Allow*	*Involve in teaching children.*
	Assistant Teacher	*Reject*	*Limited roles and responsibilities.*
	Head of School	*Reject*	*More to leadership and less experience in teaching.*
	Any managerial role	*Reject*	*Not involve in teaching process.*
	Teacher + Managerial Role	*Allow*	*Involve in teaching children even their roles are divided into other responsibilities.*

7. How many times have you attended any training/workshop/course related to the Education Blueprint 2015–2025?

	One	*Allow*	*At least, teacher is trained about the Blueprint. They have knowledge and understanding on it.*
	More than one (including refreshment course)	*Allow*	
	Never	*Reject*	*Don't have knowledge and understanding on the Blueprint.*

8. How would you describe your proficiency in the Education Blueprint 2015–2025, particularly for early childhood education?

	Fundamental awareness (Basic knowledge)	*Reject*	*In this study, to have knowledge is not enough, but practical and application are required to observe the experience of the Blueprint.*
	Novice (limited experience)	*Allow*	*In any level is accepted due to the participant have experience in practicing the Blueprint.*
	Intermediate (Practical application)	*Allow*	
	Advanced (applied theory)	*Allow*	

Tool

The researcher uses online form for screening survey. Google Form is selected for the form.

Appendix H: Semi-structured Interview Protocol (with prompt)

Topic: Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia

Research Questions

5 What do public preschool **teachers experience in interpreting** national policy in relation to educational access for promoting equitable quality in early childhood education?

6 What do public preschool **teachers lived experience in practicing** educational access policy in the promotion of equitable quality in early childhood education?

No	Question	Duration (min)	RQ	Remarks
	Please tell me about yourself - What do you teach? - How long have you been a teacher?	5		Icebreaking
1.	Definition of diversity? If I were a fly on the wall in your classroom, how might I see diversity at work in your classroom? - What is you teaching philosophy related with fairness and inclusion? - How do you demonstrate it in practice? Examples? - How comfortable or confident do you feel to respond to the needs of your	10		Background context

	children's population? Needs relative to particular disability. Emotional needs, cognitive needs?			
2.	Educational Access What do you understand about educational access? What is your expectation of access as you entered the teaching profession? In previous section, we talk about diversity in your classroom. How is this diversity connected with the education access?	10		Background context
3.	<u>Education Policy</u> – Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 To what extend do you believe education policy play its role in shaping educational system? - Do you think it is important as a teacher to know/understand, why?	10	RQ1	Education Policy
4.	You attended any training/courses/townhall related with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. What is your expectation about the Blueprint? - Does the Blueprint meet your expectation – could you describe it? (P – duration, aspect, ECE)	10	RQ1	Education Policy

	- Why you have been selected to attend the training/courses/townhall? - During the course/training/townhall, do you have any chance to ask or share any experience to the audience? Example? What do you feel?			
5.	Do you think your school policy in line with the objectives of THE BLUEPRINT, particularly in education access? How it happens? Is there any change made to meet them? For example? Do you develop a new policy/practice to meet them? For example? What is you impression of your school's openness to issue of inclusion? Example?	10	RQ2	Education Policy – school
6.	Is there any time when you do not understand about THE BLUEPRINT, you have a further discussion with your colleagues internally or/and externally? From the official website? Any sources? Can you describe the issue?	5	RQ2	Education Policy – school
7.	Reflection You realize the THE BLUEPRINT currently at the Phase 3, final phase approaching 2025. In relation to education access, do you experience yourself different as a teacher?	10	RQ2	Reflection

	How THE BLUEPRINT shape you? Do you have a different practice when dealing with specific educational access issue before and after you know THE BLUEPRINT? What change? Why? Do you feel like other teachers have a different practice as well? If yes, how do your account for differences between their experiences and yours?			
8.	Think about what you did this year (and past) in your class in terms of educational access in promoting fairness and inclusion, how much were you able to do compare to what you thought you would do before you know THE BLUEPRINT? What are some of things you did? Did you do all that you thought you would? What will you differently if you do not know THE BLUEPRINT?	10	RQ2	Reflection
9.	How would you characterize your THE BLUEPRINT experiences? If you had to think back on the highlights of practicing THE BLUEPRINT, could you describe one the **best** times? Also, could you describe one the more **challenging** moments? If you had to do it again (best and challenging), what would you do differently? ***Why do you do that?***	10	RQ2	Reflection

10.	If you had to think about your successes and challenges in practicing THE BLUEPRINT in relation to educational access, what do you think **contributed** to the successes? ***Can* you describe these facilitators and barriers?**	10	RQ2	Reflection
11	How well do the THE BLUEPRINT understand and include you as a teacher/person? - How connected do you feel toward the Blueprint? - How much respect do you think you obtain from the Blueprint, do you feel like belong at the THE BLUEPRINT?	10	RQ2	Reflection
	Total	110 min (1 hour 50 min)		

Highlights

1. For the first 3 questions, it is not a direct question to answer my research question, its more to understanding their background and early understanding on equitable quality and educational asses.

Appendix I: Semi-structured Interview Protocol (clean)

No	Questions
	Please tell me about yourself - What do you teach? - How long have you been a teacher?
1.	Definition of diversity? If I were a fly on the wall in your classroom, how might I see diversity at work in your classroom? - What is you teaching philosophy related with fairness and inclusion? How do you demonstrate it in practice? Examples?
2.	Educational Access - What do you understand about educational access? - Just now, we talk about diversity in your classroom. How is this diversity connected with the education access?
3.	Education Policy – Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 To what extend do you believe education policy play its role in shaping educational system? - Do you think it is important as a teacher to know/understand, why?
4.	You attended any training/courses/townhall related with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. - What is your expectation about the Blueprint? Does the Blueprint meet your expectation – could you describe it?
5.	Do you think your school policy in line with the objectives of THE BLUEPRINT, particularly in education access? How it happens? Is there any change made to meet them? For example? Do you develop a new policy/practice to meet them? For example?
6.	Is there any time when you do not understand about THE BLUEPRINT, you have a further discussion with your colleagues internally or/and externally? From the official website? Any sources? Can you describe the issue?

7.	Reflection - You realize the THE BLUEPRINT currently at the Phase 3, final phase approaching 2025. In relation to education access, do you experience yourself different as a teacher? Do you have a different practice when dealing with specific educational access issue before and after you know THE BLUEPRINT? What change? Why?
8.	Think about what you did this year (and past) in your class in terms of educational access in promoting fairness and inclusion. - How much were you able to do compare to what you thought you would do before you know THE BLUEPRINT? What are some of things you did? Did you do all that you thought you would?
9.	How would you characterize your THE BLUEPRINT experiences? If you had to think back on the highlights of practicing THE BLUEPRINT, could you describe one the **best** times? Also, could you describe one the more **challenging** moments? If you had to do it again (best and challenging), what would you do differently? ***Why do you do that?***
10.	If you had to think about your successes and challenges in practicing THE BLUEPRINT in relation to educational access, what do you think **contributed** to the successes? *Can* you describe these facilitators and barriers?
11.	How well do the THE BLUEPRINT understand and include you as a teacher/person? - How connected do you feel toward the Blueprint? - How much respect do you think you obtain from the Blueprint, do you feel like belong at the THE BLUEPRINT?

Appendix J: Poster Participant Recruitment

Appendix K: Ethical approval from University of Edinburgh

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Moray House School of Education and Sport

Research, Knowledge Exchange and Impact Office
Moray House School of Education and Sport
The University of Edinburgh
Old Moray House
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

D/D +44 (0)131 651 4846
S/B +44 (0)131 650 1000

www.ed.ac.uk

Ref: HISM20062023

Hazhari Ismail
Moray House School of Education and Sport

Date: 10th August 2023

Dear Hazhari,

Title: Exploring the Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia

The School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee has now considered your request for ethical approval for the studies detailed in the above application.

This is to confirm that the Sub-Committee is happy to approve your application and that the research meets the School Ethics Approval criterion for this particular project. A standard condition of this ethical approval is that should any amendment, or deviation from the original protocol outlined in your application need to be made to carry out or continue your research, please notify the Ethics Sub-Committee at MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk. The Committee also needs to be notified if there are any unexpected results or events once the research is underway that raise questions about the safety of the research.

Should you receive any formal complaints relating to the study you should notify the MHSES Ethics Committee immediately by email to MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of:
Dr Fiona O'Hanlon
Director of Ethics

The University of Edinburgh is a charitable body, registered in Scotland, with registration number SC005336

No. 3510

UNIT PERANCANG EKONOMI
JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI

PAS PENYELIDIKAN

Nama : HAZHARI BIN ISMAIL
No.Pasport/No.K.P.: 890517-14-5411
Warganegara : MALAYSIA
Sah Hingga : 27.08.2024
Rujukan : EPU 40/200/19/3850

KAD PAS INI ADALAH SURAT RASMI DIKELUARKAN MENURUT PEKELILING AM: PERATURAN BAGI MENJALANKAN PENYELIDIKAN DI MALAYSIA DILARANG MEMBAWA PAS INI KELUAR DARI MALAYSIA.

SESIAPA YANG MENJUMPAI HENDAKLAH MENYERAHKANNYA KEPADA KETUA PENGARAH UNIT PERANCANG EKONOMI, JABATAN PERDANA MENTERI, 62502 PUTRAJAYA.

'EDUCATION ACCESS POLICY IN PROMOTING EQUITABLE QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY FROM TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE IN PUBLIC PRESCHOOL IN MALAYSIA'
Tarikh : 28.08.2023

Ketua Pengarah
Unit Perancang Ekonomi
Jabatan Perdana Menteri

REVIEW OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL
ULASAN TENTANG CADANGAN KAJIAN

Researcher's Name / Nama : **Hazhari bin Ismail**

Research/ Kajian: [✓] **Ph.D / Kedoktoran** [ ] **Masters / Sarjana** [ ] **Am** [ ] **Sarjana Muda**

Name of institution/ Nama Institusi : **University of Edinburgh United Kingdom**

Research Title/ Tajuk Kajian : ***Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia***

a) ***Views concerning the research proposal:***
Setelah membaca cadangan kajian seperti yang dinyatakan di atas, pandangan terhadap cadangan kajian adalah seperti berikut:

i) ***Area of study*** **/ Bidang yang akan dikaji:**

[✓] ***Suitable*** **/ Sesuai** [ ] ***Not Suitable*** **/ Tidak Sesuai**

ii) **Sample *and research location* / Sampel dan lokasi kajian:**

[✓] ***Suitable*** **/ Sesuai** [ ] ***Not Suitable*** **/ Tidak Sesuai**

iii) ***Benefits of the research or its importance to the Ministry Of Education, Malaysia /*** **Hasil penyelidikan - faedah penyelidikan kepada Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia**

[✓] ***Beneficial*** **/ Faedah** [ ] ***Not Beneficial*** **/ Tidak Berfaedah**

[ ] ***Not Applicable*** **/ Tidak Berkaitan**

b) ***Suggestions made by EPRD, Ministry of Education, Malaysia*** **/ Cadangan BPPDP, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia:**

[ ] ***Approved*** **/ Diluluskan** [✓] ***Approved with Conditions /*** **Diluluskan dengan bersyarat**

[ ] ***Not Approved*** **/ Tidak diluluskan**

Findings of this study will be important to the MOE because it informs policy makers on:

"To gain new knowledge about how equitable quality education is understood and implemented in the early childhood and to support education aspirations".

***Remarks*:**

Pengutipan data termasuk secara dalam talian (contoh: *google form*) perlu mendapatkan kebenaran Pengarah Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri dan pertimbangan pentadbir sekolah. Pengutipan data tidak boleh mengganggu aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran murid. Penglibatan, pemerhatian serta rakaman video terhadap aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran murid di dalam bilik darjah tidak dibenarkan.

(DR. ZAININ BINTI BIDIN)
Senior Principal Assistant Director
Policy Research and Evaluation Sector
Educational Planning and Research Division
Ministry of Education, Malaysia

Tarikh: 21 **Ogos 2023**

Ulasan Luar Negara/2017

Appendix L: Research Pass from EPU

KEMENTERIAN PENDIDIKAN MALAYSIA
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION MALAYSIA
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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH DIVISION
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Ruj. Kami: KPM.600-3/2/3 Jld 3(66)
Tarikh: 02 Ogos 2023

Ketua Pengarah
Unit Perancang Ekonomi
Jabatan Perdana Menteri
Setia Perdana 5 & 6, Kompleks Setia Perdana
Pusat Pentadbiran Kerajaan Persekutuan
62502 PUTRAJAYA
(u.p.: En. Muhammad Jawad bin Tajuddin)

Tuan,

Permohonan Untuk Menjalankan Penyelidikan di Malaysia: "Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education : Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia".
Nama: Hazhari bin Ismail.

Dengan hormatnya saya merujuk kepada perkara di atas.

2. Adalah saya diarahkan memaklumkan bahawa permohonan Hazhari bin Ismail untuk menjalankan kajian seperti yang tersebut di atas telah diluluskan dengan bersyarat:

a. **Pengutipan data termasuk secara dalam talian (contoh: google form) perlu mendapatkan kebenaran Pengarah Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri dan pertimbangan pentadbir sekolah. Pengutipan data tidak boleh mengganggu aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran murid.Penglibatan, pemerhatian serta rakaman video terhadap aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran murid di dalam bilik darjah tidak dibernarkan.**

3. Bersama-sama ini disertakan ulasan Bahagian ini ke atas cadangan penyelidikan yang dikemukakan.

Sekian dimaklumkan, terima kasih.

"MALAYSIA MADANI"

"BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA"

Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

(DR. RUHAYA BINTI HASSAN)
Timbalan Pengarah Penyelidikan dan Penilaian
Sektor Penyelidikan Dan Penilaian Dasar
Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan
b.p. Ketua Setiausaha
Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia

QUALITY SYSTEM SIRIM IQNet
CERTIFIED TO ISO 9001:2015
CERT.NO: QMS 1222

Appendix M: Approval Letter from EPRD

KEMENTERIAN PENDIDIKAN MALAYSIA
Jabatan Pendidikan Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur
Persiaran Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin
50604 Kuala Lumpur

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Ruj. Tuan : -
Ruj.Kami : JPWPKL.600-9/1/5Jld.11(50)
Tarikh : 7 September 2023

Hazhari Ismail
University Of Edinburgh Old College
South Bridge Edinburgh, EH8 9YL

Tuan,

KEBENARAN UNTUK MENJALANKAN KAJIAN :
EDUCATION ACCESS POLICY IN PROMOTING EQUITABLE QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION : PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY FROM TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE IN PUBLIC PRESCHOOL IN MALAYSIA

Dengan hormatnya perkara di atas dirujuk dan e-mel tuan serta surat dari Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia KPM.600-3/2/3Jld3(66) bertarikh 22 Ogos 2023 adalah berkaitan.

2. Sukacita dimaklumkan bahawa permohonan tuan untuk menjalankan kajian bertajuk ***"EDUCATION ACCESS POLICY IN PROMOTING EQUITABLE QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION : PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY FROM TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE IN PUBLIC PRESCHOOL IN MALAYSIA"*** diluluskan dan tuan adalah tertakluk kepada syarat-syarat berikut:

2.1 Kelulusan ini adalah tertakluk kepada kandungan dalam cadangan penyelidikan yang telah diluluskan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia;
2.2 Sila kemukakan surat kebenaran ini ketika berurusan dengan pihak pengurusan di Sektor/Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah atau Pengetua/Guru Besar di sekolah berkenaan;
2.3 Kebenaran ini bergantung kepada pertimbangan pihak pentadbir sekolah berkenaan;
2.4 Kelulusan ini hanya untuk sekolah-sekolah di bawah pentadbiran Jabatan Pendidikan Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur sahaja;
2.5 Maklumat penyelidik dimasukkan dalam instrumen kajian;
2.6 Tuan hendaklah mengemukakan senaskhah hasil kajian kepada jabatan ini sebaik sahaja ia siap sepenuhnya;
2.7 Penyelidik perlu mendapatkan kebenaran bertulis daripada ibu bapa/penjaga murid yang terlibat dalam kajian ini;
2.8 Rakaman video terhadap aktiviti pengajaran dan pembelajaran murid di dalam bilik darjah **tidak dibenarkan;** dan
2.9 Maklumat peribadi serta data murid adalah sulit dan tidak boleh dikeluarkan tanpa kelulusan jabatan ini.

3. Kebenaran ini adalah untuk tujuan dipohon sahaja dan sah digunakan bermula dari **28 Ogos 2023** hingga **27 Ogos 2024.**

...2/-

Appendix N: Approval from Kuala Lumpur State Education Department

Appendix O: Journal Reflection Prompts

Journaling (Teacher's Reflection) Prompt

Topic: Education Access Policy in Promoting Equitable Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenology Study from Teacher's Perspective in Public Preschool in Malaysia

Research Questions

1. What do public preschool **teachers experience in interpreting** national policy in relation to educational access for promoting equitable quality in early childhood education?
2. What do public preschool **teachers lived experience in practicing** educational access policy in the promotion of equitable quality in early childhood education?

