

Discourses of quality ECCE in Malaysia: A critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian government has put much attention into increasing quality control in preschool education. This attention is based on an increased recognition that a quality early start to education has long-term cognitive and social benefits for children, and contributes to the country's economic progress (ECCE Council, 2011). According to Kumar and Sarangapani (2004), for virtually all developing countries in Asia, there is still an emphasis on education as an ordering instrument – a remnant of British and European colonisation. When it comes to putting quality early childhood education to practice, there is a strong normalising tendency and an implication in processes of regulation and control (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013) in many countries around the world. Based on these views, the discourse of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Malaysia may have this same tendency, which may limit the discussion on what constitutes a good ECCE within Malaysian context. This research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the discourses of quality ECCE within Malaysian context, and the driving force behind the increased attention, which the Malaysian government has paid to quality control in ECCE services in Malaysia since 1990s. The analysis studies the Malaysian context on Macro and Micro level, looking at its socio-political, economic development, as well as written documents relevant to quality ECCE in Malaysia, aiming at understanding how the language of 'quality' in ECCE Malaysia is constructed, and then explore possibilities of alternative understandings and approaches to "quality ECCE" within the Malaysian context. The purpose of this research is to draw out an alternate narrative of quality, and to allow other ways of understanding the ECCE profession. I believe when new dialogues that surround quality ECCE begins to prioritise children's learning experiences, well-being and meaning-making, instead of being used as an economic and political tool, then the long-term goals of genuine social coherence and equality can finally take a step forward to becoming a reality in Malaysia.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	<i>i</i>
ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP	<i>v</i>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<i>vi</i>
List of Figures	<i>vii</i>
List of Tables	<i>viii</i>
List of Abbreviations	<i>ix</i>
1.0 Introduction	<i>1</i>
2.0 Theoretical framework	<i>5</i>
2.1 Discourse	<i>5</i>
2.1.1 Discourse in Structuralism	<i>6</i>
2.1.2 Discourse in Poststructuralism	<i>7</i>
2.1.3 Foucault's discourse	<i>7</i>
2.2 Discourse analysis within a critical paradigm	<i>8</i>
2.2.1 Critical paradigm	<i>8</i>
2.2.2 Foucauldian discourse analysis	<i>9</i>
2.2.3 Critical discourse analysis	<i>10</i>
2.3 A CDA framework	<i>11</i>
3.0 Discourses of quality ECCE (A Literature Review)	<i>13</i>
3.1 Definition of quality	<i>13</i>
3.2 Quality in education	<i>13</i>
3.3 Paradigms informing quality ECCE	<i>15</i>
3.3.1 Quality ECCE in political and economic perspectives	<i>15</i>
3.3.2 Quality ECCE in the domain of Behaviourism, Developmentalism and Neuroscience	<i>17</i>
3.3.3 Quality ECCE in social and cultural perspectives	<i>19</i>
3.4 Critiques of quality ECCE	<i>20</i>
3.4.1 Problematising quality in early childhood context	<i>20</i>
3.5 Early childhood practitioners within the quality ECCE discourses	<i>26</i>
3.5.1 Early childhood educators as technicians	<i>26</i>
3.5.2 Erosion of professional autonomy and genuine care	<i>27</i>

4.0	<i>Contextualising quality ECCE in Malaysia</i>	29
4.1	An overview of Malaysia	29
4.1.1	Peaceful country?	30
4.2	Brief historical background of Malaysia	30
4.3	Economic history of Malaysia after independence	32
4.4	Neoliberalism and Malaysia	36
4.4.1	Malaysia and the Asian Economic Crisis	37
4.5	History of Malaysia's education	38
4.6	ECCE in Malaysia	43
4.6.1	History of ECCE in Malaysia	43
4.6.2	History of Preschool Education in Malaysia	44
4.6.3	History of childcare services for 0 - 4 years old	48
5.0	<i>Quality discourses in Malaysian Education</i>	51
5.1	Macro level: Quality within the Malaysian system of education from 1996 - 2016	51
5.1.1	1990s: The impact of NEP	51
5.1.2	2000s: Human resource development and education for business	57
5.2	Micro level: Quality within Malaysian ECCE policies and standards	66
5.2.1	Childcare Malaysia – an answer to gender equality in workforce	67
5.2.2	Preschool education – an early contributor to economic transformation	71
5.3	Quality ECCE and the ECCE profession in Malaysia	77
5.3.1	Teachers held accountable for poor education performance in Malaysia	78
5.3.2	The need to monitor and measure teachers' competence	80
5.3.3	Early childhood educators as technicians	82
5.3.4	Social engineering and a diversion from ineffective governance?	84
6.0	<i>Discussion and implications</i>	87
6.1	Overview	87
6.2	'Quality' and ECCE Malaysia	88
6.2.1	Children living in poverty and indigenous children in Malaysia	89
6.2.2	Good governance?	90
6.3	'Quality' and the changing perception of education	92
6.3.1	Individualism vs. Collectivism in Malaysian education	92
6.4	Education and politics	94
6.4.1	The language policies	95

6.5 Implications	95
6.5.1 Education should not be used for cultivating an unhealthy competitiveness that divides the Malaysian people	96
6.5.2 Education should not be a money-making enterprise for business corporations	96
6.5.3 Reorienting narratives in education towards students	97
6.5.4 Make teaching a profession, not a 'last resort'	98
6.5.5 Implication for communities and families	99
7.0 Conclusion	100
References	102

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to be substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Signature: _____

(Mee-Ling Ting)

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List of Figures

Figure 4.1: The 12 National Key Economic Areas of the Economic Transformation Programme

Figure 4.2: The 17 EPPs under the Education NKEA

Figure 5.1: The LINUS screening process

Figure 5.2: Education production line

List of Tables

Table 4.1: Different types of ECCE institutions under the jurisdiction of different ministries in Malaysia

Table 4.2: Summary of the history of preschool education in Malaysia

Table 4.3: Summary of the history of childcare services in Malaysia

Table 5.1: Scoring table for Dimension of Quality of Curriculum

List of Abbreviations

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDD	Curriculum Development Division
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EFA	Education For All
EPP	Entry Point Projects
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
ETP	Economic Transformation Programme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTP	Government Transformation Programme
IBE	International Bureau of Education
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KEMAS	Ministry of Rural and Regional Development
KEMP	K-based Economy Master Plan
LDC	Less Developed Countries
LINUS	Literacy and Numeracy Screenings
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association

MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MOE	Ministry of Education Malaysia
MTS	Malaysian Teacher Standards
MWFCD	Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NDP	New Development Policy
NEM	New Economic Model
NEP	New Economic Policy
NIC	Newly-Industrialised Country
NKEA	National Key Economic Area
NKRA	National Key Results Area
NOC	National Operations Council
NPCS	National Preschool Curriculum Standards
NPQS	National Preschool Quality Standards
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEMANDU	Performance Management and Delivery Unit
PERPADUAN	Department of National Unity and Integration
PIPP	Education Development Master Plan
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QIAS	Quality Improvement Accreditation System

SEAMEO INNOTECH	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology
SPM	Malaysian Certificate of Education
SSM	Companies Commission of Malaysia
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TN50	National Transformation
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNESCO	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1.0 Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Malaysia generally refers to early years services that cater for children who are younger than 7, the official age for beginning primary school. This means that preschool serves children from beginning of age 4 to the end of age 6. ECCE in Malaysia comprises preschool education, which caters for children aged from 4 to 6 years old and childcare services, which caters for children from 0 to 4 years old. The term ECCE, as such, refers to both preschool education and childcare services, and is used interchangeably with early childhood education throughout this thesis.

The following anecdote of various, recent sources, provides a general picture of current ECCE in Malaysia, highlighting important questions relating to the issue of quality ECCE that led to my choice to do this research.

It is a norm in today's Malaysian society to compare and compete in relation to matters regarding a child's academic development. Many Malaysian parents choose to have their children starting school at a very young age in the hope that their children will stay ahead of their peers (*The Malaysian Times*, 2016). Children are nurtured at a very young age to value individual success rather than mutual success in the race for academic achievement. Children between 0 and 4 years old are sent to childcare centres where most of these children are put through activities to help them read early, before going to preschool at the age of 4 or 5. Parents are not only pushing for academic readiness, but the preschool curriculum also takes on formal academic learning mode, to prepare children for Year One (*The Star Online*, 2012). In Malaysia, especially in urban areas, there are expectations that a child should be able to read confidently by age 4. It has become 'abnormal' for a 4-year-old to be unable to read, such that to some extent the child is treated as they had potential learning difficulties and were in need of special programmes (Capel, 2012). When it comes to choosing preschools and/or childcare services, it has become a common scenario that parents are more and more opting for international preschools (Malaysian Digest, 2015) or childcare services that promote programmes imported from the West (Hutchins, 1995), because it is widely accepted that these ECCE services offer better quality programmes.

These expectations on children are widespread throughout Malaysia. They are distinctively fuelled by a popular belief that the first 5 years of the child's life determine their future development. This is driven by the Ministry of Education Malaysia's proposal to lower formal school-entry age to 5 (Pusat Sumber Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak, 2012), which is furthermore reinforced by rigid assessment requirements that are governed by expected curriculum outcomes. Such expectations of starting early, staying ahead,

preparing for assessments, and being school-ready, seemed to have rendered ECCE services as preparation grounds for these young children to start learning how to fulfil curriculum expectations when they start formal schooling. Assessments of quality ECCE are often shaped by how well young children meet these expectations, and the assessment of children is often epitomised by scores and checklists, rather than asking if the child is ready or whether it is meaningful for the child.

As mentioned earlier, ECCE in Malaysia is divided into two groups according to the age of children. ECCE programmes are offered by two types of institutions. They are the childcare centres, nurseries or *Taska* (Malay language) catering for children up to 4 years old, and the preschools, kindergartens or *Tadika* (Malay language), catering for 4 to 6 years old. The 0 to 4-year-olds fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD), whereas the 4 to 6-year-olds fall under three agencies: the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KEMAS), and the Department of National Unity and Integration (PERPADUAN) (Schools of Malaysia Directory, n.d.).

There was no significant interest in ECCE before the 1990s; that is engaging childcare services for children under the age of 3 was uncommon, while kindergarten or preschool were not formally recognised as part of Malaysian's formal education system until 1996 (Curriculum Development Division [CDD], 2007). Then, with more women entering the labour forces, prompted by the country's scaling up of human resources capacity for economic advancement, there is an increased number of ECCE services being established in Malaysia so as to enable parents with young children to work (Chiam, 2008). For the past two decades, the Malaysian Government has put a lot of attention into increasing quality control in ECCE. This involvement reflects an increased recognition that a quality early start to education has long-term cognitive and social benefits for children, and contributes to the country's economic progress (ECCE Council, 2011). Various policies, regulations and plans have been put in place in recent years to assure the quality of ECCE services.

The above anecdote has offered some insights into how quality ECCE is viewed in Malaysia: Firstly, Malaysia with its British colonial history, traces of colonial legacy can be seen in the provision of programmes for young children in Malaysia, particularly programmes that are informed by ideologies of individualism (Hutchins, 1995). That is, ideologies that value individual thoughts, actions and achievements, rather than shared effort and responsibility – meaning there are expectations that children should begin preparation for school, as early as possible, so as to get ahead of everybody else. Secondly, there was the implication that ECCE programmes imported from the West were of better quality. This was often seen in aggressive marketing techniques, used by local and foreign entrepreneurs that promise to produce 'intellectually superior' children (Hutchins, 1995, p. 113). Thirdly, the construction of curriculum guidelines was characterised by a process of cultural borrowing and adaptation, which reflects the hegemony of Western theories of child development and philosophies of early childhood education. Hence,

ECCE quality assurance in Malaysia is more or less framed by a concept of 'quality' that results from Western views, which take a universalising and highly decontextualised approach to children. Like many developing countries in the Asia Pacific region, Malaysia has adopted this concept of quality as a means to continue to make economic progress, which it has been enforced via its national educational policies (Kamerman, 2006).

Despite the good intention to improve quality in the ECCE sector, it seems that the concept of quality in ECCE, with its underlying theoretical foundation drawn from a positivistic framework (Dahlberg et al., 2013), may not be a good fit in the Malaysian context. That is, applying a primarily Western construct of 'quality' and 'normal' child development into policies and standards of early childhood fields in Malaysia, may not be suitable for the local context. As such, the theories of quality that are applied are decontextualised, making little room for significant local beliefs regarding what quality might mean and how it might be experienced by Malaysians. Furthermore, there are also concerns that the emphasis on the mastering of a range of dispositions, skills and knowledge that are based on a decontextualised theoretical framework may be "poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children" in the local context (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006, p. 13). Meier and Kroll (2015) also assert that by importing and adopting practices which may not fit the local context and children's natural learning styles, there is a risk of "a wiping out of approaches characteristic of particular cultures, a loss of diversity in approaches to early childhood education" (p. xii), which in turn is likely to undermine children's well-being, their genuine interest in learning and the motivation to complete and/ or further their schooling.

All in all, there is still plenty of space for a more holistic discussion around ECCE quality assurance framework in Malaysia. One that will include Malaysia's social, cultural and political context, the varied needs of local young children, and a long-term goal for social unity (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology [SEAMEO INNOTECH], 2014).

Purpose of research

This research explores how current dominant discourse on quality ECCE shapes and moulds the ECCE sector in Malaysia, and furthermore influences ECCE practitioners, policy-makers, and society's view on Malaysia's ECCE as a sector. This study uses qualitative methods of data collection and analysis within a critical framework to analyse the discourses of quality ECCE within the Malaysian context. Framed by three research questions, the analysis was carried out on documents relevant to understanding quality ECCE in Malaysia from 1996 to 2016, with the aim of understanding:

- 1) How the concept of 'quality' is constructed in ECCE Malaysia?
- 2) How is quality being interpreted in Malaysia's educational policies and standards?
- 3) How is the underlying driving force of quality discourse shaping Malaysian ECCE profession in terms of policies and practice standards?

This research also attempts to explore possibilities of alternative understandings and approaches to quality ECCE within the Malaysian context. In hope that these alternate approaches to 'quality' may shed a new light on how ECCE profession is viewed. New dialogues that prioritise children's well-being and meaning-making, as well as long-term goals of social coherence and equality may also take place. In short, the purpose is to generate conversations about 'quality' that can be appropriated to the Malaysian context more effectively, and allowing other ways of understanding the ECCE profession. In the next chapter, the discussion that follows addresses the theoretical framework of the research and how the thesis is structured.

2.0 Theoretical framework

This research will engage in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by examining various writings obtained from different sources related to ECCE in Malaysia during the period from 1996 to 2016. This chapter looks into the underlying theoretical framework for discourse analysis that is employed in this study. Keeping in mind that, the data collected for this research is dealing with writings (language), the discussion that follows will therefore begin with explaining structuralisms' concept of discourse before moving onto discussion of poststructuralisms' notion of discourse. This research mainly draws on Michel Foucault's definition of discourse, from there proceeding to an analysis of discourse in the critical paradigm. A framework for doing CDA will be outlined and then used to structure the following chapters of the thesis in order to examine the discourse of quality ECCE in Malaysia.

2.1 Discourse

Discourse (2017), as defined in the *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, denotes written or spoken communication. According to Revolvly (n.d.-a), discourse, in the first sense, is "a conceptual generalisation of conversation within context of communication" (para. 1). In the second sense, it is "the totality of codified language used in a given field of intellectual enquiry and of social practice" (para. 1). In the third sense, which is inspired by Foucault in 1969 (as cited in Revolvly, n.d.-a) "discourse describes an entity of sequences, in that they are statements in conversation" (para. 1). Put it together, discourse is an abstract construct that allows the semiotic sequences, or "relations among signs to assign meaning and communicate specific, repeatable communications to, between, and among objects, subjects, and statements" (Revolvly, n.d.-a, para. 2). A discourse is an assemblage of content, consisting of both internal relations in a body of text and external relations among discourses, intended to impart particular information and knowledge. Therefore, a discourse is identified with other discourses rather than existing in itself (Revolvly, n.d.-a). According to Gee (1999), discourse is an active and continuous process of building and rebuilding of our worlds through the use of language together with "actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing" (p. 11). Language is used, be it spoken or written, in such a way that is fitting to the context. Concurrently, the way that has been spoken or written, builds that very context, or the world of activities and institutions.

In the humanities and social sciences, discourses are embedded in different rhetorical genres, describing a formal way of thinking that can be expressed through language. It defines boundaries on what statements can and cannot be said about a topic, and it can affect the person's perspective (Revolvly, n.d.-a).

2.1.1 Discourse in Structuralism

Structuralism is a 20th century intellectual movement. Structuralist theorists argue that all human actions, social formations, and all cultural systems can be comprehended as frameworks or systems of related elements, such as language or coded systems of meaning, rather than as a direct transaction with reality (Revolvy, n.d.-a; Whisnant, n.d.). In other words, all human activities, perceptions and thoughts are constructed, and are related to language. The language system in which we operate, thus gives everything meanings (Mastin, 2008a). According to Whisnant (n.d.), structuralists tend to emphasise the consistency of a framework, within which, limits are set upon the construction of meaning, and on what can or cannot be said. They tend to come up with “Universal truths” that claim to explain everything, while reducing many complicated phenomena to a few key elements. Structuralism has the tendency to bind all humans together, based on what certain members of a given society have in common, within some basic structures. In these structures, our thoughts, world-views and sense of self are shaped. In other words, how we perceive the world is structured by the system we are in, and thus, all power becomes an operation of the system (Whisnant, n.d.).

Another way of explaining structuralism, according to Phillips (n.d.), is that it refers to “a name given to a wide range of discourses that study structures of signification”, which “occurs wherever there is a meaningful event or in the practice of meaningful actions” (para. 1) that have been documented in text.

From the point of view of structuralism, Philips (n.d.) notes that every human activity is related to language, and thus “all texts, meaningful events, and signifying practices” (para. 1) have underlying structures that can be analysed. These underlying structures often reveal the ideological views that are disseminated through making languages, images or signs work in a particular way, such that they convey deep mythical meanings within widely accepted ‘common knowledge’ rather than what the surface images might immediately suggest (Mastin, 2008a). Although this structure remains unconscious and abstract, it is this very “structure itself that determines the significance, meaning and function of the individual elements of a system” (Howarth, 2000, p. 17). Therefore, such a structure becomes a necessary aspect of our whole way of being what we are.

Around late 1960s, the debate surrounding structuralism had reached its peak when a new generation of theorists arrived on the intellectual scene, namely the poststructuralists (Angermuller, 2014). Poststructuralism within the humanities and social sciences began to emerge in the latter part of the 20th century. Both the structuralist and poststructuralist are concerned with power relations, but poststructuralist “emphasises the role of knowledge and textual processes” with respect to the ways they achieve and sustain relations of power (Fox, 2014, Definitions section, para. 1).

2.1.2 Discourse in Poststructuralism

Poststructuralists reject claims that all aspects of society can be explained by a single theoretical approach. Instead, they emphasises on examining the differences and varieties of perspectives of individuals and groups in relation to common encounters, and focusing on how truths are produced and sustained rather than searching for universal truths (Revolvy, n.d.-a). For poststructuralists, the interpretation of meaning of a text is subjective, multifaceted, and contextual with no single purpose. Therefore, post-structuralist approach to the interpretation of text does not guarantee consistency and is never authoritative (Mastin, 2008b).

Discourse in poststructuralism, as illustrated by Angermuller (2014), is:

an open and dynamic terrain of changeable perspectives and nested voices in which the discourse participants are confronted with the difficult practical task of defining their place in discourse. Discourse is considered to be a linguistically encoded practice of positioning oneself and others and creating discursive relationships with others... (p. 4)

In other words, there is a power-relation embedded in language use within a space containing many different voices of different perspectives and validities. In summary, poststructuralist researchers tend to analyse discourses through examining other sources for meaning, such as texts, cultural norms, policies and practices (Mastin, 2008b; Revolvy, n.d.-a).

2.1.3 Foucault's discourse

One of the prominent poststructuralists, Michel Foucault, who was initially a structuralist, and had later rejected these labels himself and most of structuralism's claims (Mastin, 2008b). Foucault was interested in how discourses define the social reality, people and the ideas that inhabit the world. In fact, Foucault was the first to identify the dominant and hierarchical power structures within politics and knowledge (Ember, 2013). Drawing on Foucault's work in 1977 (as cited in Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013), discourses can be traced in social processes of power, and in the legitimation, construction and maintenance of current truths. Pinkus (1996) notes that discourses are more than just ways of thinking and producing meaning, rather, it is a form of power relations that are inherent in knowledge, and is combined with social practices. This power is always present and exercised within discourses. It controls "what can be spoken of... where and how one may speak..., and who may speak" (Revolvy, n.d.-a, para. 14). In his definition of discourse, Foucault refers to it as an institutionalised way of speaking or writing in a way that defines the boundaries of reality according to what can and cannot be said about the world (Routledge, 2016).

Discourse, according to Foucauldian theory, is a manifestation of power that constitutes particular social realities and identities that position people in ways that only the voice of certain groups are

privileged over others (Thomas, 2005). In other words, discourse is related to power as it asserts control by setting limits on how and what statements can be created (Revolvy, n.d.-b), which tends to exert pressure or power of constraint on other discourses that are not promoted by the mainstream (Pinkus, 1996). With this understanding of discourse, Foucault, along with other poststructuralists, is critical of the silencing of the voice of the Other, of controlling resistant practices and disobedient knowledge, and of homogenising the social through production of hegemonies (Angermuller, 2014). This overview leads us to the next discussion on discourse analysis in the critical paradigm.

2.2 Discourse analysis within a critical paradigm

2.2.1 Critical paradigm

Too often, things are taken for granted or deemed ‘that’s just the way things are’ without being questioned in relation to how they got that way in the first place, how they are functioning, and whom they are privileging. When actions are taken to merely negatively represent a reaction or a rebellion against the ‘system’, these actions are still under the influence of the very hegemonic perspectives that have created these systems in the first place (Ember, 2013). In order for deep-seated change to happen, Ember (2013) asserts that we need to be able to liberate ourselves entirely from these hegemonic perspectives and generate actual resistance via critical approaches that examine the entire hegemonic way of seeing and thinking. This means the critical paradigm provides the means of examining social conditions.

The critical paradigm, according to Mack (2010), stems from critical theory and the belief that research is done in order to target understanding or providing an explanation of societal norms in order to change these behaviours. In a critical paradigm, no aspect of life is without value in that both social and power relations from within a society influence the construction of knowledge (Scotland, 2012). Research in the critical paradigm implicates the need to evaluate the known structure of social strata, and suggest that there is a clash between a certain group with a specific political agenda and the culture, and other groups’ interests (Carballo, 2003). According to Mack (2010), there are two things an educational research in the critical paradigm do: 1) looks for the political and economic foundations of our construction of knowledge, curriculum, and teaching, and 2) challenges the multiplication and reproduction of power imbalances and inequalities. Therefore, research in this paradigm, as St. Pierre (2000) has pointed out, does not aim to reject or discard of the “metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work”, but instead, it is to deconstruct and “to re-inscribe them in another way” (p. 482) It is an affirmative and empowering practice in as much as it results in acknowledgment of human agency. That is to say, research in the critical paradigm not only examines the inherent power relations at work found in language, cultural practices, codes of practices that have been taken for granted, yet in addition provides the possibility of putting the dominant ideology under scrutiny and subjecting it to questioning with the goal that we do not passively follow the aforementioned language and practices.

In short, research in the critical paradigm is a constant transformative activity that works at deconstructing the *status quo* (Ramalin, 2014), challenging the fundamental frameworks of dominant ideologies (Bohman, 2005), and calling for all stakeholders to take on an active role in engaging in a dialogical process of collective discovery of the unequal oppressive structure, processes and practices (Biesta, 2013), instead of acting as merely a passive receiving audience.

Combining this understanding of critical theory with Michel Foucault's conception of discourse discussed earlier, where discourse is thought of as "a productive technology of social practice, which subjects people to forms of power while providing them with spaces of agency and possibilities for action" (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 2), and that defining discourses is seen as defining reality itself (Routledge, 2016). Discourse analysis, therefore, does not aim to attain truth (Hook, 2001). Rather, it is the search for the scarcity of meaning; that is, the attempt to discern what cannot be said, what is impossible or unreasonable within a certain discursive location (Hook, 2001). The following discussion will look briefly at Foucauldian discourse analysis.

2.2.2 Foucauldian discourse analysis

Foucault's work is characterised by its attention to history. Pinkus (1996) explains Foucault "looks at the continuities and discontinuities between... the knowledge systems which primarily informed the thinking during certain periods of history... and the social context in which certain knowledge and practices emerged as... desirable or changed" (para. 2). Foucault sees the formation of social identities or practices as socially determined, and as being a function of historically specific discourses, and thus, as an understanding of how such discursive constructions (in this research, these constructions refer to the discursive construction of quality ECCE in Malaysia) are formed while at the same time facilitating change and contestation. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, the focus is upon societal power relations that are expressed through language and practices, where power is connected to the development of discourse within specific historical periods (Pinkus, 1996). Such analysis puts the emphasis on asking, firstly, how the social world is constructed through language that is affected by various sources of power (Given, 2008). Secondly, it emphasises how some discourses have gained dominant status through shaping and creating the meaning-making systems, while other alternative discourses are either marginalised or silenced. Thirdly, it emphasises how we organise and position ourselves and our social world under the influence of these dominant discourses. Once these analyses are understood, then there is the potential for hegemonic practices or ideologies to be challenged. Foucault's analyses are fundamental to critical discourse (Ember, 2013). CDA is therefore, principally informed by the work of Foucault (Graham, 2005).

2.2.3 Critical discourse analysis

In the humanities and social sciences, CDA neither limit its analysis to specific structures of text nor focus on entities and persons, but on a complex set of social relations that include structures in the socio-political context in order to produce insights into the way in which discourse reproduces or resists social and political inequality, power abuse and hegemony (Fairclough, 2010). In education, CDA combines aspects of socio-political and critical theory with a rather general (usually thematic) analysis of language that is not necessarily rooted in any particular linguistic background or theory (Gee, 2004), with the object of describing, interpreting, and explaining the construction of dogmatic beliefs and ideologies in written texts (Rogers, 2008). The study of relationships between texts, discursive and social practices, may reveal the manner in which power relations are implicit within texts, social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge (Rogers, 2008).

This research draws on an approach that is referred to by Rogers (2008) involving the use of CDA in an examination of written texts in the domain of policy studies. In this approach to doing CDA, there are basically two levels of analysis, namely the Macro level and the Micro level. Both of these levels will be incorporated into the doing of CDA in this research. While this will be further discussed in detail in the next section, it can be briefly stated here that, in the examination of quality ECCE in Malaysia, analysis at the Macro level will focus on historical, political, and economic incentives as well as the government agendas that sit behind the language used to promote quality ECCE during a set period of time, (i.e. between 1996 - 2016). That is, documenting the emergence of the quality regime in ECCE Malaysia, which is constructed by corporations that serve economic interests, has consequences on ECCE services, teachers, and children under this regime. The Micro level will mainly draw on texts on the ECCE in Malaysia, for example, academic writing, policy documents, both international and local assessment documents, and reports on ECCE in Malaysia etc. However, it should be noted that there is limited academic literature that critically examines the Malaysian ECCE programmes and policies. This is particularly the case with respect to and the role of government in the creation of the quality ECCE discourses, leaving it necessary to derive relevant material from non-academic internet sources, including news reports, political speeches etc. CDA is then used to demonstrate the connections between the Macro and Micro, by interrogating the normative features of the quality ECCE discourse, how quality ECCE is constructed and represented in these forms of text, and also by investigating the ways in which oppositional and resistant discourses may be produced.

In this study, I am taking the position that although the meaning of quality is created and regulated by discourses and cultural practices, the poststructuralist approach offers that it is still possible to resist the dominant dogmas and their normalising effects by moving from discourses where only certain statements can be made, to others where different statements are possible (Weedon, 2004). At the same time, this study attempts to dig deeper beneath the surface agendas set by the dominant voices and to actively decode and recode the meaning of quality within the discursive formations that involve ongoing dialogue, negotiation and cultural practices.

However, this research does not intend to propose any drastic changes or claim to produce some pristine truth from the distorted ideology surrounding this topic. Rather, as an early childhood educator in Malaysia, and as one of the many stakeholders in the Malaysian ECCE sector, I am simply attempting to join the “conversations” surrounding quality ECCE already set by the Malaysian education ministry and government agencies.

This research aims to provide a different perspective on quality ECCE in the Malaysian context, to invite conversations surrounding the issue of quality that may help to point out contradictions, to learn what is really going on and, as such, exposing the predominant ideology while opening up a space for competing ideologies to be heard – in other words, to create a space for ongoing negotiation and conceptualisation. As Foucault (1982) puts it, there is the need for ‘a constant checking’, in this case of what quality ECCE means in this market-driven era.

The following discussion will attempt to provide an explanation of ‘doing’ CDA by drawing on a framework that has been developed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough in 1999 (as cited in Thomas, 2005), and how this framework can be applied when examining the construction of quality ECCE in various texts and documents (both at the Micro and Macro levels) within Malaysia.

2.3 A CDA framework

The following approach to doing CDA is based on a five-stage framework developed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (Thomas, 2005). Because Thomas (2005) suggests that it is not necessary for a CDA to involve all five stages of the framework, only four of the five stages will be used as the means of structuring the chapters of this thesis. These four stages are explained below.

