



Exploring Career-Related Learning Activities in the Preschool Classroom

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Abstract: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) endeavours to developing knowledge and skills of individuals for their future career, and early childhood has been identified as the best period for this purpose because children begin to create career awareness and build up an imagination about the profession that they are interested in. The information regarding the career that children gather at this age will be expanding throughout their life span. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the practice that is practiced by teachers to urge career exploration among pre-schoolers in Malaysia. A qualitative study using phenomenology research design was conducted to gather the required information. A total of 24 preschool teachers from a public funded school were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions. The interview session was conducted using a focus group interview technique. Four respondents were interviewed in each group. The data from the interview session were transcribed and a thematic analysis had been conducted. Research findings show that preschool teachers have been practicing some strategies to arouse the curiosity about career among young children. The strategies are introducing career, engaging role-play, referring to role models, watching videos, as well as using career card and mini book. Research has also found that teachers have good perceptions towards career education at an early age. Correspondingly, the findings in this research can be used to plan an appropriate learning approach towards career-related activities among young children. An appropriate learning approach will help to broaden the children's occupational choices where they will start to think about what they would like to do. As they are growing up, they can narrow down their choices and be more prepared to take related courses that could lead them to the preferred career. Accordingly, the government could consider incorporating career education as a compulsory subject at the early childhood level in the future.

Keywords: Career exploration, vocational exploration, career education, teachers' practice

1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) refers to aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupants in the various sectors of economic and social life (UNESCO, 2015a). Thus, TVET aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, to promote social equity, to promote environmental sustainability and to empower individuals and promote employment, decent work and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015b). However, this article only focuses on TVET roles to promote employment and decent work through vocational exploration. Vocational exploration refers to any ways that make people aware of the world of work

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and to identify any possible career that suit them (Porfeli & Lee, 2011). This effort takes place across all range of educational levels, from early childhood to tertiary educational settings.

Childhood has been identified as an important developmental life period. Scholars have also recognised the childhood period as a threshold period for vocational development (Jiang, Newman, Le, Presbitero, & Zheng, 2018; Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2008) and career education in childhood has been identified as establishing a foundation for lifelong career development (Liu, McMahon & Watson, 2014; Watson & McMahon, 2007). At this period, children are engaged in various processes of learning and they may show great curiosity and explorative behaviour. Teaching career during childhood will arouse the children's curiosity and explorative behaviour about the world of work (Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2008). Subsequently, children will start searching and collecting more information about the career. Information on the world of work gathers at this age would extend throughout their lifespan and give a significant impact to lifelong career development (Porfeli & Lee 2011).

Three phases of career development has been proposed by The Vocational Identity Status Model; which are, career explorations, career commitment and career reconsideration. Career exploration takes place during infancy age; career commitments take place during teenager age, while career reconsideration occurs when a person set up his or her first job (Porfeli & Lee, 2011). However, this article only discusses career explorations. Career explorations needs the children to explore the nature of the career. Children start to discover the work's world through others' experience, constructing a sense of self and later they will be coordinating the self with the work's world to create an aspiring worker identity (Maree, 2018; Porfeli & Lee, 2011; Oliveira, Traveira&Porfeli, 2015). Children also begin to seek a different kind of work and grow patterns of industry (Ginzberg, 1952). After that, the children will continue to define career paths based on gender roles, social values and social practice that have a powerful effect on upcoming education and career decisions (Akos, Charles, Orther & Cooley, 2011; Cook, Church, Anjanaku, Shadish, Kim & Cohen 1996; Fouad & Smith, 1996; Gottfredson, 1981).

In the beginning phase, children become acquainted about a career by noticing the adults near to them, especially their parents (Cahill & Furey, 2017), and through reading. This happens with no interest and intention on a career. But they will slowly grow their curiosity about the career. After that, children will collect extra knowledge about the basic aspects of the career by asking their parents or discovering it on their self. (Oliveira, Porfeli, Taveira& Lee, 2020; Patton & Porfeli, 2007; Porfeli & Skorikov, 2010). This way, children will get a crystal-clear perception about the career and as a result, they will start thinking about the career that suits them. Children who have a sense of career awareness will start to create from imagination and engage in role-play as a worker with their peers. This process is known as career exploration.