The study collects the participants' journal entries and reflections over a 4-week period. The researcher requests the participants to respond to an online weekly journal prompt and submit their responses on a weekly basis.

The reflections prompt participants to ponder deeply on their experiences and readiness to meet diverse learners at the beginning of the school term, considering their level of preparation and support received. Additionally, participants are encouraged to reflect on classroom management strategies to meet diverse learner needs, aligning with teaching objectives and utilizing instructional materials effectively. Furthermore, participants are prompted to reflect on the extent to which the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 informs their classroom management practices and their feelings about it. Moreover, participants are asked to reflect on the challenges encountered in meeting expectations associated with the teaching profession, including non-teaching responsibilities, and to consider how the blueprint aligns with the reality of the preschool setting. Finally, participants are invited to reflect on their experiences in implementing the Malaysia Education Blueprint, identifying both limitations and opportunities and expressing their hopes for future education blueprints.

(In Malay language)

Kajian ini mengumpulkan entri jurnal dan refleksi peserta sepanjang tempoh 4 minggu. Penyelidik meminta peserta untuk merespon kepada arahan jurnal mingguan secara dalam talian dan menghantar respon mereka setiap minggu.

Refleksi tersebut menggalakkan peserta untuk merenung secara mendalam tentang pengalaman dan kesediaan mereka untuk memenuhi keperluan pelajar yang pelbagai pada permulaan penggal sekolah, dengan mempertimbangkan tahap persediaan dan sokongan yang diterima. Selain itu, peserta digalakkan untuk merenung tentang strategi pengurusan kelas untuk memenuhi keperluan pelajar yang pelbagai, selaras dengan objektif pengajaran dan menggunakan bahan pengajaran secara efektif. Peserta juga diminta untuk merenung tentang sejauh mana Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025 memberi informasi kepada amalan pengurusan kelas mereka dan perasaan mereka tentangnya. Tambahan pula, peserta diminta untuk merenung tentang cabaran yang dihadapi dalam memenuhi jangkaan yang dikaitkan dengan profesion keguruan, termasuk tanggungjawab bukan pengajaran, dan untuk mempertimbangkan bagaimana pelan tersebut selaras dengan realiti di setting prasekolah. Akhirnya, peserta dijemput untuk merenung tentang pengalaman mereka dalam melaksanakan Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia, mengenal pasti kedua-dua batasan dan peluang dan meluahkan harapan mereka untuk pelan pendidikan masa depan.

Weekly Journaling Prompt for Public Preschool Teachers

Arahan Jurnal Mingguan untuk Guru Prasekolah Kerajaan

Reflection	Prompts	RQ
Reflection 1	**Understanding and Interpreting the National Policy** - Reflect on your understanding of the national policy concerning educational access in early childhood education. How do you interpret these policies in your daily teaching practices? - Consider how well-prepared you feel at the start of the school term to implement these policies. What kind of support and resources have been provided to you to aid in this preparation? **Memahami dan Mentafsir Dasar Nasional** - Renungkan pemahaman anda mengenai dasar nasional berkaitan akses pendidikan dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak. Bagaimanakah anda mentafsirkan dasar-dasar ini dalam amalan mengajar harian anda? - Pertimbangkan sejauh mana anda merasa bersedia pada permulaan penggal sekolah untuk melaksanakan dasar-dasar ini. Apakah jenis sokongan dan sumber yang telah disediakan kepada anda untuk membantu dalam persiapan ini?	**1**
Reflection 2	**Policy in Practice** - Discuss your experiences in applying the education access policy within your classroom. How does this policy help you to address the needs of diverse learners? - Reflect on the strategies you employ for classroom management and teaching. How are these influenced by the policy directives from the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025?	**1,2**

	Dasar dalam Amalan - Bincangkan pengalaman anda dalam mengaplikasikan dasar akses pendidikan dalam kelas anda. Bagaimanakah dasar ini membantu anda memenuhi keperluan pelajar yang pelbagai? - Renungkan strategi yang anda gunakan untuk pengurusan kelas dan pengajaran. Bagaimanakah ini dipengaruhi oleh arahan dasar dari Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025?	
Reflection 3	**Challenges and Realities** - Reflect on the challenges you face in aligning the expectations of the Malaysia Education Blueprint with the realities of your preschool setting. Include specific examples related to both teaching and non-teaching responsibilities. - How do these challenges affect your ability to meet the diverse needs of your learners? What support would you need to overcome these challenges? **Cabaran dan Realiti** - Renungkan cabaran yang anda hadapi dalam menyelaraskan jangkaan Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia dengan realiti di setting prasekolah anda. Sertakan contoh khusus yang berkaitan dengan tanggungjawab mengajar dan bukan mengajar. - Bagaimanakah cabaran ini mempengaruhi keupayaan anda untuk memenuhi keperluan pelajar yang pelbagai? Apakah sokongan yang anda perlukan untuk mengatasi cabaran ini?	**2**

Reflection 4	**Reflections on the Blueprint and Looking Forward** - Consider the extent to which the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 has shaped your classroom practices and management. What are its strengths and limitations as you see them in your everyday teaching environment? - Reflect on your hopes and recommendations for future educational blueprints. What changes or improvements would you like to see to better support equitable quality in early childhood education? **Refleksi tentang Pelan dan Pandangan ke Hadapan** - Pertimbangkan sejauh mana Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025 telah membentuk amalan dan pengurusan kelas anda. Apakah kekuatan dan kelemahan pelan ini seperti yang anda lihat dalam persekitaran pengajaran harian anda? - Renungkan harapan dan cadangan anda untuk pelan pendidikan masa depan. Apakah perubahan atau penambahbaikan yang anda ingin lihat untuk lebih menyokong kualiti yang saksama dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak?	**2**

General Guidance for All Entries:

- In each week's reflection, please try to provide specific examples from your teaching experiences that illustrate your points.
- Feel free to discuss your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the policies and their implementation in your classroom.
- Your insights are invaluable in understanding the practical implications of national education policies from the perspective of frontline educators.

Arahan Umum untuk Semua Penulisan:

- Dalam refleksi mingguan, cuba sediakan contoh khusus dari pengalaman mengajar anda yang menggambarkan poin anda.

- Anda bebas untuk membincangkan pemikiran, perasaan, dan reaksi anda terhadap dasar-dasar dan pelaksanaannya di dalam kelas anda.
- Pandangan anda sangat berharga dalam memahami implikasi praktikal dasar-dasar pendidikan nasional dari perspektif pendidik barisan hadapan.

Appendix P: Pilot Study Report

Date: December 2023

Introduction

This pilot study was conducted to evaluate the feasibility of the research design, recruitment strategies, and data collection tools for the main study. The aim was to identify logistical, methodological, and procedural challenges in exploring public preschool teachers' interpretations and lived experiences of Malaysia's National Education Blueprint 2013-2025. A single participant (a public preschool teacher in Kuala Lumpur) was recruited to test the interview schedule, the researcher's phenomenological engagement, transcription, and preliminary data analysis.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment

Inclusion Criteria: Public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur with direct experience implementing the Education Blueprint.

Recruitment Process: A screening survey was distributed via institutional channels. One eligible participant was selected after a 10-day response window.

Ethics Approval: Obtained from the University of Edinburgh and the Malaysian Economic Planning Unit (EPU), with additional permissions required from the State Education Department and school principals.

Data Collection

Tool: Semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams, audio-recorded with participant consent.

Interview Schedule: Two phases:

Background Context: Questions on policy awareness and institutional support.

Lived Experiences: Open-ended prompts on interpreting and practicing equitable access policies.

Duration: 45–60 minutes.

Analysis

Transcription: Manual transcription of audio recordings.

Phenomenological Analysis: Preliminary thematic coding to identify patterns in the participant's lived experiences.

Key Findings and Reflections

Reflections are structured around four critical aspects identified during the pilot:

Recruitment Challenges

Issue	**Adjustments for Main Study**
Multi-layered permissions: Time-consuming approvals from school principals (due to participants being spread across schools).	Recruit multiple participants per school to minimise administrative delays.
Participant attrition: A long gap between recruitment and interview led to disengagement.	Use **snowball sampling** and rapid follow-ups (e.g., reminders via WhatsApp).
School calendar conflicts: Participants unavailable during exams/holidays.	Align recruitment with non-peak school periods (e.g., mid-term breaks).

Phenomenological Engagement

Issue	**Adjustments for Main Study**
Bracketing: The researcher's insider perspective (prior ECEC policy experience) risked influencing interpretations.	Maintain a **reflexive journal** to document and bracket preconceptions during interviews.
Shared meaning: Balancing the participant's "expertise" in their lived experience with the researcher's theoretical knowledge.	Use open-ended prompts (e.g., *"Can you describe a time when policy guidelines conflicted with your classroom reality?"*) to prioritise participant-led narratives.

Research Process Difficulties

Issue	**Adjustments for Main Study**
Interview technique: Transitioning from structured protocol to phenomenological depth required flexibility.	Train in **active listening** to probe emergent themes (e.g., *"You mentioned resource gaps, how did that shape your approach?"*).

Time-intensive transcription: Manual transcription of 60-minute interviews took ~6 hours.	Use transcription software (e.g., Otter.ai) for draft transcripts, with manual verification for accuracy.

3.4 Interview Logistics

Issue	**Adjustments for Main Study**
Technical barriers: Unstable internet and Teams recording setup disrupted flow.	Provide participants with a pre-interview **technical checklist** (e.g., testing microphone, internet stability).
Question clarity: Some policy-related terms (e.g., "equitable access") required simplification.	Pilot-test revised questions with 2–3 teachers to ensure accessibility.

Discussion and reflection

The pilot study highlighted critical areas for refinement:

- Recruitment Efficiency: Snowball sampling and school-based recruitment will mitigate delays.
- Phenomenological Rigour: Reflexivity and participant-centred questioning are vital to avoid researcher bias.
- Technical Preparedness: Pre-interview briefings on Teams usage will minimise disruptions.
- Data Management: Allocating extended timelines for transcription and thematic analysis is essential.

The participant's engagement validated the interview schedule's viability, with rich insights into policy-practice gaps (e.g., "We lack training to translate policy goals into classroom activities"). However, the single-participant sample limited diversity in perspectives, underscoring the need for a larger sample (15–20 participants) in the main study.

Conclusion

The pilot study confirmed the research design's overall feasibility while identifying actionable improvements. Key lessons include:

- Streamlining permissions by targeting clusters of teachers within schools.
- Enhancing phenomenological rigour through reflexive practices.

- Allocating additional time for transcription and iterative coding.
- These adjustments will strengthen the main study's capacity to address the research questions and contribute meaningfully to ECE equity literature.

Next Steps:

Revise interview questions for clarity.

Secure permissions for multi-participant schools.

- Conduct training sessions on phenomenological interviewing techniques.

Poster **Presentation**

"EXPLORING EDUCATION ACCESS IN PROMOTING EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A REFLECTION FROM PILOT STUDY"

Hazhari Ismail, Lynn McNair, William C. Smith
University of Edinburgh, UK

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Authors
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This study is funded by Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia & Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

Funded by:

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

- The background of the study is centered on the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and involves investigating the experiences of teachers within this context. The study employs a phenomenological approach to understand teachers' perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of the phenomenon. The research is interpretative in nature, aiming to examine the qualities of human experience as it relates to the educational reforms outlined in the Blueprint.

OBJECTIVE

The pilot study aimed to identify issues and barriers related to recruiting potential participants, engage with participants from a phenomenological perspective to create shared meaning, reflect on the importance of the research process, and consider the difficulty in conducting phenomenological inquiry. It also aimed to refine the interview and interview questions based on the pilot experience

METHODOLOGY

- The pilot study included two participants with characteristics required for the actual research.
- The pilot study's objectives were to test the viability of the interview schedule, the researcher's interview technique, transcription skills, and data-analysis skills.
- Ethical permissions were obtained from the University of Edinburgh and additional permissions from Malaysian authorities.

RESULTS

Results show the outcome of the research and should answer the question or hypothesis stated in the introduction. State what you've found from your study.

Key issues and future considerations are identified in four areas: recruitment, phenomenological engagement, research process, and interview execution.

ANALYSIS

The pilot study indicates that with careful planning and consideration of these issues, successful participant engagement and valuable data collection can be achieved for the larger study. The researcher suggests that reflections from the pilot experience can contribute to the analysis, and the positive pilot experience suggests that participant engagement and retention in the main study are feasible.

RECRUITMENT
In recruitment, ethical permissions and a time-consuming process of obtaining consent from various authorities are noted, along with challenges in participant filtering and scheduling interviews around the school calendar. The immediate follow-up, alternative recruitment strategies, and careful scheduling to address these issues.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT
Phenomenological engagement raises concerns about bracketing, where the researcher's personal experience may influence the study; the solution is to acknowledge the participant as the expert and to aim for shared meaning.

RESEARCH PROCESS
In the research process, maintaining a phenomenologically consistent interview technique and critical self-awareness are highlighted.

INTERVIEW EXECUTION
In the interview phase, technical aspects such as familiarity with the Teams platform, internet stability, and appropriate handling of recordings are discussed, with the researcher advising on protocol improvements and participant preparation.

REFLECTION AND KEY ACTIONS

Based on the provided context, the conclusion of the pilot study can be summarized with the following actionable items:

1. Refinement of Recruitment Strategies
The pilot study has highlighted the need for immediate filtering of participants and maintaining regular communication to keep them engaged. Alternative recruitment strategies, such as multiple waves of invitations and snowball sampling, should be considered to ensure a sufficient number of participants for the main study.
2. Ethical and Permission Considerations
The process of obtaining ethical permissions from various authorities is time-consuming and requires careful planning. Future studies should account for this in their timelines and consider the scheduling constraints of participants, particularly those in educational settings.
3. Interview and Technical Preparedness
Familiarity with the Teams platform and stable internet connections are essential for conducting smooth interviews. Including recording instructions in the interview protocol and ensuring participants are well-informed about the technical aspects of the interview will improve the quality of data collection.
4. Phenomenological Approach and Interview Technique
The pilot study underscores the importance of bracketing and maintaining a phenomenological perspective throughout the research process. Researchers should remain critically self-aware and adapt their interviewing style to focus on the participant's experiences rather than their own interests.
5. Reflection and Analysis Integration
Reflections from the pilot study, including the experiences with the interview schedule and questions, should be incorporated into the analysis of the main study. This will enhance the depth and relevance of the findings.
6. Policy and Implementation Implications
The insights gained from the pilot study can inform policy creation and implementation related to teacher experiences with educational reforms. Further study may be warranted to explore the broader implications of these findings within the context of the Malaysian Education Blueprint. These actionable items will guide the transition from the pilot study to the main study, ensuring that the research is conducted effectively and contributes valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

CONCLUSION

The pilot study's reflection is integral to the analysis, providing insights into the feasibility of the research design and methodology for the main study. Key takeaways include the importance of participant engagement, the effectiveness of a phenomenological approach, and the need for careful planning around recruitment, ethical permissions, and interview scheduling. Technical preparedness, particularly with the Teams platform, is crucial for data collection. These reflections will inform the main study, ensuring a robust research process that captures the experiences of teachers regarding the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

Appendix Q: SEAMEO-CECCEP Writing Fellowship 2024

Topic

The influence on educational policy to engage children access in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood

Abstract

This study delves into the complexities of policy implementation in early childhood education within Malaysia, aiming to uncover the local interpretations and practices of equitable quality education as experienced by practitioners. Employing a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach, the research engages with public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor through online semi-structured interviews. The objective is to construct rich descriptive narratives that capture the essence of policy enactment and its alignment with the goal of equitable quality education. The findings, distilled into six main themes, underscore the significance of stakeholder involvement, particularly the inclusion of teachers' voices in policy-making. The study identifies challenges and power dynamics that create barriers to equitable education, emphasizing the need for collaborative policy formation and implementation that is both efficient and responsive. The research highlights the importance of a structured educational framework and child-centered teaching strategies to facilitate learning and reduce inequities. Ethical considerations were meticulously observed, with approvals from relevant authorities ensuring the integrity of the research process. The study contributes to the global discourse on educational equity, offering insights into the practical realities of policy implementation in early childhood education.

Keywords: Equitable Quality Education, Policy Implementation, Early Childhood Education, Education access, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Introduction

Quality education is the focus of the Education 2030 Framework for Action. Through its lifelong learning approach, quality education allows increased and expanded access, inclusion and equity, and quality learning outcomes at all levels. Also, Sustainable Educational Goals (SDGs) will fail without quality education (United Nations, 2015), as one of the SDGs' workplan is to ensure that no one is left behind in quality education.