The first stage of the framework is the identification of a discourse-related problem (Thomas, 2005) of quality ECCE. This will begin with an interpretation of quality in ECCE. Various academic writings concerning the problems of quality in ECCE will be reviewed.

The second stage looks to see how the said issue emerges and furthermore how it is established in the way social life is organised. At this stage, the analysis will employ the Macro and Micro levels of analysis, as outlined by Rogers (2008), and which was previously discussed in Section 2.2.3.

- Analysis at the Macro level (Rogers, 2008) “focuses on questions of power and power struggles” (Thomas, 2005, p. 7). It is an “analysis of the practice in relation to its discursive moments” and “how the discourse articulates with other moments” (Thomas, 2005, p. 7). That is, examining the representations of quality ECCE, the discursive constructions of ‘good’ quality at a time when quality ECCE has rapidly gained the attention of and when it was perceived by the Malaysian Government to be important (particularly after 1996).

As such, this analysis addresses the first research question of this study - *How is the concept of quality constructed in ECCE Malaysia?* A timeline of significant social moments or events between the years 1996 and 2016 will be included to help identify the relationships between the discourse on quality ECCE and these said events. The purpose of this is to identify how power struggles are disguised within the discourse, and work to reconstruct the practices that are located within the discourse. This part of the analysis is concerned with contextualising the problem (Thomas, 2005).

- Next, the Micro level (Rogers, 2008) of the analysis “examines the dialectic... between the linguistic elements and the social” (Thomas, 2005, p. 12). This work corresponds to the second research question – *How is quality being interpreted in the educational policies and standards?* This part of the analysis examines the relations between authors and the way in which quality ECCE is constructed within the policy documents or reports. These relations are said to be recognisable in “the grammatical features of modality and evaluation” (Fairclough, as cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 12). According to Thomas’ (2005) explanation, modality is examined through statements made in policy documents or reports, and thus uncover the authors’ relative commitment to truth. Evaluation, on the other hand, refers to “the ways in which authors commit themselves to values and concerns the authors’ commitment to desirability” (Fairclough, as cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 13), that is, the evaluative statements about what is desired, and what is not.

The third stage of the framework then attempts to find the connection between the Macro and Micro levels, which led to an examination on whose interests are upheld by the way social life is organised, and, who may also have a hand in propagating the problem instead of resolving it. This stage is therefore an attempt to answer the third research question - *What function this discourse on quality has within the network of ECCE professionals?* That is, how is quality constructing the Malaysian ECCE profession and who benefits from it most? Then the fourth stage includes a discussion on the research work and possible implications.

3.0 Discourses of quality ECCE (A Literature Review)

3.1 Definition of quality

The word quality is generally associated with the properties of merchandise or a product that are valued by the consumers and, furthermore, it is understood to infer an ongoing process of fulfilling stated and implied consumer needs (Quality Digest, 2001). The nature of quality is relative, since it is rated according to the degree of satisfaction experienced by the customers or consumers utilising the product (Chandrupatla, 2009). The ultimate aim is to warrant continuous, reasonable profit for the provider of the service. Ensuring reliability of the product is therefore said to be key to sustaining a lasting relationship with customers (Chandrupatla, 2009) or to retaining and maintaining them as repeat customers.

The history of quality is as old as civilisation. However, quality has since gained an increased acknowledgement during and after World War II, especially in both manufacturing lines and military applications (Chandrupatla, 2009), the reason being it became more important to achieving competitive advantage. Chandrupatla refers to Japan as a perfect example of how a nation became a world player as a consequence of its industry and trade by increasing the quality of its commercial goods after the war. Other Asia Pacific countries have since followed in Japan's footsteps. These countries were well aware that the only way to excel in the competitive world market, and for their nations to grow and prosper, they would need to be able to offer better quality products than their competitors. Quality then, no longer just provided a competitive advantage, but it furthermore became a necessity for survival in the marketplace.

Quality is economic jargon used in market transactions (Massey, 2013) and in the marketplace. As such, it can mean a lot of things in that its significance depends on people's perceptions of the value of a product or service, and their expectations of the performance and reliability of that product or service. Chandrupatla (2009) loosely summarises philosophies relating to the concept of quality, by drawing on some of the best-known quality experts, who state that quality refers to an absence of variation, conforming to specifications or standards, meeting expectations, and being measurable and reliable. At the turn of the 20th century, quality requirements went beyond manufacturing to include education, such that usage of the term 'quality' in education had become significant by the mid-twentieth century (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004).

3.2 Quality in education

Quality in education is also of an ever-shifting and complex nature because of its dependence on the consistently changing political climate, social and cultural context, economic expectations, as well as demands by policy-makers and various stakeholders' needs. Kumar and Sarangapani (2004) describe the idea of quality in education as one that interconnects the essential characteristics of educational activities and the superiority of these attributes, which in turn are

understood to be necessarily linked to ensuring the production of the normative outcomes expected by society. As such, it is implied that education has a certain norm built into it, and that someone who has been educated is expected to be changed for the better (Sheshagiri, 2009).

Deliberate use of the term quality with respect to education only became important after the 1950s. It can therefore be said that the discourse on quality is relatively new compared to other discourses on education (Sheshagiri, 2009). The rise of human capital theory in economics, in the 1960s onwards, proposed that education should be a “way of reducing poverty and enhancing social mobility in the newly independent countries facing the challenge of speedy economic development” (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004, p. 2), and what is more, it should make education an important ingredient in the economic well-being of the new nation states that adopted this policy. Ensuring parity in quality in education consequently became an important commitment of many states (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004). In the 1960s, there was a rise in popularity of behaviourism, as a science of learning, which defined learning as objectively observable behaviours acquired through environmental conditioning, offering testing as a way of reliable monitoring of learning and quality in education systems (Shepard, 2000). According to Kumar and Sarangapani (2004), this behaviourist approach to learning and assessment contains underlying assumptions that:

cognitive abilities are universal and general, culture and context do not influence their acquisition, [as] they are predictive of learning and capabilities, and they are unevenly and ‘normally’ distributed in any given population of children. (p. 4)

The behaviourist idea of learning, adopts a positivist epistemological approach which understands observable and measurable evidence as the only form of fact. This development can be seen as involving the creation of paradigm of understanding that influenced education policy development, curricular design, and classroom practices. That is to say, the discourse on quality within the behaviourist paradigm emphasises the idea of learner achievement as being observable and predictable through the gathering of measurable evidence through testing and assessment (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004). This behaviourist approach to education “was brought by Britain and Europe to colonies in Asia” (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004, p. 7), and has continued to inform the discussion of quality in education in many developing countries.

Concerns for and attention paid to quality in education are also pervasive in early childhood education (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). In 2001, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with a mission “to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world” (OECD, 2016, para. 1), has noted the increased importance of early years’ experiences and their impact on education, social, and family policy agenda. Dahlberg et al. (2013) also point out that many countries are driven by recognition that early learning enhances subsequent academic performance. Furthermore, they recognise that ECCE services are part of the social and economic structure of healthy and wealthy local communities.

The following section examines some of the dominant paradigms and discussions surrounding quality ECCE in the period after World War II. The concept of quality in the post-war period has been marked by some important changes in the political framework with the formation of new nation states, followed by a race for modernisation, economic development and competitiveness.

3.3 Paradigms informing quality ECCE

Woodhead (2006) asserts that early childhood services, curricular approaches and practices are shaped by “generations of human activity and creativity” (p.22), and by specific conditions. As such, formation of these settings and practices are informed by discourses about what is desirable with respect to the historical, political and economic climate at the time (Woodhead, 2006). Consequently, any particular specification of what counts as ‘quality’ in early childhood education or ECCE will “inevitably reflect particular combinations of cultural assumptions and aspirations” (Woodhead, 2006, p. 22). According to Moss and Dahlberg (2008), a discourse of quality can be understood as the product of a specific paradigm with certain values and assumptions regarding ECCE, as well as the power relationships between professionals and/ or expert researcher in the early childhood field, and the governments, children, families (Woodhead, 2006). Quality ECCE is a construct (Fenech, 2011) that is interconnected with the changes that are taking place in the social, economic and political worlds (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). Furthermore, quality ECCE sits in in a circular relationship with the systems of power that produce and sustain them (Moss, 2006). Although this interconnectedness should not be envisaged separately, the following sections attempt to examine how quality ECCE can be envisioned within the dominant perspectives. This separate treatment of the dominant perspectives does not necessarily mean these perspectives can be segregated into separate domains.

3.3.1 Quality ECCE in political and economic perspectives

ECCE programmes are increasingly being justified as the most effective way of achieving social and economic advancement and change by “ensuring school readiness, equalising opportunities and promoting social justice” (Woodhead, 2006, p. 12) through early intervention. In brief, ECCE is said to be likened to preventive medicine to eradicate disease, such that, it is an intervention to resolve issues of social reform.

Various influential experiments were done to support this notion that ECCE could serve as a social intervention. According to Woodhead (2006), a relatively small-scale US experiment done in the 1960s concluded that high quality early childhood education programmes have long term benefits such as “lower dropout rates and higher school achievements..., lower referral rates to special education, and lower incidences of crime” (p.13). This claim had been generalised both within the US and across the global domain. Similarly during the 1970s, social problems in central

Europe, such as unemployment, were often associated with the failure of working-class children in school (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). It was said the only way to ensure the salvation of children was through early intervention involving predictable, monitorable and high quality programmes, such that children would be assisted in becoming better adjusted, and autonomous, as well as entrepreneurial citizens (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). ECCE was therefore, seen as a form of social intervention. The beneficial effects of high quality early childhood education were then assumed to be self-evident to policy-makers (Woodhead, 2006).

If the language of economics were to be used to interpret early childhood education, then it would be understood as an investment that yields high returns “in terms of reduced expenditure on special education, youth justice, social welfare etc” (Breedlove & Schweinhart, as cited in Woodhead, 2006, p. 14). According to Penn (2002), this human capital model of early childhood has become the basis for defining ECCE policy. The World Bank Group is notable in its adoption, as is clearly stated on its website (<http://live.worldbank.org/human-capital-summit>), that “investing in the early years is one of the smartest investments a country can make...” and is “critical for the future productivity of individuals and for the economic competitiveness of nations” (para. 1).

In the 1980s, the world experienced a debt crisis as a consequence of many developing regions being unable to repay the debt, meaning financial rescue operations became necessary (Welch & Oringer, 1998). In response to this crisis, the US became the principal financial aid provider and played a fundamental role in the designing and financing of structural adjustment programmes of the main International Financial Institutions, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Welch & Oringer, 1998). As a condition of receiving the financial aid, recipient nations were obligated to adhere to the prescriptions of economic reforms set by the World Bank and IMF (Welch & Oringer, 1998); that is, they were obliged to change their economic policies to facilitate increased foreign trade and investment. In other words, the countries receiving financial aid were obliged to open their markets to competition from foreign companies, on top of having to deal with an increased reliance on subsidised projects to meet basic and essential necessities (since the 1980s), the need to compete for funding in education catalysed the discourse of quality education that surrounds “the ideas of regulation, accountability (through output measurement), cost efficiency, and international comparisons” (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004, p. 10).

The OECD, which was established in Europe, promotes policies that are aimed at improving the economic and social well-being of people worldwide (OECD, 2016), and sees improving the quality of, and the access to, early childhood services as a major policy priority (OECD, 2001). The main objectives are to strengthen educational, emotional and social outcomes for children, to foster equity and social integration, and to promote equal opportunities of participation in the labour market. These objectives concur with the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and other centres of global power, which also see early childhood education of a certain type as being crucial to the development and modernisation of a nation. There’s an implication that the condition for the poorer and less powerful nations to be able to participate in the global

economy lies in the promotion of Western/European capitalist values, which include secularism, and a focus on the production of a flexible labour market (Tobin, 2005).

What quality ECCE means

In order to further modernisation and win approval from the global powers, Tobin (2005) asserts that many countries use “reform of early childhood education as a tool for producing a labour force [that is] able to compete more effectively in the global economy” (p. 429), and, as such, they are compelled to adapt Western notions of quality in their early childhood education (Tobin, 2005). In other words, ECCE is viewed as an industry and the foundation for contributing to a nation’s achievement of certain economic and social goals. Quality ECCE is then driven by a belief that children need to follow prescriptions and achieve outcome criteria set out in curricula, and employees need to achieve industry-defined standards (Moss, 2006).

3.3.2 Quality ECCE in the domain of Behaviourism, Developmentalism and Neuroscience

The mid-twentieth century was the period that saw the rise of psychological science and developmental psychology (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006), but its influence on education was delayed till the late 1960s (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004). This coincided with the rising popularity of human capital theory around the same period, which saw an emphasis on investment in human capital (i.e. education) to produce essential skills in the labour-force that is needed for economic growth (“A Dictionary of Sociology,” 1998). To ensure the survival of the skilled human-capital reservoir, investment in quality education is crucial, thus spurring the influence of behaviourism both as the science of learning, as well as providing the groundwork for guiding what counts as good quality education.

In behaviourism, learning is being defined as observable changes in behaviour (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004), in which learning is assumed to be a progressive process that advances toward predefined outcomes (Moss, 2006). The learners’ performances are monitored and their achievements are measured through standardised testing to ensure they meet the requirements that define a quality education. In short, behaviourism forms the framework for assessment tools to assess the quality of education (Fenech, 2011).

In the ECCE sector, the claim that the early years are formative years and the most crucial period of time for children’s development, which may assert long-term influences on their later lives, is one of the most influential themes that seems to pervade throughout developmental psychology, which in turn, has shaped various discourses in early childhood (Woodhead, 2006). This claim not only has been emphasised by influential early childhood scholars, educators and reformers over the last couple of centuries, it has also directly informed many early childhood programme

designs and curriculum approaches, as well as research and policy that address issues about appropriateness and quality of care (Woodhead, 2006).

There are a few major themes in developmentalism that need to be mentioned (Woodhead, 2006). Firstly, it is believed that there are numerous progressive transformations occurring before children even begin schooling, in fact the transformations begin from earliest infancy. Secondly, these transformations are believed to comprise distinctive phases, stages and milestones of development. As such, it is believed that young children's acquisition of physical, mental, cognitive and social-emotional competencies is different from the competencies that characterise the capabilities of older children and adults. Thirdly, during early childhood, young children are especially sensitive to negative impact of the way they are treated and the repercussions are said to be felt throughout childhood and into adult years. Therefore, responsive relationships with others during early childhood can ensure "their emotional security, social integration and cognitive and cultural competencies" (Woodhead, 2006, p. 7). In other words, an early intervention in relation to early adversity is said to have the most impact in producing a rapid and complete remedy to combating long-term, negative outcomes for children. These themes have highlighted the criticalness of early childhood development, which in turn fuelled policy work, recommending comprehensive early childhood programmes as a major interventional tool.

Apart from developmentalism, advances in neuroscience have also endorsed the idea that the early years are the prime-time for development. Early brain development researches have drawn significant attention to the period between birth to two years old, claiming that this is the period when synapse formation is most rapid and that this formation in the earliest years become hard-wired for life. However, beyond this period, synaptic density declines gradually (Woodhead, 2006). It is "assumed that [this] synaptic density is an indicator of intelligence" (Woodhead, 2006, p. 9), meaning the early years are often interpreted as the best time for intervention and learning. Consequently, Woodhead goes on to say that early childhood education is envisioned as a vital site for compensating for disadvantages, equalising opportunities and providing children growing up with adversities a head start. The idea of 'early is best' has thus been advocated and endorsed by neuroscience, producing new education policy informed by developmental research (Woodhead, 2006).

What quality ECCE means

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) was formulated by the US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) during the 1980s. DAP underpins many frameworks for early childhood policy and practice, and what constitutes quality standards for early childhood education (Woodhead, 2006). DAP is an approach to teaching informed by child development researches. It emphasises universal stages of development, where these stages are often treated as taken-for-granted truths that are full of culturally specific assumptions rooted in Western cultural traditions and values. Although DAP originated in the US, it has provided the guideline for quality in early childhood programmes in many countries (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, & Ingram, 2010).

Early years educators are considered to be of high-quality if they have the ability to help children obtain predicted competence at each developmental stage (Walsh et al., 2010). Tobin (2005) states that, the knowing how children develop tends to suggest prescriptive best practices, approaches and strategies to achieve expected outcomes. The task of attaining quality is therefore seen as an adherence to these prescriptions. As for the design of preschool curriculum, what is considered to be of high-quality is often the curriculum that claims to be informed by brain research and its study of early developmental stages, with the hint that that latest scientific breakthrough is a guarantee for helping children to stay ahead (Tobin, 2005). Thus, quality here also seems to imply being ahead of everyone else in a competitive sense.

3.3.3 Quality ECCE in social and cultural perspectives

During the 19th century, Europe launched a new period of colonial expansion that was energised by the industrial revolution while at the same time being under pressure from a rapidly growing population (The Map as History, n.d.). During this time, 19th century teachers, often missionaries who were also inspired by the desire to civilise the barbaric nations, followed European troops to help carry out the presumed responsibility of white people to govern the world through imparting their culture to the rest of the world's population (Cole, 2005). Note that, during the colonial period, only a few countries like Liberia, Japan, Thailand, Bhutan, and Iran managed to escape colonial rule altogether (Mikva, 2014), which is to say, the majority of nations have to deal with the legacy of their colonial experience in some respect.

Although the last of the colonised countries became independent around the middle of the 20th century, the remnants of colonial power is still pervasive, as it is deeply integrated into societies and the minds of the people of these former-colonial countries. As a by-product of European colonisation, the European model of schooling was implemented in the colonies (Southard, 2012), often with the justification that the natives should be moved away from their primitive ways (Cole, 2005). Cole also asserts that the 'Western-style' education that "operates in the service of the secular state, economic development and ... [its] bureaucratic structures" (p. 202), has become the dominant and ideal form of schooling all over the world (Cole, 2005). Woodhead (2006) also states that the Western model of child development is deemed the way to modernisation, and is often taken as the standard for all. To put it simply, it has become an accepted fact by many societies all over the world that the Western approach to schooling is essential to the process of becoming modern, and the sooner it is adopted, the easier it is for the in question society to stay ahead.

Entering the 21st century, the increased interconnectedness of the world, as a result of integration of markets in the global economy, nation-states and societies have also opened their borders to many foreign influences (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). With a market dynamic that supports rivalry and competition, demands higher quality and levels of productivity, and requires top skills and talents in supply-chain optimisation (Britt, 2007), there is a growing need for

autonomous, independent, entrepreneurial individuals in a liberal, free market oriented society (Moss, 2006). At the same time, a growing trend to individualise social phenomena where every individual is expected to take his or her future into his or her own hands (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006) places ever greater responsibility on the citizens of society.

What quality ECCE means

The effect of globalisation, leading to social demands and expectations to stay ahead of the competition has also trickled down to early years pedagogical approaches that see growing attention paid to the autonomous child and self-expression (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). What is considered as 'best practice' in approaches to ECCE can be seen in some of the taken-for-granted views and beliefs, which highly value child-centredness, individualistic approaches that encourages independence in young children, organisation of environment that enables children to learn by doing, and the use of active questioning (Fleer, 2003). According to Walsh et al. (2010), there has been a strong consensus worldwide about the early years curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches that emphasises child-centredness, flexibility and individualism, and the need to empower the child to be a self-directed learner - all of which reflect interactional patterns of behaviour between adults and young children that are rooted in 'Western' values.

In summary, it is safe to say, there is a homogenising representation of Western culture in the definition of quality in early childhood education throughout the world (Rana, 2012). The concept of quality ECCE itself is also inscribed with the assumption that it is possible to derive universal norms based on expert knowledge, and to do this with values that place emphasis on the individualistic Euro-American ideologies of child-centred child development (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Rana, 2012).

3.4 Critiques of quality ECCE

The early 21st century sees a rise in the critique of dominant early childhood discourses that are largely characterised by their universalising and prescriptive features, which are also predominated by Western ideas of 'best practice', of quality, and of what is normal and necessary (Woodhead, 2006). These critiques, according to Dahlberg and Moss's work in 2005 (as cited in Woodhead, 2006), represent "the starting point for recognising structures of social control, oppression and social exclusion, social inequalities and injustices" (p. 24).

3.4.1 Problematising quality in early childhood context

Quality in the early childhood context is, as Moss and Dahlberg (2008) argue, a concept that is "inscribed with specific assumptions and values" (p. 4), an evaluation of the conformity of service

to a universal norm that claims to have been objectively derived based on scientific knowledge. As such, it values uniformity, universality, objectivity, and efficiency (Britt, 2007; Moss and Dahlberg, 2008; Tobin, 2005).

These features of quality become a problem as people began to discuss the significance of the way toward characterising and defining quality and how this should include a wide range of stakeholders, as well as how quality could accommodate multiple perspectives, while taking into account the contexts and values of different groups in different places. In other words, the assumption that a universalised expectation, generally referring to a Western approach, to young children's care and development can be applied "within diverse societies with very different cultural traditions and child-rearing practices" is now being increasingly challenged (Woodhead, 2006, p. 16).

Young children as objects that need processing in order that they serve the nation's purpose

The need for developing quality ECCE policy is mostly set on the basis for investment in human capital, which tends to view children as a supply factor in determining the labour force (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Young children within the human capital paradigm are generally seen as empty vessels or raw materials that are expected to be 'processed' by following biologically determined universal stages of development and, as such, to be filled with knowledge. To this effect, they are to come out of this process as 'products' equipped with expert knowledge as their competitive advantage, which is then to be supplied to the labour force.

Young children are understood as passive, individualised and incapable (Dahlberg et al., 2013), at the mercy of external experiences and their impacts. Early childhood institutions then serve as the intervening mediums that are responsible for the delivery of the desired 'product'. These 'products' come in the forms of well-adapted, self-regulated individuals, 'made-ready' to advance into learning in schools. Woodhead (2006) refers early childhood institutions as sites that offer 'protective factors' that allow children to cope with adversities and to progress to their greatest potential. As such, early childhood institutions are commonly seen as contributing to a nation's developmental and economic projects (Dahlberg et al., 2013). To ensure these early childhood institutions are producing 'products' that satisfactorily serve the nation's purpose, quality standards are then prescribed. These quality standards are often said to be generalisable, objective, and are expected to be met and monitored (Tobin, 2005).

Based on the above understanding of young children and the purpose of early childhood institutions, on one hand, there is the implication that quality is observable, predictable, and can be generalised to all, regardless of the context, on account of their scientific underpinnings. On the other hand, it also seemed to imply that, compared with children who were under the 'protection' of high quality early childhood programmes, young children who were deprived of ECCE opportunities are automatically considered to have fallen victim to social exclusion or discrimination, and are seen as being marginalised and worse off. Basically, it means all young

children are vulnerable and that the only way to save them from the repercussions of these implied adversities is to make sure they engage early childhood services as early as possible in order that they develop 'normally' according to prescription, so as they become transformed through careful monitoring.

A fundamental ethical objection presented by Woodhead (2006) is the "instrumental view of young child as a natural resource to be exploited" (p. 14) for economic purposes. Children are constructed as a separate but homogenous category, in which they are seen as helpless objects that need saving and intervention (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006).

On one hand, this positioning of all young children as passive, vulnerable beings who are always at risk, who pose danger to their own well-being and development fails to adequately acknowledge the diversity of young children's lives in terms of their gender, social status, culture, values etc. At the same time, ignoring the "variations in how childhood is understood and experienced, and how it is applied to individual and groups of children, in relation to their age, gender, maturity, social status" (Woodhead, 2006, p. 18). Seeing them as objects in need of correction when they differ from the acceptable 'norm' is denying them as meaning-makers (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). On the other hand, the assumption that all children would benefit from authoritative intervention can also be considered a tactic to control children's experiences (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2008), as well as steering attention away from inequalities that are inherent in the patterns of power-relations that have marginalised children in the first place (Fenech et al., 2008; Woodhead, 2006).

Quality standards as a strategy of control

Child development research and studies were generated mainly in America, and as a consequence of this research, several indicators of quality care have been defined "in terms of their predictive significance for children's development" (Phillips, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 40). Another product of this research is the development of measurement tools to assess quality (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Underpinning these quality indicators and quality assessment tools, is a view that places young children as subjects who are required to meet developmental standards (Fenech, 2006). These quality standards, grounded on positivist assumptions that define quality as fixed, measurable and observable, are deeply embedded in the project of modernity, and are applied unquestioningly in other countries throughout the world (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Derived from the Western model of child development, these standardised quality criteria are therefore largely characterised by individualism, with its emphasis on socialisation approaches that value independence and separation, and encourage a rearing style that fosters autonomy as the core goal for social development (Woodhead, 2006). In other words, what has become valued as 'normal' and of high quality ECCE is essentially a Western view of childhood (Fleer, 2003).

Tobin (2005) argues that the attempt to impose such universalistic, decontextualised, external standards of quality on communities who do not fully endorse the values and beliefs of the

Western culture can be problematic, and may not be relevant to all children of all cultures, especially those in non-Western communities. What accounts for 'normal' development does not take into full account of the impact of changes in social structures and circumstances, such as migration and multi-culturalism in care systems (Woodhead, 2006). Tobin (2005) proposes that quality standards in ECCE should not just be prescriptive, stand-alone entities that are imposed across cultures, instead the quality standards should arise out of ongoing conversations in local communities, which reflect local values and concerns. It should take into account of local communities' points of view and concerns, and recognise that these communities may hold significantly different beliefs about child-rearing approaches from those of middle-class, white, Americans. As such, Tobin (2005) concludes that quality in ECCE should reflect the importance of the process rather than be a product, that is, an ongoing, responsive conversation that takes into account the perspectives and interests of local communities rather than a mere document that imposes ideals of the dominant powers.

Osgood (2006) states that the need for accountability and standardised approaches to early childhood practices are often justified by the discursive construct of a crisis. Seeing young children as 'at-risk' is therefore a construct that is created to legitimise government domination, which is really a facade for normalisation controls (Fenech, 2006).

Under the guise of quality assurance, with the assumption that quality is measurable and can be standardised, Fenech (2006) states that quality ECCE is an attempt to "privilege those whose values concur with the dominant discourses" while limiting capacity to "appropriately apply standardised measure of care across diverse settings" (p. 52). Therefore, the use of regulation as a means of assuring quality may be used to serve the interests of dominant groups or those in power, and not necessarily promote the well-being of children (Fenech et al., 2008).

Quality standards serving neoliberal interests

In the era of globalisation, neoliberal policies have become widespread. The main aspects of neoliberalism include privatisation, deregulation, decentralisation (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). Martinez and Garcia (1996) explain 'neo-liberalism' as referring to a set of economic policies that have the effect of "liberating... private enterprise from any bonds imposed by government... allowing "freedom of movement for capital, goods and services" (para. 7), and greater openness to international trade and investment. Reduced government regulation and the cutting of public expenditure for social services, the selling of state-owned goods and services to private investors can also be traced back to current neoliberal policies that have been implemented in the name of reducing the government's role in order to maximise profit and efficiency. Other effects include the growing emphasis on individual responsibility and the elimination of the concept of community. When a social problem arises, it is every man and woman for themselves. Everyone is expected to be responsible for finding his or her own solution and, as such, will be blamed for the problem should he or she fail. Fenech et al. (2008) refer to this as the governments' and regulatory bodies' attempts to transfer these pressures to individuals as a means of protecting their institutional interests.

Under the neoliberal regime, the emerging construct of childhood as a vehicle for and site of consumption derived from commercialised views of childhood (Woodrow & Press, 2007) has dominated discourses on children and childhood in modern societies. That is, childcare is now seen as big business and a market place that competes for government subsidised parent dollars.

In the context of global neoliberalism and its subsequent effect of constructing childhood as a commercial practice, the dominant discourses surrounding ECCE have seen a growing emphasis on educational outcomes that value autonomy, independence, and individual responsibilities (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006), meaning government has become concerned with gaining certainties through regulation and achieving predetermined goals (Urban, 2008). It is desirable for the children to be active participants who are self-expressive and competent in their verbalisation of self, together with the “assumption that growing independence and autonomy” should be the “core goal for development” (Woodhead, 2006, p. 19).

Social policies like education policies are increasingly moving away from social investment, which is about better understanding students’ needs and strengthening their capacities to enable them to participate in life and society. Instead, education policies focus more on social containment, in the form of behavioural checklists, performance measurements, and targeted interventions designed to contain future social crises (Woodrow & Press, 2007). These crises around issues such as ‘academic achievements’, ‘employment rates’, etc. are in fact, as Woodrow and Press (2007) have argued, deliberately manufactured to justify such intervention at the minimal expense of government, should they be needed. Supported by scientific researches, which point to early childhood as the site for early intervention, there has been a growing establishment of ECCE services competing for consumers and government funding. Government funding is limited only to those early childhood institutions who meet specific ‘quality’ conditions. These quality criteria are often linked to early childhood curriculum frameworks that claim to ensure children are made ready for school experiences, and achieving expected developmental outcomes.

Such policies claim to fix social ills by relying on the meeting of set requirements are often developed within a framework of power imbalances, and take on a ‘blaming’ stance with underlying deficit ideologies. In other words, there is the tendency to overlook the real causes behind these social issues while invalidly blaming these issues on those who are already disenfranchised, because they do not fit into the accepted ‘norm’ constructed by the dominant groups (Gorski, 2010).