Childhood has been identified as an essential time for career development (Celik, 2019; Oliveira, Traveira&Porfeli, 2015) and also been a supreme time for social-emotional development (Mohamed & Toran, 2018). Research found out that there is a powerful bond between childhood career development and social-emotional development among infants and toddler. Any activities related to career explorations will foster positive impacts on social-emotional development. After the children been exposed to career explorations activities, usually their assertiveness, empathy and emotional regulation will be escalated (Santrok, 2010). Specialist in early childhood admits that positive social-emotional development at an early age would affect a notable result to the children's achievement in their academic and personality development in time to come (Mohamed & Toran, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to explore preschool teachers' practice towards career exploration among young children in Malaysia and to identify what the teachers do in order to introduce a career to the children. The teachers' practices are important in order to foster and nurture career exploration among young children. After all, preschool teachers are the first people who teach children about careers. In addition, they also play an important role in implementing career exploration in the classroom setting.

2. Methodology

A case study research design with a qualitative approach was conducted using the focus group interviews technique. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate method as they allowed the respondents to express and explain their beliefs and practices, in response to the questions that were set by the researcher, as well as to each other's comments. This allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding into the central issues. The respondents were preschool teachers from various states in Malaysia, and a purposeful sampling technique had been used in selecting the sample. This type of sampling was used because it can help to develop a detailed understanding of the situation (Creswell, 2013). To be eligible the respondents had to have at least one-year of experience in a preschool setting and they had to have a Degree of Education with a major in Early Childhood Education. A total of 24 preschool teachers had agreed to participate in this research. A majority of the respondents were female ($n = 21$) and the rest were male ($n = 3$). The respondents' age range was 21 to 30 years old ($n = 18$), 31 to 40 years old ($n = 3$), and 41 to 50 years old ($n = 3$). Additionally, they reported that they have worked in a preschool setting between 1 to 5 years ($n = 13$), 6 to 10 years ($n = 8$) and 11 to 15 years ($n = 3$).

Six focus group meetings were conducted within a week. Each group consisted of four respondents and one facilitator. The respondents were asked to describe their practices that promote career explorations among young children. The focus group interviews lasted for one and half hour and were audio recorded. Each respondent at the beginning of

the interviews said his or her name to help the transcriptionist to discriminate the voices. After the focus group interviews were completed, the respondent was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The list of interview questions is provided in Table 1. After conducting the focus group interviews, the data from the audio recorder were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were given to the respondent for review purpose. This procedure was carried out to evaluate the truth value of the research findings. According to Noble and Smith (2015), the truth value for qualitative research can be obtained by clearly and accurately presenting the participants' perspectives.

After the respondents give their consent on the interview transcripts, a thematic analysis is conducted. A thematic analysis was conducted in order to explore the respondents' beliefs and practices regarding career exploration at an early age, using open coding. To ensure trustworthiness, the transcripts were read in their entirety several times. This reading activity helps the researcher to explore and gain a profound understanding of the data. Trustworthiness can be attained by demonstrating a clear decision trail and ensuring that the interpretations of the data are consistent and transparent (Noble & Smith, 2015). Trustworthiness and truth value that are applied in qualitative research to enhance the credibility of research findings. The next process is to code the data. The coding data process helps the researchers to identify common information regarding the preschool teachers' beliefs and practices. Similar codes were grouped to form more general themes that were related to the research objectives. The thematic analysis and data coding process were conducted conventionally.

Table 1 - List of interview question.

No.	Questions
1.	What do you think about career exposure at an early age? Is it too early?
2.	Are children ready to receive these inputs? Could you please explain your opinion?
3.	Have you ever asked the children questions such as, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" If yes, could you explain further the reason you have asked that question.
4.	What is your opinion on the role of the teachers in early childhood education to expose children to a wide variety of careers?
5.	Is it necessary for teachers to nurture and foster children's interest in careers by providing career-based activities in the classroom?
6.	What are the activities on career that have been carried out in your classroom? Do the children love it?