> 'Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.'
> (United Nation General Assembly (UNGA), 2015. p. 14)

To achieve quality education, ministries responsible for adequate resources for implementation across areas such as education, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, social and justice must integrate multisectoral policies and strategies for early childhood care and education (ECCE). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) includes education as a distinctive goal by recognising its importance. The fourth SDG is aimed at quality education and consists of seven targets, with specific sub-goals focusing on early childhood education.

> 'Goal 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
>
> Goal 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'
> (UNGA, 2015, p. 17)

However, the term 'equitable quality education' in Goal 4.1 is culturally influenced because its meaning is socially constructed through the ontology of lived lives and realities. For example, in Malaysia, the concept of equitable quality education may be influenced by factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, type of schools, and rural-urban population distribution. As a result, many countries have developed policies in early childhood care and education to address the issues of equitable quality education. Many aim to reduce the gap and increase the human development index. This is because early childhood care and education is not only beneficial for the development of children that is consistent with the realisation of their rights, but it also serves an early investment in human capital and a crucial pro-poverty strategy (Woodhead et al., 2009).

Aim and objectives

The **aim** of the current research is to explore local interpretations and perceptions of issues and practices in equitable quality education within the policy context of early childhood education

The **primary objective of the current research** is to explore local interpretation and perceptions in order to understand equitable quality in early childhood care and education in Malaysian policy papers and practice from the practitioners (Ball et al., 2011). To accomplish this objective, a series of individual semi-structured interviews will be conducted with early childhood practitioners to learn about their perspectives on equitable quality education in the real setting. The aim is that this will develop rich descriptive narratives of the participants' experience in relation to the implementation of equitable quality in early childhood care and education and their representation in policy enactment and implementation.

The following **research questions** are proposed to achieve the objectives of the current research:

1. What are the practices of teachers in promoting education access for equitable quality education services among practitioners in early childhood care and education setting?
2. To what extent do the effectiveness of teacher's practices align with and justify equitable quality education policy?

Literature Review

The concept of equity

Equity in early childhood care and education is a subject of global debate. A large body of research reveals that equity is not only troublesome in underdeveloped countries, but also in developing and developed regions (Ainscow, 2016; The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2016). According to Schleicher (2014), equity can be understood from two perspectives: inclusion and fairness. Equity as fairness indicates that personal or socioeconomic conditions, such as gender, ethnicity, or family background, are not barriers to educational achievement for children. Meanwhile, equity as inclusion ensures that all children attain a minimal level of capabilities. Equitable education systems are fair and inclusive because they assist children in realising their learning potential without explicitly or implicitly lowering expectations or creating barriers.

Equity in education is a core and longstanding emphasis of Programme for International Children Assessment (PISA) and a major global concern (OECD, 2020). The SDGs of the United Nations argue to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and encouraging lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO, 2016). The main principle of democratic political and economic

institutions is that everyone has an equal opportunity to improve their lives, regardless of their personal circumstances. The principle is an efficient approach to use resources and improve education and social results in general because it ensures that all children have access to the best educational opportunities. According to Roemer and Trannoy (2016), equity does not imply that all children attain identical outcomes, but rather that each children has acquired the skills necessary to fully engage in society and has been given equal opportunity to realise his or her potential. As a result, various education systems attempt to assist disadvantaged children. However, the ways in which education systems are organised, how children are assigned to early childhood setting, the learning environment, and teaching practises can exacerbate the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

The concept of quality

At the world education meeting in Dakar, where the Dakar Declaration was developed, there was a significant deal of contention and argument surrounding the concept of quality education (UNESCO, 2000). In general, quality is interpreted as adherence to a set of predetermined, quantifiable indicators or criteria as supported by The World Bank (Klees, 2002). To be precise, according to UNICEF (2000), quality education includes:

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished, and ready to participate and learn, and whose families and communities provide learning support.
- Healthy, safe, gender-sensitive, and protected environments with enough resources and amenities.
- Content reflected in applicable curricula and resources for the development of basic abilities, particularly in the areas of reading, numeracy, and life skills, as well as knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention, and peace.
- Facilitating learning and reducing inequities through the use of child-centered teaching strategies in well-managed classrooms and schools, as well as through skillful evaluation.
- Knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that are linked to national goals for education and positive engagement in society

In short, quality implies a specific level of excellence, but the judgement of this level of excellence is highly subjective. Nevertheless, the idea of quality has its origins in the industrial and management areas. Hence, its applications to education have resulted in a close alignment with economic-rationalist perspectives. Quality is evaluated based on the standards, outcomes, and performances of children, teachers, schools, and nations (Eadie *et al.*, 2022). The OECD (2016) recognises a preoccupation with measuring and the quality of measurement that has made the PISA the world's leading benchmark for evaluating the quality,

equity, and efficiency of school systems. Ng (2015) concludes that the concept of quality education can be understood depending on whether the discussion is approached from the process or outcomes of educational viewpoints.

The concept influences in equitable quality education

In the Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, questions of equity and access as a part of quality are the prominent concerns (UNICEF, 2013a). This report emphasized on education, with particular emphasis on societal concerns and the need for the global education systems to respond to them. Furthermore, the report identified education as a basic human right that enables the realisation of other socio-economic, political rights and cultural. In addition, it emphasised the advantages of investing in quality education, including the production of responsible citizens committed to the principles of respect for life, human dignity, and cultural diversity to produce more resilient and stable societies. Thus, equitable and equal quality education must be viewed as the necessary objectives within the framework for future development.

These objectives are reflected in the No. 4 of the United Nations SDGs, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and encourage lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNGA, 2015). The objective acknowledges that issues of equity and access must be considered at the levels of society, institution, and classroom. For instance, the need for a greater understanding of the conditions under which everyday teaching practises and classroom interaction should provide equitable access to quality education, including equal preconditions and opportunities for autonomous involvement and achievement, is the challenge not only at the international level but also at the national level for all modern communities and educational institutions (Hudson, 2019a).

The issue of access to quality education in the context of international development is viewed as a simple issue of school enrolment. Nevertheless, according to Humphreys et al. (2015), enrolment figures are the unsatisfactory indicator of access because being enrolled in school does not necessarily imply attendance, and attendance does not necessarily imply productive learning. Hence, they identify four distinct stages of access: (a) access as enrolment; (b) access as sustained attendance (sustained access); (c) access to the classroom, once in school; and (d) access to the curriculum, with children engaged in meaningful learning (Humpreys et al., 2015, p.5)

First, access to a quality education is the ultimate objective, which fits with the notion of high epistemic quality. This argument aligns with that of Morrow (2009) who proposes the concept of epistemic access, which has now become a curriculum principle that optimises the likelihood that all children will receive a quality education. Alongside the concept of epistemic quality, the notion of epistemic access is a major concern in the current research.

Education access in equitable quality education

In this study, questions of equity and access became central considerations that informed by the (UNESCO, 2013) in the Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. This report focused on education with special reference to societal challenges and the need for worldwide responses from education systems to them. It pinpoints education as a 'fundamental human right in itself as well as an enabling right, fostering the accomplishment of all other social, cultural, economic and political rights' (p. 2). It also highlights the benefits of investment in quality education, among them the formation of responsible citizenship-oriented to principles of respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity and thereby of more resilient and stable societies (UNESCO, 2013). From this report, two main education-specific goals were considered to be addressed as a part of the future development framework: equitable access and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2013).

Subsequently, these goals were reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goal Number 4 which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNGA, 2015). However, this is a challenge not only at the global level but also nationally for all contemporary societies and education systems. In Malaysia, The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 shares similar aspirations as in the preschool to secondary education, which are access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. The preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education systems share a vision of what the outcome of a Malaysian education should look like, and what that means for individual children.

A better understanding of the conditions under which everyday teaching practises and classroom interaction produce equitable access to high-quality education, including equal preconditions and chances of autonomous participation and success. In doing so, the need to consider issues of equity and access at the societal, institutional, and classroom levels is acknowledged. Regarding the issue of access to quality education in an international development context, this has generally been considered to be simply a question of school enrolment. However, Humphreys *et*

al., (2015) argued that enrolment figures are an inadequate indicator of access because being enrolled in school does not necessarily mean being in school, and being in school does not necessarily mean being engaged in productive learning. For this reason, Humphreys *et al.* (2015) identified four distinct stages of educational access for all levels: access as enrolment, access as sustained attendance, access to the classroom and access to the curriculum.

These collectively form access to good quality education as the ultimate goal which aligns with the concept of epistemic quality (Hudson, 2019a). This argument is resonant with (Morrow, 2009) who offers the notion of epistemic access which has subsequently been used as a curriculum principle that maximizes the chances for all children to experience high-quality education in school setting. Furthermore, du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) relate this to the idea of meaningful or expanded access in building on this notion to education.

Methods

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences and perspectives of public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor regarding policy implementation in early childhood education. The research method involved conducting online interviews with purposefully sampled participants, aimed at gaining in-depth insights into their lived experiences and perceptions. The duration of each interview session ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to express their thoughts and experiences thoroughly.

Sampling

The sampling strategy utilized purposeful sampling, targeting 15 public preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor who were deemed most relevant and knowledgeable about the topic under investigation. Eligible respondents were identified through an online screening survey designed to filter potential participants based on their expertise and experiences in early childhood education policy implementation.

Steps

The first step involved the identification of eligible respondents through the online screening survey, which assessed participants' qualifications and experiences in the field of early childhood education policy. Once eligible participants were identified, permission was sought from the respective schools' principals or administrators to conduct the online interviews. The interview sessions were then scheduled at mutually convenient times.

Data Collection

The interview sessions were conducted online using video conferencing platforms, allowing for remote communication between the researcher and the participants. During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses regarding their experiences, perspectives, and challenges related to policy implementation in early childhood education. Probing questions were used to explore specific themes and issues in greater depth, ensuring comprehensive data collection.

Data Analysis

Following the interview sessions, the recorded data were transcribed verbatim to capture participants' responses accurately. The transcribed data were then analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify and interpret emerging themes and patterns within the dataset. This analytical approach facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences and perspectives, allowing for nuanced insights into the complexities of policy implementation in early childhood education.

Ethics and Permission

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. As this research is a part of doctoral study from the University of Edinburgh, the ethics approval was sought upon the data collection stage. Permission was obtained from relevant government agencies, including the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and the Educational Planning and Research Development (EPRD) under the Ministry of Education. Additionally, approval was sought from the State Education Departments of Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The research adhered to ethical guidelines and protocols established by relevant authorities to safeguard the rights and well-being of the participants.

Preliminary results

The analysed data emerged to six (6) main themes; importance of stakeholder involvement: challenges and power dynamics: collaborative policy formation: alignment and implementation: efficiency and responsiveness: authentic engagement and value-driven education.

Importance of stakeholders' involvement

Respondents highlights the critical role of stakeholder involvement, particularly the importance of amplifying the teacher's voice in policymaking processes. Teachers underscore the significance of their direct involvement in shaping educational policies, advocating for their perspectives to be considered in decision-making. In line with Reznikova, Labanino and McKee Mathews (2024) This emphasis on educator involvement in policymaking reflects a recognition of the valuable insights and expertise teachers possess, emphasizing the need for inclusive approaches to ensure that policies align with the realities of early childhood education on the ground.

Moreover, the analysis reveals the value placed on teacher input in policy development, indicating a desire for policies that reflect the insights and experiences of those working directly with young children. Teachers express a need for their contributions to be valued and incorporated into the policymaking process, recognizing that their frontline experiences can inform more effective and equitable educational practices. This recognition of teacher input underscores the importance of collaborative decision-making processes that prioritize the voices of those directly impacted by educational policies (Finnanger and Prøitz, 2024).

Furthermore, the data analysis highlights the importance of fostering educator involvement in policy development, emphasizing the need for mechanisms that facilitate meaningful participation. Teachers advocate for opportunities to engage in policy discussions and contribute their perspectives, emphasizing the importance of being active participants in shaping the educational landscape. According to Tohidian and Nodooshan (2021), by involving educators in policy development, policymakers can ensure that policies are informed by the realities of the classroom and effectively address the diverse needs of children, thus promoting equitable access to quality early childhood education.

Power Dynamics

Teachers sheds light on the challenges and power dynamics inherent in policy implementation, highlighting key barriers to promoting equitable quality education in early childhood. One significant challenge identified is the existence of loopholes and power dynamics within the

system, which contribute to disparities in educational access and quality. These loopholes often result in discrepancies between policy intent and implementation on the ground, leading to inequities in educational opportunities for young children. Adolfsson and Alvunger (2020) suggest that the recognition of these loopholes underscores the need for policymakers to address systemic barriers and ensure that policies are effectively translated into action to promote equitable access to quality early childhood education.

Moreover, the analysis reveals a policy-classroom disconnect, where policies formulated at higher levels fail to adequately align with the realities of classroom practice. This disconnect highlights the importance of bridging the gap between policymakers and educators to ensure that policies are contextually relevant and responsive to the diverse needs of children (Symonds, 2021). Teachers' insights into this challenge emphasize the necessity of fostering collaboration and communication between policymakers and practitioners to bridge this gap and ensure that policies are effectively implemented to promote equitable quality education for all children.

Additionally, the data analysis brings attention to the disconnect between policymakers and educators, further exacerbating challenges in policy implementation. This disconnect underscores the importance of fostering meaningful engagement between policymakers and teachers to ensure that policies are informed by the insights and experiences of those directly involved in early childhood education (Gao and Cui, 2024). By addressing these power dynamics and fostering collaborative relationships between policymakers and educators, policymakers can work towards creating policies that better address the needs of children and promote equitable access to quality early childhood education.

Collaborative policy formation

The importance of collaborative policy formation in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood is the next focus. The role of the ECCE Council emerges as crucial in facilitating collaborative approaches to policy development. Teachers recognize the significance of the council's involvement in shaping policies that address the diverse needs of children and educators. By leveraging the expertise and input of various stakeholders, including teachers, policymakers, and community representatives, the ECCE Council can foster a collaborative approach that ensures policies are inclusive and responsive to local contexts (Hansen *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the data analysis underscores the importance of grassroots involvement in policy formation. Teachers advocate for bottom-up approaches that prioritize input from those directly involved in early childhood education. Liu, Holmes and Albright (2020) found that this grassroots

engagement empowers educators to contribute their perspectives and experiences to the policymaking process, ensuring that policies are grounded in the realities of the classroom. By involving teachers and other stakeholders at the grassroots level, policymakers can develop policies that are more effective, relevant, and equitable, ultimately enhancing educational access and quality for all children in early childhood settings.

In addition to grassroots involvement, the analysis highlights the need for a collaborative approach to policy formation. Teachers emphasize the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, parents, and community members. By fostering a collaborative environment, policymakers can harness the collective expertise and resources of these stakeholders to develop comprehensive policies that address the complex challenges facing early childhood education (Äikäs *et al.*, 2023). This collaborative approach ensures that policies reflect a diverse range of perspectives and priorities, leading to more inclusive and effective solutions that promote equitable access to quality education for all children.

Moreover, the data analysis underscores the importance of bottom-up policy development in promoting educational access and quality in early childhood. Teachers advocate for policies that are developed in consultation with educators and other stakeholders at the grassroots level, rather than imposed from above. This bottom-up approach ensures that policies are informed by the experiences and needs of those directly involved in early childhood education, leading to more responsive and contextually relevant solutions (Sebastian, 2023). By prioritizing bottom-up policy development, policymakers can foster a sense of ownership and investment among educators and communities, ultimately leading to more sustainable and equitable outcomes in early childhood education.

Alignment and implementation

Respondents illuminates key considerations regarding policy alignment and implementation in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood. One significant aspect highlighted by the respondents is the importance of policy alignment with the identity and ethos of individual schools. Teachers emphasize the need for policies to be adaptable to the unique contexts and characteristics of each school, ensuring that they resonate with the values, priorities, and specific needs of the community they serve. This emphasis on policy alignment with school identity underscores the importance of promoting inclusivity and responsiveness in policy

implementation, thereby enhancing educational access and quality for all children (Whitaker, Jenkins and Duer, 2022).

Additionally, the data analysis reveals insights into the hierarchical nature of policy implementation within the education system. Teachers acknowledge the prevalence of hierarchical structures that dictate the flow of policies from higher authorities down to the classroom level as highlighted in (Little, 2023). However, they also highlight the potential challenges associated with hierarchical policy implementation, such as the disconnect between policymakers and educators, as well as the rigid adherence to top-down directives that may not adequately address the nuanced realities of early childhood education. By recognizing these challenges, policymakers can work towards fostering more collaborative and inclusive approaches to policy implementation that prioritize the input and experiences of educators, thus promoting more equitable educational outcomes.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores the impact of top-down policy implementation on educational access and quality in early childhood. While top-down approaches can provide a framework for consistency and direction in education, respondents caution against the potential limitations of such approaches (Setiawan, 2020). Teachers highlight the need for flexibility and responsiveness in policy implementation to address the diverse needs and contexts of early childhood settings. By striking a balance between top-down directives and bottom-up input, policymakers can create policies that are both effective and adaptable, thereby promoting equitable access to quality education for all children.