Neoliberal quality standards with inherent deficit ideologies

Gorski (2010) explains deficit ideology as systematically organised perspectives that runs deeper than any individual convention. The deficit ideology is frequently weaved with the society’s socialising institutions, such as schools, with the capacity of empowering consistency and compliance with an oppressive social order. It systematically shifts attention away from inequalities, not only through disregarding the underlying issue of unequal socio-political conditions that grant some greater social, political, and economic access while barring the others,

but also by putting blame on those who have had their intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioural “deficiencies” disenfranchised in the first place. It takes a stance that blames the already marginalised; a stance that is often based on false assumptions that certain deficiencies are inherent in certain communities because they are different from the well-established, dominant group (Bishop, 2015). That blame is often applied to a whole group of people based upon a single aspect, and often a superficial part of their identity (Gorski, 2010).

Quality standards that are decontextualised, taken for granted as a universal ‘truth’ for all, and presumed to be the prescription for fixing social issues can easily be suspected to operate with an implicit deficit ideology that accuse those at the bottom of the power hierarchy for being the main contributors to social problems (Gorski, 2010). The deficit ideology also redirects attention of the masses away from the existing socio-political conditions that have continued to marginalise the already disadvantaged while masking its function to serve the interests of individuals who have situated themselves at the highest point of the power hierarchy. In other words, those at the top of hierarchal power create a dominant discourse that labels any qualities, traits, practices, and belief systems that do not conform to the defined norm as inadequacies. In this way, deficit ideology functions as a diverter that transfers state’s and collective’s duty in addressing social problems to the individuals (Stewart, 2016), such that, a supposedly collective obligation is completely characterised as an issue of individual adaptation, alteration and adjustment, as well as adherence to a set agenda defined by individuals who dominate the hierarchical power within the socio-political settings (Biesta, 2013).

Combining quality standards driven by an underlying deficit ideology with neoliberal interests, i.e. an inherent focus on profit and efficiency, these quality standards can therefore, act as a powerful decoy that attempts to occupy the mass attention by locating the cause of social problem within the disenfranchised communities while diverting considerations away from the systemic conditions and socio-political context that underlie inequities, so that “efforts to redress inequalities focus on ‘fixing’ disenfranchised people rather than the conditions which disenfranchise them” (Gorski, 2010, p. 4). For example, public attentions are drawn towards rural children’s poor academic achievements in school, and then blaming this on factors that include inadequate early childhood education programmes, lack of quality resources, and unsatisfactory teacher quality. At such, these children with poor academic performances need to be fixed, better programmes and resources are needed, and teachers need to be monitored. However, these ‘corrective actions’ are not taking into account government’s cutting public expenditure, privatisation of state-owned services such as health care and education, and ignoring other factors like poverty and accessibility to these services.

Fenech (2011) points out that quality ECCE is a discursive construct, shaped by a particular socio-political and economic context at the particular period. Hatch (2002) calls the pushing of socio-political and economic expectations from broader social structures down to early childhood settings through the production of prescriptive, decontextualised and universalised quality standards, an ‘accountability shovedown’, which he believes not only threatens the quality of

educational experiences for young children, but also the integrity of early childhood professionals. Hence, the next section explores these issues in relation to the early childhood profession.

3.5 Early childhood practitioners within the quality ECCE discourses

ECCE services are seen as the “necessary condition both for competing economically in an increasingly globalised and marketised capitalism and for ameliorating... social disorders” (Moss, 2006, p. 30). As such, the educational outcomes of pedagogical approaches and policies governing ECCE services tend to focus on producing autonomous, self-expressive, entrepreneurial individuals who are self-sufficient and self-regulated (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-de Bie, 2006). The early childhood workforce is expected to play their important role in ensuring these outcomes.

According to Urban (2008), the early childhood workforce is generally recognised as central to achieving ambitious policy goals such as increasing quality ECCE provision, whereas, the discourse on ‘quality’ seemingly cannot do without ‘professionalising’ the early childhood workforce. Professionalism is defined as incorporating the list of skills, competences and behaviours that are determined by regulatory bodies, and expected from a person who is trained to do a job well (‘Professionalism’, 2017). All in all, this seems to imply that being professional is equivalent to having the ability to meet standards and indicators determined by regulatory bodies, meaning ‘professionalism’ in early childhood workforce would be automatically equated with quality care and education (Fenech, 2006).

Fenech (2006) also notes that in the regulatory environment, what constitutes effective quality caregiving is often the measure of the early childhood educators’ practices and performances. They are being evaluated regularly to monitor their ability to demonstrate compliance with specified quality criteria. As reward for meeting these criteria, educators are accredited for acting professionally, thus gaining recognition for their expertise. As for what it means for early childhood practitioners to ‘act professionally’, Urban (2008) has pointed out that it is the expectations placed on practitioners to help children achieve predetermined, assessable outcomes, and according to which they are told to follow a technical list of required actions, procedures and practices that are deemed to guarantee quality results. It is said that this form of accountability system supports the professional esteem of early childhood educators, as well as putting public trust in the capacity of these educators to deliver quality care.

3.5.1 Early childhood educators as technicians

There is no doubt that there is a growing demand, as the ECCE services expand, for high quality early childhood educators. There is an increased policy interest in early childhood services that

is driven by a belief that the early childhood workforce must be monitored and their practices measured against prescriptive procedures to ensure the provision of quality care (Moss, 2006). However, Moss (2006) insists that this heightened policy attention given to early childhood services is increasingly shaping early childhood educators into technicians responsible for ensuring the possibility of an ordered world. To realise these objectives, their performances must be controlled and standardised. That is, like technicians, they are required to follow through specified procedures by applying a defined set of skills, and are expected to produce prescriptive and quantifiable results. For instance, early childhood educators are required to use developmental observation instruments as assessment tools to measure children's performances against the prescribed developmental norms; the practice of which leads to the formation of early childhood educators as technicians (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006). Their work is inscribed with "a belief in the possibility of applying processes in a detached and replicable way", where transmission of knowledge is understood as "a process of reproduction" that progresses toward predefined outcomes in a series of stages or steps (Moss, 2006, p. 35).

When it comes to measurement of the quality of early childhood educators, the early childhood educators' quality is dependent on their ability to work with prescriptive curricula and procedures, which is, in turn, assessed against a nationally recognised benchmark with highly prescriptive specifications of what should be achieved (Moss, 2006).

3.5.2 Erosion of professional autonomy and genuine care

Professionalism, according to Urban (2008), seems to link to discourses on quality in ECCE, with an underlying assumption that professional practice has a direct impact on outcomes. Thus, the individual early childhood educator is increasingly expected to 'act professionally' and do what they are told. To do what counts and what works according to standards is the important thing. In other words, determination of quality ECCE is dependent upon educators' or practitioners' professionalism with respect to their meeting of a list of standard quality criteria or working procedures (Fenech, 2006). According to this notion of professionalism, early childhood educators/practitioners are subjected to a powerful strategy of bringing forward a particular view of professional practice. Such a strategy includes the proliferation of quality standards that determine what is acceptable, what works and what is appropriate, as well as regulating and guiding practices and behaviours that are recognised as being professional (Urban, 2008). Fenech (2006) argues that such an approach to professionalism privileges those whose values concur with dominant discourses, while putting excessive emphasis on risk management instead of what is valued as quality care in the local context.

The accountability systems that measure early childhood practitioners' professional practices thus do not encourage practitioners to engage in decision-making, flexible negotiation and determination of what constitutes quality care individual situations. The evidence-based practice leaves the practitioners little room to make relevant judgements in accordance with the actual

working environment (Urban, 2008), and furthermore inhibiting responsive and respectful responsibilities between carers and children, as well as carers and parents (Fenech, 2006). Instead, early childhood practitioners are expected to comply with stringent regulatory requirements, which further deprive them of their professional autonomy, making them into a group of obedient and productive technicians who dutifully follow guidelines and standards (Urban, 2008).

This form of 'professionalism' that stresses mechanical compliance seems to fit well within the neoliberal and economic context that positions rationality above emotionality, and places emphasis on the development of "individualistic self-interest in a quest to demonstrate an entrepreneurial self" (Osgood, 2006, p. 8). Although Osgood acknowledges emotionality as being essential to providing good quality ECCE to young children; something that would go beyond the rigidly defined standards on account of emotionality still being perceived by government as comprising "feminine characteristics that are seemingly unquantifiable" (p. 8), unmanageable, and impossible for the state to regulate. Therefore, under the state-driven professionalism agenda that is preoccupied with assessment, accreditation, targets, accountability and performativity, emotionality is dismissed as unprofessional (Osgood, 2006). As part of the increased demands for ECCE practitioners to demonstrate professional competence, Osgood (2006) highlights that "the focus is placed squarely upon the technical-rational model, whereby the externally prescribed regulations and standards define what it means to 'be professional'" (p. 9). Thus, rhetorically, emotionality is loaded with negative undertones, often associated with being unprofessional, illogical and irrational. In practice, early childhood practitioners may not feel the need to operate outside the set standards, and Fenech et al. (2008) warn of a shift in priorities of early childhood educators that focus on achieving only the minimum requirements prescribed instead of providing genuine quality care and education.

Quality ECCE is not in itself a new topic: it has been a popular topic of examination for policy makers, academics, researchers, and educators. ECCE advocates, service owners and parents all seem to be talking about 'quality' in terms of ECCE services, programmes and approaches, teacher qualification, children's performance, etc. Malaysia is no exception. This literature review has only provided an overview of the discourses surrounding quality ECCE. Currently, the dominant discourse on the concept of quality ECCE is said to be produced and sustained by the systems of power that decide whether certain ways of understanding and interpretation are necessary or not (Moss, 2006). It is generally argued that 'quality' is a cultural construct that should reflect local values and concerns (Tobin, 2005), "a social construct that cannot and should not be defined and measured in a standardised way" (Fenech, 2006, p. 52), as well as a construct that is dependent on certain conditions and assumptions constituted in a particular economic and political context in a certain period of time (Vandenbroeck & Bouvern-de Bie, 2006).

Base on the literature review on the concept of 'quality', this study attempts to examine the construction of quality ECCE in the Malaysian, how ECCE policies reflect the underlying local values and assumptions within the political economic climate between the 1990s until 2016.

4.0 Contextualising quality ECCE in Malaysia

Before moving onto the analysis on the discourses of quality ECCE in Malaysia, this chapter will provide an overview of the background of Malaysia's situation with respect to its impact on the history for ECCE services. First, an overview of Malaysia's cultural background will be provided, followed by an account of its history and economic development since independence. Next, its education system since the 1950s will be examined, after which the history of ECCE provision, particularly after the 1990s, where ECCE gained significantly more attention (Kamerman, 2006), will be described.

4.1 An overview of Malaysia

Malaysia is physically separated by the South China Sea into eastern and western regions. These regions were politically united in 1963. Eastern Malaysia consists of the Sarawak and Sabah territories, separated by the country of Brunei on the island of Borneo. Western Malaysia consists of the Malay Peninsula, with the *Banjaran Titiwangsa*, a central mountain range that divided the Malay Peninsula into the east and west coasts. The east coast of Peninsular Malaysia is less populated compared to the west coast, where most large cities, heavy industry, and immigrant groups are concentrated (Williamson, n.d.).

The total population in Malaysia was estimated to be 31 million in 2016. In 1951, Malaysia had a population of only 6.1 million (Malaysia population, 2017), with 80 percent of the Malaysian population living on the peninsula (Williamson, n.d.). Malaysia is a multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society (Khader, 2012); the most important Malaysian demographic statistic having to do with the category ethnicity (Williamson, n.d.). The largest group of *Bumiputra* (son of earth) are Malays, which constitutes 60 percent of Malaysia's total population. The rest of the population comprises 25 percent with Chinese descent, 10 percent with Indian descent, with the remaining approximately 5 percent comprising indigenous groups who live on the peninsula and in North Borneo, as well as Eurasians (Williamson, n.d.). However, this is still just an overly simplified description of the diversity of the population because each of these major ethnic groups is heterogeneous even in terms of religion, spoken dialects, and customs (Berthelsen & Karupiah, 2011). That is, each of these ethnic groups has its own robustly maintained culture, traditions and community structures. Furthermore, these diversities are made even more complicated when these cultures have also mixed and blended together to create the country's uniquely diverse legacy and heritage (Khader, 2012).

4.1.1 Peaceful country?

Surging underneath the peaceful surface of Malaysia's multicultural and multi-ethnic population, is an undercurrent of ethnic polarisation. People of different ethnicities and cultures are not interacting with each other as much, and there has been a rise to racial tensions and cultural conflicts (Abdullah, 2009). Before school-age, most Malaysian children customarily do not have more than "brief encounters with members of an ethnic group other than their own" (Khader, 2012, p. 270).

At first glance, education is viewed as an ideal space that provide all ethnic groups with the opportunity to gather and intermingle and, as such, to achieve a much needed level of understanding among the people (Khader, 2012). "Built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality and human dignity" (Khader, 2012, p. 276), education is said to play a significant role in enhancing the social integration of Malaysia's different ethnic groups. Education in Malaysia has a directive to eliminate "social prejudice and discrimination and to promote greater social tolerance and interaction" (Phoon, Abdullah and Abdullah, 2013, p. 428). However, this is overly simplistic if we look at the political history of Malaysia. The integration of ethnic groups cannot be simply treated as a problem to be solved by education alone as this would be merely touching the tip of the iceberg.

The ongoing presence of inter-ethnic tensions has long been a ticking time-bomb that has occasionally manifested in violence, most notably in 1969. This topic will be briefly touched on later in the thesis. The events of 1969 brought forth a series of government reactions, which have significantly changed Malaysia's political-economic landscape. Various policies, including education policies were developed, and while they were introduced at the time with the good intentions of eliminating prejudice and discrimination, and appeasing racial sensitivity, the picture since then has been complicated.

The following section will provide an overview of Malaysia's background, and its economic and political history. This background of the historical process of Malaysia's political and economic experience is an important contributing factor to assessment of the state's institutions and its state-building effort (Noh, 2010). For this research, examining Malaysia's political and economic contexts are important contributing conditions to assess the construction of quality ECCE in Malaysia.

4.2 Brief historical background of Malaysia

Long before Malaysia became a modern nation-state, it was already a multicultural society (Lian, 2016) – the result of centuries of inter-nation trading and colonialism. Historians believe that long before the colonial era, traders from China and India arrived in the Strait of Malacca; which is to say, as early as the first century AD (Library of Congress, 2006). Bringing with them Chinese and

Indian culture and religion: Buddhism and Hinduism have significantly influenced the local culture. Islam was later introduced by the Arab and Indian-Muslim traders in the 1200s and began to spread among the Malay ethnic group. Islam became firmly established in the 14th century when the Sultanate of Malacca converted to Islam (Al Jazeera, 2013). Islam has continued to flourish and influence the Malay lifestyle and culture.

Malacca was an important commercial power and cultural influence “largely as a result of its numerous advantages as a trading port, and its commercial and military alliances” during the 14th century (Library of Congress, 2006, p. 2). The great wealth and trade power of the city-state of Malacca grew and prospered throughout the 15th century (Lambert, 2015) and soon attracted European powers soon after the beginning of the 16th century (Library of Congress, 2006). Portugal made the first European colonial claim by conquering Malacca in 1511 (Al Jazeera, 2013), which marked the beginning of the European colonial era. By the 17th century, the Dutch and local allies pushed the Portuguese out of Malacca; Malacca falling to the Dutch in 1641 (Lambert, 2015).

In the 18th century, British trade with China expanded. Also attracted by the Malay Peninsula’s vast reserves of tin, the British established colonies and trading ports on the Malay Peninsula, which furthermore brought an influx of Arab, Indian and Chinese labours who later occupied particular economic niches (Al Jazeera, 2013), while majority of the Malay population worked in small rice fields (Williamson, n.d.). The British signed a treaty with the Dutch, requesting the surrender of Malacca to the British in 1824 (Lambert, 2015). The British colonial presence was then established itself on the Malay Peninsula/Malaya (Library of Congress, 2006), extending their influence to incorporate Borneo by 1888. Until then, “developments in Borneo were generally separate from those on the peninsula” (Library of Congress, 2006, p. 3). There was limited European involvement in Borneo until 1840, when a wealthy, former British East India Company officer, James Brooke, arrived in Borneo and helped the sultan of Brunei to crush a rebellion led by other Brunei elites (Library of Congress, 2006). As a reward, Brooke was allowed to govern a territory (Sarawak) and was granted the title of Raja of Sarawak by the sultan. Brooke and his descendants were able to govern Sarawak with substantial autonomy (Library of Congress, 2006). Then in 1888, Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo became British protectorates (Lambert, 2015).

By the early 20th century, stable forms of government had emerged. Malayan rubber, tin and the oil industry had boomed, which produced a prosperous Malayan economy in the 1920s (Lambert, 2015). In this period, promotion of the Malay nation was on the rise following the emergence of an ethnic Malay identity, which claim that Malays shared a common ethnicity (Library of Congress, 2006).

Between 1942 and 1945, during World War II, Southeast Asia region experienced the Japanese occupation (Williamson, n.d.). The Japanese invaded the Malay Peninsula and Borneo, driving out the British troops in 1942 (Lambert, 2015). During the Japanese occupation, there was a

growing anti-colonial movement. When the British returned after the war, this anti-colonial movement had continued and later acted as a catalyst for the formation of Malaysia.

When the Japanese were defeated in 1945, the British resumed control over Malaya and attempted to re-establish themselves as a durable administrative power by organising the administration of Malaya into a single political body called the Malayan Union (Lambert, 2015). However, the naturalisation requirements of this political arrangement, although generally supported by non-Malays, was met with strong protests from the ethnic Malays as they feared that “they would become a minority group in the new state” (Library of Congress, 2006, p. 4). In 1947, the British agreed to negotiate with the Malay leaders, which produced the Federation of Malaya Agreement that replaced the Malayan Union, with terms that were favourable to the Malays (Lee, 2010). However, this development caused unease among ethnic Chinese and Indians who were sceptical about living under ethnic the Malay majority that privileged the status of the Malays (Library of Congress, 2006).

In 1948, a civil conflict, led by the largely ethnic Chinese Communist Party, followed (Lambert, 2015). “To address Malay criticisms and to promote counter-insurgency, the British undertook a vast range of nation-building efforts” (Williamson, n.d., para. 8), such as promoting unity among different ethnic groups (Library of Congress, 2006). Local ethnic leaders (the Malays, Chinese and Indians) had also established a partnership in their own attempt to unite the disparate Malayan population (Williamson, n.d.). A coalition of ethnic-based parties, the Alliance, was formed (Library of Congress, 2006). The Alliance represented a coalition of three ethnic parties – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), with UMNO holding the dominating power (Brown, 2007). The Alliance won the first federal election in 1955 – serving as the dominant form of interracial cooperation – taking the lead in negotiating independence (Lee, 2010). Malaya gained independence in 1957. Six years later, the federation became Malaysia after the addition of Singapore and the north Borneo territories, Sabah and Sarawak, in 1963 (Williamson, n.d.). Since independence, UMNO has been Malaysia’s largest political party and has dominated Malaysian politics (Library of Congress, 2006).

4.3 Economic history of Malaysia after independence

According to Drabble (2004), after World War II, the Five-Year Plan was widely adopted by Less Developed Countries (LDCs) including Malaya. The Five-Year Plan focused on realising economic growth during the 1950s. Owing to its good geographical position on worldwide trade routes, and to its relatively open approach to trade and investment, the Malaysian economy underwent a huge change from reliance on agriculture and commodity exports to becoming a more diversified and open economy, with increasing engagement with global markets (Koen, Asada, Nixon, Rahuman, & Arif, 2017). With the Five-Year Plan and the move towards industrialisation, Malaysia’s transition to modern economic development was considered as one

of the smoothest and most successful amongst the non-Western nations during the 1950s and 1960s (Drabble, 2004). Since its independence, Malaysia's Government policy has given a central role to foreign capital, offering various incentives to attract foreign investments. Most notably the five-year tax holidays, granting of tariff protection, and offering foreign investors the freedom to repatriate profits and capital etcetera, in The Pioneer Industries Ordinance in 1958 (Drabble, 2004). As a result of this policy, just over half the capital invested in Malaysia came from abroad. Malaysia was at the time undergoing the development of an export-oriented industrialisation, however, an outbreak of civil disturbance in 1969 impeded this development, and also deterred foreign investments. The incident marked a turning point in Malaysian affairs.

On May 13, 1969, violent race riots broke out in the capital Kuala Lumpur, and spread to other parts of the country (Mehmet, 1974). These riots were precipitated by the federal election, in which the ruling Alliance party (whose membership comprised largely of Malays) lost two-thirds of its power in Parliament to the opposing political parties in Peninsula Malaysia that were largely of non-*Bumiputra* (generally refers to non-Malays) members (Drabble, 2004). These riots unearthed a long history of ongoing racial tensions between Malays, Chinese and Indians, unmasking discontentment among the Peninsula Malays that non-Malay minorities, particularly the Chinese and Indians, had been doing better economically during the period after gaining independence (Drabble, 2004). On top of the already chronic social unrest, caused by poverty and economic imbalance, the ruling Alliance Party's loss of majority of its power in Parliament as a result of the 1969 federal election was the last straw, and the illusion of Malaysia's peaceful facade gave way taking the country to breaking-point (Mehmet, 1974).

The race riots led to the suspension of parliament for two years and the restructuring of the Malaysian economy through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1970-1990 (Drabble, 2004). The NEP is said to emphasise the pursuit of economic growth, with an overriding goal of national unity, by eradicating poverty and encouraging the *Bumiputras* to participate in mainstream economic activities (Economic Planning Unit [EPU], 2013a). The aims of the NEP, as summarised by Drabble (2004), were:

- to redistribute corporate equity, so that the *Bumiputras* would achieve 30 percent equity ownership,
- to eliminate the ethnic division of labour and the link between race and economic function – as mentioned by Williamson (n.d.), the majority of the Malay population worked in primary sector where incomes were generally lowest, while the minorities, Chinese and Indian population, dominated the commerce, plantation, professions and mining sectors,
- to restructure employment so that the *Bumiputra* shared in each sector in a manner that more accurately reflected their proportion of the total population (roughly 60 percent) was the goal,
- to eradicate poverty irrespective of race.

The NEP was defined as Malaysia's socioeconomic affirmative action plan (Zubedy, 2012), the policy of which had the intention of employing positive discrimination by favouring the

economically disadvantaged, especially the *Bumiputras*. The *Bumiputras* were given an economic stake in the country corresponding to their indigenous status and their percentage of the population (Drabble, 2004). According to Khoo (as cited in Drabble, 2004), it is argued that this approach should ultimately lead the *Bumiputra* to assume “a more modern outlook and the ability to compete with other races”, particularly with the Chinese (para. 39). Some favourable outcomes resulted, most notably the increased enrolment rate of *Bumiputra* in education. Particularly effective were the ethnic quotas and government scholarships. Also, better health services led to a reduction in infant mortality. Zubedy (2012) believes that there is now more intermingling of all races in Malaysia, both economically and socially, and a restored peace in the society. However, Zubedy also points out that the NEP has not been without its problems. Zubedy reveals that the NEP’s biggest failure was that the affirmative action, which was an integral part of the NEP, had failed to provide aid and support to many deserving non-*Bumiputras*, and that there has been some abuse of the NEP. Drabble (2004) sees a spread of ‘money politics’, which Thomas White International (2014) calls ‘crony capitalism’, where cheap credit and large contracts are made available only to politically well-connected businessmen and elites, mainly ethnic Malays, in place of the open process of competitive tendering.

From 1970 to 1990, Malaysia changed from being a poor, largely rural and agricultural country to an export-oriented industrial one (Lambert, 2015), and by 1990 the country had largely met the criteria for a Newly-Industrialised Country (NIC) status, which stipulates that 30 percent of exports need to consist of manufactured goods (Drabble, 2004). According to Zubedy (2012), the NEP’s underlying principle – to redistribute wealth and to “restructure society to eliminate identification of race with economic function” (para. 1) – has continued in subsequent national development plans and policies.

In 1991 the New Development Policy (NDP) was developed as part of a longer-term programme known as Vision 2020, a vision introduced by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who had set his eyes on the goal of Malaysia achieving the ‘fully developed nation’ status by the year 2020 (Teh, 2009). NDP emphasised assistance would only be given to “*Bumiputra* with potential, commitment and good track records” (Malaysian Government, as cited in Drabble, 2004, para. 40) rather than the previous blanket measures of the NEP which redistributed wealth and employment (Drabble, 2004). The vision for Malaysia to become fully industrialised, required the country to advance “from low- to high-tech... industrial production, with a corresponding increase in the intensity of capital investment and greater retention of value-added... by Malaysian producers” (Drabble, 2004, para. 40). The Malaysian economy continued to boom for much of the 1990s.

Following a major slump in the Thai currency exchange rate, the East and Southeast Asia region entered a severe economic crisis in 1997-98 (Berg, 1999) affecting the banking and finance sectors. Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia had reluctantly adopted IMF’s recommendation to proceed with austerity changes to fiscal and monetary policies in order to counter the crisis at the time (Drabble, 2004).

Malaysia, however, refused to take on the IMF's recommendation and instead implemented independent measures. By 1998, the Malaysian economy had contracted by nearly 7 percent, with the Malaysian Ringgit exchange rate falling from RM 2.42 to 4.88 to the US dollar by January 1998. There was a heavy outflow of foreign capital. The Malaysian Government took drastic measures by holding the ringgit at RM3.80 to the US dollar, making the ringgit non-convertible externally, while imposing substantial levies on foreign capital that was repatriated if the investment was less than 12 months old (Drabble, 2004). These actions effectively stabilised the domestic economic situation such that Malaysia was able to experience a steady economic recovery by 2000, and relatively stable growth between 2002 and 2004.

In 2003, the 5th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, planned to shift the emphasis onto the smaller, less-costly, domestic manufacturing sector, while pin-pointing improvements to education as being the key factor that would underpin further advancement (Drabble, 2004). There was also a transition to a knowledge-based economic model; Malaysia attempting to develop its service sectors to deliver high-end services (Thomas White International, 2014).

The 6th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Abdul Razak, who took office in 2009, continued the above mentioned plan and focused on reforming the service sector. In April 2009, Prime Minister introduced the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) with the objective of transforming the government service delivery and of advancing Malaysia forward “to become an advanced, united, and just society with high standards of living for all” (EPU, 2013b, para. 1). Seven National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) were identified and said to be the main components to drive the service sector reforms, each area being led by a Cabinet Minister (Performance Management & Delivery Unit [PEMANDU], 2011a). Based on a World Bank report on Malaysia, the Prime Minister acknowledged that skilled workers and professionals are crucial to the development of modern manufacturing and service sectors, and that elevating the quality of education in Malaysia would be a key factor in overcoming the severe shortage of skilled professionals needed in the development of the service sectors in Malaysia. The focus was therefore on quality education, which became one of the Government's priorities in budget allocation (Thomas White International, 2014). Since elevating quality of education has been identified as the key to development, one of the aforementioned seven NKRAs has included the Assuring Quality Education NKRA (EDU NKRA) with aim to produce excellent human capital needed to drive the nation's economy. There were several different initiatives in the EDU NKRA that focused on addressing the structure of Malaysia's education system, right from early childhood education up to secondary schools. In the first set of EDU NKRA reforms, one of the initiatives intends to raise the preschool enrolment rate. While the second wave of reforms see the initiative looking to improving the quality of preschools by introducing minimum standards, with this initiative also extending to cover early childcare services (PEMANDU, 2011b).

Between 2011 and 2015, Malaysia's economy became “more domestically driven, with the service sectors now representing more than half of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)” (Koen et al., 2017, p. 7). As Malaysia comes closer to the 2020 deadline, which Malaysia set for itself to

become a developed, high-income nation, the Government has seen the need to make an effort to strengthen current progress (PEMANDU, 2011c). In 2010, the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) was launched by Prime Minister¹. This programme is aimed at improving the competitiveness of the economy and increasing private investment so as to meet Malaysia's target of becoming a high-income nation by 2020. According to Hussein (2011), this plan marks a clear departure from all past development plans implemented in Malaysia because past plans, while focusing on economic growth and structural change, have "in actuality ... [been little] more than budget priorities for the federal government" (Hussein, 2011, para. 2). In other words, while the development plans managed to correctly identify economic issues, government spending that supposedly focus on resolving these economic issues did not seem to be in line with the expected results that these plans have promised (Hussein, 2011).

The ETP was a product of joint effort between interested stakeholders, with the goal to formulate "specific policies, detailed implementation plans, and measurable objectives" (Hussein, 2011, para. 4). Hussein argues that ETP is not only focused on economic growth alone, but is also focused on transforming Malaysian economy and society into "a more productive, value-adding private sector, coupled with a more efficient public sector" – the purpose being to "support and nourish a high income, more equitable society" (2011, para. 8).