3. Result

A total of 24 preschool teachers were involved in this study. Based on the interview session that has been conducted, all the respondents have agreed that exposure to careers is appropriate at preschool age. According to the respondent, children at this age are ready to receive inputs about careers. However, the teachers need to be wise in selecting the appropriate approaches and strategies to deliver the inputs about the careers to the children. The approach and strategy that are used should be easy to understand and could attract the children's interest.

Research findings show that the respondents are implementing various types of career-related learning activities in their classroom. The description of the practical that had been conducted by the respondent was based on the number of respondents who had practiced it. A majority of the respondents were using methods such as introducing careers, role playing and referring to role models. Although they were using the same methods, however, the respondents were using different techniques in implementing career exploration activities. Besides, there was only one respondent who used methods such as watching a video, interviewing parents, and preparing a mini book and careers card. Table 2 provides further details on career teaching strategies that are practiced by the preschool teacher.

Table 2 - Career teaching strategies implemented by preschool teachers in the classroom.

Teaching strategies	<i>f</i>	Percentage (%)
Introducing career	24	100.0
Role play	24	100.0
Role models	16	66.7
Watching video	5	20.8
Interviewing parents	1	4.2
Mini book	1	4.2
Career card	1	4.2

3.1 Introducing Careers

The most commonly used method that has been used by the teachers in introducing a career to the children is by asking a question on "What do you want to be when you grow up?". Based on the focus group discussion, there are several reasons

that led the respondent to ask the children this question. The first reason is to identify the children's understanding on the concept of the career. According to the respondent, among the popular answers that are given by the children is they want to be 'Superman' or 'Princess Elsa'. Children show that they do not have a proper perspective of a career by given these types of answer. Therefore, it would be the teacher's task to provide guidance on the true definition of what is a career.

The second reason is to identify the tendency of the children's interest. Based on these identified interests, the respondent will begin to provide an appropriate lesson plan. The main purpose of this lesson plan is to increase the level of knowledge and understanding of the children about the task or role of the career that they choose. Besides, the children will also learn about another career while listening to a career that has been chosen by their friends. This will indirectly help the children to be more open about the various career options out there. The third reason is to create curiosity and to stimulate the children's interest in the career. This activity will then motivate the children to keep on learning and finding additional information about any career. This situation not only enhances the level of the children's knowledge about careers but can also stimulate thinking skills and foster self-reliance among children.

However, the respondents also agree that at this age, children still do not have a fixed answer regarding the selection of a career. Hence, children tend to give different answers every time they are addressed with this kind of question. However, the respondent believes that this is a good learning process for them, as this scenario shows that the children will be aware of the various careers in the world. Besides, career selection is also related to gender roles, all of the respondents agree that girls are more likely to choose a career that is described as feminine such as a teacher and a nurse. Meanwhile, boys are more likely to choose a more masculine career such as a firefighter and a policeman. Here is the statement of R19:

"Yes, I have asked them for several times. In some cases, they usually keep changing their future career idea. This is because when a child begins to think about career at a very early age, it will be influenced by the various roles that are played by the adults around them. For example, like doctor, policeman, teacher, nurse, artist and so on. In their early age, they are usually influenced by what they have seen before. Asking about what they want to be when they grow up will open their minds, imagination and will also motivate them." - R19

3.2 Role Play

Role play is a game that is very popular among children. Through this game, children are able to act like a person or whatever they want to be. Based on the focus group discussion that has been conducted, a majority of the respondents make the role play activity as a medium to introduce the careers to the children. Among the activities that have been conducted by the respondent is, by providing the uniform of various careers. The children will be given a chance to choose and wear the uniform that they are interested in. Children will be asked to act based on the given situation and to relate to their chosen career's role. Next, the respondent will ask a question to gauge the children's knowledge about the career that they have chosen.