Efficiency and responsiveness

Next, the data provides valuable insights into the importance of efficiency and responsiveness in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood. One key aspect highlighted by the respondents is the need for a structured educational framework that provides consistency and direction in education. Teachers emphasize the importance of clear guidelines and standards to ensure that all children have access to high-quality educational experiences. A structured framework helps to establish a common foundation for teaching and learning, thereby promoting equity by ensuring that all children receive a similar level of education regardless of their background or circumstances (Huston, 2008b).

Additionally, the data analysis reveals the importance of responsiveness to ground-level challenges in policy development and implementation. Teachers stress the need for policies that address the specific needs and realities of early childhood settings, including factors such as

socioeconomic status, cultural diversity, and community resources. According to Alexiadou *et al.*, (2024), by being responsive to these challenges, policymakers can develop policies that are more inclusive and effective in meeting the diverse needs of children and families. This responsiveness is essential for promoting equitable access to quality education and ensuring that no child is left behind.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the importance of efficient policy management in promoting educational access and quality. Teachers emphasize the need for streamlined processes and procedures to ensure that policies are implemented effectively and efficiently. Efficient policy management helps to minimize bureaucratic hurdles and administrative burdens, allowing educators to focus on their primary role of supporting children's learning and development. By promoting efficient policy management, policymakers can enhance the overall quality of early childhood education and create a more conducive learning environment for children.

Moreover, the data analysis provides practical insights for policy formation, drawing on the experiences and expertise of frontline educators. Teachers offer valuable perspectives and recommendations based on their first-hand experiences working in early childhood settings. These insights can inform the development of more effective and equitable policies that address the real needs and challenges faced by educators and children (Pearson and Degotardi, 2024). By incorporating these practical insights into policy formation processes, policymakers can ensure that policies are grounded in reality and better aligned with the goals of promoting equitable quality education in early childhood.

Authentic Engagement and Value-Driven Education

The data analysis from the responses of 15 preschool teachers in public preschools in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor underscores the importance of authentic engagement and value-driven education in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood. One key aspect highlighted by the respondents is the sequence of input in policymaking processes. Teachers emphasize the need for a structured sequence of input that allows for meaningful contributions from various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and community members. By ensuring that all voices are heard and considered in the policymaking process, policymakers can foster a sense of ownership and investment among stakeholders, ultimately leading to more inclusive and effective policies that promote equitable access to quality education for all children (Agbenyega and Klibthong, 2022).

Furthermore, the data analysis reveals insights into the synchronization of efforts among stakeholders in early childhood education. Teachers stress the importance of collaborative efforts

that are coordinated and aligned towards common goals. This synchronization of efforts enables stakeholders to work together towards shared objectives, maximizing resources and expertise to address the diverse needs and challenges of early childhood education (Agbenyega and Klibthong, 2022). By fostering collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, policymakers can create more cohesive and impactful strategies that promote educational access and quality for all children.

Moreover, the analysis highlights the importance of value-driven education in shaping policies and practices in early childhood education. Teachers advocate for policies that prioritize the values and principles of education, such as inclusivity, diversity, and equity. By grounding policies in these values, policymakers can ensure that educational practices are aligned with the holistic development and well-being of children, fostering environments that are supportive, nurturing, and conducive to learning (Brooks, McIntyre and Mutton, 2021). This emphasis on value-driven education underscores the importance of promoting an educational ethos that prioritizes the needs and interests of children above all else.

Additionally, the data analysis reveals the importance of setting realistic educational targets in promoting equitable quality education in early childhood. Teachers stress the need for policies and practices that are based on achievable goals and objectives, taking into account the unique contexts and challenges of early childhood settings (Whitebread, Kuvalja and O'connor, 2015). By setting realistic targets, policymakers can create more meaningful and impactful strategies that address the specific needs and priorities of children and communities, ultimately leading to more equitable outcomes in early childhood education.

Lastly, the analysis highlights the distinction between child-centric and government-centric policies in early childhood education. Teachers advocate for policies that prioritize the well-being and development of children, placing their needs and interests at the forefront of decision-making processes (Ball *et al.*, 2011). By adopting a child-centric approach, policymakers can ensure that policies and practices are responsive to the diverse needs and experiences of children, promoting more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study suggests that to achieve equitable quality education in early childhood, there must be a concerted effort to involve stakeholders in policy development, address systemic challenges, and ensure that policies are efficiently implemented and responsive to the needs of the educational community. The concept of epistemic quality and access is central to this

endeavor, as it aims to optimize the chances for all children to experience meaningful learning. The study calls for synchronized efforts among stakeholders and a commitment to value-driven education that prioritizes the well-being and development of children, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of international development and educational equity.

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Appendix R: Systematic Literature Review on Malaysia Education Blueprint

The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025

Summary of the SLR

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) aimed to transform education, focusing on holistic children development, technology integration, and inclusivity. Despite its ambitious goals, challenges included funding issues, regional disparities, teacher adaptability, impact measurement complexities, and the need for continuous curriculum updates to meet evolving global demands. Addressing these challenges required consistent commitment, collaboration, and adaptability. This systematic literature review examines research related to the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), focusing on scope, primary issues (access, quality, equity, unity, efficiency), and criticisms raised by studies, aiming to analyse challenges in education policy. Four credible databases: Scopus, Web of Sciences, ERIC, and Dimension.ai were used. The research involved three main phases: identification with keyword recognition and search strings, screening with stringent selection criteria, and eligibility with thorough article review. After these phases, eight (8) articles were included for data abstraction and analysis. The analysis of Malaysia's education system reveals multifaceted challenges. However, a gap exists as research findings lack explicit alignment with the Malaysia Education Blueprint's objectives, hindering effective policy implementation. Bridging this gap is crucial for a more targeted, responsive, and efficient education system in Malaysia. The discussion highlights key themes in Malaysia's education policy and administration, quality of education, guidelines and implementation, ownership and participation, and learning environment. Addressing these issues is crucial for successful policy execution and creating an inclusive educational experience.

Keywords: education policy, Malaysia Education Blueprint, systematic literature review, education reform, policy reenactment and development

Introduction—The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Blueprint) represents a comprehensive policy intervention designed to overhaul the national education system, addressing systemic challenges in curriculum design, pedagogical practices, infrastructure, and equity (MOE, 2013). Framed as a response to globalisation and Malaysia's aspirations for high-income status, the Blueprint sought to cultivate a generation of children characterised by holistic competencies, entrepreneurial mindsets, and ethical grounding, while aligning educational outcomes with 21st-century economic demands (Hussin & Raini, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Structured across three phased "waves," the Blueprint sought to cultivate a generation of children characterised by holistic competencies, entrepreneurial mindsets, and ethical grounding, while aligning educational outcomes with the demands of a globalised knowledge economy (Hussin & Raini, 2022).

Wave 1 (2013–2015): Systemic Foundation-Building

The initial phase prioritised foundational reforms, including curriculum standardisation and infrastructure modernisation. Core subject competencies in mathematics and science were strengthened through revised curricula emphasising problem-solving over rote memorisation (MOE, 2015). Concurrently, the 1BestariNet initiative provided internet connectivity and cloud-based learning platforms to 10,000 schools, though critics noted uneven implementation, with rural schools experiencing 32% slower connectivity speeds than urban counterparts (Ministry of Higher Education [MOHE], 2016; Razak et al., 2023). Teacher training programs were scaled, with 420,000 educators completing competency modules on formative assessment and technology integration (World Bank, 2017).

Wave 2 (2016–2020): Holistic Human Capital Development

The second wave expanded focus to holistic development, operationalised through the KSSR/KSSM curriculum revisions that integrated STEM, arts, and character-building elements (MOE, 2016). Equity measures included targeted funding for marginalised groups, reducing enrolment gaps between B40 (bottom 40% income) and T20 (top 20%) households by 18% (UNESCO, 2021). Vocational education reforms aligned training with industry needs, increasing technical and vocational education and training (TVET) enrolment by 27% (OECD, 2020). However, studies by Tan and Lee (2023) critique persisting stigma around TVET pathways, with only 14% of urban parents viewing them as "prestigious."

Wave 3 (2021–2025): Future-Ready Sustainability

The final wave emphasised sustainability and digital readiness. The Digital Education Policy 2021 mandated coding literacy and AI basics in upper primary grades, aiming for 90% children proficiency by 2025 (MOE, 2021). Longitudinal data from PISA 2022 indicated a 12-point improvement in Malaysian children' collaborative problem-solving scores, though disparities persisted: rural children scored 23% lower in digital literacy than urban peers (OECD, 2023). Systemic challenges, including teacher retention rates (82% in urban vs. 68% in rural areas), underscored unfinished equity agendas (World Bank, 2023).

While the Blueprint achieved measurable progress—notably 97% primary enrolment and 89% lower secondary completion rates by 2022 (MOE, 2023)—scholars highlight unresolved tensions. Neo-liberal undertones in the Blueprint's human capital framing have drawn criticism for privileging economic productivity over cultural preservation (Rahim et al., 2024). Conversely, advocates argue that its emphasis on digital fluency and global competencies positions Malaysia competitively within ASEAN's education rankings (Hashim, 2023).

Therefore, the aim of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to analyse current research linked to the subject of the study, challenges surrounding the Blueprint, where the research questions are

1. What is the scope of the study in terms of education level, methods, and results?
2. What are the primary issues raised in each study in relation to the five areas of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2015): access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency?
3. What are the criticisms of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) raised by each study?

Material and methods

This paper was based solely on SLR, where the literature was examined via Scopus, Web of Sciences, ERIC, and Dimension.ai. Four databases were selected for this study based on their credibility as known, established sources and reliability related to social science studies.

Identification

In choosing several appropriate papers for this study, the systematic review process consists of three main phases. The first step is keyword recognition and the quest for linked

similar terms based on the thesaurus, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and previous studies. Accordingly, Table 2 presents the research string after all the relevant keywords were decided on the Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Dimensions.ai databases have been created. In the first step of the systematic review process, the present research work successfully retrieved 90 papers from all databases.

Table 10: SLR Blueprint The Search String

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (malaysia AND education AND blueprint AND policy) Date of Access: 24 October 2023
Dimension ai.	malaysia AND education AND blueprint AND policy Filters Applied: Web of Science, Journals, 2021-2022 Refined By: Open Access, Publication, Years: 2022 or 2021, Document Types: Article, Languages: English
ERIC	malaysia AND education AND blueprint AND policy
WoS	malaysia AND education AND blueprint AND policy

Screening

The next step is screening, where 90 articles have been prepared. In the process of determining suitable materials for our research, stringent selection criteria were employed. The primary criterion was language, with preference given to English literature, ensuring a consistent and comprehensible analysis. Additionally, the timeline for inclusion was set

between 2018 and 2022, guaranteeing the most recent and relevant information. Specific focus was placed on scholarly journals, specifically articles, as they often present in-depth and peer-reviewed content. Conference proceedings, books, and reviews were excluded to maintain the integrity of the research. Moreover, only publications in their final stage were considered, omitting any materials still in press, to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the chosen sources. Table 3 provides inclusion and exclusion criteria that were meticulously designed to curate a high-quality and focused collection of literature, providing a solid foundation for our research endeavours. After screening, 24 articles were excluded, including 19 duplications. 57 articles were processed for the eligibility stage.

Table 11: SLR Blueprint The Selection criterio in search

TABLE 3

The selection criterion is searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Time line	2018 – 2022	< 2017
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press

Eligibility

For the third step, known as eligibility, a total of 57 articles has been prepared. All articles' titles and key content were thoroughly reviewed at this stage to ensure that the inclusion requirements were fulfilled and fit into the present study with the current research aims. First and foremost, materials lacking full text accessibility were automatically eliminated from consideration, totalling 5 sources, as accessibility to complete documents was deemed essential for comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, 15 sources were excluded due to being out of the field of study, ensuring that the selected materials remained relevant and focused. Additionally, 9 sources were omitted because their titles did not significantly align with the research objectives, indicating a lack of relevance from the outset. Another 20 sources were disregarded as

their abstracts failed to directly address the study's objectives, demonstrating the importance of aligning content with the research's core aims. These meticulous exclusions were crucial in refining the source pool, ensuring that only pertinent, accessible, and contextually appropriate materials were included in our analysis. A total of 49 sources were excluded from our study based on specific criteria.

Finally, only 8 articles were included for the analysis. Table 4 is the list of final articles that have been used based on the proposed searching criterion. Figure 1 illustrates the data abstraction and analysis from each stage: identification, screening, and eligibility.

Table 12: SLR Blueprint The research article find SLR Bing based on the proposed searching criteria

TABLE 4

The research article finding based on the proposed searching criterion

No	Authors	Title	Year	Source title
1	Wan, Chang Da; Sirat, Morshidi; Razak, Dzulkifli Abdul	Academic Governance And Leadership In Malaysia: Examining The National Higher Education Strategic Initiatives	2020	Journal Of International And Comparative Education
2	Bush, Tony; Ng, Ashley Yoon Mooi	Distributed leadership and the Malaysia Education Blueprint	2019	Journal of Educational Administration
3	Bush, Tony; Ng, Ashley Yoon Mooi; Too, Wei Keong; Glover, Derek ; Chay, Josephine	Ensuring Acceptability and Feasibility: The Challenges of Educational Policy Reform in Malaysia	2023	Leadership and Policy in Schools
4	Asmawi, Adelina; Jaladin, Rafidah Aga Mohd	Higher education system in Malaysia: Exploring strategic trends and challenges in policy implementation for new Malaysia	2018	Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management
5	Joseph Jeyaraj, Joanna; Harland, Tony	Linking critical pedagogy practice to higher education in Malaysia: insights from English language teachers	2019	Asia Pacific Journal of Education
6	Taha, Hafsah; Hanafi, Zahyah ; Dzainudin, Masayu ; Ibrahim, Mohd Mokhzani ; Yahaya, Asmayati ; Ahmad, Che Nidzam Che ; Masnan, Abdul Halim ; Ramli, Saipolbarin ; Taib, Rosfizah Md; Mustafa, Mazlina Che; Yassin, Sopia Md ; Kastari, Mohammad Azizuddin; Daud, Norrulkamari ; Padmanathan, Hasviniy	Malaysian early childcare and childhood education (ECCE) curriculum: Perspectives of Malaysian ECCE educationists	2020	Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education
7	Habibah, Abdul Rahim ; Bity, Salwana Alias; Mohd,	Model, Instruments, and Unity Index and Their Impact on the Unity Policy	2019	Creative Education

	Radzi Ishak; Zaida, Nor Zainudin			
8	Tang, Dan Dan; Dhamotharan, Mogana; Abdul Rahman, Mohd Nazri	Unveiling Malaysian parents' perspectives on existing quality of early childhood care and education	2021	Perspektivy Nauki i Obrazovania