4.4 Neoliberalism and Malaysia

Neoliberalism is the dominant ideology in the current conception of economic theory, where the pro-market economic reforms, such as privatisation and deregulation, are carried out in the name of efficiency and growth (Siddiqui, 2012). It assumes that people make rational decisions across a range of market choices, and that "free market forces encourage private enterprise, consumer choice, and reward entrepreneurship" (Siddiqui, 2012, p. 15). Supporters of neoliberal economic policies believe that with market freedom and little intervention by the state, private enterprise becomes driven by the profit-making motive and the need to compete for consumers. Consequently, the private enterprise will then strive to supply better quality goods and services in order to attract businesses. As such, neoliberalism is supposed to best serve the people while driving improved growth and efficiency. This pro-market ideology was launched in the late 1970s in Western capitalist economies and has been strongly recommended to the developing countries, while being fully supported by international financial institutions such as the IMF and

¹ Malaysia's Prime Ministers from independence to 2017 (BERNAMA, 2009):

First PM, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj (From Aug 28, 1957 to Sep 21, 1970)

Second PM, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (From Sep 22, 1970 to Jan 14, 1976)

Third PM, Tun Hussein Onn (From Jan 15, 1976 to July 16, 1981)

Fourth PM, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (From July 16, 1981 to Oct 31, 2003)

Fifth PM, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (From Oct 31, 2003 to April 3, 2009)

Sixth PM, Datuk Seri Najib Razak (From April 3, 2009 - present)

the World Bank (Siddiqui, 2012). Under the pretext of ensuring ongoing development, higher growth to eradicate poverty and to the bringing down of unemployment and inequality (Siddiqui, 2012), governments have intervened in the economic sector in order to further promote capitalism (Khoo, 2010). Compared to the Western capitalist economies, Southeast Asian states are without a strong domestic capitalist class, therefore, instead of minimising government intervention, these states still maintain a significant state presence in selected sectors, “allowing market and [other] sectors to ... [become] fragmented according to political power” (Khoo, 2010, p. 4).

4.4.1 Malaysia and the Asian Economic Crisis

During the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997, some countries, such as South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia reluctantly received aid from international financial institutions (Drabble, 2004). Malaysia, for its part, avoided adopting the IMF rescue programme and instead managed itself through the crisis through adept use of its administrative machinery and domestic resources (Khoo, 2010). By implementing independent measures without the IMF’s intervention, Malaysia was able to face up more easily to the demands of pro-market reforms (Khoo, 2010).

Khoo (2010) observes that Malaysia was well known for being systematically interventionist on behalf of the Malay community and especially on behalf of the middle class which was sponsored and promoted by the state through the NEP in 1970. At the same time, the neoliberal measures were also enacted according to the interests of various government sectors, projects and constituencies, although many past neoliberal policies were not identified as being neoliberal because they were simply conceptualised as pragmatic policies (Khoo, 2010).

From the mid-1980s onwards, Malaysia implemented policies such as privatisation, reduced funding for state-owned enterprises, and imposed budgetary restraints. The state also proceeded with liberalising, deregulating and privatising social services that had previously been under state control (Khoo, 2010), most notably those social services involving transportation, utilities, telecommunication, healthcare services, and tertiary education (Drabble, 2004; Khoo, 2010).

In Malaysia, neoliberal practices reconciled certain state and class interests; that is, privatisation transferred public assets to Malay capitalists, providing them with an economic stake in the country, which is meant to enable them to compete with capitalists from other races in the country (Drabble, 2004). Deregulation is said to have rebuilt the state’s alliance with domestic Chinese capital, which was previously constrained by legal and administrative restrictions (Khoo, 2010), particularly by the NEP with its preferential treatment of Malays and its apparent suppression of Chinese economic, educational, and cultural interests (Koon, 1997). Deregulation is also said to have liberalised the investment regime, and revitalised foreign investments to stimulate the Malaysian economic growth (Khoo, 2010; Koon, 1997). In neoliberal terms, these practices reduce public sector inefficiency and spending, and imply the need for reliance on the private sector as the source and driving force of growth.

4.5 History of Malaysia's education

At the end of the colonial period, Malaysia's educational system lacked curriculum uniformity as its "education was segregated into separate and disjointed linguistic-ethnic streams: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil" (Rudner, 1977, p. 23). Basically, the country's three major ethnic communities – Malays, Chinese and Indians – ran their own schools. This involved the Chinese and Indians often importing syllabi used in their countries of origin. During this period, there was no policy with an underlying rationale "that was relevant to the political and socio-economic goals of the people" (StateUniversity.com, 2017, para. 1).

In the year 1951, the British Government put forward a proposal –The Barnes Report of 1951 – recommending that the primary one until primary six education will be delivered in Malay and English within the national school system. However, this proposal was not well-received by the Chinese community because of the lack of provision for non-Malay vernacular schools (StateUniversity.com, 2017). In the same year, the report on Chinese Schools and the education of Chinese Malayan, known as the "Fenn-Wu Report" made recommendations to promote trilingualism in Chinese Malaysians, with Malay as the official language, English as the business language, and Chinese as the cultural language (National Library Board, 2015). However, the Fenn-Wu Report did not gain the approval of the Federal Legislative Council. In an effort to pacify ethnic sensitivities, and as a compromise between the Barnes Report and the Fenn-Wu Report, The Razak Report was written in 1955, recommending a common curriculum for all primary school levels, while allowing the usage of two languages (Malay and English) in Malay schools and three languages (Malay-English-Tamil) in Tamil schools, and (Malay-English-Mandarin) in Chinese schools. Two types of schools were recommended: the 'national school', where Malay was used as the medium of instruction, and other languages schools, Chinese, Tamil or English, which were known as 'national-type schools' (StateUniversity.com, 2017).

In 1962, the Government extended financial aid to the 'national-type' institutions. It was at this point that non-Malays who attended 'national-type' primary schools began to receive free schooling. The consequence of this extension of free and aided schooling saw an incremental enrolment in public education (Rudner, 1977).

During the mid-1960s, education evolved out of economic considerations, as the Malaysian Government felt obliged to focus on upgrading the content of education in order to make sure that education kept up with the needs of the expanding economy (Rudner, 1977). Investment in human capital (i.e. education) was deemed an important ingredient for success with respect to the country's economic development (StateUniversity.com, 2017). However, according to Rudner (1977), the development of education in Malaysia was instrumentally related to certain compelling political objectives. That is, despite the talk about how education plays a vital role in the country's development, there was little or no realisation of financial commitments from officials to improve the content of education unless it is politically motivated.

Towards the late 1960s, racial tension had risen to an unprecedented level as various policies implemented by the Alliance Government exposed the underlying intention of making the Malay first-class citizens while systematically relegating all other races to an inferior status (Mehmet, 1974). Government education policy attempted to make Malay the sole language of instruction in public schools. Other than that, Mehmet (1974) also points out that the Government was reluctant to expand university education to all other races by putting in place racial quotas for university admission. Establishment of technical and vocational institutions were also meant to benefit the Malays only since admission was restricted to Malay students. At the same time, jobs within the public service sectors were reserved for the Malays with guaranteed job security, because they are entitled to such benefits owing to their Malay 'special rights' (Mehmet, 1974). All these policies further aggravated fears among the Chinese and Indian communities that they were under increasing threat of losing their language, culture, education and job opportunities. Overall, much of the political culture during the 1960s was dominated by language politics (Rudner, 1977).

The aftermath of the racial riot in 1969 saw political reconstruction laid down by official ideology, the *Rukunegara*, Malaysia's National Ideology, which Rudner (1977) has pointed out to include "the Monarchy (Malay Rulers), the Established Religion (Islam), the National Language (Malay) and communal status (Malay 'special rights')" (p. 61). These distinctively Malay values have since characterised the Malaysian politics, and non-Malays are "expected to subscribe to strictly Malay symbols of national identity" (p. 62) through adherence to Malay education policy.

On the one hand, there was a process of political acculturation, while on the other hand, policy encouraged intercommunal partnerships. In the early 1970s, there was a drastic change in Malaysia's education policy, which according to Yusoff, Hasan, and Jalil (2000), allowed the primary and secondary school education to be opened up to 'almost-free' education for all races. For instance, Malay secondary education was free, while government-aided secondary schools levied tuition fees (Rudner, 1977). As a result, access to education for all ethnic groups, in both urban and rural areas, had improved. This change of education policy also did much to ameliorate the quality of education.

With an increased demand in the manufacturing sector between 1970 and 1997 for skilled labour, the education system was expected to adjust rapidly to keep up with this demand. Policies were designed to encourage participation in education, especially for the poor and women in every level of schooling (Yusoff et al., 2000). A major legislative development in education took place in 1996 when the Education Act 1996 was passed. This Act aimed to expand access to schooling through the building of more schools, retention rates, the expansion of higher education, and a review of the normal national curriculum (ESPACT, 2015). The Act attempted to provide comprehensive coverage of all matters concerning education, including from pre-school to higher education. Compulsory primary education was introduced in 2003 through the amended Education Act.

By late 2000, Malaysia was shifting to The Information Age. The Malaysian Government was pushing for an economy based on information computerisation, announcing the need to create a

knowledge-based society via technology education and high-tech industries. The Government's focus on education was then to generate knowledgeable workers to follow a shift to a knowledge-driven economy, to empower individuals to meet the needs of the information age in the 21st century, while at the same time aiming to close the digital divide between the rural population and urban centres (StateUniversity.com, 2017). Since, a knowledge-based economy is driven by productivity gains that rely on intellectual capabilities more than labour inputs, the Malaysian Government saw the need to call for an increase in the quality of education and for skills training, an adoption of information technology, and an improvement in the function of the labour market in order to better position the country in the global economy (Koen et al., 2017).

In response to the advent of the knowledge-based economy, the Malaysian Government published a document, titled the '*New Economic Model*' (NEM) in 2010 (ESPACT, 2015). This policy implies a comprehensive plan to transform the Malaysian economy, with education highlighted as having a key role to play in the country's future economic endeavours, as well as the need to produce talents needed for the country's economic transformation. In the very same year, the Prime Minister, Najib Razak launched the ETP, with the aim of propelling Malaysia towards becoming a developed, high-income nation by 2020. In this programme, 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) had been identified as the key areas to drive Malaysia's economic development and transformation, one of them being education (Education NKEA). The Government's focus, as such, is to strengthen private education services and expand education exports (ESPACT, 2015). Within Education NKEA alone, there are 17 targets, called the Entry Point Projects (EPPs). Out of these 17 EPPs, the first 2 EPPs have the objective of scaling up ECCE centres, and improving ECCE training (PEMANDU, 2013a).

Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, illustrate an overview of the ETP, with its 12 NKEAs and the EPPs under Education NKEA.

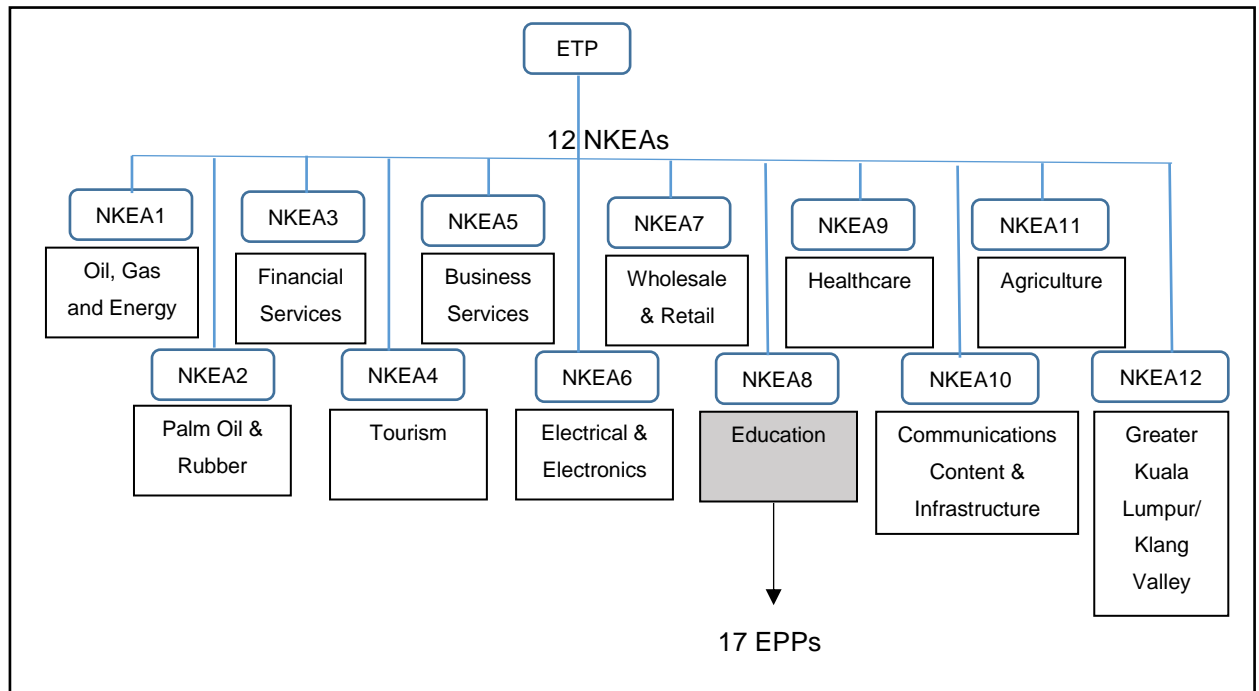


Figure 4.1. The 12 National Key Economic Areas of the Economic Transformation Programme.
Adapted from *Overview of the national key economic areas*, by Performance Management & Delivery Unit, 2013a. Retrieved from http://etp.pemandu.gov.my/Sectors_in_Focus-@-Overview_of_NKEAs.aspx.

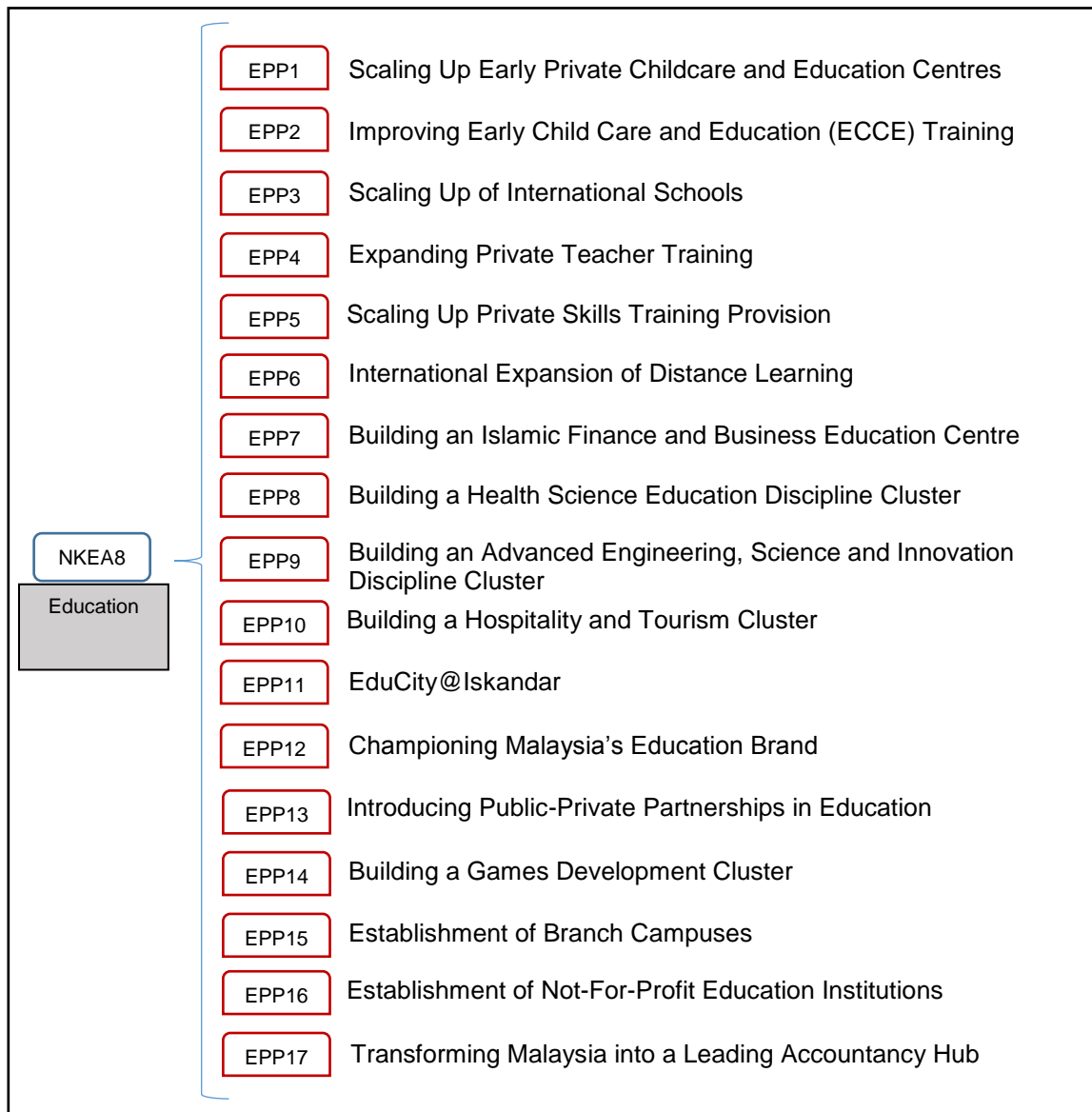


Figure 4.2. The 17 EPPs under the Education NKEA. Adapted from *Overview of the national key economic areas*, by Performance Management & Delivery Unit, 2013a. Retrieved from http://etp.pemandu.gov.my/Sectors_in_Focus-@-Overview_of_NKEAs.aspx.

In 2011, after a major review of Malaysia's education system, a new National Education Blueprint was developed, the result of which was the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025. This blueprint gives direction for preschool to post-secondary education, providing contextual support to the Government's ambition to better prepare Malaysia's children in developing skills and meeting the needs of the 21st century. The blueprint has key objectives of "improving access to education, raising standards (quality), closing achievement gaps (equity), promoting unity amongst students and maximising system efficiency" (MOE, 2013, p.1-4). The Blueprint also suggests plans that are said to provide the structure in which changes need to occur to achieve these ambitious goals.

4.6 ECCE in Malaysia

A survey conducted by UNESCO in 1961, revealed that Malaysia did not see early childhood education as an educational priority (Kamerman, 2006). Like many other developing countries in Asia before the 1990s, Malaysia shared a similar attitude towards ECCE, in that it did not consider early childhood education to be of any significance or that government action was necessary.

When the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989, Malaysia signed for the convention (Chiam, 2008). In general, the convention makes the care and protection of every child a priority for the Government. It emphasises the importance of children's rights to education, healthcare, protection, rights to quality care, and rights to be respected (Chiam, 2008).

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All was held at Jomtien in Thailand. During this conference, ECCE was identified as "a necessary component for future economic and social development in developing countries" (Kamerman, 2006, p. 25). It was then that ECCE gained importance, particularly when conference attendees were made aware of the long-term influence that early years experiences have on subsequent child development and learning. This new awareness was underpinned by the importance of ECCE's role in supplying future human capital to stimulate and support economic and social development of the developing countries (Kamerman, 2006). The demand for ECCE programmes had since increased in many developing countries including Malaysia. Especially when there is a demand to upgrade the country's capacity of human resources for economic advancement, Malaysia has seen a growing numbers of women joining the workforce. This demand for ECCE programmes is also fuelled by the idea that "ECCE ... [is] the best investment for economic growth, with the higher rate of return as a cost-effective route to poverty reduction" (Kamerman, 2006, p. 23). There is now a popular belief that participation in early education will later lead to enhanced school performance and stronger literacy and numeracy skills, and subsequently, to better academic performances that will guarantee the supply of the highly-skilled labour force that is needed to support the country's development.

4.6.1 History of ECCE in Malaysia

Early childhood care and education or ECCE in Malaysia generally refers to services for children under the age of 6, before compulsory schooling begins at the age of 7. ECCE in Malaysia is broadly divided into two main age groups (CDD, 2007):

1. Services for children aged 4 to 6 years old are generally referred to as the preschool education. Services for this age group falls under the responsibilities of three Ministries, and they are Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KEMAS), as well as Department of National Unity and Integration

(PERPADUAN). Preschools that are set up by these Ministries have different names in their local languages, i.e. the MOE's *prasekolah*, the *Tabika* KEMAS, and the *Tadika* PERPADUAN.

2. Services that offer care and education for children in the age group of 0 to 4, are known as childcare or *Tadika* (an acronym in Malay), which are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD);

A summary of different types of ECCE institutions provided by different ministries in Malaysia is presented below in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1

Different types of ECCE institutions under the jurisdiction of different ministries in Malaysia

	Ministry of Education Malaysia	Ministry of Rural and Regional Development	Department of National Unity and Integration	Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
Preschool (4-6 years old)	Kindergarten or preschool/ <i>prasekolah</i>	<i>Tabika</i> KEMAS	<i>Tadika</i> PERPADUAN	
Childcare (0-4 years old)				<i>Taska</i> / Nursery

Note. Adapted from Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Implementation Review.

Malaysia: Ministry of Education Malaysia, by Curriculum Development Division, retrieved from <http://en.unesco.org/ecce/policy-reviews>.

4.6.2 History of Preschool Education in Malaysia

ECCE has existed in Malaysia since the period prior to the 1960s. Around that time, providers of ECCE in Malaysia were mostly religious bodies or non-governmental organisations (CDD, 2007). ECCE at the time was mostly established in the urban areas, catering for children from rich families. There was no professional training for the teachers. The usual age range for children in the programme was 3 to 6 years – the term ‘kindergarten’ being used to describe these programmes. There was very limited coverage for children under 3 years old, as they were the responsibility of parents (Kamerman, 2006).

In the beginning of the early 1970s, KEMAS, the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, became a pioneer in setting up preschools in Malaysia. These preschools are usually known as the KEMAS preschool or, *Tabika* KEMAS, which has since become the biggest provider of

preschool education in the country (CDD, 2007; Mustafa & Azman, 2013). According to ECCE Policy Reviews (CDD, 2007), these KEMAS preschools are set up for children age between 4 and 6 years who are from families with very low incomes, and are living in the rural and remote areas.

In the late 1970s, PERPADUAN, the Department of National Unity and Integration, set up preschools in the urban areas (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). The first preschool (with 25 classes) was established in 1976 specifically for urban areas covered by a 'friendly neighbourhood scheme', or '*Skim Rukun Tetangga*', which emphasises on community development to ensure unity and harmony of the country. These preschools are known as the PERPADUAN preschools or *Tadika* PERPADUAN, and cater mainly for children age 5 to 6 years old. They aim to provide opportunities to young children as well as parents from different races to interact and increase their understanding of each other. The general goals of PERPADUAN preschools are to strengthen and promote unity among parents and the community, while at the same time fostering spirit of harmony, neighbourliness, unity and nationality by inculcating positive spiritual and moral values in the children's everyday lives through informal learning processes (CDD, 2007).

In the 1980s, other different government agencies, religious and volunteering bodies, including the police and armies, built and managed their own preschools, offering numerous programmes with differing materials, and no set requirement for teacher qualifications (CDD, 2007). This sparked a need in the MOE to standardise and regulate preschool education in Malaysia, leading to the launching of two preschool projects, which were separately managed by Curriculum Development Centre, assisted by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, and the Education Planning and Research Division, assisted by UNICEF. From these projects, the first formalised curriculum document – the 1986 Preschool Guidebook – for early childhood education in Malaysia was formulated. This curriculum document aims to guide and coordinate kindergarten minders, and to enhance the standard of Malaysian preschool education so that it comes into line with global development at the time (CDD, 2007).

In the year 1992, preschool classes were set up by MOE, for children of 4 to 6 years old, in the form of a pilot project annexed to existing public primary schools (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). It was not until 1996 that preschool education was officially declared through the National Education Act 1996, Act 550 to be part of the Malaysian school system (CDD, 2007).

In 2003, the National Education Act introduced and mandated a national preschool curriculum, the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS), developed by the MOE (CDD, 2007). The MOE preschool project was rolled out to the whole nation, and since 2007, the MOE has become the second largest preschool provider after KEMAS in Malaysia, and it is still expanding.

The NPCS was revised in 2010, such that all preschools in Malaysia, public or private, were required by the law to follow the preschool curriculum and the quality standards, which include content standards, teaching and learning standards, and assessment standards (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). To ensure the quality of learning, a national assessment instrument for

preschool students' performance and development was developed by the MOE and has been used in all preschools since 2011 (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). The methods of assessment include observation, checklist, and portfolio, focusing on assessing young children's performances, predominantly their ability in reading. It is said that this is to prepare children so that they are ready for primary school. As such, "this system of performance standards is ...being streamlined to provide a continuum with primary school performance standards" (p. 26).

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010, that Malaysian Government has emphasised the need for human capital building, to elevate capacity for knowledge and to nurture innovation as keys for the nation's growth and development. It has been determined that improving access and the quality of the education system is a critical strategy for achieving this goal (Chiam, 2008). In line with this government mission, the MOE has put in place an action plan – the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP) 2006 - 2010, with the intension of extending preschool education to all National Schools, that is, with preschools built in as an extension to existing public primary schools, especially in rural areas and remote areas of Malaysia (Ng, 2015).

In September 2012, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was launched as the latest government initiative to transform Malaysia's education system. The purpose of this policy is to produce innovative students with creative thinking abilities through education system transformation in order to meet the needs of the new economy (OECD, 2013) by raising the quality of education from preschool to post-secondary education. In the area of preschool education, the aim of the Blueprint is to have all children aged 5 enrolled in registered preschools and receiving an education, to raise preschool teacher qualifications, and to close the gap between urban and rural preschools by 2020 (Ng, 2015).

Table 4.2 presents the historical timeline of the major milestones of preschool education in Malaysia.

Table 4.2

Summary of the history of preschool education in Malaysia

<i>Year</i>	<i>Milestones</i>
1960s	Providers of early childhood care and education in Malaysia were mostly from religious bodies or non-governmental organisations; private kindergartens were not common
1971	The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development started the first preschool known commonly as the <i>Tabika</i> KEMAS – the biggest provider of preschool education in the country
1972	The Ministry of Education Malaysia drafted the first legal document concerning the registration of ECE
1976	The Department of National Integration and Unity started the first preschool known as PERPADUAN preschools
1980s	The Ministry of Education Malaysia pioneered 2 major preschool projects: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Projek Pendidikan Imbuhan</i> managed by Curriculum Development Centre with help from Yayasan Bernard Van Leer (a Dutch body) 2. <i>Projek Kajian Pendidikan Prasekolah</i> managed by Education Planning and Research Division with assistance from UNICEF
1986	Release of the 1986 Preschool Guidebook – the first formalised curriculum document for ECE in Malaysia
1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Permanent Committee on the Coordination of Preschool Education decided to review the 1986 Preschool Guideline to suit its current needs and development - 1131 preschool classes under the Ministry of Education Malaysia were set up as pilot projects annexed to existing primary schools
1996	As a result of the National Education Act 1996 – preschool education is finally officially declared to be part of the school system
2003	All preschools (public/private) are required by the law to follow the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) developed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia
2007	The Ministry of Education Malaysia preschools become the second largest preschool providers after KEMAS
2010	NPCS was revised
2012	Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was launched

Note. Adapted from Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Implementation Review.

Malaysia: Ministry of Education Malaysia, by Curriculum Development Division, retrieved from <http://en.unesco.org/ecce/policy-reviews>.

4.6.3 History of childcare services for 0 - 4 years old

ECCE services for 0 to 4 year olds, or referred to as childcare services, was mainly established so that women can enter the labour force to answer the country's call for scaling up of human resources capacity (Chiam, 2008). ECCE for this age group falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). Childcare centres in Malaysia are mainly run by the private sector; the biggest childcare centre provider in the government sector is the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development or KEMAS. That is, besides running preschool classes for 4 to 6 year olds, KEMAS also runs childcare services, or *Taska*, for the 0 to 4 year olds (CDD, 2007).

The 0-4 age group did not get a lot of attention until a study was conducted by the Ministry of Social Welfare together with UNICEF in 1982. This study indicated that there was a need to upgrade and improve the quality of childcare among nurseries or childcare providers, particularly in relation to the quality of food, the environment, children's holistic development, and the education of child carers (CDD, 2007).

As a consequence of funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Government set up a special unit to initiate the formulation of the Childcare Centre's Act 1984, which set minimum standards and regulations. This Act was first implemented in Kuala Lumpur in 1985 before being rolled out to other states in 1986. Under the Childcare Centre's Act 1984, every childcare centre (*Taska*) in Malaysia must be registered with the Department of Social Welfare. The Act aims to ensure the quality of the childcare centres and to protect children against any form of abuse. Its underlying philosophy is to provide care and education for children in the early years, especially to those children under 4 years old, and to support working mothers (CDD, 2007). During this period Chiam (2008) suggests that there has been a change in attitude towards childcare and an increased demand for quality of care in childcare services because of the introduction of this Act.

In 2007, the Childcare Centre Act 1984 was amended, and bring about the Care Centres (Amendment) Act 2007 (CDD, 2007). There are some administrative changes following the amendment. Namely, the renewal of childcare centre operating licence has been extended from 12 calendar months to 60 months, and an increase in categories of childcare centres (Chiam, 2008). That is, other than home-based childcare centres, there are now government supported Community Childcare Centre that are managed by voluntary associations in collaboration with private sectors, which aim to make childcare services more affordable and accessible to more parents and children (CDD, 2007). Work-place Childcare Centres receive government subsidies to cater for the increasing number of mothers participating in the workforce as a result of rapid expansion of the country's economic and workforce demand. On top of these changes, a Quality Improvement Accreditation System (QIAS) has also been formulated to set standards for childcare providers in terms of practice, child development, and teacher qualification (CDD, 2007).