Figure 10: SLR Blueprint Data Abstraction and Analysis

Data Abstraction and Analysis

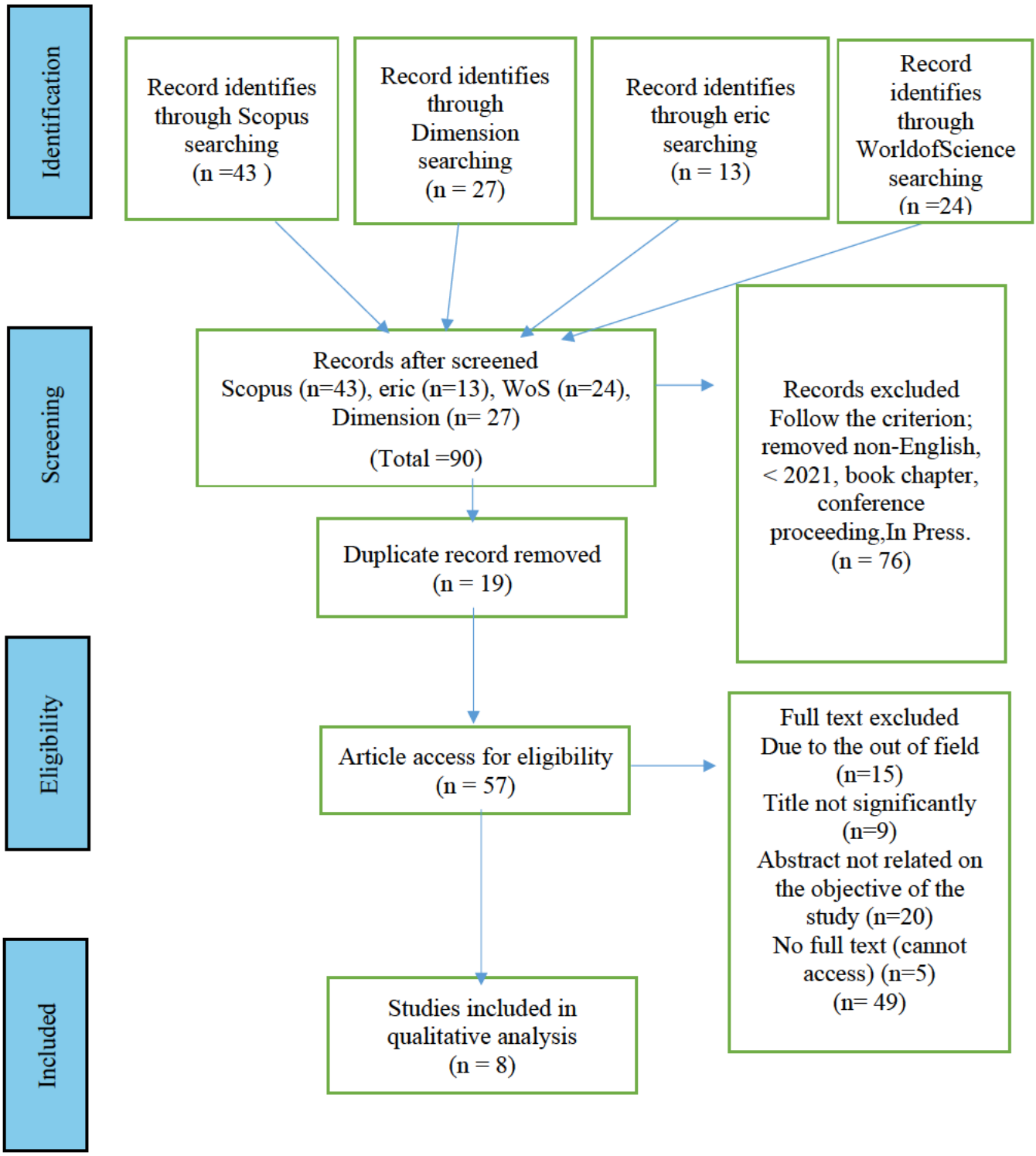

FIGURE 1. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, 2009)

Findings

Findings on scope of level of education, methodology, result

Level of education

The studies cover a broad spectrum of educational levels in Malaysia, ranging from higher education down to preschool education. This diversity reflects a comprehensive understanding of the educational system. The focus on higher education indicates a keen interest in governance, policy, and teaching methodologies at the tertiary level. In primary and secondary education, the emphasis is on leadership, policy challenges, and the impact of educational reforms. Additionally, the attention to preschool education highlights the importance of early childhood development and parental perspectives on the quality of education provided. Overall, this table showcases a holistic approach to understanding and improving various facets of Malaysia's education system, ensuring a well-rounded analysis of education in the country.

In detail, the presented Table offers a comprehensive overview of diverse educational research conducted in Malaysia, highlighting a wide array of educational levels explored by various authors. Da Wan and colleagues (2020) delve into the complexities of higher education, focusing on academic governance and leadership. Bush and Ng (2019) shift their focus to primary and secondary education, investigating the nuances of distributed leadership within the framework of the Malaysia Education Blueprint. Building on this, Bush and team (2023) continue their exploration of primary and secondary education, concentrating on the challenges of educational policy reforms. Asmawi and Jaladin (2018) return to the realm of higher education, meticulously analysing the strategic trends and challenges in policy implementation. Meanwhile, Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) maintain their focus on higher education, providing insights into critical pedagogy practices through the lens of English language teachers. Transitioning to preschool education, Taha and colleagues (2020) scrutinise Malaysia's early childcare and childhood education curriculum, emphasising the viewpoints of ECCE educationists. Rahim and associates (2019) return to primary and secondary education, examining the impact of models, instruments, and the unity index on educational policies. Lastly, Tang and team (2021)

concentrate on preschool education, exploring parental perspectives on the existing quality of early childhood care and education. This diverse range of educational levels underlines the multifaceted nature of Malaysia's educational landscape, showcasing the depth and breadth of research undertaken to address the varied challenges and opportunities present at different stages of the country's education system.

The gap related to preschool education in the provided paragraph is the lack of specific details regarding the focus and findings of the studies related to this educational level. While the paragraph mentions that Tang and team (2021) concentrated on preschool education, it does not provide any insight into the specific issues addressed in their study or the perspectives shared by parents regarding the quality of early childhood care and education. There is a dearth of information on the challenges faced by preschool education in Malaysia, such as curriculum effectiveness, teacher training, infrastructure, parental involvement, and socio-economic factors affecting early childhood development. Without specific details about these aspects, it is challenging to assess the depth of research undertaken in preschool education or to identify the specific gaps and opportunities in this critical stage of education. Further elaboration on the findings and methodologies of the preschool education studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the state of early childhood education in Malaysia.

Methodology

The varied methodologies reflect the multifaceted nature of educational research in Malaysia. Qualitative approaches, such as interviews and case studies, offer in-depth insights from stakeholders like teachers and experts. Document analysis provides a historical and contextual understanding. Quantitative methods, like surveys, offer numerical data, while mixed methods provide a comprehensive understanding by combining quantitative and qualitative data. The use of diverse methodologies showcases a holistic approach to understanding Malaysian education, capturing perspectives from educators, policymakers, parents, and children, enriching the depth of research findings.

In detail, the table illustrates a diverse array of research methodologies employed in studies related to Malaysian education. Da Wan et al. (2020) utilised critical review and policy analysis, delving deep into existing literature and national policies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Bush and Ng (2019) opted for a qualitative case study approach, conducting detailed investigations within schools, involving semi-structured interviews with school leaders, teachers, and children, along with document

analysis. Building on this, Bush and team (2023) employed reviews and interviews with policymakers and school principals to gain insights into the challenges and intricacies of educational policy reforms. Asmawi and Jaladin (2018) relied on document analysis coupled with semi-structured interviews with experts, ensuring a well-rounded perspective on policy implementation challenges. Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers online, offering a flexible and convenient approach to gather valuable insights from educators. Taha et al. (2020) and Rahim et al. (2019) both employed semi-structured interviews with teachers, although Taha et al. (2020) supplemented this with quantitative surveys involving primary and secondary children, providing numerical data for a more comprehensive analysis. Finally, Tang et al. (2021) utilised a mixed-method approach, combining questionnaires with parents and focus group discussions, ensuring a diverse range of parental perspectives was considered. This varied methodological approach showcases the adaptability and depth of research methodologies in understanding the complexities of Malaysia's educational landscape, encompassing policy analysis, qualitative and quantitative investigations, and stakeholder interviews to provide a holistic overview.

The gap in methodology related to phenomenology from the provided paragraph is the absence of explicit use or mention of phenomenological approaches in the studies discussed. Phenomenological research focuses on exploring individuals' lived experiences and perceptions of a specific phenomenon, and none of the studies mentioned explicitly state the use of phenomenological methods. While the paragraph describes diverse research methodologies, it does not include any study that utilized a phenomenological approach to delve into the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings attributed to educational phenomena by participants. The absence of phenomenological research represents a gap in employing this specific qualitative approach, which could provide valuable insights into the intricate and nuanced aspects of individuals' experiences within the educational context. Incorporating phenomenological methods could enhance the depth and richness of understanding the human experiences within the Malaysian education system and the long-term impact of educational policies and practices in Malaysia.

Result

The results presented in the analysis offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges and achievements within Malaysia's education system. Da Wan et al. (2020) critically assess Malaysian higher education governance, advocating for autonomy amidst evident challenges, indicating concerns about the existing structures in higher education. Bush and

Ng (2019) shed light on hierarchy constraints within Malaysian schools, advocating for decision-making zones to enhance the education system. Bush et al. (2023) highlight hurdles in educational reforms due to a lack of understanding and awareness, emphasising the vital need for better communication and education about these reforms. Asmawi and Jaladin (2018) analyse education trends, emphasising outcome-based methods and technology integration, while recognising challenges such as training and flexibility. Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) delve into the challenges and potential of critical pedagogy in Malaysian higher education, underscoring the need for innovative teaching methods. Taha et al. (2020) reveal that Malaysia's early childhood education curriculum is comprehensive but lacks the necessary resources for effective implementation, indicating a gap between policy and practice. Rahim et al. (2019) report a decline in the children unity index in 2018, indicating potential social cohesion challenges within primary and secondary schools. Finally, Tang et al. (2021) find that parents are generally content with early childhood education quality but suggest ongoing curriculum improvements. These results collectively highlight the complexity of the Malaysian education landscape, showcasing not only achievements but also significant challenges that need to be addressed, ranging from governance and policy issues to resource constraints and social cohesion challenges. Addressing these multifaceted aspects is crucial for shaping a more effective and equitable educational system in Malaysia.

The gap related to the Education Blueprint in this paragraph is the lack of specific details about how the mentioned studies align with or address the goals and strategies outlined in Malaysia's Education Blueprint. While the challenges and achievements within the education system are discussed, there is no explicit mention of how these studies contribute to the objectives set forth in the Education Blueprint. Understanding how these research findings relate to the goals of the Blueprint is essential for policymakers and educators to bridge the gap between research outcomes and policy implementation. Explicit connections between research results and the initiatives outlined in the Education Blueprint would provide a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of the current educational policies and practices in Malaysia.

Analysis on issues related to five areas of the Blueprint

Based on the themes of access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency, the themes of the issues can be grouped as follows. In this categorisation, "access" includes factors related to the availability and feasibility of education. "Quality" encompasses aspects related to the

standard and consistency of education. "Equity" focuses on issues related to fairness and inclusivity. "Unity" refers to fostering a sense of community and togetherness within the educational system. Lastly, "efficiency" pertains to aligning educational objectives with societal needs effectively.

The table provides a concise summary of various studies related to key aspects of Malaysia's education system, focusing on access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. Da Wan et al. (2020) address access, quality, and efficiency concerns while noting the lack of attention to cultural factors. Bush and Ng (2019) emphasise access but also highlight issues related to curriculum, quality, and cultural challenges. Bush et al. (2023) discuss centralisation, feasibility, unity, and consistency, indicating a multifaceted perspective on education reform. Asmawi and Jaladin (2018) concentrate on quality, equity, unity, and efficiency, pointing out the need for cultural and contextual attention. Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) focus on quality, unity, and social objectives, highlighting performance and accountability challenges. Taha et al. (2020) specifically address equity concerns. Rahim et al. (2019) discuss quality, equity, and cultural challenges, emphasising power and leadership issues. Finally, Tang et al. (2021) concentrate on equity, highlighting the need for further attention to cultural factors. The gap related to the Education Blueprint in this paragraph lies in the absence of explicit references to how the studies align with or contribute to the objectives outlined in Malaysia's Education Blueprint. While the studies highlight crucial aspects of the education system, such as access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency, they do not explicitly state their alignment with the goals and strategies set forth in the Education Blueprint. Understanding how these research findings relate to the objectives of the Blueprint is essential for policymakers and educators to bridge the gap between research outcomes and policy implementation. Explicit connections between research results and the initiatives outlined in the Education Blueprint would provide a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of the current educational policies and practices in Malaysia. This linkage is crucial for shaping a more targeted, efficient, and impactful educational system in Malaysia, aligning with the overarching goals of the Education Blueprint.

In summary, these studies collectively shed light on various critical dimensions of Malaysia's education system. While each study has its unique focus, they collectively highlight challenges related to access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. The table underscores the complexity of the Malaysian education landscape, indicating the need for comprehensive, multifaceted approaches to address these challenges effectively. Attention to cultural and contextual factors appears as a common theme, suggesting the importance of a culturally

sensitive and contextually relevant educational framework in Malaysia. Further research and policy initiatives addressing these aspects could significantly enhance the overall quality and inclusivity of Malaysia's education system.

Table 13: SLR Blueprint Issues related with the Blueprint

Authors	Access			Quality									Equity			Unity	Efficiency
	centralization	lack of attention to	feasibility	performance and	curriculum	producing learning	world class ranking	consistency	quality of curriculum	lack of practical	cocurricular activites	language policy	cultural and political	acceptability and	power and leadership	fostering unity	align with social objectives
(Da Wan *al.*, 2020)	X	X		X													
(Bush and Ng, 2019)	X														X		
(Bush *et al.*, 2023)			X					X						X			
(Asmawi and Jaladin, 2018)					X	X	X										
(Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland, 2019)										X			X				X

(Taha *et al.*, 2020)									X								
(Rahim *et al.*, 2019)											X	X				X	
(Tang *et al.*, 2021)									X								

Analysis on critics on education blueprint

By addressing these thematic challenges, educational systems can work towards a more equitable, culturally sensitive, and effective learning environment.

These critics can be grouped into categories as follows:

Table 14: SLR Blueprint Critics on the Blueprint based on the Categories

Categories	Critics
Measurement and evaluation	Emphasis on quantitative measures Overemphasis on rankings
Cultural and Contextual considerations	Lack of attention to cultural and contextual factors Cultural norms and social order
Stakeholer Engagemen and Awareness	Limited stakeholder engagement Poor understanding/clarity Limited awareness
Reform and Implemenation challenges	Ambitious reform Slow pace of change Insufficient funding and investment Lack of vocational education
Social and Equalities issue	Inequality and lack of freedom of expression Unity Quality

These critics can be categorised into distinct themes, each highlighting specific challenges within the educational system:

1. Measurement and Evaluation:

Critics under this category emphasise the undue focus on quantitative measures, often leading to an overemphasis on rankings, neglecting the holistic evaluation of educational processes and outcomes.

2. Cultural and Contextual Considerations:

Issues related to cultural and contextual factors emerge as significant concerns. Critics point out the lack of attention given to these aspects, which can profoundly influence the effectiveness of educational initiatives. Additionally, rigid adherence to cultural norms and social order can stifle innovation and inclusivity.

3. Stakeholder Engagement and Awareness:

Limited stakeholder engagement is a critical challenge, hindering collaborative efforts. Poor understanding and clarity compound this problem, along with limited awareness among relevant stakeholders. Without active and informed involvement, educational reforms face substantial obstacles.

4. Reform and Implementation Challenges:

Ambitious reform initiatives often face hurdles during implementation. Critics note the slow pace of change, which can impede progress significantly. Insufficient funding exacerbates the situation, affecting various aspects of education, including the lack of vocational education opportunities. Limited implementation of proposed reforms further hampers their efficacy.

5. Social and Equality Issues:

This category encapsulates concerns related to social inequality and the suppression of freedom of expression. Critics highlight disparities in access and opportunities, emphasizing the need for unity and quality education as essential components of a fair and inclusive educational system.

The presented table offers a comprehensive overview of critics within Malaysia's education system, as viewed through different research lenses. Da Wan et al. (2020) prioritise measurement and evaluation, acknowledging the importance of cultural and contextual factors and emphasising stakeholder engagement. Bush and Ng (2019) focus primarily on cultural and contextual considerations, recognising the influence of cultural norms and social order on education practices. Bush et al. (2023) delve into reform and implementation challenges, highlighting limited stakeholder engagement, poor understanding, and ambitious yet slow-paced reforms. Asmawi and Jaladin (2018) emphasise measurement and evaluation alongside cultural and contextual considerations, addressing stakeholder engagement and underscoring issues related to awareness and vocational education. Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019) concentrate on cultural and contextual factors and stakeholder engagement while pointing out concerns about overemphasising rankings and addressing equality challenges. Taha et al. (2020) spotlight reform challenges, emphasising the need to address a slow pace of change. Rahim et al. (2019) bring attention to the crucial issues of limited awareness and insufficient funding. Lastly, Tang et al. (2021) discuss measurement and evaluation and underscore challenges related to both cultural factors and stakeholder engagement.

This diverse array of perspectives underlines the multifaceted challenges faced by Malaysia's education system, encompassing issues of measurement and evaluation, cultural sensitivity, stakeholder engagement, reform implementation, and social equality.

The absence of uniformity in these studies emphasises the complexity of the educational landscape, suggesting a need for a comprehensive, well-balanced approach that integrates these varied concerns. Addressing these diverse challenges collectively is vital for creating a robust, inclusive, and effective educational system in Malaysia, ensuring that policy decisions and implementations are attuned to the diverse and intricate needs of the society it serves

The gap related to the Education Blueprint in this context is the absence of explicit alignment between the research findings and the objectives outlined in Malaysia's Education Blueprint. While the studies provide valuable insights into different facets of the education system, such as measurement and evaluation, cultural sensitivity, stakeholder engagement, reform implementation, and social equality, there is a lack of direct reference to how these findings align with or contribute to the specific goals and strategies outlined in the Education Blueprint. This alignment is crucial for policymakers and educators to ensure that research outcomes inform and influence policy decisions effectively. Explicit connections between the research results and the initiatives outlined in the Education Blueprint would provide a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of the current educational policies and practices in Malaysia, facilitating a more targeted and impactful approach toward educational reform. Therefore, addressing this gap by integrating research findings with the Education Blueprint's objectives is essential for shaping a more responsive and efficient education system in Malaysia.

Table 15: SLR Blueprint Mapping Critics and Articles

Authors	Measurement and evaluation		Cultural and contextual considerations		Stakeholder engagement and awareness			Reform and implementation challenges				Social and equalities issues		
	emphasizes on	overemphasize on	lack of attention to	cultural norms and	limited stakeholder	poor	limited awareness	ambitious reform	slow pace of change	insufficient funding	lack of vocational	inequality and lack of	quality	unity
(Da Wan *et al.*, 2020)	X		X		X									
(Bush and Ng, 2019)			X											
(Bush *et al.*, 2023)						X	X	X						
(Asmawi and Jaladin, 2018)		X								X	X			
(Joseph Jeyaraj and				X					X			X		

Harland, 2019)														
(Taha *et al.*, 2020)													X	
(Rahim *et al.*, 2019)														X
(Tang *et al.*, 2021)										X			X	

Discussion and Conclusion

In examining the findings through five distinct themes related to education policy and administration, quality of education, guidelines and implementation, ownership and participation, and learning environment, several key aspects emerge from the diverse array of research perspectives presented in the table.

***Education Policy and Administration**:*

The studies collectively emphasize the critical role of centralized policies, underlining the necessity for guidelines that are culturally and contextually sensitive. Bush et al. (2023) specifically address the challenges in curriculum consistency, highlighting the need for centralized efforts to ensure a unified educational approach. However, challenges persist, such as a lack of practical guidelines (Da Wan et al., 2020) and limited stakeholder engagement (Bush et al., 2023), indicating the complex landscape of policy formulation and implementation.

In the context of Malaysia's education blueprint, the issues highlighted in the paragraph concerning education policy and administration are of paramount significance. The emphasis on centralized policies, as underscored by Bush et al. (2023), aligns closely with the objectives outlined in the education blueprint. The blueprint, as a national framework, aims to standardize and centralize certain aspects of education to ensure consistency and quality across all educational institutions in Malaysia. The emphasis on centralized efforts, particularly in addressing curriculum consistency, resonates with the blueprint's goal of establishing a uniform educational approach throughout the country.

However, the challenges mentioned, such as the lack of practical guidelines (Da Wan et al., 2020) and limited stakeholder engagement (Bush et al., 2023), highlight areas where the education blueprint can be refined. The blueprint, as a comprehensive policy document, should provide clear, practical guidelines to bridge gaps in implementation. Practical guidelines are essential for educators and administrators to effectively translate the blueprint's vision into actionable steps within classrooms and institutions. Addressing this lack, as identified in Da Wan et al.'s study, is vital for the successful execution of the blueprint's goals.

Quality of Education:

Quality of education is a focal point, with multiple studies addressing issues related to curriculum quality, performance, and accountability. Bush and Ng (2019) highlight concerns about the curriculum, emphasizing the need for enhancements to improve the overall quality of education. Addressing cultural and political challenges (Rahim et al., 2019) and ensuring alignment with social objectives (Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland, 2019) are crucial steps toward enhancing the quality of education in Malaysia.

Firstly, the emphasis on the quality of education aligns with the fundamental goals of the education blueprint. One of the blueprint's primary objectives is to elevate the quality of education across all levels in Malaysia. By addressing concerns about curriculum quality, as highlighted by Bush and Ng (2019), the education blueprint can focus on revising and enhancing the existing curriculum to meet contemporary educational standards. This process ensures that children receive an education that is up-to-date, relevant, and competitive on a global scale, in line with the blueprint's aspirations for educational excellence.

Secondly, addressing cultural and political challenges, as noted by Rahim et al. (2019), is crucial within the context of the education blueprint. Malaysia's diverse cultural and political landscape necessitates an education system that is sensitive to these nuances. The blueprint can incorporate strategies to navigate these challenges, ensuring that educational policies and practices are culturally inclusive and politically neutral. By fostering a culturally responsive educational environment, the blueprint can promote social cohesion and unity, essential elements for the overall development of the nation.

Lastly, ensuring alignment with social objectives, as emphasized by Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019), is integral to the education blueprint's holistic approach. The blueprint often outlines social objectives related to inclusivity, equality, and community development. By aligning educational practices with these social goals, the blueprint can contribute significantly to social progress and harmony. This alignment ensures that the education system not only imparts knowledge and skills but also nurtures responsible, compassionate citizens who actively contribute to society, fulfilling the blueprint's broader societal objectives.

Guidelines and Implementation:

Feasibility and practicality are key concerns in policy implementation. Da Wan et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of feasible policies, indicating a recognition of the challenges posed by impractical guidelines. Bush et al. (2023) further delve into the complexities of implementation, highlighting the need for consistent and feasible strategies. The lack of attention to cultural and contextual factors (Da Wan et al., 2020) adds an additional layer of complexity to the effective implementation of policies.

Within the context of the education blueprint, guidelines and policies are fundamental tools for achieving educational objectives. The emphasis on the feasibility and practicality of policies, as highlighted by Da Wan et al. (2020), aligns closely with the blueprint's emphasis on realistic, actionable strategies. The blueprint, as a comprehensive educational roadmap, aims to translate ambitious goals into practical, implementable policies that can be executed effectively within the country's educational framework. Recognizing the challenges posed by impractical guidelines emphasizes the blueprint's need to focus on creating policies that are not only visionary but also attainable, considering the real-world constraints faced by educational institutions.

Moreover, the complexities of implementation discussed by Bush et al. (2023) underline a significant aspect of the education blueprint: execution. A blueprint can outline grand visions for educational reform, but its success ultimately depends on the implementation strategies employed. Consistent and feasible implementation strategies, as advocated by Bush et al., are pivotal for translating blueprint goals into tangible educational improvements. The blueprint, therefore, must provide detailed implementation plans, ensuring that schools, teachers, and administrators have clear, practical guidelines for executing the proposed reforms.

Additionally, the lack of attention to cultural and contextual factors, as pointed out by Da Wan et al. (2020), underscores the need for a culturally sensitive approach within the education blueprint. Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape necessitates policies that are not only practical but also culturally relevant. A blueprint that is attuned to cultural nuances can foster a more inclusive educational environment, ensuring that

educational policies resonate with the diverse population of children and educators in Malaysia.

Ownership and Participation:

Ownership and participation emerge as vital components, with a need for increased stakeholder engagement and awareness. Limited awareness (Rahim et al., 2019) and insufficient funding (Taha et al., 2020) underscore the challenges in garnering public participation and support for educational initiatives. Creating a sense of ownership among stakeholders is crucial for the successful execution of policies and reforms.

In the context of the education blueprint, ownership and participation are fundamental principles. The blueprint recognizes the importance of involving various stakeholders, including educators, children, parents, community leaders, and policymakers, in the educational decision-making process. Actively engaging these stakeholders ensures that the policies outlined in the blueprint are not only understood but also embraced by the communities they are designed to serve.

The challenges highlighted in the paragraph, particularly limited awareness and insufficient funding, are critical areas of concern for the education blueprint. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic communication plan to raise awareness about the blueprint's goals, methodologies, and anticipated outcomes. Public awareness campaigns, workshops, and community outreach programs are vital components of the blueprint's implementation strategy. By enhancing awareness, the blueprint can garner support and participation from a broader spectrum of society.

Furthermore, creating a sense of ownership among stakeholders is essential for the successful execution of policies and reforms. When stakeholders feel a personal connection to the initiatives outlined in the education blueprint, they are more likely to actively participate and contribute to their implementation. The blueprint should aim to instill a sense of pride and responsibility within communities, encouraging them to take an active role in supporting educational initiatives, whether through volunteering, mentorship, or advocacy efforts.

Additionally, addressing insufficient funding, as highlighted in the paragraph, is a key

challenge that the education blueprint must navigate. Adequate funding ensures the effective implementation of various programs and initiatives outlined in the blueprint. The blueprint should include detailed financial plans, exploring diverse funding sources, public-private partnerships, and efficient allocation of resources to meet the financial requirements for its successful implementation.

Learning Environment:

The learning environment is shaped by various factors, including language policy, co-curricular activities, and fostering unity which are deeply intertwined with the objectives of the education blueprint in Malaysia. The need for cohesive language policies (Tang et al., 2021) and robust co-curricular activities (Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland, 2019) is evident to provide a holistic learning experience. Fostering unity through policies that align with social objectives (Da Wan et al., 2020) is essential for creating an inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

Firstly, the need for cohesive language policies, as highlighted by Tang et al. (2021), aligns with the education blueprint's aim to create an inclusive learning environment for all children. Language policies play a pivotal role in ensuring that children have equal access to education, regardless of their linguistic background. By promoting language inclusivity, the education blueprint ensures that children can fully engage with the curriculum and participate in educational activities, fostering a sense of belonging and enabling diverse learners to thrive.

Secondly, the emphasis on robust co-curricular activities, as noted by Joseph Jeyaraj and Harland (2019), aligns with the holistic approach advocated by the education blueprint. Co-curricular activities are integral to a well-rounded education, providing children with opportunities to develop essential life skills, teamwork, leadership, and creativity. The education blueprint recognizes the significance of extracurricular activities in nurturing children' overall growth and, consequently, promotes a wide range of such activities to enhance the learning experience.

Lastly, fostering unity through policies that align with social objectives, as emphasized by Da Wan et al. (2020), is a cornerstone of the education blueprint. Malaysia's diverse

society necessitates educational policies that promote understanding, tolerance, and unity among different cultural and social groups. By fostering unity, the education blueprint contributes to creating an inclusive and harmonious learning environment where children from various backgrounds can coexist, collaborate, and learn from one another.

In the context of the Blueprint, this underscores the blueprint's commitment to creating a comprehensive learning environment. By addressing language inclusivity, promoting co-curricular activities, and fostering unity, the education blueprint ensures that education in Malaysia goes beyond academic achievements. It aims to mold well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world, fostering a sense of unity, understanding, and harmony among the diverse communities within Malaysia. These efforts not only enrich the educational experience for children but also contribute significantly to the blueprint's overarching goal of building a socially cohesive and prosperous nation through education.

Conclusion

In summary, these themes highlight the multifaceted challenges within Malaysia's education system. Policy formulation and implementation require careful consideration of cultural nuances, active stakeholder participation, feasible guidelines, and an unwavering focus on enhancing the quality and inclusivity of education. Balancing these elements is essential to creating a robust educational framework that meets the diverse needs of Malaysia's population.

Overall, the alignment between the findings of these studies and the goals of the education blueprint is evident. While challenges exist, these studies provide valuable insights that can guide the blueprint's refinement, ensuring that it addresses the diverse needs of Malaysia's educational landscape comprehensively.

Appendix S: Scoping Review on Equitable Quality Education

Scoping review on equitable quality in early childhood education

Summary

This scoping review synthesizes research on equitable quality in early childhood education (ECE) in public sector, examining the interplay between policy, place, practice, and people. The review encompasses 60 studies from diverse global contexts, employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods to explore the complex nature of ECE. Key findings highlight the necessity of inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environments that cater to the diverse needs of children, families, and educators. The studies underscore the importance of systemic policy issues, the physical and community environments, pedagogical strategies, and the roles of individuals involved in ECE. The review emphasizes the need for personalized learning experiences, culturally responsive teaching practices, and collaborative partnerships to ensure fairness and inclusivity in ECE. By addressing these critical dimensions, the review contributes to the understanding of how to create a more just and prosperous future for all individuals through equitable quality education.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Equitable Quality, Inclusivity, Educational Policy, Pedagogical Practices, Systematic Review, Global Perspectives, Accessibility, Teaching Strategies, Educational Environments.

Introduction

Equitable quality education, a cornerstone of educational policy and practice, encapsulates the commitment to ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, have access to high-quality learning opportunities that meet their needs and foster their full potential. As highlighted by Darling-Hammond (2015), equitable education goes beyond mere equality in access to encompass the provision of resources, support services, and inclusive practices that address the diverse needs of learners. This concept emphasizes fairness, inclusivity, and the recognition of disparities that may exist among different children populations. It requires a multifaceted approach that involves not only equitable distribution of resources but also personalized learning experiences, culturally responsive teaching practices, and collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities

(UNESCO, 2017). By prioritizing equity in education, societies can strive towards creating a more just and prosperous future for all individuals.

A systematic review by Meyer, Shen and Plucker (2024) presents on reducing excellence gaps in advanced education, which is crucial for achieving equitable quality education. It analyses interventions and programs aimed at narrowing excellence gaps and ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have access to advanced educational opportunities and provide insights into effective strategies for promoting equity in advanced education. The presence of education equity policy is significant which examines by Juarez and León (2023) mentioned on how Equity Policy Framework implemented by a State Education Agency (SEA) contributes to achieving equitable quality education. It assesses whether the policy framework addresses disparities in educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes among different children groups. The analysis includes evaluating the effectiveness of the policy in promoting high-quality education for all children, regardless of their background or circumstances. Similarly in Great Britain, Ainscow (2023) discusses strategies for promoting equitable quality education within education systems, drawing on lessons from Great Britain. It examines policies, practices, and initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in educational outcomes and ensuring that all children have access to high-quality learning opportunities. The paper highlights successful interventions and identify areas for improvement in promoting equity within education systems.

Morrell (2017) argues that achieving equitable quality education requires a critical, global approach to literacy research, policy, and practice. It discusses the importance of addressing disparities in literacy achievement among different children populations and promoting inclusivity and diversity in literacy education. The paper advocate for policies and practices that prioritize equity and ensure that all children have access to high-quality literacy instruction. In different view, Keefe and Cochran-Smith (2022) introduces a special issue focused on advancing equity and democracy in teacher education. It discusses how preparing teachers to provide equitable quality education is essential for promoting democratic principles within educational systems. The paper highlights the importance of teacher education programs that prioritize equity, inclusivity, and social justice in preparing educators to foster equitable learning environments.

Examining equitable quality in early childhood education involves ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, have access to high-quality educational experiences that support their holistic development. Equitable quality in early childhood education starts with ensuring universal access to early childhood programs. This includes addressing barriers such as cost, geographic location, and availability of spaces (Yoshikawa

et al., 2018). Additionally, policies should prioritize enrolment of marginalized or underserved populations, including children from low-income families, those with disabilities, and linguistic minorities. Besides, Whitebook *et al.*(2018) highlights the need for investing in the early childhood workforce by providing professional development opportunities and competitive wages to attract and retain qualified educators. Ensuring that early childhood educators are well-trained, qualified, and supported is essential for delivering equitable quality education. This involves providing professional development opportunities, competitive wages, and supportive working environments that attract and retain skilled professionals.

Therefore, this scoping review aimed to analyse the current research linked to the subject of the study, challenges surrounding the equitable quality education, where the research question are

1. What **research design and methods** have been utilized to investigate evidence-based, inclusive and equitable early childhood initiatives?
2. What **outcomes** have been recorded in terms of excellent early childhood education efforts that are inclusive and equitable?

Material and methods

This study relied exclusively on a scoping review approach, which involved scrutinizing literature from Scopus and WoS databases. The choice of these databases was guided by their recognized credibility and reliability in the realm of social science research. The process encompassed five key stages: formulating research inquiries, identifying pertinent studies, choosing relevant literature, organizing and gathering data, and finally, synthesizing and presenting the findings.

Identification

The process of selecting suitable articles for this report involved a three-phase scoping review. Initially, the process entailed identifying keywords and related terms using resources such as thesauri, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and prior research. Subsequently, these identified keywords were used to formulate search queries for the Scopus and WoS databases (refer to Table 2). The initial phase of the systematic review yielded a total of 6650 articles from both databases.

TABLE 2

The search string

Table 16: SR The research string

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(early childhood education OR early years OR early learning OR preschool OR kindergarten) AND (definition equitable OR equity OR fairness OR inclusion) AND (public school OR government school) AND definition Qualitativety OR assessment AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2022) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2020) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2016)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"English")) Date of Access: 15 December 2023
WoS	((ALL=(early childhood education OR early years OR early learning OR preschool OR kindergarten OR nursery)) AND ALL=(equity OR fairness OR inclusion)) AND ALL=(Qualitativety OR assessment) Date of Access: 16 December 2023

Screening

In the screening phase of the review, the initial identification yielded a total of 6650 studies. Before the formal screening process began, duplicate records were meticulously removed, resulting in the exclusion of 2299 studies. This step was crucial to ensure that each study was only considered once in the review process. Following the deduplication, 1387 records were screened. The first level of screening involved applying exclusion criteria to further refine the pool of studies. Records were excluded if they were not published in English, did not pertain to the Social Sciences or Education fields, or were not article journals. This process was essential to align the body of work with the research aims and to maintain a focus on empirical, peer-reviewed academic literature within the specified disciplines.