In the same year, the PERMATA Negara Early Childhood Care and Education Programme was launched by the Prime Minister's Department (Education for All, 2015). The programme was

inspired by the UK model 'Sure Start' but was rooted in Malaysian values. The PERMATA programmes aim to incorporate the needs of the local community into the provision of quality care and early education services for children 0 to 4 years old and their families (CDD, 2007). The PERMATA curriculum is orientated towards the holistic development of the child and focuses on cognitive, socio-emotional and communication skills, and physical well-being (PERMATA Negara, 2017).

The Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy 2008 concretises existing national policies on early childhood, advocating holistic development and quality care for the age group of 0 to 4 year old children (Education for All, 2015), and aims to develop the human capital needed for the country to achieve its 'high income' status by 2020. The policy acknowledges the importance of early intervention in child development and aims to ensure quality standards in ECCD training and services. It furthermore aims to make sure that childcare services provide environments that stimulate early development of young children in the hope that they will achieve optimum development in line with the national aspirations (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). Then, in 2011, Malaysia's MOE developed the Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum for 0 to 4 year olds, based on the PERMATA curriculum (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014).

An overview of the major milestones of childcare services in Malaysia is presented in Table 4.3

Table 4.3

Summary of the history of childcare services in Malaysia

<i>Year</i>	<i>Milestone</i>
1982	The Ministry of Social Welfare conducted a survey on childcare in collaboration with UNICEF - Outcomes indicated the need to enhance the quality of childcare among the nursery/childcare providers
early 1984	The Government sets up special unit to initiate the formulation of the 1984 Childcare Centre's Act under the funding of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation
1985	The Childcare Centre's Act was first implemented in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur
1986	The Childcare Centre's Act was rolled out to other states
1989	The Association of Registered Childcare Providers Malaysia – a non-profit organisation – was registered with the Registrar of Societies
1990	The Association of Registered Childcare Providers Sarawak – a non-governmental organisation – was established
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The amended version of the Childcare Centre Act was passed through Parliament, as The Care Centres (Amendment) Act 2007 - Formulation of the Quality Improvement Accreditation System (QIAS) - PERMATA Early Childhood Education and Care childcare centres becomes the latest entry into ECCE service in Malaysia - PERMATA programmes were founded under the auspices of the wife of Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister
2008	The Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy advocating holistic development and quality care for all children between 0 and 4 years old
2010	The ECCE Council was established
2011	Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum for children from 0 to 4 years old was developed

Note. Adapted from Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Implementation Review.

Malaysia: Ministry of Education Malaysia, by Curriculum Development Division, retrieved from <http://en.unesco.org/ecce/policy-reviews>.

5.0 Quality discourses in Malaysian Education

The following critical analysis of the discourses on quality ECCE in the Malaysian context draws on sources of information that include journal articles, conference papers, online magazine articles, Acts of Parliament, official news and reports. Due to the limited academic literature that critically examines the Malaysian Government's role in discourses on quality ECCE programmes and in policy-making, particularly when political and racial issues are involved, it was necessary to base the analysis for this research on non-academic internet sources. The first level of analysis – the Macro level – will involve looking at the discourse of quality in Malaysia's system of education in general against the backdrop of the nation's politico-economic development between during the years from 1996 to 2016. Then analysis, at the Micro level, will involve an examination of policies and standards in the quality discourse and as they are interpreted in Malaysia's ECCE sector. Both the Macro and Micro level analyses and the connections between these two analyses will guide the attempt to answer the research questions: 1) How is the concept of 'quality' constructed in ECCE Malaysia? 2) How is quality being interpreted in Malaysia's educational policies and standards? 3) How is the underlying driving force of quality discourse shaping Malaysian ECCE profession in terms of policies and practice standards?

5.1 Macro level: Quality within the Malaysian system of education from 1996 - 2016

This section of analysis will examine the articulation of quality in the education sector in relation to the nation's politico-economic events between 1996 and 2016. Through the coincidence of these major events with the establishment of the most significant national education policies by the Government in this time-frame, the analysis in this chapter will attempt to identify themes that characterise the discourses on quality in Malaysia's system of education. However, keeping in mind that these themes of inquiry are not necessarily a separate construct, it needs to be highlighted that they are actually a consequential product of historical events and, as such, overlap and interconnect throughout recent decades since the 1970s. To put it simply, this analysis intends to look at how governmental decisions have influenced ideological constructions of quality within Malaysia's system of education (Macro level) between 1990s - 2010s.

5.1.1 1990s: The impact of NEP

Ethnic demographics have had a major influence on the shaping Malaysia's political, economic, and education policies. According to Yunus (2013):

The politics of ethnic identification among the three major ethnic groups (*Bumiputra* including Malay, Chinese, and Indians) have resulted in power

imbalances and [the formation of] hierarchies [and inequalities within]
...various social, educational, and economic dimensions. (para. 6)

That is, although Bumiputras make up over 60% of the country's total population, and although they play a major role in the country's politics and government, the majority of them are still economically less well-off with lower average incomes and wealth, having less involvement in the country's capitalisation of the market, and live in poorer living conditions compared to the Chinese and Indian minorities. Race relations were stressed and finally resulting in deadly riots in 1969. These riots led the country to declare a state of exigency and form a National Operations Council (NOC), as an emergency administrative body to enforce law and order in the country until the restoration of Parliament in 1971 (Jauhar, Abdul Ghani, & Islam, 2016). It was in this context that the so-called New Economic Policy, or NEP, was launched in 1970 with the intention of improving the overall economic and educational status the *Bumiputras*. The policy reflected a concerted effort to reduce poverty and restructure both society and the economy, engineering "a major distributional transformation of the Malaysian economy" with built-in "mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and ...adjust the linkages between economic growth and distribution" (Yusof & Bhattasali, 2008, p. 53).

Under NEP, the Malaysian Government plays a direct and dominant role in regulating the country's economy. That is, as Lee (1997) puts it, the Government assumes the power to set "Malay quotas for the the issuance of trading/ business licences and permits, ownership of equity and employment" (p. 31), and the allocation of resources and special assistance for Malay businessmen. Furthermore it also assumes the right, on behalf of the *Bumiputras*, to directly intervene in the share acquisitions of private corporations (Lee, 1997).

These powers are clearly stated in the following strategies articulated within the NEP (EPU, 2013a):

- Direct intervention by Government through the creation of specialised agency to ensure a more effective *Bumiputra* participation in the economy and sustainable equity ownership.
- Introduction of specially designed rules and arrangements, whereby the involvement and participation of *Bumiputra* are assisted and facilitated over a period.
- Increasing *Bumiputra* ownership through privatisation projects.
- To create balance in the workforce that reflects ethnic's composition through a more equitable economic growth. (para. 2)

Although the intention was, supposedly, to promote social harmony and economic equality by lending the *Bumiputras* a helping hand, this policy is also considered by the minority ethnic groups and political opponent parties as positive discrimination that favoured *Bumiputras* over other races. This perception has resulted in even greater inter-ethnic resentment (Kuppusamy, 2006).

When NEP was launched in 1970, it was originally designed to last for 20 years (until 1990), with the intention of redistributing wealth, while claiming to strive for economic equality between ethnic groups so as to attain and produce “national unity, social cohesion, social justice, political stability, system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence” (Lee, 1997, p. 32). However, this policy of positive discrimination has continued well after 1990 and is maintained by the Government even now, favouring ethnic Malays over other races - policies which include “preferential treatment in employment, education, scholarships, business, access to cheaper housing and assisted savings” (Kuppusamy, 2006, para. 5). This is to say, the essence of preferential policy has continued to be evident in the New Development Policy, or NDP, 1991, which superseded the NEP. On one hand, the NDP is calling the nation to achieve fully developed nation status by year 2020 (Drabble, 2004), while on the other hand, the basic NEP commitments are still maintained. That is, in terms of nation’s advancement, the Malaysian Government is emphasising private sector-led growth and a reliance “on human resource development to achieve distributional objectives” (Jomo, as cited in Lee, 1997, p. 33), while at the same time, insisting on preferential initiatives being enacted through the Government’s consistent intervention when directing and regulating economic activity that focus on redistribution of income to eliminate poverty and to empower development of *Bumiputra* commercial and industrial community (Lee, 1997).

Aftermath of NEP and Malaysia’s education

The main intention of the NEP is to urbanise and elevate the economic status of the *Bumiputras* – the majority population in society. This direct governmental intervention, and the so-called affirmative action, has also been leaving their marks on Malaysia’s education system, and has continued to date.

One of the most alarming consequences of NEP for education is the creation of the power dynamics among the ethnic groups in Malaysia, which saw to Malaysia’s education system becoming highly politicised and ethnicised (Yunus, 2013). Schools in Malaysia are strategically used “by the government and ethnic collectives in the social and political positioning of the ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia” (Yunus, 2013, para. 6). This is especially apparent in terms of (i) the allocation of government funding to Malay-medium schools, (ii) the imposition of racial quotas and scholarships for university enrolment, and (iii) language policies regarding the medium of instruction in all national schools.

Rationalised through equal access to education for the disadvantaged Malays, and also as part of the affirmative action of the NEP, Malays are able to attend schools free of charge; tuition fees in Malay-medium schools are waived (Cheong, Hill & Leong, 2016). Most government scholarships and loans were “granted on a purely ethnic-based and income blind basis” (Cheong et al., 2016, p.74), which in turn guarantees a majority of *Bumiputra* students secure entry to state universities while rejecting many non-*Bumiputras* who were just as, if not more qualified. This has resulted in many non-*Bumiputras*, especially the ethnic Chinese, feeling undervalued and discriminated against, resulting in many Chinese opting to go overseas for both education and

better employment opportunities. This has subsequently fuelled a brain drain (Sukumaran, 2017) and an outflow of Malaysian currency (Lee, 1997).

Following the establishment of The National Education Policy in 1971, the language policy that saw a major change in Malaysia's education system was the replacement of English with the Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia, as the sole medium of instruction in all national universities (Gill, 2005; Tharmalingam, 2012). This is justified by the claim that "Malaysia needed a common language to unite its people and to promote its national identity" (Lee, 1997, p. 31), and that Malaysia needed to secure its electorates' cultural and economic interests (referring to the *Bumiputras*) through elevating the status of Bahasa Malaysia to that of royalty such that it should be regarded as sacred (Gill, 2005).

However, this decision to reduce the role of English in Malaysia has affected ethnic relations, as the non-*Bumiputras* felt that this change was a means to only advance the economic interests of Malays (Jamil & Raman, 2012). Furthermore, this approach has also resulted in a significant drop in the country's English standard, even more so among the *Bumiputras* who have almost no exposure to the English language in the first place, apart from in school settings. It was later realised that the deteriorating competence in English among the '*rakya*' (the ordinary citizens) undermined the country's capacity to advance economically and compete in the global market, since English remains the most important medium in the commercial sector (Lee, 1997). It was not until in the 1990s that Malaysian "political elites were willing to acknowledge the importance of English as an international language for trade, and for the transfer of scientific knowledge and modern technology" (Lee, 1997, p. 34).

The importance of English is re-emphasised and this is reflected in the passing of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Bill 1996, which allows for private colleges to deliver their courses in English (Gill, 2005), and for an increase in the usage of the English language in local public universities' programmes (Lee, 1997). Although it was not specifically mentioned in the speech in 1991 made by Malaysia's 4th Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, English language competency is being implicitly emphasised as one of the keys to access up-to-date knowledge to realise the country's vision of achieving developed and industrialised status by the year 2020:

We cannot but aspire to the highest standards with regard to the skills of our people, to their devotion to know how and knowledge upgrading and self-improvement, to their language competence... (Mahathir, 1991, np)

For school levels, the Education Act 1996 made the English language a compulsory subject in all primary and secondary government- and govern-aided schools. That is, English came to be taught as a stand-alone subject among other academic subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Since the 1990s, Malaysia is also seeing a growing preference for private schools/international schools, with English as the medium of instruction, over Malay-medium, public institutions. This development is also fuelled by a "belief that the public sector is inefficient, unproductive",

ineffective and unresponsive “to the rapid changes in the modern world” (Lee, 1997, p.36). This belief has continued to be pervasive among Malaysian communities, as reported in FMT News (2015):

More Malaysian parents are opting to send their children for private education, despite the soaring costs of living... [parents] believe private schools provide a more rounded education... where knowledge gained can be better put to practice and adapted into daily routines... children display better presence and self-confidence in social setting. (para. 1)

One of the reasons for parents to choose private schools is because of the high standard of English taught in these schools, as many Malaysian parents believe that the standards in government schools are poor (Chan, 2015).

Apart from the perceived, higher standard of English use as the medium of instruction, private schools also have more freedom in their program development because they are not subject to budget limitations imposed by the state. Private schools, especially the international private schools, offer a wider range of curriculum, the materials largely being from Western English-speaking countries, which is, in turn, believed to give private school students more opportunity to get involved, to explore and to express themselves, thus producing a well-rounded, adaptable generation (Chan, 2015). This assessment was also reflected in words of the Malaysian Digest (2015):

While it is an undeniable fact that both national and international schools in the country have done the inevitable to offer the most effective and highest quality education system in the nation's bid to produce a more all-rounded generation, efforts of the former seem to fall short as Malaysians now prefer sending their children to international schools which offer English-medium education instead. (para. 14)

When it comes to defining ‘quality’ education, it seems that the English language plays a determining role since it is a widely accepted belief that competency in the language allows access to international trade, scientific knowledge and the modern technology needed for the country to achieve its ‘developed country’ status.

With Malaysia’s new-found ambition, in the late 1990s, to transform the country’s economy into an export-oriented industrial one, there has also been a growing demand for human resource development. Apart from being an instrument for promotion of national unity and social equality, education then, has a new added role, which is understood by the Malaysian Government as having the purpose of pushing Malaysia towards the rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation of the nation’s economy. This government’s emphasis on development and its vision for education are also apparent in the revised version of National Education Philosophy for Malaysia, written in 1996 (MOE, 2013):

Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society, and the nation at large. (p. E-4)

Under the umbrella of human resource development, educational reforms in the 1990s steered educational policy towards both democratisation and the privatisation of the Malaysian education system (Lee, 1997). The democratisation of education, according to Kiyao (1981) refers to the “development of policies designed to reduce social and economic inequalities, and to reduce costs of school attendance” (p. 3). This includes the establishment of relevant curriculum (Kiyao, 1981), and the restructuring of educational institutions (Lee, 1997). In its effort to democratise education, Malaysia has lengthened the provision of basic education from 9 years to 11 years, where all students attend six years of primary school education and then proceed to complete five years, instead of three years, of secondary education (Lee, 1997). Also, preschool education has been included in the national education system under the Education Act 1996, thus making preschool education subject to government control and regulation.

It was also then that the word “quality” appeared in government policy for the first time, although this was only once, stating the role of education:

...the mission to develop a world-class quality education system which will realize the full potential of the individual and fulfil the aspiration of the Malaysian nation. (Education Act, 1996, p. 13)

Theme 1: Quality education - a mere slogan, where education is a tool for governmental control

Education in Malaysia, so it seems, is an incubator, a controlled environment, for realising the Government's goals and agenda. Education is a tool for governmental monitoring and managing the redistribution of opportunities and wealth by controlling access to higher education (Lee, 1997). It functioned as a ‘filter’, during the NEP era, for deciding who should and should not get access to higher education. This policy continued to impact on Malaysia's education system well after the 1990s, when there were hardly any discursive activity related to ‘quality’ in education. However, there is a strong presence of government control in every aspect of the national education system, from prescription of curriculum, admission criteria, allocation of funds, to administration (Cheong et al., 2016).

There was no apparent use of the word 'quality' in education nor any discourses on quality related to education during the NEP era (1970 -1990). 'Quality' education in general was a mere slogan while the main concern during this period was to get the *Bumiputras* to participate in the modernisation of economy through direct governmental intervention. Above all else, ethnicity played a major role in determining the allocation of financial aid, material resources and access to higher level of education during the NEP era.

Malay power has a strong grip on government services, which are used as a major avenue to advance Malay professional and economic status, and this is particularly noticeable in the Malaysian education system (Lee, 1997). That is, ethnic Malays dominate the higher administrative and policy-making levels in the MOE. They are in charge of designing policies that aim to promote the interests of the ruling class. Generally, any decisions made are not open for public discussion and input, thus giving the idea that policy is designed to promote concealed objectives (Lee, 1997).

Drawing on Jones' (2009) study of the role of knowledge in policy development processes in developing countries, the NEP fits perfectly into Jones' 'pluralism and opportunism' paradigm, in that the process of policy-making is described as "involving pragmatic decisions taken based on multiple factors in the face of uncertainty" (p. 11). The implementation in 1970 of the NEP was clearly an erratic and opportunistic process after the 1969 race riots. Instead of a linear problem-solving enterprise, the policy was an emergency measure taken during times of political turmoil. Education is seen here as a site of politics, a gatekeeper, where it is used to benefit the dominant ethnic group while marginalising the minorities. This involved explicit efforts to put the interests of the dominant group above the interests of all others. Under the glossy surface of equity and unity, those holding political power have strategically used education to marginalise the minorities by controlling access to education and business opportunities through the use of so-called 'positive discrimination'. Discussion of 'quality' in education was not prominent during the NEP era. Even if it were mentioned, it would have been a mere slogan used to legitimise contested and political aspects of situations. It was not until nearly the end of 1990s that the word 'quality' first appeared in the amended Education Act 1996, signalling that Malaysia was undergoing educational restructuring as a way of reacting to the forces of globalisation.

5.1.2 2000s: Human resource development and education for business

Physical capital and labour inputs have always been important basic factors that contribute to Malaysia's economic growth, however, as the country enters the 21st century, mere dependence on these basic factors is no longer enough to sustain economic growth. In the 2000s, the Government introduced a whole range of economic developmental plans and strategies that focus on "increasing domestic capacity, institution building and skills upgrading", with the aim of strengthening the nation's "ability to meet the challenges arising from the rapid pace of globalisation and advances in information and communication technologies" (Bank Negara

Malaysia, 2016, p. 9). Human resource development was given priority in 2001 in the country's budget planning, as the country re-oriented itself towards a knowledge-based economy.

The K-economy

The emergence of a knowledge-based economy or k-economy in Malaysia in the 2000s saw an increase in competition to gain employment. Then on securing employment, there was a stiffer fight to retain one's position on account of the skills and knowledge needed by the employer to leverage an advantage over their competitors. Employees are expected to improve the productivity and profitability of the company, while stable or lifelong employment was no longer possible (Mustapha & Abdullah, 2004). In other words, knowledge now replaces physical labour and natural resources in economic development, and the country's economic prosperity and functioning is said to depend on its human capital and/or intellectual capital (Almendarez, 2011; Mustapha & Abdullah, 2004). As can be seen in the launching of Malaysia's K-based Economy Master Plan (KEMP) by Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies in 2002, human resources are said to be "the single most important factor that will determine the pace and success of the transition towards the K-based economy" (p. x). Also stated in KEMP (Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, 2002):

K-based economies are also characterised by high investment in R & D, high literacy, high tertiary education enrolments, good technology-related capacity and skills, strength in innovation, and high ICT penetration and Internet usage.
(p. iii)

The characteristics of K-based economies can be broken down into the so-called seven strategic thrusts identified in the Master Plan. The plan contains a total of 136 recommendations that are said to enable the country to quickly develop into a knowledge-based economy. Out of the 136 recommendations, 64 of them encompass human resource development, which puts a lot of emphasis on quality of human resources as reflecting the inclusion of the following skills (Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, 2002):

literacy; secondary enrolment; tertiary enrolment; enrolment in science and technology-related subjects; science graduates; technical graduates; expenditure on education; thinking and innovation skills; a learning culture; lifelong learning facilities; English language skills; receptivity to change. (p. v)

Researches in the social and behavioural science has been putting a lot of effort in studying factors responsible for the enhancement of human skills and talents and not surprisingly, as a site of knowledge production, education is singled out as the key factor in developing the skills needed and, as such, plays a critical role in pushing advancement in the country's economy (Thomas White International, 2014). Almendarez (2011) regards formal education as a highly productive

and beneficial investment in human capital because it “increases the [economic] productivity and efficiency of workers by increasing the level of cognitive stock of economically productive human capability” (Almendarez, 2011, para. 5). To put it simply, investment in education to improve human capital will lead to greater economic output.

This emphasis on investment in education as an important driver for economic advancement is also reflected in Malaysia’s various economic development plans entering the 21st century. Namely, the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006-2010, the New Economic Model, the ETP, and the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, all of which were drawn up by the federal government ministry called the Prime Minister Department of Malaysia, headed by the Prime Minister. Most notably, the federal government development allocation and expenditure in the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006-2010, shows that expenditure on education has dominated the social sector (EPU, 2006, p. 539).

Education in Malaysia’s economic development

The emphasis on education as the key to the creation of human capital can be seen in the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006 - 2010 (EPU, 2006), through its articulated goal of raising the capacity for knowledge and nurturing innovation. Furthermore there is insistence on improving access to and the quality of education as critical strategies to achieve the goal of human capital creation (Chiam, 2008). The goal of the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006 – 2010 (EPU, 2006) is depicted as follows:

...the quality of the nation’s human capital – will be the key determinants of Malaysia’s future success as a knowledge-based economy. The country must raise the capacity of its people by... undertaking comprehensive improvement of the education system, from pre-school to tertiary level, from the aspects of curriculum and teaching to school facilities... (p. 15)

In the New Economic Model, or NEM, 2010, it is stated that Malaysia is in need of a radical change in the country’s approach to economic development, for the reason that the country is facing weakened economic growth (National Economic Advisory Council, 2009). This has been blamed on the lack of creativity and innovation, and subsequently has been traced back to education (National Economic Advisory Council, 2009):

...the weak productivity growth highlights the stark reality that Malaysia still lacks creativity and innovation... – as shown in stagnant contribution by total factor productivity and education to output growth. (p. 52)

The NEM goes on to point out the education system in Malaysia is not producing the skills, adequate creativity and English proficiency that are needed by firms, causing stagnation in productivity, and leading to a slowing in economic growth (National Economic Advisory Council, 2009). Also reported in National Economic Advisory Council in 2010 (as cited in OECD, 2013), it is said that Malaysia is suffering from “a shortage of skilled workers, weak productivity stemming from a lack of creativity and innovation in the workforce, and an over-reliance on unskilled and

low-wage migrant workers” (OECD, 2013, p.3). In short, education or lack of effective education has been highlighted as the key factor for Malaysia’s economic setbacks.

The Economic Transformation Programme, or ETP, is formulated in 2010 to deliver the goals of the NEM, which focus on increasing private investment and improving Malaysia’s economic competitiveness (PEMANDU, 2013a). The ETP has selected 12 sectors to be presented as economic opportunities for the private sector, which are called the 12 NKEAs. They have been identified as the main economic areas that are expected to drive Malaysia towards high-income status and global competitiveness. Education has been highlighted as a site for business opportunities and a main component that will drive the country’s economic development and transformation, as stated in PEMANDU (2013b):

...the Education NKEA has identified additional business opportunities that can support the growth of the industry... Overall, these business opportunities, coupled with the baseline growth of the sector, are estimated to contribute an additional RM14.3 billion of GNI in 2020 and generate over 252,000 incremental jobs. (para. 3)

In the ETP, the focus is on strengthening private education services and expanding education export (ESPACT, 2015). However, there are also other driving forces that have been inadvertently fuelling the expansion of the private education sector in Malaysia since the 1990s.

There has been a growing awareness, since the 1990s, of education as a doorway to employment opportunities and social mobility, which has created an increased demand for higher education. More and more Malaysian students are seeking further education after completing 11 years basic education, especially advancement into university level education. Malaysian Educational Statistics, as compiled by the Educational Planning and Research Division under the Malaysian MOE, spotted a hike in the rate of public university participation from 5.9% in 1993 to 18.7% in 2003 (MOE, 2004). However, because the Government controls access to higher education through the racial quota system, admission to public higher education institutions for non-*Bumiputras* is very limited, resulting in many non-*Bumiputra* students having no choice but to pay higher tuition fees in the private institutions in order to further their education (Lee, 1997).

Another driving force behind the rapid expansion of the private education sector is the liberalisation of education. In the 1990s, the Malaysian Government relinquished its role as the sole provider of higher education after facing tight budgetary constraints (Lee, 1997). Private colleges and universities were allowed institutional autonomy, but only to some extent. For example, the Government allowed English to be the medium of instruction in private institutions (Gill, 2005). Since English is considered to be “the language of economic opportunity and social mobility”, English competency becomes one of the determining factors of employment in companies in the private sector (Gill, 2005, p. 246). Therefore, it is not surprising that more Malaysian students are choosing private universities. In other words, graduates from private universities, rather than graduates from public university, are more sought after because of their

competency in English (Gill, 2005). Thus, with the rapidly increasing demand for English speaking graduates, the private sector is both expanding rapidly and playing an increasingly active role in education.

These developments in the 2000s seem to have coincided with the Malaysian Government's various economic development plans and strategies that all seek to push for privatisation of public utilities in the name of economic growth. It is then emphasised that privatisation can lead to greater efficiency and productivity, while reducing government expenditure (EPU, 2006). It is expected that private educational institutions, which are subjected to consumer demands and expectations, will end up being in competition with each other for consumers or students, and thus are likely to produce best quality education. It is also projected that market forces will push the school managers to find the most efficient ways of running their schools, to adequately fund them themselves, and to improve quality while making it affordable and meeting consumers' expectations (BERNAMA, 2015):

...private schools today were a preferred option because of... adequate financing, effective pedagogy and syllabus, helpful internal policies and the autonomy and independence to decide their own staffing needs. (para. 16)

Furthermore, the Malaysian Government is aiming for Malaysia to become the centre for education in the ASEAN region, by allowing foreign universities to set up branch campuses in the country (Lee, 1997). The National Accreditation Board Bill 1996 was tabled, allowing the board to set standard and quality control policies regarding certification awarded by private educational institutions (Lee, 1997). This is done so that Malaysian students are able to receive quality education locally without having to go overseas. The intention is to impede the outflow of the Malaysian Ringgit that would accompany the large number of Malaysian students studying abroad (Lee, 1997), as well as "to promote investment, create jobs and encourage rapid development" (EPU, 2006, p. 28) in the education sector. Barriers are also removed so as to attract foreign investors and international students – that is, private businesses can run educational institutes in Malaysia without compulsory local stake; the introduction of Employment Pass II by the Malaysian Government, allows international students to study and work in Malaysia (PEMANDU, 2013b). A key initiative of the Education NKEA is the implementation of the Malaysia Quality Evaluation System for Private Colleges (known as MyQuest), which represents an advance towards quality education (PEMANDU, 2013b), and will eventually to ensure Malaysian student outcomes can be benchmarked against international standards and compete on the global level in terms of human capital development.

The Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011 - 2015) involving "an integrated human capital and talent development framework" (OECD, 2013, p. 6), consists of 3 themes (EPU, 2010):

- 1) **Revamping the education system to significantly raise student outcomes.** The main strategic focus is on developing and enhancing the quality of teachers towards driving student outcomes, and holding schools and principals accountable for student performance.

- 2) **Raising the skills of Malaysians to increase employability.** Technical education and vocational training will be mainstreamed, to ensure that the development of necessary human capital will meet industry requirements through adding value to services, and driving up productivity.
- 3) **Reforming the labour market.** Targeting the development and retention of world-class talent, sourcing top talents from overseas and within the country, while ensuring equitable access to opportunities for upgrading skills. The bottom 40% of Malaysian households are given priority to these skills training opportunities, aiming to close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students and low performing schools.

It is apparent, this emphasis on investing in human capital development for economic advancement within all these economic development plans in Malaysia have an underpinning theoretical framework that is known as the human capital theory. Basically, under this framework, education is seen primarily as a key determinant of a country's economic performance. (Almendarez, 2011).

Up to this point, education has been identified as necessary for Malaysia's economic transformation in that it is understood to serve society by developing skills in human resources that are both important for production activity and needed to advance the country towards becoming a k-economy. Also, education is seen as a site that nurtures unity, "creates improved citizens and helps to upgrade the general standard of living of society" (Almendarez, 2011, para. 2). That education is important lies in a belief that it is an agent of change and therefore, that it is capable of expanding educational opportunities that promote economic growth (Almendarez, 2011). Not only is education vital for development, it is now an economic good, a site for business investment. According to Almendarez (2011), education is considered by economists, as both a consumer and capital good. As a consumer good, education offers consumer satisfaction by delivering what is expected and needed. As a capital good, education then serves as a tool that the country uses to produce the human resources necessary for economic and social transformation. 'Improving and monitoring quality of education' has thus become the catch-phrase in various education development plans and policies.

In Malaysia, the MOE assumes large roles and responsibilities in influencing education performance. The concentration of authority emerges in every aspect of education, from decision-making and consultation, to any innovation at the lowest level, all must fall under the purview of the central authority (Cheong et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2013). In its effort to match Malaysian's national aspirations to produce quality human resources for economic advancement, MOE programmes and projects are geared towards "developing a world class quality education system to enable individuals to realise their full potential" (MOE, 2004, p. 19). The skills that have been highlighted as the characteristics of quality human resources, which mainly include competency in literacy skills, science and mathematics, English language skills and innovative thinking skills, are used as a reference for policy development, as well as measurements for quality standards within Malaysia's education sector.

The assessment of quality education as a whole, is mainly gauged by access and equity to education, gender equality in access to education, efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery system, students' participation based on enrolment numbers (Kamerman, 2002; MOE, 2004; UNESCO, 2013), and an emphasis on performance in science and technology, as well as thinking skills via standardised national examinations (MOE, 2004). In the case of measuring school quality, the number of teachers with a qualification in teaching in a school, pupil-teacher ratios or even per-pupil district expenditure is used (Rao & Jani, 2009). That is, the allocation funds to schools is based on measurements made of the academic excellence of the pupils, the greater the number of high academic achievers a school can produce, the more funding it will receive, which, in turn, renders the school a 'high-quality' school.

According to Kamerman (2002), Malaysia's effort to improve the quality of education focuses mainly on revising curriculum and strengthening basic academic skills. Skills that are said to be of relevance are those that both satisfy individual needs and the task of nation building (International Bureau of Education [IBE]–UNESCO, n.d.). Effectiveness of the education system is evaluated against the implementation of curricular programmes; the assessment and monitoring of these curricular programmes being carried out by various divisions within the MOE (IBE–UNESCO, n.d.). Effectiveness of the curricular programme is then based on pupils' performances in the centralised national examinations which aim to gauge their progress against learning outcomes (IBE–UNESCO, n.d.).

In 2012, The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was launched as the Government's latest initiative for the transformation of Malaysia's education system. The Blueprint is said to lay out a roadmap of policies that are to be implemented in order to produce an innovative, talent-based workforce that will meet the needs of the new economy and enable comparison to the standards used by its regional peers and other high-income nations (OECD, 2013). The Blueprint especially emphasises student performance in Mathematics, Science, and Languages, because these subjects are identified as key to equipping Malaysian students with knowledge and to developing their higher-order thinking skills that they will need to be successful in life (MOE, 2013). Performance in these subjects is also measured using international student assessments, such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), with assessment results used to directly compare the "quality of educational outcomes across different countries and across systems" (MOE, 2013, p. 3-5). It is clearly stated in the Blueprint that to be successful requires the ability to align the standards for Malaysian student outcomes, as well as learning practices and curriculum, with other high-performing education systems so as to affirm that Malaysia is producing students who are globally competitive (MOE, 2013):

What will success look like? ...standards for student outcomes and learning practices will be benchmarked and aligned with that of high-performing education systems so that the students Malaysia produces are globally competitive... (p. E-11)

All in all, when it comes to assessing the quality of the education system, Malaysia focuses “largely on the intellectual dimension of academic student outcomes, with the benefit of available and measurable data” (MOE, 2013, p. 3-5) for reason that the success of students, and their eventual impact on economic development, depend on their ability to acquire skills in literacy and numeracy, and science (MOE, 2013).

Theme 2: Quality education – transforming education into an industry for business

As Malaysia enters the process of greater globalisation, in which markets are opened to international competition, the Malaysian Government, in its effort to keep up with the competition, is emphasising the need for greater spending on human capital development and, as such, is encouraging private spending on education. This ideological stance is clearly articulated in the Government’s development plans. On the one hand, privatising education relieves the Government of financial burden, on the other hand, it renders education as a consumer good subjected to the laws and forces of demand and supply (Ali, 2005).

Lee (1997) asserts that privatisation of education also works towards the corporatisation of education institution, with a strong emphasis on accountability, as well as formality, uniformity, rigidity, and bureaucratisation, all of which are hallmarks of a corporate setting (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). The approach to education has become more competitive (Cheong et al., 2016) in the sense that it is competing for customers and investments based on its ability to produce what is expected from these consumers. Furthermore, approach to education has become oriented towards its income-generating potentiality, while knowledge production and dissemination is receiving less attention (Lee, 1997).

According to Lightfoot-Rueda, Peach and Leask (2015), the discourse concerning education in many developing countries is infused with language of human capital that has both been explicitly and implicitly linked to schooling with economic status, and Malaysia is no different. That is, education is seen as the key to development and growth of a market economy, because its main function is to produce a workforce that should be highly competitive and, as such, be able to deal with the requirements of the global economy (Ali, 2005). In a way, education is an industry with a production line that produces a human workforce, rather than an industry that provides for the creation and spread of knowledge for its own sake. Producing a quality workforce becomes the objective that gives education its purpose, which is to say, there is a shift in the ideological focus of education from the creation of knowledge to the preparation of human capital that will be useful in the market place (Ali, 2005).

Parallel to this belief that education is vital for a nation to compete global commercial world, there is also the notion that success or failure in the nation’s economic performance can be predicted via student scores on comparative international tests (Lightfoot-Rueda et al., 2015). This notion of equating test scores to education quality is specifically emphasised in the Education Blueprint

2013-2025. In other words, student test scores not only reflect the quality of a workforce, it also serves as quality assurance criteria for the education industry, and subsequently, these numeric scores serve as a forecasting tool for predicting the nation's economic performance.

Last but not least, the implication that education is the country's key developmental factor has provided policy-makers with opportunities to generate data or knowledge to justify the implementation of education policy (Jones, 2009). According to Jones (2009), such data is generated via "the process of implementing the developmental plans, which emphasises the need for projects to monitor and evaluate their progress, and to link these activities to learning and accountability mechanisms" (p. 20). This is evident in various developmental plans in Malaysia. Furthermore, as it has been pointed out in policy review reports on the Malaysian education system produced by UNESCO, the OECD, and the MOE, that there is a general focus on what Jones (2009) refers to as "the 'causal chain' from 'inputs' (e.g. staff, budget) to 'outputs' (e.g. schools built, training courses held), then 'outcomes' and 'impact' (e.g. greater educational achievement, reduced poverty)" (p. 20). This sort of knowledge is then used by policy makers as reference to come up with a generally plausible improvement strategy, and by the implementing agencies as a guideline for progress monitoring method or as solutions to a particular issue. Thus, this aligning of education to economic development leads to an increased interest in process monitoring and documenting (Jones, 2009).

Quality education, in the Malaysian context, is therefore dependent on the industry's (education's) ability to produce high-quality products (students and the future workforce). The quality criteria of these 'products' and the workforce as a whole include "strong analytical and problem-solving capabilities, a good command of English, effective social networking skills" (OECD, 2013, p. 4) – capabilities and skills which can all be measured using standardised test scores. To guarantee a production of graduates that will meet the nation's needs, the management and monitoring of the quality of the 'production line' or system of education must be based on 'quality criteria' that include accessibility, accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and a responsive to change (OECD, 2013). The measurements of these quality criteria are often represented by participation or school enrolments numbers, and the level of competence and performances in a specific set of measurable skills that are said to be relevant to the preparation of young people for future economic productivity (Lightfoot-Rueda et al., 2015).

To put it simply, quality education for Malaysians is equal to test scores. For policy-makers, high enrolment numbers and good test scores are evidence of the Government doing a good job in coming up with plans and strategies to improve the country's human resources. For teachers and schools, these test scores determine whether they should be rewarded. For the students, examination results are the only pathway into higher education and economic opportunities. Approaches to teaching and learning in schools remain focused on spoon-feeding strategies and fact-retention tactics despite the call for education reform. While there is no real improvement, there continues to be an increased pressure on producing 'nice numbers' on paper, which can be easily manipulated. The frequent exam papers leaks of standardised Malaysian national examinations are the very products of such manipulation, which should set-off alarms bells with

policy-makers, but don't. Instead, the Government is using this as, what Stier (1997) calls political artifice, which convincingly shifts all blame to educators, while making themselves out to be the 'victim' of political sabotage. This occurs without policy-makers even examining if the reform strategies, which they had spent millions of ringgit of Malaysian taxpayers' money on, were even well thought out. Using the leaking of the national exam papers in 2014 as example, Lim (2014) has stated:

...leaks ...[of] this year's UPSR examination papers, causing the deputy prime minister and education minister to allege that the leaks could have been purposely done to sabotage him personally and the Education Ministry. (para. 1)

Hossain (2014) also states that:

...the Government did not pay any heed to their arguments [Malaysian eminent educationists' warning of the waning standard of Malaysian education], rather tried to term their claims as a conspiracy against the Government to eclipse the achievements attained in the sector. (para. 2)

All in all, like many developing countries, the spirit of managerialism has seeped deep into Malaysian education. The governance of education has become concerned more with goals, strict regulations, monitoring, competition and decentralisation (Lightfoot-Rueda et al., 2015). In terms of monitoring the effectiveness of education policy and implementation, the focus is on the quantifiable achievements and performances, which lack any real will towards improvement. Instead, this strategy for development is leading to a strengthened bureaucracy that manipulates achievement results and exploits the system (Lightfoot-Rueda et al., 2015).

Education, according to Plato, supposedly functions as a means to achieve excellence, to attain virtue, and to achieve justice through obtaining knowledge (Turan, 2011). However, with the aforementioned spirit of managerialism, Malaysian education has been callously treated as a mere instrument that politicians can conveniently use to feature their achievements in the education sector (Hossain, 2014).

5.2 Micro level: Quality within Malaysian ECCE policies and standards

When government policy is understood as both text and discourse, it becomes possible to trace how policy-makers seek to promote a certain discursive truth (Osgood, 2009). Therefore, from within government policies and reports it is possible to trace the ways in which quality ECCE is constructed in Malaysia. The following section will involve the Micro level of analysis, by examining key policies and official documents to look for underlying drivers regarding the construction of quality and the implications of these drivers, and thus intending to address the

second research question in this study: How is quality being interpreted within Malaysian ECCE policies and standards?

5.2.1 Childcare Malaysia – an answer to gender equality in workforce

As mentioned earlier, ECCE in Malaysia is broadly divided into childcare for the 0 to 4 years old, and preschool education for the 4 to 6 years old. Childcare is not considered to be part of the education system in Malaysia. However, it is seen as a service that empowers women's participation in the labour force (Chiam, 2008).

As Malaysia is embarking on a journey of upgrading the capacity of human resources to meet both ongoing challenges and the need for greater economic growth, and the country, as such, has been pushing for increased women's participation in areas of human development and employment (Ahmad, 1998). This has involved acknowledging that women play just as important a role as men in contributing to the development of Malaysia's economy (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development [MWFC], 2007). Research is emphasising that "women are highly important contributors to the country's economic and social development" (Borham & Razak, 2013, p. 34). Also, it has been pointed out that greater women participation in the formal workforce has played a major role in Malaysia's economic growth (Bakar & Abdullah, 2007; Borham & Razak, 2013). In the effort to encourage greater participation of women in the workforce, the provision of childcare facilities and services has been identified as one of the major factors that allow women the flexibility with respect to their working arrangements, which in turn, facilitate women with childcare responsibilities to enter the job market (Ahmad, 1998; MWFC, 2007).

A Cabinet Committee on Gender Equality was even established in 2004 to provide policy direction with respect to the need to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment in Malaysia (MWFC, 2007). In supporting greater participation of women in the workforce, the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010 proposed the establishment of workplace childcare centres with tax incentives for employers. This was done to encourage workplaces to establish childcare centres for working mothers, with the intention to reduce women's combined burden of work, childcare and family duties, and consequently boost women's labour force participation (EPU, 2006):

To promote greater participation of women in business, their access to financing will be improved. Measures will also be undertaken to increase the provision of childcare facilities and promote flexible working arrangements to facilitate the greater participation of women in the labour force. (p. 33)

Although childcare is not considered to be a critical strategy for building human capital on a national scale, it is positioned in the role of servitude to working families (Chiam, 2008; Osgood, 2009). Childcare functions as a supplement to Malaysia's grand plan of developing its human

resources for economic advancement, in that they provide service to Malaysian working mothers, which in turn allows them peace of mind and enables them “to contribute to national development and prosperity” (MWFCF, 2007, p. xi).

There is a popular Chinese proverb which stresses the importance of family well-being, ‘家和万事兴’, translated, this proverb says ‘a harmonious family is the basis for success in any undertaking’. Since family is the fundamental unit of society, well-being of its members, particularly children, is considered the primary determinant of a prosperous nation. That is, harmonious and healthy family units make a prosperous community, society, and therefore nation. For both parents to work, especially for mothers, it is fundamental that their concerns for their children’s well-being and care are addressed. According to Bakar and Abdullah (2007), one of the major factors that influence the decision-making of Malaysian women with respect to their desire to participate in the labour market is childcare policies. One such factor is childcare quality.

When it comes to childcare (0 to 4 years old), and not wanting to be left behind, the Malaysian Government has shown that it is aware of overseas practices and has put in a great deal of effort to formulate a whole array of guidelines, policies, laws and legislations (Ng, 2015) that are said to be in line with the principles of the CRC. Child Act 2001 (Act 611) was enacted to fulfil obligations under the CRC (CDD, 2007) to facilitate child welfare, protection, development and participation (EPU, 2006). Collaboration with international bodies such as the Bernard van Leer Foundation, UNICEF, and UNESCO in setting frameworks and guidelines for various policies and curriculum design that cover children in this age group have, in turn, painted a picture of what quality childcare should look like.

The Malaysian Government sees childcare as the answer to the problem of enabling both parents to participate in the labour force. Furthermore, it has directed special attention to enhancing quality assurance and the strengthening of childcare programmes; both of which are said to improve the quality of life of children. A special unit was set up by the Government with funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation to initiate the formulation of the Childcare Centres Act in 1984, and was later amended in 2007 to become the Childcare Centres Act (Amendment) 2007 (Act 308), which aims to provide quality care, in order to enable mothers to work (CDD, 2007). Basically, the amended Act required that every childcare centre must be registered with the Department of Social Welfare, implying that upon registration, the childcare centre receives a stamp of quality approval (the Certificate of Registration), and is deemed fit for operation. In actuality, the Childcare Centres Act does little to improve the quality of service in terms of care and child developmental principles, while the amendments to the Act are more for administrative purposes, and hardly provide for the delivery of quality childcare (Chiam, 2008). This can be seen in the prescribed guidelines of the childcare centre registration procedure.

The application procedure for registering a childcare centre, instruction on how the childcare centre should be run, as well as how children ought to be monitored and educated, are all laid out in the guidelines for setting up a childcare centre (Companies Commission of Malaysia [SSM] &

UNICEF Malaysia, 2010). These guidelines were commissioned, in collaboration with UNICEF, by the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM), an agency set up in 2002, under the Ministry of Domestic Trade, Co-operatives and Consumerism that regulates companies and businesses (Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia, 2017). Members of the commission consists of business executives along with their political associates, whose expertise and concern lies in running companies or winning political elections. None of these parties are qualified professionals in the education field, let alone having been trained as early childhood professionals. Yet these businessmen and politicians get to decide how Malaysia's youngest citizens ought to be 'assembled' according to the 'minimum standards'. Managing childcare and the lives of these young children in a corporate-style institution, is clearly affirmed in the commission's vision statement (Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia, 2017):

As the leading authority for the improvement of corporate governance, SSM fulfils its function to ensure compliance with business registration and corporate legislation through comprehensive enforcement and monitoring activities so as to sustain positive developments in the corporate and business sectors of the Nation. (para. 2)

The guidelines for setting up a childcare centre are designed in such a way that goals consist of intangible qualities (e.g. children's well-being and emotional stability) represented by tangible data (e.g. child-adult ratio and number of young children attending childcare), which are monitored and collected as summative assessments, in the form of solid evidence on whether or not the set standards are met. This corporate mentality and approach can be seen in all the recent policies in the childcare sector in Malaysia.

The formulation of the ECCD 2008 policy in Malaysia is said to aim to enhance the quality of life of children while advocating for holistic development and quality care for 0 to 4 year olds (Education for All, 2015), which are in line with the CRC principles. The promise to provide quality care to young children, not only ease the minds of working parents, it is also making it easier for more mothers to join the workforce (Evans & Ismail, 1994). The ECCD 2008 policy is enforced by law and regulations, and is monitored by special accreditation body (Ng, 2015). This policy also serves as a framework for other strategic plans to ensure provision and accessibility to quality childcare services and facilities for the lower-income groups in the urban areas. With this, more government agencies spring up, with more plans that often overlap, creating an excessive multiplication of administrative bureaus. This strongly implies that there is not enough collaboration and cooperation across the government agencies involved, which has been pointed out in the Education Policy Review conducted by UNESCO in 2013. The lack of coordination between and within the Ministries in Malaysia is "affecting the integrity and effectiveness of policy design" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 20). What is more, it is creating more paper work for the frontline personnel in the education which, in turn, diverts their efforts away from what they are supposedly called to do for their students. This in turns, defeats the whole purpose of developing such policies and programmes for education reform.

When the ECCD policy was first drafted in 2006 by a committee of early childhood experts, it was not approved by the Parliament's Cabinet. It was not until the task had been assigned to the National PERMATA Committee, chaired by Rosmah Mansor (the wife of the then Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak), that it was endorsed by the Government (Chiam, 2008). Rosmah Mansor founded the PERMATA programmes in 2007. These programmes consist of various modules that cover a broad scope of activities which have been created especially for children and teenagers of Malaysia. The PERMATA Negara is one of these modules. It is the childcare and early education programme that covers the 0 to 4 year old age-group. Under PERMATA Negara, the PERMATA curriculum was developed. This curriculum was later adopted as the national curriculum for childcare services in 2008 (PERMATA Negara, 2017). Through the Childcare Centre Regulations 2012, childcare centres or *Taska*, registered under the Childcare Centres Act (1984), are required to implement this national curriculum (Shahabudin, 2016).

On 18 May 2017, Rosmah Mansor, launched the Permata Negara Quality Assurance System (PERMATA Q) to ensure that good curriculum practices would be implemented (BERNAMA, 2017). The rationale behind PERMATA Q is that reducing adversity in the early years can serve to reduce inequality and raise the productive capacity of a society (Melhuish, 2016). In its attempt to justify the need of such quality assurance system, and to prove such system is internationally benchmarked, the PERMATA Q has drawn material from various international studies, which consistently paints the picture that adversity suffered in early life leads to a negative experience of adulthood life (Melhuish, 2016). Not only does a society with a high proportion of disadvantaged individuals pose an extra load on the nation's resources, but this society is also deemed less able to adapt to the high levels of demand for productivity required to maintain the living standards that people expect to enjoy (Melhuish, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative for the PERMATA council should be responsible for preparing "guidelines on standards, evaluation instruments, rules of conduct, procedures for evaluation and score sheet" (Shahabudin, 2016, p. 23). The PERMATA Q's quality assurance system consists of 6 areas of compliance standards that Shahabudin (2016) says include the following:

- 1) Routine practices and child care
- 2) Learning and assessing children
- 3) Care and assessing babies
- 4) Physical safety and learning resources
- 5) Human resources, and
- 6) Management (p. 22)

Under each of these areas are sub-standards that are further broken down into various items. According to the PERMATA Q quality assurance system official website (http://permata-q.permata.jpm.my/?page_id=284), there are altogether 459 items arranged into a check-list, which are basically the detailed, prescriptive procedures of every aspect of childcare. Childcare centres are to be assessed and scored by assessors appointed by the PERMATA Q Committee, who will carry out the evaluation, collect evidence and make recommendations over the course

of 2 days. Childcare centres are required to follow through these prescribed procedures for the delivering of the early childcare curriculum based on the 6 areas. Star ratings are then given to indicate the level of quality of the childcare service, and that reflect how well the childcare centre scores in these areas (Bahagian PERMATA, 2017). This standards-based curriculum reduces a rich set of experiences to a list of sequences of procedures that can be assessed which, in turn, takes the life out of young children's experiences (Hatch, 2002).

Malaysia is shifting from seeing childcare as an answer to gender inequality in the workforce to, what Hatch (2002) calls the 'accountability shovedown', which refers to Malaysia holding its youngest children accountable for both the nation's state of affairs and its development through standards-based approaches that measures productivity according to an arbitrary set of narrowly defined outcomes.

5.2.2 Preschool education – an early contributor to economic transformation

Malaysian economic development has come a long way since independence, and despite the set-backs of political unrest in the late-1960s, various policy reforms, and an economic crisis in the late-1990s, the nation has continued to strive towards the implementation of its vision for economic growth and transformation. This is reflected in the national vision of becoming a fully developed, high-income nation by the year 2020 (Teh, 2009). In 2016, Najib Razak, the Malaysian 6th Prime Minister, announced a new 30-year transformation plan: a new vision for the nation titled *Transformasi Nasional* (TN50), translated as National Transformation (TN50), which is aiming to transform Malaysia into what the Prime Minister described as "a nation of calibre... with *par excellence* mindset" (NST ONLINE, 2016) by year 2050.

In 2009, a Performance Management & Delivery Unit, also known as PEMANDU, was established by the Prime Minister's Department to manage and assess the delivery and progress of the ETP, a government initiative to turn Malaysia into a high-income economy by the year 2020. The ETP is primarily led and funded by the private sector while the Government plays a facilitative role through policy support (PEMANDU, 2010). The ETP has identified Education as one of the 12 NKEAs that are expected to make a substantial contribution to Malaysia's economic performance, because education is seen as the key to drive Malaysia's "transformation from a middle- to high-income nation due [to] its impact on productivity and human capital development" (PEMANDU, 2013c, p. 476). In other words, it is clear to the Malaysian government that, if Malaysia was to strengthen its economic competitiveness, it will need a highly skilled and innovative work force, and such work force can be produced via education. Therefore the provision of a high quality education becomes imperative (Goh, 2013).

According to Abdullah (2009), the Malaysian early childhood sector has gained significant attention since emphasis has been given to the need to create human capital as early as possible. This increased attention that the ECCE sector has been shown by policy-makers in Malaysia

became prominent in 1996 (OECD, 2013), and especially once preschools became recognised by National Education Act 1996 to be part of the formal education system (CDD, 2007). This attention is also backed by popular reference to Western research in both child development and in neuroscience, which suggests quality early childhood education is a fundamental element of providing young children with the possibility of becoming academically successful and therefore in the future contributing as citizens to the economic progress (Abdullah, 2009). In 2013, Majzub stated the following:

high-quality early childhood education programmes... confirm lasting positive effects such as greater academic success, higher education rates, lower juvenile crime, decreased need for special education services, lower adolescent pregnancy rates. (p. 150)

In other words, a quality early childhood education that strengthens educational, emotion and social outcomes for children at a young age, will in turn strengthen possibilities of better social development and economic progress (OECD, 2001). This has become an overarching rationale behind the transformation of the education system in Malaysia - a development which sees preschool education gaining unprecedented attention from policy-makers whose intention is to control and monitor young children's preschool performances.

Not only researches in child development and neuroscience confirms the need for quality ECCE, the Government also used various research findings to justify their effort in the setting up of agencies to implement various ECCE related standards, policies, and projects in Malaysia. Especially research findings that include:

1. showing "children who enrol in preschool programmes tend to be more committed to learning and earning higher incomes in later years" (OECD, 2013, p. 7);
2. demonstrating the first 8 years of child's life are the most critical years of growth and, as such, are a window of opportunity which should be "fully used and strengthened to ensure long-term the benefits" for both the individual child and also for the larger community, with the purpose of "helping to break the poverty cycle" (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 5);
3. recognising ECCE "as a significant pathway to inclusiveness and social equity in education" when "the programmes are accessible to all sections of a society" (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 5);
4. evidence that shows "investing in ECCE yields high returns" and that "public expenditure in education... especially the case for spending on ECCE and early educational stages will significantly reduce initial differences in income (OECD, 2012, pp. 27-28);
5. defining ECCE's role as key in assisting the government in "fulfilling their commitments to help young children exercise their rights and develop to their full potential" (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 5).

As with the increased acceptance of the need for quality ECCE, Malaysian Government has also accepted that there is an increased need to invest in the early childhood sector in terms of

infrastructure, teacher training, and funding to encourage and improve access to quality ECCE (Majzub, 2013). Accessibility to ECCE has been recognised as a factor that is indicative of good quality (Education for All, 2015; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). Efforts are made to “increase enrolment to ECCE to match [the] developed country norm” (Chiam, 2010, p. 11), as can be seen in the ETP, which places scaling up early childcare and education as one of the project priorities (PEMANDU, 2013b). This ECCE ramp-up initiative targets increasing preschool enrolments, which are expected to reach 97% by 2020. The realisation of this objective is driven by the Malaysian PEMANDU, or the Performance Management & Delivery Unit (Chiam, 2010). The rationale behind this initiative implies that an increased participation in ECCE means that more young children will have a good head start as a result of them receiving an opportunity to become fully literate and numerate, which in turn will increase their basic literacy and numeracy rates as these children progress through their schooling years. This enables them to excel academically, which, with the improved students’ outcome, will eventually contribute to boosting the country’s economic growth (Government Transformation Programme, 2010).

Accessibility aside, the increased attention the Government is giving quality ECCE has also seen educational policies and standards becoming more devoted to the subject of ensuring positive children’s outcomes, especially in terms of their academic performances. For instance, a screening test called the Literacy and Numeracy Screenings (LINUS) programme has been introduced by the MOE in 2010 for children entering primary school, supported by aforementioned overarching rationale that increased participation in preschool education will heighten literacy and numeracy rate in Malaysia. The implementation of such screenings claims to reflect the MOE’s commitment to ensure each child will “master the basic skills after three years of his or her primary education” (Sani & Idris, 2013, p. 25). The LINUS screening process is shown in Figure 5.1:

Figure 5.1. The LINUS screening process. Reprinted from Improving student outcomes. Annual Report 2010 (p. 112), by Government Transformation Programme, 2010. Retrieved from <http://gtp.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/upload/78971400-f8d4-4956-a277-f77fde8bbd8c.pdf>. Copyright 2010 by Performance Management & Delivery Unit (PEMANDU).

According to this screening process, before a child can proceed from Primary 1 to Primary 2, he/she needs to go through 3 screenings every year. Failing the screening process results in the child being sent for medical assessment to see if the child has learning difficulties or special needs. In other words, children from Primary 1 to Primary 3, aged 7 to 9 years old, who have failed such a screening, based on their literacy and numeracy performances, may be branded as children with learning difficulties and/or be labelled as children with special needs.

The use of a national curriculum for preschool, *Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan* (KSPK), translated as the National Preschool Curriculum Standards, or NPCS, became compulsory in 2010 (CDD, 2007). The NPCS is reviewed every seven years. The newly revised version of NPCS will take effect in 2017 (*The Star Online*, 2016). Then in the following year, in 2011, the MOE initiated the National Preschool Quality Standards (NPQS) that defines a standardised national assessment instrument for pre-schoolers, which is used as a monitoring tool to gauge young children's progress in learning and development. These preschool assessment standards focus predominantly on academic achievements in the early years (CDD, 2007), and claim "to provide a continuum with primary school performance standards" (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014, p. 26). Measurement of preschool programme quality in Malaysia uses the National Preschool Quality Standard Instrument, which was first rolled out in 2013 to carry out assessments, inspections, monitoring and supervision activities (MOE, 2014). Standardised

assessments are carried out by recording and calculating scores for 5 defined dimensions of quality, which are said to be “the factors that affect learning and pupil development” (MOE, 2014, p. 7). The dimensions of quality consist of Quality of Governance, Quality of Teachers and Teaching Assistants, Quality of Curriculum, Quality of Preschool-Parent interaction, and Quality of Health, Nutrition and Safety (MOE, 2014).

A scoring/rating guideline is developed from a list of prescribed, objective and subjective quality indicators under each of these 5 dimensions (MOE, 2014). The objective quality indicators are defined by aspects “that can be observed, measured, assessed, and verified quickly and accurately” (MOE, 2014, p. 4), while the subjective indicators require lengthier period of observation, involving “measurement and assessment of subjective elements by referring to the score description guide for determining the adoption level of the relevant item” (MOE, 2014, p. 4).

Of the 5 dimensions, Quality of Curriculum accounts for the heaviest weightage in determining the quality of preschool with the most numbers of quality indicators. The majority of these indicators are based on the children’s academic performance. As shown in Table 5.1, out of the 14 items in the scoring table for Dimension of Quality of Curriculum (MOE, 2014, p. 8), eight of these scoring items (items no. 6 to 13) are based on academic performance.

Table 5.1

Scoring table for Dimension of Quality of Curriculum

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Note. Reprinted from *National preschool quality standard*, by Ministry of Education Malaysia, retrieved from https://smpk.moe.gov.my/muatturun/skpk/DOKUMEN%20SKPK_VERSI%20BI.pdf. Copyright 2014 by Inspectorate and Quality Assurance Ministry of Education Malaysia.

In short, the development and implementation of the ECCE curriculum – the NPCS – is in itself a quality assurance mechanism that sets out to monitor the development of preschool students through observations, and is heavily dependent on their performances in the six core learning areas prescribed in the NPCS (Profeta, 2012).