TABLE 3

The selection criterion is searching

Table 17: SR The selection criterion in searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population/Context	Includes all early childhood educational settings across all countries (high, middle, and low income countries) Public/government school or funding May also include individuals or stakeholders involved in ECE. Eg. Parents, communities, industry, children	Private school, no description of location, non profit centre/ volunteering centre/fee based,
Concept	Contributing to the definition or identifying aspects of equitable quality of early childhood education	Not contribution to the definition or identifying aspects of equitable quality of early childhood education
General Criteria	Publication time span Jan 2016 – October 2022 English language Any study type Article in journal only	Publication before Jan 2016 Not English Exclude Book

Eligibility

In the third step of the review, which focuses on eligibility, a total of 198 reports were meticulously assessed to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study. The criteria for exclusion at this stage were stringent to ensure the relevance and specificity of the research. Reports were excluded for several reasons: if they were too broad and not

sufficiently focused on the research aims, if they did not pertain to public or government schools, if they did not contribute to the definition or understanding of equitable quality in early childhood education, if they were systematic literature reviews (SLR) or scoping reviews (SR) without new empirical evidence, if they were set in the wrong educational context (not about early childhood education), if they focused solely on nursery education, or if they encompassed multiple levels of education beyond early childhood (preschool, primary, secondary). After this rigorous process, 60 studies were deemed eligible and included in the final review, aligning with the research objectives and contributing valuable insights into equitable quality in early childhood education.

The 60 articles for the review as shown in Table 4.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

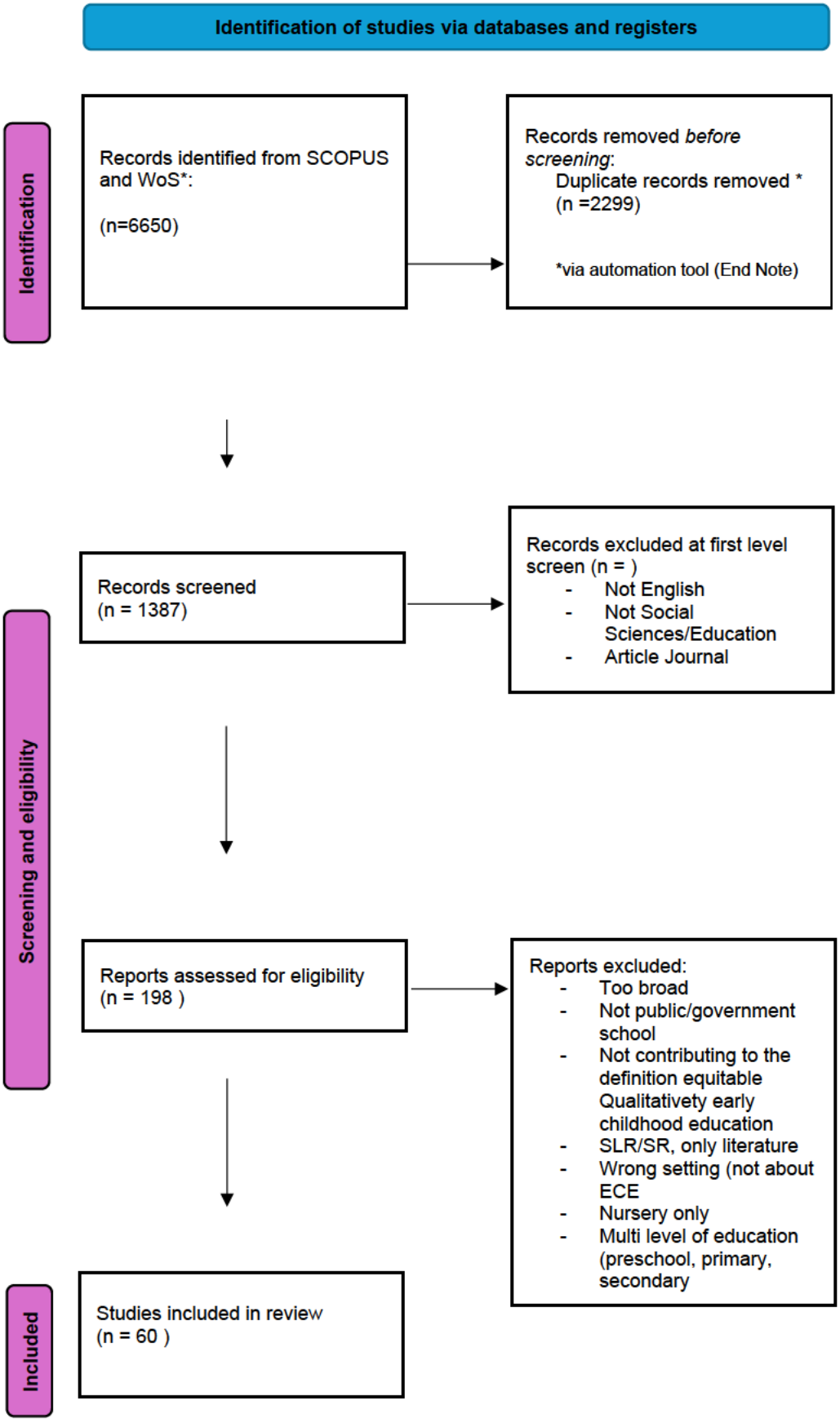

Figure 11: SR Data Abstraction and analysis

FIGURE 2 Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, 2009)

Findings

The findings were analysed to answer these research questions;

1. What **research design and methods** have been utilized to investigate evidence-based, inclusive and equitable early childhood initiatives?
2. What **outcomes** have been recorded in terms of excellent early childhood education efforts that are inclusive and equitable education

Demographics analysis

The review conducted for this study encompasses a diverse range of research papers from various countries, reflecting a global perspective on education policy and reform. The review includes a total of 60 papers, with contributions from countries such as the USA (26 papers), Australia (4 papers), China (3 papers), and several others, including comparative studies involving multiple countries. This broad geographical representation ensures a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies in education systems worldwide.

The sampling for this review is equally diverse, covering different population groups involved in the education sector. The review includes 14 papers focusing on children, 4 on parents, 13 on teachers or future teachers, and 19 on schools or educational programs. This varied sampling provides a holistic view of the educational landscape, capturing insights from multiple stakeholders and contexts. By examining these diverse perspectives, the review aims to identify common themes, challenges, and best practices that can inform the implementation and improvement of education policies.

Population

Table 18: SR Population

Country	**No. of paper (n)**
Bulgaria	1
Brazil	2
Australia	4
Canada	2
Canary Island	1
China	3
England/ UK	2
Indonesia	2
Israel	1
Lithuania	1
Luxemburg	1
New Zealand	1
Spain	3
South Korea	2
Sweden	1
Swiss	1
Tanzania	1
Thai	1
Turkey	1
USA	26
Multiple Countries (comparative studies)	
Argentina - UK	1
South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan)	1
Turkey – USA	1
Total	60

Sampling

Table 19: SR Sampling

Sampling	***No. of paper (n)***
Children	14
Parents	4
Teacher/Future Teacher	13
School/Program	19

Table 20: The research article finding based on the proposed searching criterion in SCOPUS and WoS

Authors	Title	Year	Source Title
Mathis, E., Hartz, K., Berkowitz, M., Carlson, A., Kimport, R., Brown, C., Biel, M.G., Domitrovich, C.E.	Using Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation to Facilitate the Social–Emotional Competence and School Readiness of Preschool Children in Marginalized Communities	2022	School Mental Health
Novak, A.	The Association Between Adverse Childhood Experiences, Neuropsychological Deficits, and Experiences of Exclusionary Discipline in Early Childhood	2022	Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology
Gulosino, C., Maxwell, P.	A Comprehensive Framework for Evaluating Shelby County School District's Voluntary Preschool Program: The Challenges of Equity, Choice, Efficiency, and Social Cohesion	2022	Urban Education
Rakhmawati, N.I.S., Widayanti, M.D., Ramadan, A.N., Hasibuan, R.	Using Books in Early Childhood to Prevent the Assumption of Traditional Gender Roles	2022	International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
McCoy, D.C., Sabol, T.J., Hanno, E.C., Odgers, C.L.	Assessing School Communities Using Google Street View: A Virtual Systematic Social Observation Approach	2022	AERA Open

Taylor, H.F., McCorkle, L.S., Vestal, A.R., Wood, C.L.	“I Need You to Show Me:” Coaching Early Childhood Professionals	2022	Early Childhood Education Journal
Lewis Presser, A.E., Young, J.M., Clements, L.J., Rosenfeld, D., Cerrone, M., Kook, J.F., Sherwood, H.	Exploring Preschool Data Collection and Analysis: A Pilot Study	2022	Education Sciences
Scanlon, G., Radeva, S., McKenna, G., Maguire, C.	Together from kindergarten: exploring Quality to inform inclusion in early childhood settings in Bulgaria	2022	European Early Childhood Education Research Journal
Wang, Y., Zhou, Y., Jiang, Y., Li, H., Liu, X.	Are Parents Satisfied with China’s Puhui Early Childhood Education? Evidence from a National Validation Study	2022	Early Education and Development
Sanchis, A.C., Ferrandis, I.G., Gómez, J.G.	The perception of the environment through drawing in early childhood education. The case of the wetland of the Albufera in Valencia (Spain)	2022	Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education
Gözüm, A.İ.C., Metin, Ş., Uzun, H., Karaca, N.H.	Developing the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale in the Use of ICT at Home for Pre-school Distance Education During Covid-19	2022	Technology, Knowledge and Learning
Zhang, Q., Jenkins, J.M.	Did State Pre-Kindergarten Programs Affect the Head Start Enrollment of Children with Disabilities? A Quasi-Experimental Analysis	2022	Exceptional Children

Shavitt, I., Ayres de Araujo Scatollin, M., Suzart Ungaretti Rossi, A., Pacífico Mercadante, M., Gamez, L., Resegue, R.M., Pisani, L., do Rosário, M.C.	Transcultural adaptation and psychometric properties of the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) in Brazilian pre-school children	2022	International Journal of Educational Research Open
Hayashi, A., Liew, J., Aguilar, S.D., Nyanamba, J.M., Zhao, Y.	Embodied and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood: Situating Culturally Relevant SEL in Asian, African, and North American Contexts	2022	Early Education and Development
Black, R., Ollerton, J.	Playspace users' experience of a socially inclusive playspace: the case study of Livvi's Place, Port Macquarie, New South Wales, Australia	2022	World Leisure Journal
Hu, B.Y., Wang, S., Song, Y., Roberts, S.K.	Profiles of Provision for Learning in Preschool Classrooms in Rural China: Associated Quality of Teacher-child Interactions and Teacher Characteristics	2022	Early Education and Development
Ginner Hau, H., Selenius, H., Björck Åkesson, E.	A preschool for all children?–Swedish preschool teachers' perspective on inclusion	2022	International Journal of Inclusive Education
Classen, A.I., Westbrook, A.	Professional credential program: impacting early childhood inclusive learning environments	2022	International Journal of Inclusive Education
Ford, T.G., Kwon, K.-A., Tsotsoros, J.D.	Early childhood distance learning in the U.S. during the COVID pandemic: Challenges and opportunities	2021	Children and Youth Services Review

Greenwood, C.R., Carta, J.J., Irvin, D.W., Schnitz, A.G.	Advancing Children's Learning Through Innovations in the Measurement of Literacy Engagement	2021	Topics in Early Childhood Special Education
Wilinski, B., Morley, A.	"Parent Leadership and Voice": How Mid-Level Administrators Appropriate Pre-Kindergarten Parent Involvement Policy	2021	Educational Policy
Pires, L., Santero-Sánchez, R., Macías, C.	School failure in the region of Madrid (Spain): An approximation through diagnostic assessment in 2019	2021	Sustainability (Switzerland)
Steed, E.A., Rausch, A., Strain, P.S., Bold, E., Leech, N.	High- Quality Inclusion in Preschool Settings: A Survey of Early Childhood Personnel	2021	Topics in Early Childhood Special Education
Corral-Granados, A., Rogers, C., Kruse, F.	The forgotten ECEC staff working with birth-to-3-year-olds: The imbalances between the workforce policies and ECEC staff employment conditions in Spain	2021	Management in Education
Moshel, S., Berkovich, I.	Supervisors as definers of a new middle-level managers' leadership model: Typology of four middle-level leadership prototypes in early childhood education	2021	Leadership and Policy in Schools
Ma, X., Shen, J., Brandi, K., Lu, X., Baron, M.	Effects of Classroom Practices and Funding Streams on Early Childhood Learning Outcomes	2021	Early Education and Development

Akaba, S., Peters, L.E., Liang, E., Graves, S.B.	“That's the whole idea of college readiness”: A critical examination of universal Pre-K teachers’ understandings around kindergarten readiness	2020	Teaching and Teacher Education
Kirsch, C.	Opening minds to translanguaging pedagogies	2020	System
Cohen-Vogel, L., Sadler, J.R., Little, M., Merrill, B.	(Mis)Alignment of instructional policy supports in Pre-K and kindergarten: Evidence from rural districts in North Carolina	2020	Early Childhood Research Quarterly
Wong, M.	How giftedness is understood and practised in initial teacher education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand	2020	Australasian Journal of Gifted Education
Gross, D., Bettencourt, A.F., Taylor, K., Francis, L., Bower, K., Singleton, D.L.	What is Parent Engagement in Early Learning? Depends Who You Ask	2020	Journal of Child and Family Studies
Curenton, S.M., Iruka, I.U., Humphries, M., Jensen, B., Durden, T., Rochester, S.E., Sims, J., Whittaker, J.V., Kinzie, M.B.	Validity for the Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES) in Early Childhood Classrooms	2020	Early Education and Development
van Rhijn, T., Maich, K., Maich, K., Irwin, S.H.	Assessing Inclusion Quality : The SpeciaLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale	2020	Exceptionality Education International
Kotas, J., Bridi, J., Garrity, S.M.	Enhancing preschool-kindergarten educator implementation of interactive reading instruction through vertical teaming: Exploring collaborative enquiry	2020	Journal of Early Childhood Literacy

Bettencourt, A.F., Gross, D., Bower, K., Francis, L., Taylor, K., Singleton, D.L., Han, H.R.	Identifying Meaningful Indicators of Parent Engagement in Early Learning for Low-Income, Urban Families	2020	Urban Education
Suryani, A.	“I chose teacher education because…”: a look into Indonesian future teachers	2020	Asia Pacific Journal of Education
Slutzky, C., DeBruin-Parecki, A.	State-Level Perspectives on Kindergarten Readiness	2019	ETS Research Report Series
Baum, D.R., Hernandez, J.E., Orchard, A.	Early childhood education for all: a Mix methoded-methods study of the global policy agenda in Tanzania	2019	Early Years
Mariano, M., Caetano, S.C., Ribeiro da Silva, A., Surkan, P.J., Martins, S.S., Cogo-Moreira, H.	Psychometric Properties of the ECERS-R Among an Epidemiological Sample of Preschools	2019	Early Education and Development
Reid, J.L., Melvin, S.A., Kagan, S.L., Brooks-Gunn, J.	Building a unified system for universal Pre-K: The case of New York City	2019	Children and Youth Services Review
Ring-Dimitriou, S., Freudenthaler, T., Aistleitner, V., Horvath, G., Stallinger, J., Dimitriou, M., Ardelt-Gattinger, E., Weghuber, D.	SALTO - Study Protocol and Rationale of a Community-Oriented Obesity Prevention Program in the Kindergarten	2018	Obesity Facts
Weiland, C., McCormick, M., Mattera, S., Maier, M., Morris, P.	Preschool Curricula and Professional Development Features for Getting to High- Quality Implementation at Scale: A Comparative Review Across Five Trials	2018	AERA Open

Harvey, H., Ohle, K.	What's the purpose? Educators' perceptions and use of a state-mandated kindergarten entry assessment *[Qual é o propósito? Percepções de educadores e o uso de uma avaliação]*	2018	Education Policy Analysis Archives
Kim, R., Mejía-Guevara, I., Corsi, D.J., Aguayo, V.M., Subramanian, S.V.	Relative importance of 13 correlates of child stunting in South Asia: Insights from nationally representative data from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan	2017	Social Science and Medicine
McFarland, L., Dealtry, L.	Hearing in the early childhood setting: Children's perspectives	2017	Australasian Journal of Early Childhood
Jeong, H.I., Kim, Y.	The acceptance of computer technology by teachers in early childhood education	2017	Interactive Learning Environments
Lee, J., Jang, Y.J.	Equal access to early childhood education in South Korea using the Geographic Information System	2017	International Journal of Early Years Education
Arikan, A., Fernie, D.E., Kantor, R.	Supporting the professional development of early childhood teachers in head start: A case of acquiring technology proficiency *[Head start programi erken çocukluk dönemi öğretmenlerinin mesleki gelişimlerinin desteklenmesi: Teknoloji yeterliklerinin kazanimina bir örnek]*	2017	Elementary Education Online
Rakap, S., Parlak-Rakap, A., Aydin, B.	Investigation and comparison of Turkish and American preschool teacher candidates' attitudes towards inclusion of young children with disabilities	2016	International Journal of Inclusive Education