These initiatives focus on quality with an underlying belief that quality is a goal that education needs to achieve in order to bring about the country's economic progress, which has a theoretical framework that stems from the introduction to education of human capital theory in the 1960s (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004), and which sees education as an investment to ensure economic development. The key indicators of quality ECCE in Malaysia have to do with learner achievement (CDD, 2007), access to ECCE (Majzub, 2013), teachers' skills (Goh, 2012) and a conformity to

the developed country norm (Chiam, 2010). The concept of quality illustrated within the Malaysian context also has an underlying behaviourist framework, as identified in the work of Kumar and Sarangapani (2004), which assumes the possibility of making decontextualised, universal claims in relation to 'facts' or norms based on objective evaluation. That is, quality is often linked to observable behaviours, specific actions or outcomes in a form that can be assessed and measured, and that must comply with a certain norm, regardless of the circumstances or contexts in which these behaviours occur. For instance, what is emphasised in the assessment of ECCE quality is the collection of concrete, easily measured, numerical data. The quality of a preschool programme is translated into the amount of material/apparatus available, as well as into examination scores achieved by young students. In a wider sense, one of the measurements of the nation's progress is rendered by the expansion of preschool education, which in turn translates into the number of student enrolments in ECCE services (OECD, 2013). In a way, the Government's proof of effort in contributing to the nation's progress can be seen in this articulation of plans, projects, and programmes, followed by the setting up of various Government agencies and organisations that are responsible for the designing of large numbers of strategies, policies, and standards, said to provide guidelines for effective implementation of such plans and projects. In order to gauge effectiveness of these plans, measurement instruments are then developed to collect superficial data that indicates the success or failure of such effort.

Jones (2009) argues that most policies are written by organisations or institutions that do not have sufficient knowledge of the context that will be affected by the policies, creating power imbalances in the development of discourse. When it comes to discourses surrounding quality early childhood education, voices of the primary stakeholders (teachers and young children), the marginalised as well as the minority groups that have "the potential to inform policy with a grounded understanding of the problems they face" (Jones, 2009, p. 8) seldom feed into government policies or inform the development agencies. Instead, Hatch (2002) points out that there is a tendency to put higher and higher academic expectations on children at younger and younger age through the proliferation of standards for early childhood settings. In Malaysia, these expectations are pushed as far down into childcare programmes, and onto children as young as 0 to 4 years old. Rather than achieving educational advantages, which these rigid standards claim to have been designed for, young children are robbed of a truly fulfilling school experience while being subjected to academic pressure at a very young age. In turn, disallowing them to discover how much they can learn and how satisfying the process of learning can be (Hatch, 2002).

5.3 Quality ECCE and the ECCE profession in Malaysia

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has become caught in the tide of economic transformation along with the rest of the world. The Malaysian Government strongly believes that a skilled, innovative work force is needed to compete for economic advancement, and that the task of cultivating such work force falls on teachers. It has been decided that the country's ability to achieve economic competitiveness is dependent upon teacher quality (OECD, 2013). However, how is the quality

of ECCE professionals being measured when the country is emphasising young children's outcome as being the determinant of quality? This question will form the backdrop of the following section, which will explore the construction of the Malaysian ECCE profession under the various government developmental policies and quality standards.

In Malaysia, the ECCE sector is divided into two categories which are based on the age range of children for which the service is provided for. The provision of education for 0 to 4 year olds is the responsibility of childcare services, while the provision of education for 4 to 6 year olds is the responsibility of preschools. Ever since preschool was included in the Malaysian education system under the Education Act 1996, preschools and preschool educators have been regulated by the MOE. However, although childcare is under the jurisdiction of the MWFCD, and not considered as part of the education system, childcare staff are also subjected to quality standards developed by other government agencies, leading to their role becoming more or less similar to that of preschool teachers. For the rest of Chapter 5 and for ease of differentiating between these two categories of the early childhood educators in ECCE Malaysia, professionals working in preschool settings will be referred to as preschool teachers, while those working in childcare services will be referred to as childcare workers.

5.3.1 Teachers held accountable for poor education performance in Malaysia

According to the Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2014 report (OECD, 2014), Malaysia's march towards developed country status by 2020 has met a stumbling block. This stumbling block is associated with long-standing structural issues born out of the affirmative action policy that has been affecting the education system for decades, which in turn, have led to a shortage of skilled labourers (OECD, 2014), and furthermore produced the aforementioned brain drain (Khoo, 2015). In the same report, it has also shown that the educational attainment in Malaysia, according to its OECD's PISA scores, is significantly lower than both other OECD countries and the more advanced Asian economies (OECD, 2014). This lower level of education attainment has been linked to the slow introduction of human capital development; that its introduction has been much slower than is needed for a country which wishes to move into higher productivity in its manufacturing and services industries than the levels presently attained. Human capital development is considered to be critical to becoming a developed, high-income country. Weaknesses in teacher competencies and qualifications have been highlighted as factors contributing to this lower level of educational attainment (OECD, 2014), which in turn, have become a major obstacle to quality education in Malaysia (OECD, 2013).

Although, there are structural issues that detrimentally affect the Malaysian education system and the nation's development, the Malaysian Government seems to be convinced that the only way to reverse such a situation, is through the enhancement of teacher competence in the hope of raising education performance in Malaysia. In a way, teachers bare the full brunt of students' low

academic performances, and are considered to be directly responsible for the nation's unsatisfactory progress.

In order to improve the quality of the country's education system, priority has been given to improving teacher quality (Goh, 2012). This placing of teachers under the spotlight just as the Government is pursuing its ambition to make Malaysia a high-income nation, is reflected in language used in the Economic Transformation Programme Handbook (PEMANDU, 2013c), where it is reported that out of the 17 EPPs under the Education NKEA (Figure 4.2), two of the projects have specifically focused on raising teachers' quality (PEMANDU, 2013b):

EPP 2: Improving early childhood care and education (ECCE) training

The standard of ECCE teachers plays a crucial role in determining the quality of Malaysia's future generation. In response to the limited number of teachers in this segment who do not possess any formal qualification (93%), this EPP focuses on raising the standards of ECCE teachers through certification and training.

EPP 4: Expanding private teacher training

Malaysia aims to address the shortage of good teachers by developing high quality teachers, especially in critical subjects such as English, Bahasa Malaysia, Maths and Science

Despite the Government's efforts to elevate teacher quality, the quality of the teaching profession is still said to be deteriorating. The reason for this is students' proficiency in Mathematics and Science continues to rank low in the OECD rankings (Yap, 2015). This direct linking of teachers' competency with students' academic outcomes is a commonly accepted conception of teacher quality. Abdullah (2014) argues that teacher competence, in terms of knowledge and teaching skills, is a powerful means of fostering effective quality teachers, because of its relationship to student learning outcomes. In short, poor education performances directly reflected the teacher incompetency.

There have been various reasons that are said to have contributed to low teacher quality in Malaysia. For one, teaching is a profession of last resort and the entry requirements for joining the profession is lower compared to the entry requirements of other professions, and thus, it is not attracting the best people and people who have a passion for teaching (OECD, 2013). Mansor, Fisher, Rasul, Ibrahim and Yusoff (2012) suggest that the absence of character, sense of duty and passion in the profession are the main reasons for the deterioration in teacher quality in Malaysia. Furthermore, it is thought there is a lack of positive recognition of their profession by wider society (Nunis, 2015). Perhaps the most prominent reason of all is the insufficient selection process for suitable teacher candidates, the lack of training, and the inadequate monitoring and measuring of performance of teachers (Yap, 2015). It has been suggested that performance-

based contractual employment should be introduced in order to filter out teachers who are performing poorly, and thus encourage teachers to keep their teaching techniques and abilities sharpened (OECD, 2013).

5.3.2 The need to monitor and measure teachers' competence

Not only is teacher competency directly linked to creating world class students with excellent educational achievements, but is also “a basis by which potential international students can assess the quality of education in Malaysia” (Abdullah, 2014, p.1). What is more, it also becomes a predictive indicator of Malaysia's development as a nation. In striving to become a fully developed country that is competitive in the global economy, the Malaysian Government professes to take producing first class human resources seriously (Abdullah, 2014).

Amidst talk of elevating the quality of education in Malaysia, it has also been highlighted that there is a dire need of an overhaul of teaching staff's quality to face mounting standards of modern society. With these expectations, the MOE launched in 2009 a competency-based teacher standard – The *Standard Guru Malaysia* (SGM) or the Malaysian Teacher Standards (MTS). This teacher standard is subsumed within the Ministry's quality assurance initiatives, whereby, in order to be deemed competent all teachers in Malaysia are expected to achieve this teaching standard. (SEAMOE INNOTECH, 2010). MTS has been described as a “credible judgement on teacher competency” with the aim of improving teacher quality (Goh, 2013, p. 1). It is a guideline to measure teacher practice, and claims to serve as an early warning system for teachers to strengthen, improve and enhance their knowledge, skills and personality, and for them to develop professional values (Goh, 2012). The MTS are also for teachers themselves to measure what they are lacking, so as to become more sensitive to what areas they need to enhance and improve (Abdullah, 2014), and to become better at delivering quality education to their students.

The MTS (MOE, 2009) is presented in the form of a book divided into 2 sections. The “first section provides narrative descriptions of the rational [sic], the development and the conceptual framework of the standards... followed by the description of the three main content standards” (Goh, 2012, p. 77). Each of these content standards is further divided into 3 to 8 competencies. The second section of the book contains the 42-page questionnaire that teachers should use to gauge their teaching competencies. According to Goh (2012), this 42-page questionnaire really just comprises rhetorical statements that are not meant to elicit any answers, apart from spelling out the ambitious expectations that all teachers in Malaysia should comply with. Therefore, it is not surprising that there should be a large gap between competency statements about what a teacher is capable of doing in their role as a teacher and the actual enactment of doing it (Goh, 2012). This questionnaire contains over 200 items that need to be scored based upon a set of scales and the provided rubric. This does not allow teachers the opportunity to explain their actions or decisions, nor does it allow for the reality that good approaches to teaching and learning could take many forms (Goh, 2012). This measuring of teacher competencies is rendering

teachers as mere performers rather than reflective practitioners (Goh, 2013). Outlined in the MTS is ideological definitions of what 'good' teacher is and a series of metrics by which a teacher is judged. The metrics is usually derived from how well their students perform, often represented by grades recorded on academic report cards. However, these grades do not measure the intrinsic qualities of a teacher, such as their passions and professional values.

Similarly, when it comes to childcare workers for the 0 to 4 year olds, the childcare centre guidelines produced by the Companies Commission of Malaysia in 2010 has pointed out that staff performance is the key factor with respect to what constitutes high-quality care, and therefore must be monitored and evaluated (Companies Commission of Malaysia & UNICEF Malaysia, 2010). In the guideline, qualifications of childcare workers are not mandatory. It does however briefly mention that the childcare workers should be at least high-school graduates who have passed national examinations with a Malaysian Certificate of Education or *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), and have successfully attended the Basic Childcare Course accredited by the Department of Social Welfare. It was merely a suggestion that childcare workers should have at least a certificate or diploma, with no specification what this certificate or diploma is for (Companies Commission of Malaysia & UNICEF Malaysia, 2010):

...a minimum qualification of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) is required to work as a care provider, but it is suggested that the care provider should have at least a certificate or diploma. (p. 18)

Basically this implies that any high-school graduates are qualified as a childcare worker. Although this is the case, it is also asserted in the childcare centre guidelines that high level quality care is dependent on the childcare workers' performance in terms of their ability to maintain standards, and furthermore how competent they are in recording and evaluating young children. It is highlighted in Chapter 5 of the guideline that "A system to monitor and evaluate the services must be designed, and all staff must be trained to implement the system" (Companies Commission of Malaysia & UNICEF Malaysia, 2010, p. 22).

In summary, the competency measurement standards that decide the quality of a teacher reflect a belief that the quality of teachers can be improved by having their performance monitored with respect to hypothetical ideals of a high quality teacher. The aim of these monitoring and measuring of performance is said to guide teachers to develop such that they approach the ideal. In a broader sense, the ideal teacher is able to cultivate quality work force, which in turn lead to the country's economic growth and progress. The standards are all painted with ambitious and idealistic goals that must in turn be met by the early childhood educators. The evaluation of the early childhood educators' competencies is dictated by children's performances. The level of quality of performance of these educators is very much dependent upon how well they see to it that young children are meeting requirements that have been laid out in the so-called quality assurance system.

5.3.3 Early childhood educators as technicians

Under the Malaysian ETP, the Government encourages the privatisation of the ECCE sector, with the underlying belief that the quality of education will improve if it is forced to function in response to market pressures, (PEMANDU, 2013b). By subjecting ECCE to market forces of consumer choice, ECCE can thus be understood as a marketised commodity (Moss, 2006). Like other commodities that can be bought and sold in the market, the quality of ECCE is measured for its ability to satisfy a set of norms set out by the policy-makers. Malaysian teachers in general and educators in the ECCE sector in particular are then required to produce the specified objective outcomes, in “a detached and replicable way that excludes personal interpretation and feeling” (Moss, 2006, p. 35).

This talk of the practice of standardisation and the prescribing outcomes to ensure productiveness is what Moss (2006) believes to belong to the discourse of neo-liberal economics when partnered with politics. As can be seen in the rationale for Education NKEA in the ETP, assessment items in the teacher competency standards in the MTS and various policies and guidelines, the vocabulary used in the rationale have all been ‘hijacked’ by the same economic jargon used in market transactions (Massey, 2013), such as *demand* for world-class workforce, *production* of human *capital*, *effective* and *quality* teaching, *productive growth*, *value-added* education *services*, and so on. Politically, the Government is using the process of decentralising responsibility for ECCE services while imposing indirect control through introducing performance indicators, external inspections and quality assurance systems (Moss, 2006). In such a quality assurance regime, the quality of teachers and early childhood educators are determined by their ability to provide high standards of education and to produce a competitive workforce for the future (Abdullah, 2014). They are being monitored according to competency-based standards and assessed for their ability to maintain these standards.

Phelan (2010) believes that “the creation of prescriptive, outcome-based curricula and systems of accountability” (p. 319) have all worked strategically against the professionalisation of teachers. In fact, when comparing these competency standards and quality criteria expected of early childhood educators to the general job description for a manufacturing production technician, they are uncannily similar. The role of a manufacturing production technician as outlined by Recuitor.com (2017) is as follows:

...to ensure that a quality product is delivered quickly and according to safety, environmental, and health procedures and regulations... They inspect products to ensure quality, and may calibrate or adjust... settings in order to produce the desired product. (para. 1)

If this above definition is then compared to that provided in the *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, where “technician”, is explained as referring to individual who is “a specialist in the technical details of a subject of occupation” (“Technician”, 2017), preschool teachers and childcare workers in the ECCE sector are literally technicians who are specialists in their field,

trained with skills to carry out tasks expected of them. In other words, early childhood educators are trained technicians working in an education production line, as depicted in Figure 5.2:

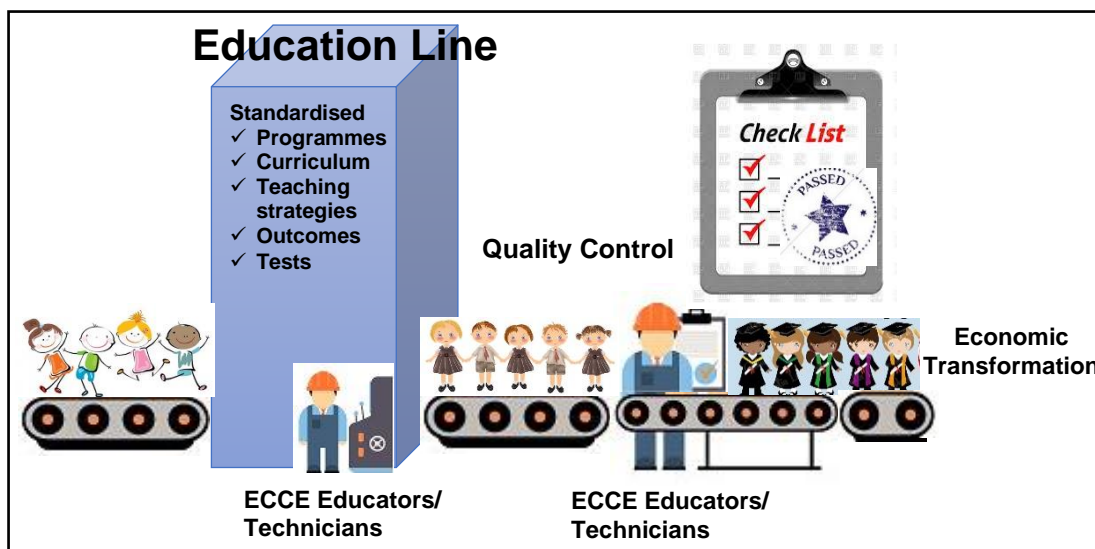


Figure 5.2. Education production line

In this education production line, early childhood educators or technicians (including both preschool teachers and childcare workers) are expected to work with a set of detailed and prescriptive curricula (e.g. National Preschool Curriculum Standards or PERMATA programme), practice guidelines (e.g. MTS) to regulate methods of working, while using standardised tests, checklists and observations as devices for monitoring and charting children's progress and performance through a hierarchy of prescribed outcomes, as well as measuring achievements against a narrow set of competencies or standardised outcome criteria (e.g. NPQS and PERMATA Negara Quality Assurance System).

The opportunities for early childhood educators to make professional decisions will have been reduced. Their competency or performances *per se*, are in turn, being assessed based on standardised curriculum delivery and teaching strategies, outcomes, and evaluation techniques, which further downgrade the ECCE profession from professional to technical status (Hatch, 2002). Vandenbroeck and Bouvern-de Bie (2006) get straight to the point when saying that the introduction of developmental observation instruments into childcare and preschool education have led to a construction of the early childhood educators as technicians.

All in all, ECCE is viewed as an industry, meaning its employees (i.e. early childhood educators), when adhering to industry-defined standards, and by having their competencies and technical abilities measured against nationally recognised benchmarks with highly prescriptive specifications of expected outcomes, contribute to achievement of certain national economic goals (Moss, 2006).

5.3.4 Social engineering and a diversion from ineffective governance?

Educational reforms that are prompted by economic transformation and driven by the Government's intention to reform the public sector, have seen a redistribution of responsibility away from central authorities to other new and diverse agencies (Ball, 2003). At the heart of the Education NKEA, is the government's intention to boost private sector participation in education, including the ECCE sector (PEMANDU, 2013b). This is what Ball (2003) refers to when he speaks about the process of substitution, where traditional public-sector actors are replaced with business enterprises, and where traditional public sector values are replaced by entrepreneurship. Government itself has become "a sort of enterprise whose task is to universalise competition and invent market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions" (Lemke, as cited in Limb, 2010, p. 6).

This redistribution of responsibility to different sites and diverse agencies has led to an increasingly diverse and unstable education policy community (Limb, 2010). In other words, there are a range of actors involved in shaping and delivering education policies. On top of that, the rapid changing of policies and numerous add-on criteria by policy makers are constantly sending mixed messages about what makes high standards (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014). That is, certain requirements may be considered to be essential under one ministry, but could change or become completely obsolete under a different ministry or after a change of minister. This leads to governance complexity, with the policy domain crowded with differing governance arrangements, policy prescriptions, and participants (Limb, 2010). The process of implementing policies ends up producing a situation where policies bump up against and even competing with one another to cause overlaps and confusion (Limb, 2010).

This confusion in the policy domain, as described by Limb (2010), was reported in the Malaysia Education Policy Review by UNESCO in 2013:

Coordination within and between the different Ministers that are involved in education, as well as collaboration between public and private sectors, was identified as one of the cross-cutting issues. This circumstance is visible both across and within Ministries, and appears to be affecting the integrity and effectiveness of policy design as well as implementation. (p. 17)

Standards in the regulations are said to be useful tools that guide early childhood educator practices (Fenech, 2006). Teacher competency standards serve as an empowerment of early childhood educators, allowing them to evaluate their own growth and progress, and also as an early warning system for improvement (Goh, 2012). But rather than enhancing early childhood educators' competency, these accountability systems are creating a compliant workforce that is expected to adhere to an externally imposed, rigid system of measurement (Osgood, 2006), and are subjected to prescriptive ways of working without the need to engage in multifaceted decision-making processes (Fenech, 2006). A supposedly complex profession that is not only driven by passion, care and commitment to serve, but that is also doused with daily challenges and

difficulties that are never constant, has therefore been reduced to a mere technical list of required actions and behaviours. Knowledge acquisition under such a regulatory climate that values standardisation and normalisation, is then merely “a process of reproduction through... a form of linear progression... towards predefined outcomes” (Moss, 2006, p. 35). Inevitably, as a consequence of being managed according to ideological notions of quality and competency, early childhood educators can be said to experience greatly reduced autonomy in their practice. A large portion of their workload has an emphasis on technical competence and performativity, which are assessed against certain norms drawn up in the policies (Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2006).

Osgood (2006) asserts that policy documents act as normalising technologies, or a model of social engineering, upon which authorities or government departments and agencies regulate and control the early childhood profession through the use of objective codification and its standards agenda. The justification for the need to regulate and control thus stems from the need to construct and make the general public aware of a ‘crisis in education’, which in turn, brings forward the need to monitor and standardise (Osgood, 2006). This is clearly seen in Malaysia, where early childhood educators are widely presented as the cause of the nation’s deteriorating education performance, which has the effect of legitimising the necessity for their work to be accountable, performant and conformant to standards.

This talk of identification of risks and the use of regulation as a means of quality assurance, stem from a causality paradigm which functions on the assumption that there is a secure relationship between the intervention and its outcomes (Urban, 2008). This is a simplistic way of seeing things that are merely the product of cause and effect. In Malaysia, the propagation of popular discourse on the incompetencies of educators as the cause of poor student performance, and which later leads to social problems and set-backs in the country’s economic development, has nurtured an inevitable need for the Government to allocate and spend money on setting up more government agencies and taskforces to promote evidence-based practices and develop outcome-based standards. This can be seen to be true, simply by looking at the subdivisions that exist in the MOE. One can see that under this one ministry, there are 37 different divisions, all of which share a somewhat similar function to ‘plan, manage, coordinate, implement and monitor’ various education related initiatives while at the same time functioning under different denominations, according to a broad scope of influence and different aims across multiple areas in education (MOE, 2016).

There is a lack of clarity about the education system as ministers of these different departments within their ministries take charge of, what Paton (2008) calls, “a muddle of different aims” (para. 10). On the surface, it seems like the Government is making a comprehensive effort to reform the Malaysian education system, but in actuality, all there is, is just a whole plethora of hazy goals and vague talks about improving the quality of education and educators, about becoming competitive globally, and about becoming a high-income nation. The Government maintains unrealistic expectations of what early childhood education can achieve, and of the children and educators’ role in creating an ideal society which matches that of a rich and developed nation. This can be clearly seen in the *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025* (MOE, 2013), which

blatantly linked “early childhood education to increased lifetime earnings and other beneficial life outcomes” (p. 7-4). Referring to Paton (2008), this approach is a form of social engineering, where ministers manipulate the education system for the purpose of solving all social issues and regulating future development and behaviour of the society; placing educators in the position to implement national standards that promote uniformity with the “ubiquitous insistence on rubrics that serve to manipulate every educational activity, driven by de-personalised bureaucratic mechanisms and rules” (Ludwig, 2016, para. 8), which is exactly the case in the Malaysian ECCE sector.

On the one hand, it is a governmental tactic that the Government sets out to fulfil their own interests rather than to go through the motions of exhausting an allocated budget for genuine betterment of education experiences of our youngest citizens. On the other hand, it is a Government’s reaction to accusations of poor management of societal risks, and that the country under their leadership is failing to achieve its ambitious ‘Malaysian dream’ of becoming a fully developed nation by 2020, which is now less than 3 years away. To save face, instead of focusing on the primary risks embodied in their formal mission, the Government is intensifying efforts to manage institutional risks, by positioning the conduct and competency of early childhood educators as a potential problem that needs pre-emptive action. Fenech et al. (2008) see this sort of practice as involving a transfer of risk-responsibility from government bodies to individual centres and educators by inferring that early childhood educators cannot be trusted to provide high quality care without regulation. This not only leads to a general public belief that the ECCE profession operates according to low standards, but it also leads to teachers believing that they lack respect and recognition (Nunis, 2015). In such complex environment, the ECCE profession, which was never really considered to be of high status in the first place when compared to other professions in Malaysia, has been further destabilised. By having their profession, and their passion and conviction constantly judged and scrutinised according to endless sets of rigid standards that emphasise test scores, and measurable and predictable outcomes, early childhood educators are being de-professionalised (Dinkelman, 2011; Phelan, 2010).

6.0 Discussion and implications

6.1 Overview

Expectations on children in Malaysia to be literate and to be ready for school at a younger and younger age are widespread. Some children as young as four years old or even three (Capel, 2012) are expected to excel in their academic performances; an expectation that overshadows children's innate desire to understand themselves, to explore, discover and make sense of the world that they live in (Archon, 2012). ECCE has generally become a site to prepare young children as early as possible, whether they are ready or not, for schooling via a structured and restrictive curriculum that expects them to perform according to a list of prescriptive outcomes (Capel, 2012). This thesis is an attempt to take a critical stance in exploring the driving force behind this phenomenon and aims to understand: 1. how the concept of 'quality' is constructed in ECCE Malaysia 2. how 'quality' is being interpreted in the educational policies and standards, and 3. how this influences the construction of Malaysia's ECCE profession.

An analysis of the dominant discourse on quality ECCE in Malaysia was done by examining various related writings from official sources. This discourse analysis draws on Michel Foucault's definition of discourse, as discussed in Chapter 2, which is seen as a manifestation of power that constitutes particular social realities in ways that privilege discourses promoted by the mainstream (Pinkus, 1996). This thesis does not aim to express the definitive truth on the questions posed but is rather an attempt to discern what has become unreasonable, in the view of the researcher, within a certain discursive location (Hook, 2001).

The discussion in Chapters 3 to 6 is structured around a five-stage framework outlined by Chouliaraki and Fairclough in 1999 (as cited in Thomas, 2005), which has since been simplified by Thomas in her research. Derived from Thomas' (2005) more simplified version of the aforementioned framework, the thesis discussion is structured into four stages. The first stage of the framework begins with exploring the conception of quality ECCE in a review of the literature (see Chapter 3). From there the discussion moves on to identifying the discourse-related problem of quality ECCE. The function of the second stage of the project is to understand how this discourse-related problem arises in social life. In this phase, an overview of the historical, political and economic facets of the Malaysian context is studied (see Chapter 4). Then in Chapter 5, the discourse analysis is separated into discussions that examine the Macro and Micro levels of the Malaysian context, with the aim of "describ[ing]... and explain[ing] the relationships between the texts, social practices, and society-wide processes" (Rogers, 2008, p. 56). The analysis on the Macro level focuses on political and economic development, and how these developments set the scene for the Malaysian education system and the construction of quality ECCE. Next, an analysis on the Micro level is made, drawing on various writings and texts that focus on the Malaysian education system and ECCE. The third stage of the framework then makes the connection between the Macro and Micro levels of understanding. In stages two and three, the study attempted to investigate the construction of quality ECCE in Malaysia, how 'quality' is interpreted and who benefits most for the way quality ECCE is constructed, while examining the

construction of Malaysia's ECCE profession as a project under such construction. The fourth stage of the discussion examines the research realised and its possible implications for the education system in Malaysia, which is the subject of what follows in this chapter.

6.2 'Quality' and ECCE Malaysia

Like many developing countries, the dominant discourse on quality ECCE that currently shapes and moulds the ECCE sector in Malaysia tends to take a universalising approach to children. That is, an approach with an underlying assumption that see the characteristics of how children learn to be the same regardless of their abilities, cultural backgrounds, and values (Majzub, 2013). There is also an implication that all young children should attend ECCE or risk being left behind (Majzub, 2013), and furthermore that all children's vocational outcomes should take precedence over their values and personality development (UNESCO, 2013). This means accessibility becomes an indicative factor for good quality (Education for All, 2015; Majzub, 2013; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012), regardless of other factors, like poverty, children from disadvantaged situations, effectiveness and relevance of education, that might have more pressing effect on young children's education (UNESCO, 2013).

Another universalising approach to children is the 'risk-prevention' rationale, which underpins Malaysian ECCE policy and the ECCE quality assurance regulations. This talk of managing risk via regulation stems from a causality paradigm which presumes that there is a secure relationship between the intervention and its outcomes (Urban, 2008). Simultaneously, the 'risk-prevention' rationale positions all young children as passive, vulnerable and at risk, as if they should be understood as posing a danger to their own well-being and development (Woodhead, 2006). This rationale also argues that these children are potential contributors to future societal risks that may result in inhibiting the country from achieving its developmental goals (Kamerman, 2006). To eliminate such risks, quality standards have been enforced by national education policies as means of guaranteeing continuous economic progress and development (Meier & Kroll, 2015). For instance, in the discussion, in Chapter 4, on the economic history of Malaysia after independence, education has been pin-pointed as the key factor for advancement of economic progress (Drabble, 2004), a key factor of overcoming the severe shortage of skilled professionals (Thomas White International, 2014), and as a cost-effective way to poverty reduction (Kamerman, 2006). With this objective in mind, government initiatives to expand ECCE through one of the National Key Result Areas have introduced minimum standards to improve quality of preschools as well as early childcare (PEMANDU, 2011b). These initiatives use the increased of number of preschool classes and preschool enrolments as proof of good governance and the Government's continuous success in fulfilling its policy objectives (Ng, 2010). Accessibility to ECCE has been recognised as an indicator of good quality (Education for All, 2015) because high enrolment to ECCE matches the developed country norm (Chiam, 2010).

However, Ng (2010) continues to argue that what these numbers do not show is the on-going high absenteeism and dropout rate of both children living in poverty (UNESCO, 2013) and indigenous children living in remote rural areas (Ng, 2010). Furthermore, these numbers do not address the questions related to whether or not standardised national education policies and programmes are culturally sensitive to meet these children's needs, whether or not the standards of teaching and learning are meaningful to the children, and whether or not the education standards and policies fit with the way of life of these indigenous children.

6.2.1 Children living in poverty and indigenous children in Malaysia

There are two categories of poverty in Malaysia, namely the extreme poverty and poor (Jala, 2015). Households which are not earning enough to satisfy basic needs fall into the extreme poverty category, while those who cannot afford to maintain a basic standard of living, like affording healthcare and education, are defined as poor (Jala, 2015). Based on the research by United Nations Malaysia (2016), Malaysia's poverty has predominantly been a rural phenomenon, and "majority of poor rural households are in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors" (p. 18). In Malaysia, many of the *Orang Asli*, or the indigenous people, are still leading a nomadic life in the remote rural and interior areas of the country (Ng, 2010). Many of the indigenous children "either do not go to school or dropped out from school during their primary school years" (Ng, 2010, p. 49). The indigenous people have higher poverty rates compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia, with almost 34% of indigenous households falling under the poor category (United Nations Malaysia, 2016), thus making the indigenous community one of the poorest in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2016).

For the past 40 years, poverty eradication has been an objective on the Malaysian Government's agenda for the purpose of pursuing greater economic growth (Drabble, 2004). From the implementation of NEP in 1970, with its socioeconomic affirmative action plan (Zubedy, 2012), and the later ETP in 2010, with its various initiatives and projects that set out to move Malaysia towards becoming a high-income nation (PEMANDU, 2011c), education has been identified as one of the key factors influencing poverty rates in Malaysia. The reason being is that it is believed that "through education children in poor communities will stand a better chance to get better jobs or get into business" (Jala, 2015, para. 15). ECCE has been identified as the most cost-effective way to poverty reduction (Kamerman, 2006). For this reason, education has become an indispensable area of focus for policy-makers, as can be seen in all government initiatives related to economic transformation and national development.

According to UNICEF (2011), "Malaysia has invested in providing proper infrastructure to ensure access to schools" since 1970 (para. 3). Since the 1990s, preschools operated by the MOE, KEMAS and PERPADUAN have been set up to cater to the needs of indigenous children, while NGOs or local communities have been providing some form of preschool education in remote areas, where there is no preschool (Ng, 2010). The number of indigenous children attending

preschool saw a sudden increase in 2003 (Ng, 2010) when more preschools were built following the nationwide roll-out of the MOE preschool project (CDD, 2007).

However, merely providing physical facilities in the form of preschool classrooms is not doing enough to address the existing high absenteeism and dropout rate of indigenous children (Ng, 2010). There are several factors that have been directly linked to the cause of absenteeism and dropouts. Ng (2010) has pointed out that the physical distance to schools and the policy of no hostel for preschoolers are key reasons. Another factor is that indigenous children only attend school when the seasonal nature of their household chores allows it (UNICEF, 2011). The lack of culturally sensitive programmes (UNICEF, 2011), coupled with the ignorance of parents about the value of education, as well as their concerns about their children losing their indigenous cultural identities (Ng, 2010) have also deterred children from enrolling and completing their education. Other crucial factors include the lack of basic facilities such as clean water, electricity and telephone lines in the remote areas, while “rural schools sometimes face shortages of qualified teachers” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 5).

Government efforts to expand preschool education through policy development and the implementation of new standards have been successful in terms of building more preschools and increasing the numbers enrolled (Ng, 2010; UNESCO, 2013), however, there is still room to address the more pressing needs of indigenous people. In terms of curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning, there is the need to consider methods that are culturally sensitive, meaningful, such that education is adapted to the way of life of indigenous children, so that their interest in learning is genuinely nurtured and so that the motivation to complete their schooling is embedded (Meier & Kroll, 2015).

6.2.2 Good governance?

According to the Malaysia Education Policy Review (UNESCO, 2013), measurement of quality of the Malaysian education system “refers to the conditions that shape actual teaching and learning in the classroom” (p. 5). In Malaysia, this means quality refers to the number of instructional hours students receive in school – data which is said to be comparable to many developed countries. When it comes to measuring efficiency, “expenditure in education is used to provide insight to the efficiency of the education system” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 6). In Malaysia, public expenditure on education is higher than that of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, but this high expenditure does not necessarily translate into high level student performances while dropout rates for indigenous children are still significantly higher in rural schools than they are in urban schools (UNESCO, 2013. UNICEF, 2011).

The NPCS, which was prepared by the MOE, was mandated by Education Act 1996 to be used in all preschools in Malaysia, including private preschools. Failing to comply, risks having the institution’s private preschool license withdrawn (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). By mandating the

use of NPCS, policy makers have insisted that they have played their part in clearly and systematically disseminating information concerning the policy, as every preschool has a copy of the NPCS document (Ng, 2010). However, the ECCE policy Implementation Review in 2007 (CDD, 2007) reported that preschools may possess the curriculum document, but their actual practice does not fully adhere to the policy. That is, teachers do not fully utilise the NPCS in their daily teaching. Furthermore, a portion of privately run preschools exhibit a lack of understanding in the NPCS years after its introduction. Some private ECCE providers even believe that the effectiveness of enforcement is so low that “they could not be bothered with laws and regulations” (Ng, 2010, p. 55). This non-adherence has reflected negatively on the Government in terms of their efficiency and ‘good governance’, since good governance means successful implementation and effective dissemination of policies (Ng, 2010). The policy makers have attributed this non-adherence to a lack of efficient monitoring systems, as well as teachers’ lack of knowledge and competency (Ng, 2010). Thus, as has been discussed in Chapter 5, different government implementing agencies are formed to come up with various evaluative and monitoring systems to collect data in forms of test results and checklists so that they can tie adherence to the plethora of prescriptive outcome-based standards (Ng, 2010).

However, various policy reviews, namely the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Implementation Review (CDD, 2007), Malaysia Education Policy Review (UNESCO, 2013), the National Institute of Educational Policy Research (NIER) report on ECCE in Malaysia (Rowther, 2009), have all pointed out that there is an apparent lack of coordination between various implementing governmental agencies (Rowther, 2009). This, in turn, has led to much confusion for and obstruction by ECCE stakeholders when it comes to accessing the latest information (CDD, 2007). Government expenditure that were meant to serve and benefit the youngest citizens of Malaysia, are used for setting up of government departments and designing of standards instead, which could end up being a mere “wastage of manpower and funding” (Rowther, 2009, p.52) on account of the lack of coordination between authorities and stakeholders.

Overall, the entire education industry in Malaysia is “erratic, weakly institutionalised and disintegrated and, if anything at all, poorly regulated” (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2016, p. 150). As such, there is a lot of room for improvement in Malaysian education system in terms of equity and effectiveness, and there is also space for further strengthening of its capacity to be efficient (UNESCO, 2013). If ECCE in Malaysia are to achieve the national aspiration of empowering children to develop holistically to their potential by enabling them to achieve high levels of personal wellbeing as well as making positive contributions to the nation (Nor, n.d.), then the task at hand will need to involve better governance so as to ensure more effective dissemination of policies (Ng, 2010), without compromising its capacity to be sensitive towards the disadvantaged (Rowther, 2009).

6.3 ‘Quality’ and the changing perception of education

Just as Moss and Dahlberg (2008) have asserted that the concept of universal and measurable quality in the early childhood sector has been subjected to increased criticism since the early-1990s, the review report on regional and national progress in relation to the application of the Education For All (EFA) goals and targets in Asia-Pacific region, also showed that the term ‘quality’ has become a hot subject of debate in the education sector, especially in ECCE (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). According to the EFA report, although quality is a multi-dimensional construct that includes programme features, sound infrastructure, and hands-on experience for the children in ECCE, the general agreement is that ECCE quality refers to “components of the environment that are related to positive child outcomes in the academic and social domains” (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 27). Traditionally, quality has principally referred to structured, centre-based preschool programmes that are assessed according to Western benchmarks that, in turn, are predominantly derived from research done in non-Asian contexts (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). Practices in relation to such benchmarks often see the young child as an individual agent in his/her own development. This growing notion of individualism that constitutes how we think about the child is seeping into broader beliefs of the local community in Malaysia. This is not so much to do with how the child is being socialised for an experience of independence, but has more to do with rewiring the way successes, failures and education are being perceived. The talk about producing future human resources that are thought to be necessary for the country’s advancement, and the talk about preparation for future living has overtaken the current needs of our young citizens, such that the view that education is a process of living has been side-lined. The idea that children learn continuously about life and inevitably acquire the necessary skills for living – an influential pedagogic creed by John Dewey (Dewey, 1897) is an idea that is neglected in contemporary policy development.

There are concerns that the emphasis on the acquisition of a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions based on a decontextualised theoretical framework, such as the Western notion of developmentally appropriate practices or ‘best practice’, and ‘quality’, is not conducive to creating the best ECCE services for local children. The reason is that Western frameworks do not necessarily fit well in non-Western communities (Tobin, 2005), like those that populate Malaysian society, in terms of their ineffectiveness in matching the “natural learning strategies of young children” in the local context (OECD, 2006, p. 13).

6.3.1 Individualism vs. Collectivism in Malaysian education

Malaysian ECCE policies, programmes and curriculum design have been supported by Euro-western research and developmental psychology (Abdullah, 2009), promoting ‘whole child’ development (Yunus, 2013) in terms of physical and aesthetic, cognitive, socio-emotional, language, moral and values development as well as in terms of creative development (MOE, 2014). However, as discussed in Chapter 3, what is considered to be ‘best practice’ – essentially,

valuing child-centredness – is an individualistic approach that encourages independence in young children (Fleer, 2003). Furthermore, it is something that Walsh et al. (2010) refer to as practices rooted in 'Western' values that emphasise socialising approaches that value independence and separation (Woodhead, 2006). Further fuelled by a market dynamic that encourages competition, there is a growing emphasis on individual responsibility and eliminating the concept of community (Matinez & Garcia, 1996). This can be seen in the discussion in Chapter 5, and in Malaysia's various development plans and programmes that give emphasis to improving its economic competitiveness on the global stage. The purpose of education within these plans is to produce high academic performers who are innovative and can think critically, such that they can compete globally in terms of human capital development (PEMANDU, 2013b). In short, these approaches, according to Shulruf, Hattie, and Dixon (2011), value independence, self-knowledge, critical thinking and competitiveness, which are all features of individualism, which may be a challenge to completely adopt into a collectivist society like Malaysia's.

Malaysia is a multi-racial and a collectivist country (Ayob, 2012), which stresses interdependence, values interpersonal relationships within their social context, and prefers agreeableness and harmony (Aktas, 2012). Collectivist cultures emphasise the importance of the collective rather than the importance of individuals, in that priorities are given to group goals (Ayob, 2012). In a collectivist society, there is a strong sense of duty to the group, long-term commitment and responsibility towards fellow members of the group, and relationships are often family centric and community-oriented (Ayob, 2012; Shulruf et al., 2011). When it comes to the value of the social unit, it is the community and the family that is seen as having more meaning or value than individuals, and loyalty is paramount and can sometimes override other societal rules and regulations (Ayob, 2012).

In terms of education in a collectivist community, collectivistic students do not voluntarily speak up and must be prompted by the teacher. They also tend to avoid disagreement to maintain harmony within the group (Luo, Sun, & Strobel, 2013). Because of their interdependence, learning is a less self-involved activity; students in collectivistic culture generally preferring teachers to transfer knowledge in a clear, structured, and direct manner (Kaur & Noman, 2015), rather than leaving them to discover it for themselves. Aktas (2012) states that collectivist individuals prefer to learn by observation rather than taking risks and depending on their self. Working with peers and providing assistance is valued in collectivist cultures over independent work, and speaking up in class is not the norm in a collectivistic classroom.

According to Kaur and Noman (2015), educational reforms that emphasise Western notions of modern teaching and learning innovations have, to a large extent, ignored the cultures, beliefs, and norms in the local context. This means the actual forces that affect the teaching practices are alien to the local culture. Kaur and Noman (2015) believe that this caused a "disjuncture between these innovations and their implementation" (p. 1794) in societies that are collectivist in nature. This can be seen in the previous comparison of individualist and collectivist approaches in education. Meier and Kroll (2015) also state that by implementing approaches that value independence and separation, as well as importing and practices that may not fit with both the

local context and children's natural learning styles, risks "wiping out approaches characteristic of particular cultures... [and] diversity in approaches to early childhood education" (p. xi), which in turn may result in undermining children's well-being, their genuine interest to learn, their self-confidence, and motivation to further and/or complete their schooling.

6.4 Education and politics

Although Western individualism has its influences on Malaysian education policies and programmes, it is not the main factor responsible for the 'wiping out' of diverse approaches to education in Malaysia. Rather, as referred to in the discussion in Chapter 4 on the history of Malaysia, it is the underlying political objectives which drive Malaysian education reforms and policy changes that have impacted most on education in Malaysia. Just as Rudner (1977) has stated, education in Malaysia is instrumentally related to political objectives.

Malaysia's political parties often gain support from distinct ethnic communities (Library of Congress, 2006). The most powerful, ruling political party in Malaysia – the UMNO – with a majority of its members being ethnic Malays, has dominated the country since independence (Library of Congress, 2006). UMNO is also "the primary organisation for protecting and promoting Malay interests" (Mauzy, 2006, p. 49). The regulations and policies articulated by the political party, with Malay elites who believed that "a political system that offered a common citizenship and equal political rights for all would destroy the Malay race and unjustly strip Malays of their inherent rights as the historical community" (Mauzy, 2006, p. 49), tend to stir unrest and stoke outrage for short term political gain, which then has the effect of dividing the Malays from non-Malays (Mauzy, 2006). Preferential policies for the majority Malays were deemed necessary to preserve Malay 'special rights' and to assist them in gaining an equal economic footing with other communities (Brown, 2007; Mauzy, 2006).

According to Mauzy (2006), the most prominent form of the assertion of Malay hegemony was the elaborate NEP, launched in 1970 and designed to redistribute wealth in the country with active government assistance. The NEP aimed for the *Bumiputras* to own and control at least 30 percent of all commercial and industrial enterprises. The NEP has left its marks in almost all policies and regulations that came after it and has continued to serve as the underlying framework for drafting of new policies, in favour of the ethnic Malays through positive discrimination (Lee, 1997). Preferential policies are also applied to education, namely, the establishment of ethnic-quotas in university enrolments and government scholarships, notwithstanding the most controversial of all: language policy in the Malaysian education system (Yunus, 2013), as discussed in Chapter 5.

6.4.1 The language policies

Education in Malaysia is promoted as a nation-building tool that inculcate patriotism and eradicate economic disparities between races, while at the same time, it “is used as a tool for the promotion of ethnic Malay interests” (Brown, 2007, p. 318). For instance, the controversial language politics in the 1960s, relating to government policies in public education attempted to make Malay the sole language of instruction in public schools (Rudner, 1977), attempted to the claim that a common language is the way to unite people and to promote national identify (Lee, 1997). In short, diversity is a threat to unity. As detailed in Chapter 5, these changes of language policy regarding the medium of instruction in all national school subjects (Yunus, 2013) has continued to revert back and forth well into the 2000s from English to the Malay language (Tharmalingam, 2012).

Major decisions with regards to language policy in the education system have reflected the Government’s attempt to advance the economic interests of the Malays (Jamil & Raman, 2012). This approach is masked by the claim that it upholds the national language – *Bahasa Melayu* or Malay language – “as a language for national unity, as well as language of knowledge” (Azman, 2016, p. 67). The decision to reduce the standard of English in the country was later rethought because English was finally acknowledged to be an important medium in the commercial sector (Lee, 1997). However, the deteriorating competence in English, especially among *Bumiputras* (Yamaguchi & Deterding, 2016), has not helped with the overall economic advancement, leaving the Government to call for the need to re-emphasise and strengthen English language proficiency (Tharmalingam, 2012). Maths and Science were also taught in English in 2003 but had this scenario reverted to *Bahasa Melayu* in 2012 because, despite the change of medium of instruction, the academic achievement of non-*Bumiputra* students still outperformed the *Bumiputras* in general (Saw, 2016).

The Government decided to reverse the language of instruction, claiming that collective fear of losing their languages negatively affected the confidence of the multilingual ethnic groups (mainly the Malays). (Azman, 2016). Ironically, such a claim did not seem to take other ethnic groups’ concerns into consideration (Kuppusamy, 2006), thus, as a consequence, there is increased racial tension, as opposed to the inter-ethnic harmony, which education is supposed to promote (Brown, 2007; Kuppusamy, 2006). Comprehensibly, the policy-makers’ attempt to control over instructional language in education and pushing for language uniformity in the name of unity, is really doing the opposite and is wiping out diversity in Malaysian education.

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6.5 Implications

If education is to be in the service of building up a nation, then the emphasis on education should be “on examining and building on existing understandings and practices that are contextually relevant and culturally meaningful” (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012, p. 28). Quality in education and

the ECCE sector in Malaysia should resonate with the goals of building peace, real acceptance and unity, as has been illustrated in the National Education Philosophy – in which the focus of education is in developing well-rounded citizens who are essential in contributing to the harmony and well-being of family, society and the nation. Quality in ECCE should address all levels – the Macro and the Micro, including collaborations between relevant ministries and stakeholders, provide support channels for teachers and families, learning experiences that involve children's voices and consideration of their needs, and not just test scores and standardised behaviours.

6.5.1 Education should not be used for cultivating an unhealthy competitiveness that divides the Malaysian people

As in the case of Malaysia, “positive discrimination” for the Malays has tipped the balance, which benefits no one but those in political power. For the *Bumiputras*, both continuous dependency on the Government and entitlement to privilege have contributed to a complacency, which can be seen in the lack of dedication to education and work among the Malays (Mahathir, 1999). After all, why is there the need to make extra effort when opportunities are guaranteed and can be taken for granted? On the other hand, non-Malays have been deprived of the chance to contribute to the country as a consequence of limited opportunities, and subsequently a brain drain to other countries has developed (Khoo, 2015; Sukumaran, 2017). Ironically, the Government continues to magnify the fact the NEP has secured *Bumiputras*' lifetime employment, the opportunity to be educated, while saving them from the threat of having opportunities taken away from them by Others, i.e. the minority races (Chinese, Indians), and in this way the NEP legacy lives on. Under the glorified notion of unity and equity, the Government invents an enemy in the form of the non-Malays, the Others, while averting the gaze of the people that objectifies the Government's role in contributing to this complacency. Evidently, their intention is to gain full political control by snuffing out opposing voices. Instead of striving for the nation's development, government policies shrouded with apartheid are driving people away and apart with growing resentment, reluctance to understand, and prejudice.

6.5.2 Education should not be a money-making enterprise for business corporations

Education is a multi-billion-dollars industry that can always be created with an endless stream of taxpayer's money. The Government and private education companies are well aware of this, and have worked together in channelling millions of dollars into lobbying efforts and focusing on accountability, whereby rules and policies are enforced, and national standards are put in place. Education reforms with the intention of increasing private investments in education, including ECCE, are rationalised with the idea that by subjecting education to market forces these reforms will drive improvement in quality in both education and ECCE services (PEMANDU, 2013b). In a business model where quality and accountability are emphasised, the only way to address

accountability is through standardised testing, standardised rubrics and checklists of prescribed results (Katz, 2014). These standardised test data have been used to prove schools, teachers and students are not performing satisfactorily. As such, teachers and students have been used in political rhetoric to sensationalise the education system as one being in crisis (Katz, 2014), not to mention 'at risk' young children (Osgood, 2006). Therefore, the solution points to the need for new resources, training, accountability systems, new programmes etc. These needs are created by education companies that are constantly perpetuating a business model that relies on its production of a picture of failure, of society at risks. Claiming they have the solution to these failures, these education companies use policy and legislation to sell their programmes and evaluation standards (Katz, 2014). This can clearly be seen when looking at the rationale behind Malaysia's education reforms. Education is included in ETP, not only it is seen as a key to economic advancement, it is also a source of profit when it is referred to as one of the key economic areas, the NKEAs. ECCE policies with rationales that support the imperatives of having standards put in place for quality control. New programmes like PERMATA being developed, and standardised curriculum enforced, claiming to be solutions for social crisis.

There is a plethora of ECCE policies in Malaysia, put in place by various Ministries and multiple bureaucracies. However, there is an absence of sound consultation and coordination within and between different ministries and organisations, resulting in incoherent policy-making and duplicated policies (UNESCO, 2013). What Malaysia needs is not spending more taxpayer's money on developing more programmes, new measuring systems, creating more policies and rules to make sure students measure up to a set of narrowly defined outcomes, where their performances and productivity are measured according to arbitrary standards. The task is to get resource more directly to the children, and to use the allocated funds for education on the primary stakeholders in education – the students. This is where accountability should be focused: on the "ethical commitment to do what is right for every child" (Hatch, 2002, p. 461).

6.5.3 Reorienting narratives in education towards students

The continuous attempt to compare education to business has side-tracked what truly matters in education – students. Non-cognitive factors like character and integrity, which are realistic predictors of student achievement and true success (Katz, 2014) have continued to be ignored and reduced to superficial items on checklists. Cross-cutting issues like equality, equity and poverty are weakening the efficiency and effectiveness of Malaysia's education system, with a domino effect of hindering further improvements, but these too are not accounted for when it comes to accountability. In fact, according to the Malaysian education policy review, done by UNESCO in 2013, weaknesses in the curricula, policies, and assessment prevent equitable educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2013). Narratives in education are all about test scores, curriculums, measuring performances without paying attention to our students' needs and abilities, or without considering the non-tangible characteristics that enable them to succeed when it comes to accountability. If Malaysia is to improve both effectiveness and efficiency in education,

then it is high time we reorient the education system away from a fixation on vocational outcomes to one that promotes the rights of all children – so that they have their needs met, their participation valued and their voices heard. Narratives need to focus on building positive relationships, assisting and supporting children in finding their space in the world, rather than on presuming children to be lifeless commodities that must meet standards.

6.5.4 Make teaching a profession, not a ‘last resort’

The low entry requirements for teacher education, especially in ECCE, have created an image that teaching is an easy job and anyone can do it (OECD, 2013). Not only is teaching not a well-respected job, the majority of Malaysian teachers do not take pride in the profession themselves (Nunis, 2015). Worse still, there have been growing numbers of teachers who have been taken from the ranks of unemployed graduates as a consequence of the more relaxed requirement to teach, while others who do not qualify for other professions, chose to enter the teacher profession as their last career option, since the entry requirement is so low (Yap, 2015). The teaching profession in Malaysia needs to attract people who are creative, willing to innovate and with the passion and commitment to work alongside students in their growth. Teacher education in Malaysia should have a better selection process if it is to attract suitable candidates to joining the profession. Furthermore, it should have a character screening process to ensure that there will be high standards of conduct when working with children.

Teacher education needs to focus on optimising teachers’ talents and their ability to put knowledge into practice that is relevant and makes sense in the local context, and in so doing help students to get what they need to find their place in both society and the economy, instead of focusing on accountability, standardised testing, and school-readiness. Teachers should be more than just content experts who transmit information. In fact, they need to be equipped with skills that enable them to adapt to students’ needs, with ability to work flexibly, as well as with the capacity to use teaching methods that are innovative and creative, in the midst of all the inconsistencies and frequent policy changes one finds in the Malaysian setting.

It is also important to raise recognition of teachers’ mission by reducing their administrative tasks (UNESCO, 2013) and making room for teaching knowledge that is relevant. That is, making room for teaching that allows imagination, character building and even making mistakes to take place in classrooms. It is also critical to encourage leadership among teachers to be innovative in their approaches, and to have the courage to allow development of relationships with students in such a way that both teachers and students are mutually involved in finding meaning and sense-making. Children need to be assessed on what they truly need to know, while shifting the focus away from preparing students for examination success only. Teachers should be provided with professional autonomy that allows them to develop assessment systems that better fit their students’ needs, instead of assessment instruments that are designed only to measure subject-matter content. Also, instead of a standardised competency checklist, teachers might also

develop peer-review systems to promote accountability in teaching practice, while at the same time encouraging collaboration with one another. Furthermore, teachers should be involved in policy-making decisions at every level, be it local, state or national levels, instead of leaving policy-making decisions and enforcement to people who are not even related to the education field, and who have little or no direct contact with students – the people whom their policies are most directly affecting (Katz, 2014).

All in all, teaching is an extremely complex profession that requires the engagement of highly skilled teachers. If education truly is what the National Education Philosophy had laid it out to be – an effort to holistically develop Malaysian citizens with high moral standards, who will contribute to the betterment of the nation, then surely, teaching is a profession that leaves no room for people who merely treat it as a last resort.

6.5.5 Implication for communities and families

The philosophical foundation of Malaysia's education is the idea of community building that emphasises the role of education in creating virtuous individuals, society and nation. This implies human character contributes to the condition of a society. Thus, education goals and their relations to the development of the young is a reflection of a society (Turan, 2011). If Malaysia is truly pursuing education that develops moral character and knowledge to achieve high levels of personal well-being, and leads to students contributing to the harmony of society, then the public narratives surrounding education need to shift. As far as how things are presently heading, the current education approaches are merely creating a massive population of future citizens who are unable to think critically, afraid to attempt anything challenging, terrified to question, and reluctant to persevere in the face of problems. The public narratives should be surrounding what is happening in the lives of our young students as well as specific problems faced by families now (Katz, 2014). That is, there is already a lot of attention on failing schools, failing teachers, and the need for higher quality programmes, better resources, curriculum standards, training and quality control systems. The narratives need to shift to include our children with respect as to how we might help them be better students, better people, to make sure their basic needs are met, and to empower disadvantaged families to cope with their specific problems, which are often poverty-related. There is a need for co-operation between educators, parents and communities to establish comprehensive services that are more responsive both to a child's developmental needs, and to the parents' expectations for childcare, healthcare and etcetera (OECD, 2017).

7.0 Conclusion

This thesis examines the driving force behind the increased attention that the Malaysian Government has paid to quality control in the ECCE services since 1990s. The literature review that engaged the discourses on quality ECCE highlighted that quality standards in early childhood education have a strong normalising tendency on account of their processes of regulation and control (Dahlberg et al., 2013), while at the same time putting an emphasis on education as an ordering instrument (Kumar & Sarangapani, 2004). Quality standards and regulations are said to be tinted with Western values that emphasise independence and separation, as well as practices that may be undermining of diversity in approaches to early childhood education (Meier & Kroll, 2015).

The analysis at the Macro level examined the socio-political, economic and education history of Malaysia, while the Micro level analysis examined education policies, standards and regulations initiated by the Malaysian Government and which correspond to the socio-political and economic development at the time. What this study reveals is that, while Western individualism has its influences on Malaysian education policies and programmes, it is not the main factor responsible for the 'wiping out' of diverse approaches to education. Rather, it is the underlying political objectives, which drive Malaysian education reforms and policy changes that implicate their influences on recent and current approaches to education (Rudner, 1977).

In Malaysia, the need for quality control in ECCE is almost always supported by an increased recognition that a quality early start to education has long-term cognitive and social benefits for children, and contributes to the country's economic progress (ECCE Council, 2011). ECCE is seen as an investment in the nation's economic growth and as the most cost-effective way to eliminate poverty and address other social issues (Kamerman, 2006).

Malaysia may have quality assurance policies in place, but there is still a need for a holistic ECCE quality assurance framework that considers the varied needs of local pre-school children (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2014). There is still plenty of space and need for a more holistic discussion around quality ECCE in Malaysia. A discourse that is willing to include and respond to its multicultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic context, and the long-term goal for true social unity, harmony and economic betterment.

There should be different narratives apart from rigidly holding onto the concept of quality in ECCE that stems from an underlying theoretical foundation drawn from a positivistic framework (Dahlberg et al., 2013), which sees the collection of concrete data and measurements of performance against a standardised 'norm' as the only valid way of gauging a child development, an early childhood educator's performance, and the quality of the service provided. Policies and standards that are constructed and based on these rigid, most probably de-contextualised, 'norms' may not be suitable or even make any real difference in improving quality of ECCE in the Malaysian context. Simply put, quality criteria that look only at numbers and observable performances, are merely adding bureaucratic tasks for teachers, and depriving children of

opportunities and the real pleasure of knowledge discovery as something that can be experienced collaboratively with their peers and teachers.

Last but not least, if education is a process of knowledge acquirement, then imposing normalising standards on teaching and learning approaches, behaviours, and performances, for administrative and surveillance purposes, is not only reducing knowledge to a superficially acquired entity, it is also turning education into an instrument of control for those in power to achieve political objectives (Rudner, 1977). Knowledge as a superficial entity that constantly demands justification to prove students' and teachers' worth, based on varying standards constructed by dominant power, eventually takes away the true essence of learning and teaching experience.

If knowledge is, as what Plato (trans. 2013) has depicted as, one of the many ideas or renditions of a divine ideal, a perfect, "higher nature of man" (para. 15), or the "origin and unity of knowledge" (para. 16), associated with wisdom, virtue, instincts, and judgments, then knowledge cannot and should not be reduced to mere commodity, rules or principles of the dominant power, and should not be perceived and explained unanimously using numbers and words (Plato, trans. 2013).

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