Brownell, M.D., Ekuma, O., Nickel, N.C., Chartier, M., Koseva, I., Santos, R.G.	A population-based analysis of factors that predict early language and cognitive development	2016	Early Childhood Research Quarterly
Clarke, B., Doabler, C.T., Smolkowski, K., Baker, S.K., Fien, H., Strand Cary, M.	Examining the Efficacy of a Tier 2 Kindergarten Mathematics Intervention	2016	Journal of Learning Disabilities
Wood, E	Learning, development and the early childhood curriculum: A critical discourse analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England	2020	Journal Of Early Childhood Research
Tayler, C; Cloney, D; Adams, R; Ishimine, K; Thorpe, K; Nguyen, TKC	Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care experiences: study protocol	2016	Bmc Public Health
Agbenyega, J; Klibthong, S	Thai Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences Of Inclusive Teaching Practices: A Phenomenological Inquiry	2019	12th International Conference Of Education, Research And Innovation (Iceri 2019)
Ghandour, RM; Moore, KA; Murphy, K; Bethell, C; Jones, JR; Harwood, R; Buerlein, J; Kogan, M; Lu, M	School Readiness among US Children: Development of a Pilot Measure	2019	Child Indicators Research
Tunon, L; Martinez, CE	Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care in Argentina and the United Kingdom (2010-2020)	2021	Foro De Educacion

Merkys, G; Bubeliene, D; Ciuciulkiene, N	Availability Of Pre-Schooling As An Educational And Social Indicator	2019	Society, Integration, Education, Vol Ii: School Pedagogy, Preschool Pedagogy
Gervasoni, A	The Impact and Challenges of Early Mathematics Intervention in an Australian Context	2018	Invited Lectures From The 13th International Congress On Mathematical Education
de la Rosa, OMA; Angulo, LMV	Factorial analysis of the attitudes of children from 6 to 16 years old with hearing devices towards inclusive education	2019	Aula Abierta
Daniels, H; Thompson, I; Tawell, A	After Warnock: The Effects of Perverse Incentives in Policies in England for Childrens With Special Educational Needs	2019	Frontiers In Education

Methodology and Design

Table 21: SR Methodology and design

Methodology	No. of paper (n)	Design and method
Qualitative	27	Focus group, interview, observation, Document/Policy analysis, survey, case study, system analysis, phenomenology
Quantitative	30	Quasi Experiment, Questionnaire, Checklist, RCT (experiment), Government Data, Study Group*, Scale, Pre-post
Mix method Methods	3	Geospatial/policy analysis, interview, survey, observation, achievement data, policy analysis

The studies presented in the document employ a variety of research methodologies and designs to explore different aspects of early childhood education across various global contexts. The methodologies can be broadly categorized into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches.

Quantitative Methodologies:

A significant number of studies utilize quantitative methods, which involve the collection and analysis of numerical data to understand patterns and test hypotheses. These studies often employ designs such as surveys (e.g., Novak, 2022; Steed et al., 2021), randomized controlled trials (RCTs) (e.g., McCoy et al., 2022), quasi-experimental designs (e.g., Mathis et al., 2022; Zhang & Jenkins, 2022), and the use of scales or checklists (e.g., Hu et al., 2022; van Rhijn et al., 2020). These designs are chosen for their ability to measure variables and assess outcomes in a structured and replicable manner. For instance, Clarke et al. (2016) examine the efficacy of a mathematics intervention using a pre-post design, while Kim et al. (2017) analyze data to identify correlates of child stunting in South Asia.

Qualitative Methodologies:

Qualitative studies in the document focus on understanding the depth and complexity of human behavior and experiences through non-numerical data. These studies often involve interviews (e.g., Kirsch, 2020; Wong, 2020), focus groups (e.g., Taylor et al., 2022), observations (e.g., Lewis Presser et al., 2022; Greenwood et al., 2021), and document analysis (e.g., Daniels et al., 2019). The qualitative approach is exemplified by Ginner Hau et al. (2022), who explore Swedish preschool teachers' perspectives on inclusion through documentation, and by Sanchis et al. (2022), who assess children's environmental perceptions through artwork analysis.

Mixed Methods:
Some studies integrate both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions. For example, Gulosino and Maxwell (2022) use a mixed-method design that includes geospatial analysis and policy analysis to evaluate a preschool program. Baum et al. (2019) combine quantitative achievement data with qualitative policy analysis to study the global policy agenda in Tanzania.

In summary, the studies presented demonstrate a diverse application of methodologies and designs tailored to the unique demands of each research question within the field of early childhood education. Quantitative methods are used to establish patterns and test theories, qualitative methods to explore depth and nuance, and mixed methods to combine the strengths of both approaches for a more holistic view.

Output (themes, subthemes and issues)

The studies presented in the scoping review can be synthesised into four overarching themes: policy, place, practice, and people. Each theme encapsulates a range of subthemes and issues that are pertinent to early childhood education research.

Policy:
Policy-oriented studies predominantly focus on the development, assessment, and evaluation of educational frameworks and their impact on access, equity, and readiness. For instance, Mathis et al. (2022) and Shavitt et al. (2022) explore the use of mental health consultation and the adaptation of the IDELA assessment to enhance school

readiness in marginalized communities and across cultures, respectively. Gulosino and Maxwell (2022) provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating preschool programs, addressing equity and access. Studies by Wood (2020) and Cohen-Vogel et al. (2020) critically analyze curriculum standards and instructional policy supports, highlighting the need for alignment between policy and practice. The research by Reid et al. (2019) and Baum et al. (2019) underscores the global and local efforts to build inclusive and universally accessible Pre-K systems.

Place:

Place-based studies examine the physical and geographical context of early childhood education. Novak (2022) investigates the relationship between location, adverse childhood experiences, and disciplinary practices. McCoy et al. (2022) and Black and Ollerton (2022) assess the learning environment through innovative methods like Google Street View and user experiences of inclusive playspaces, emphasizing the importance of the environment in early education. Hayashi et al. (2022) situate culturally relevant social-emotional learning across different contexts, showing how place influences educational approaches.

Practice:

Practice-focused studies delve into pedagogical methods and the inclusion of diverse populations in early childhood education. Rakhmawati et al. (2022) discuss using books to challenge gender norms, while Scanlon et al. (2022) and Ginner Hau et al. (2022) explore quality and inclusion in early childhood settings. Ford et al. (2021) and Greenwood et al. (2021) address the challenges and innovations in pedagogy, such as distance learning and literacy engagement measurement. Kirsch (2020) and Wong (2020) highlight specific pedagogical approaches like translanguaging and teaching giftedness.

People:

People-centric studies focus on the roles, development, and engagement of individuals in early childhood education. Taylor et al. (2022) and Arikan et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of coaching and professional development for early childhood educators. Studies by Steed et al. (2021) and Corral-Granados et al. (2021) discuss the working conditions and training of early childhood personnel. Gross et al. (2020) and Bettencourt

et al. (2020) explore the nuances of parental engagement in early learning, indicating the significance of family and community collaboration.

Multi-themes:
The studies that encompass all themes; policy, place, practice, and people which provide a comprehensive view of early childhood education, addressing systemic policy issues, the physical and community environments, pedagogical strategies, and the roles of individuals involved. For instance, Wang et al. (2022) assess parental satisfaction with China's Puhui Early Childhood Education, reflecting on policy implications, the educational setting, teaching practices, and parental perspectives. Similarly, Wood (2020) critically examines England's Early Years Foundation Stage, considering curriculum standards, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods within the policy framework. Baum et al. (2019) explore the global policy agenda for early childhood education in Tanzania, addressing access and performance within the educational system, the local context, and the impact on the community. Reid et al. (2019) focus on the development of a universal Pre-K system in New York City, integrating policy, access issues, and the urban educational environment. These studies highlight the interconnectedness of various factors in early childhood education and underscore the importance of a holistic approach to research and policy-making that considers the full spectrum of influences on early learning and development.

In summary, these studies collectively provide a comprehensive view of the multifaceted nature of early childhood education, highlighting the interplay between policy, place, practice, and people. They underscore the importance of creating inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environments that cater to the diverse needs of children, families, and educators.

Discussion

This study offers a comprehensive overview of the four key sections that are essential to understanding and improving early childhood education: policy and investment in early learning, evaluating and advancing pedagogical practices, empowering teachers and communities and optimizing learning environments and locations.

Policy and Investment in Early Learning

Policy and investment in early learning are pivotal for setting the stage for children's future educational trajectories. The critical role of government investment in early childhood education cannot be overstated. Adequate funding ensures the availability of quality programs, resources, and trained personnel, which are essential for fostering an environment conducive to early learning and development. The studies by Mathis et al. (2022) and Gulosino and Maxwell (2022) highlight the significance of policy in shaping early childhood mental health services and preschool program evaluations, respectively. These studies emphasise the need for policies that prioritise equity, access, and the readiness of children from marginalised communities. Regulations and standards set by governments help maintain high-quality education systems. These frameworks often dictate enrolment processes, accessibility, and the inclusion of diverse populations, ensuring that every child could benefit from early education. Inclusion policies ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education. These policies must address the needs of children with disabilities, those from low-income families, and gifted learners. Furthermore, Zhang and Jenkins (2022) explore the effects of state pre-kindergarten programs on Head Start enrolment for children with disabilities, revealing the implications of policy decisions on special needs education. The work by Tunon and Martinez (2021) on inequalities in early childhood education in Argentina and the UK underscores the importance of investment and regulation in achieving equitable education systems. Policies that encourage parental involvement create a collaborative atmosphere that supports children's learning. When parents are engaged, they can reinforce educational objectives at home, bridging the gap between the classroom and the family environment. Collectively, these studies underscore the necessity for robust policies and investments that ensure all children have access to quality early learning experiences.

Evaluating and Advancing Pedagogical Practices

A well-designed curriculum is the backbone of effective early childhood education. It must be comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and inclusive to cater to the diverse needs of young learners. Regular assessment and evaluation help in understanding children's readiness, satisfaction levels of stakeholders, and the effectiveness of educational interventions. Developing reliable assessment tools is crucial for measuring

competencies and performance. Evaluating and advancing pedagogical practices are essential for the development of effective early childhood education programs. Rakhmawati et al. (2022) demonstrate the use of books to challenge gender norms, illustrating the role of pedagogical resources in shaping societal perspectives. Innovative pedagogical practices, such as play-based learning and the integration of ICT, can significantly enhance the learning experience. Resources tailored to the needs of hearing and deaf children, as well as gender-sensitive materials, contribute to a more inclusive learning environment. Lewis Presser et al. (2022) and Scanlon et al. (2022) focus on data collection and inclusive practices, respectively, to inform and enhance the quality of early childhood settings. Targeted interventions in reading, mathematics, and other areas are vital for addressing specific learning needs. Distance learning and instructional innovations have also become increasingly important, particularly in response to global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Ford et al. (2021) on distance learning during the COVID pandemic and Greenwood et al. (2021) on literacy engagement innovations highlight the need for adaptive and innovative pedagogical approaches in response to changing educational landscapes. Embracing bi- and multilingual pedagogies opens doors for children to learn in languages they are most comfortable with, fostering better understanding and inclusivity. Preparing children for school involves more than just academic skills; it encompasses social-emotional readiness and the ability to adapt to structured environments. These studies collectively advocate for continuous evaluation and advancement of teaching methods to cater to diverse learning needs and contexts.

Empowering Teachers and Communities

Empowering teachers and engaging communities are crucial for creating supportive and effective learning environments. Ensuring that educators possess the necessary teaching licenses and have access to ongoing professional development is essential for maintaining high standards of education. Taylor et al. (2022) discuss the importance of coaching for early childhood professionals, emphasizing the need for ongoing professional development. McCoy et al. (2022) use innovative methods to assess school communities, highlighting the role of community collaboration in education. The ratio of teachers to children and the quality of their interactions are pivotal in creating a nurturing and responsive educational setting. Studies by Steed et al. (2021), Corral-Granados et al. (2021), and Moshel and Berkovich (2021) address the working conditions and

leadership models of early childhood personnel, which are vital for attracting and retaining quality educators. The roles of supervisors, principals, and administrators are critical in shaping the educational landscape and securing funding for various initiatives. Fair wages and clear job descriptions contribute to job satisfaction among educators, which in turn affects the quality of education provided to children. Collaboration with families and the broader community can enhance the educational experience by promoting health, fostering neighbourhood connections, and encouraging parental engagement. These studies suggest that empowering educators through professional development, fair working conditions, and community support is essential for the success of early childhood education programs.

Optimizing Learning Environments and Locations

The optimization of learning environments and locations is fundamental to the provision of high-quality early childhood education. Classrooms and play areas equipped with appropriate resources facilitate natural learning experiences and cater to the diverse needs of children. Novak (2022) and Sanchis et al. (2022) examine the impact of location on early childhood experiences, with the latter using children's drawings to understand environmental perceptions. Outdoor spaces and natural environments offer unique opportunities for exploration and learning, contributing to the overall development of children.

Black and Ollerton (2022) explore the experiences of playspace users, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and engaging play spaces. Location plays a significant role in the accessibility of education. Culturally relevant programs ensure that children can see themselves reflected in their learning experiences. Understanding the impact of space and duration of educational experiences can help mitigate exclusionary practices, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to thrive in early childhood education settings. Classen and Westbrook (2022) discuss the impact of professional credential programs on inclusive learning environments, suggesting that learning spaces should be designed to accommodate diverse learners. These studies highlight the importance of creating learning environments that are inclusive, stimulating, and responsive to the cultural and developmental needs of young children.

Conclusion

The review makes significant theoretical and contextual contributions to the existing body of knowledge in early childhood education. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of equitable quality education by synthesizing diverse global studies that highlight the multifaceted nature of early childhood education. It integrates concepts of inclusivity, fairness, and systemic policy issues, providing a comprehensive framework that goes beyond mere access to education. This research underscores the importance of personalized learning experiences, culturally responsive teaching practices, and collaborative partnerships, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on how to achieve equity in education.

Contextually, the research is significant as it addresses the practical challenges and strategies in implementing equitable quality education across various global settings. By examining studies from high, middle, and low-income countries, it provides a nuanced understanding of how different contexts influence educational outcomes. The review highlights the critical role of policy, place, practice, and people in shaping early childhood education environments, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. For instance, it discusses the impact of systemic policy frameworks, the importance of community and physical environments, and the need for professional development and supportive working conditions for educators. This contextual analysis is crucial for informing the design and implementation of effective early childhood education programs that cater to the diverse needs of children, families, and educators worldwide.

To sum, this review contributes to the existing knowledge by providing a holistic view of equitable quality in ECCE, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various factors, and offering practical recommendations for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. It plays a pivotal role in guiding future research, policy-making, and practice in the field of early childhood education, aiming to create a more just and prosperous future for all individuals.

Appendix T: List of Publications and Conferences

Towards Publication

1. The influence on educational policy to engage children's access in promoting equitable quality education: the preliminary report

This report has been funded by the SEOMEO CECCEP Writing Fellowship 2024

2. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025: a systematic review

This review is fully supported by the Ministry of Higher Education as a part of the Bumiputera Academic Training Scheme (SLAB), which funded my PhD programme 2021-2024

Conferences/Poster presentation

1. *Presenter*, British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA) 2024 Conference, 13th February 2024, Birmingham

"Early Years Education as Political Activity: Access, Choice, Agency and Voice"

2. *Poster Presenter*,

"They don't hear me." A lived experience of preschool teachers in practicing the national policy: a comprehensive reflection from a pilot study

The session is fully funded by Postgraduate Research Fund 2023, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh

3. *Attendee*, Global Education Policy Implementation, Central European University (CEU) 2024, 24th – 29th June 2024, Budapest

This session is fully sponsored by the CEU Summer University (SUN)

4. *Attendee*, 7th Edition of the Lapland International Forum of Education (LIFE) to complete 50 credit hours ERASMUS + Staff Mobility (Teachers) 2023, Rovaniemi, Finland

This session is to fulfil the requirement of the Erasmus + Award

5. *Poster Presenter*, Great Teachers Summit, Global Education Awards, 2-4th October 2025, Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI), Perak, Malaysia