There is also a respondent who has run the Chef Cilik (Junior Chef) activity with the children. Children were given a chance to act as the chef in this activity. The children will cook with guidance from the teacher. Through this activity, children are exposed to the role of a chef which requires calculation skill in order to ensure that the quantity of the ingredients that are needed to prepare the food is correct. At the end of this activity, the respondent will ask the children to explain what they have done. Here is the statement of R18:

"I will provide all the equipment for some careers. Based on the careers, I will first tell about the career. Next, the children will be given an example of situation such as a fireman extinguishing a fire. I will conduct this activity outside of the classroom, by providing a place to put a small fire and I also provide the water. They themselves will extinguish the fire with the water. Besides, I have also conducted a career of a chef. They will act as a chef and there will be some children who will be the customers of the chef. These are some of the examples that I have conducted before." – R18

For respondents around Selangor, they will bring the children to the Kidzania every year. Kidzania is a career-based edutainment theme park. Here, children will have a chance to perform various tasks and roles. Before engaging in any activity of a profession, the children will initially be informed by the staff-in-charged about the profession. The games at Kidzania are even more fun when the children are paid salaries after completing their task. In addition, they are also given a chance to shop in the mini market using the salaries that they have received. Here is the statement of R2:

"In fact, for preschool near to Kidzania, Kidzania is a place that can be visited for a real-career-exposure. The students will be given a chance to explore the careers there and it will be a good opportunity for the teacher to expose the students and encourage them to achieve their dream career. As preparation, students will know the path they need to follow and pursue, for them to

do their best in their study until they can further their studies in a university." – R2

3.3 Refer to Role Models

Using a role model is one of the methods that is used by the respondents namely, to enhance the children's knowledge and understanding in a career. Based on the interview, a majority of the respondents use this approach to stimulate and gain the children's interest towards a career. Among the strategies that is often used by the teachers in career exploration is to make themselves as a role model. The teacher is one of the closest persons to the children and they often watch how the teacher is doing his or her job. By making themselves a role model, the children will have the opportunity to get more information about the role of a teacher besides teaching.

The second strategy that is often used by the respondent is by inviting a representative of a career to come to the school. A lot of activities will be planned to enable the children to know and understand better about the career. Among the career representative who were often chosen by the respondent were firemen, nurse, dentist and policeman. According to the respondent, the children are happier when they are able to interact with all the representatives. The representatives can also answer every question clearly since it is about their career. Here is the statement of R2:

"The teaching and learning activity that I have conducted before is by inviting a fireman, policeman and a nurse to the preschool to enable the students to explore these careers. Since my school is near the town, it makes it easier for me to invite them to come to the school, so that the learning process about the career can be done easily. Students will be happier when they are exposed to the real experience and this will enable them to do the Q&A easier with the agency. The agencies are also able to give a good response to each question, because they know the function for each of their equipment better." – R2

Besides, there is also a respondent who organizes a Career Day in their preschool. During the Career Day, a representative from any career will be invited to the preschool to share information with the children. These representatives will be placed in different stations. The children will move from one station to another station to get information about their career. According to the respondent, the children are very excited about the activity as they can interact directly with the person who serves in their preferred careers.

Apart from that, the respondents also bring the children to the workplace of the career representative. Among the popular locations that have often been visited is the fire station. A visit to the location will enable the children to see with their own eyes how firemen do their tasks. Besides, the children will be introduced to the types of machinery and equipment that are used by the firemen in performing their rescuing task. The respondent believes that this activity can give an optimal impact on the children where they can feel the atmosphere and the work routine of a fireman. However, the respondent has also said that usually, the boys will be more excited to be in the fire station compared to the girls. This respondent's opinion is in line with the study, which has stated that gender factors will influence the selection of a career among children in the early ages (Akos, Charles, Ortner & Cooley, 2011). Here is the statement of R4:

"A visit to the fire station was conducted and a lot of activities were provided by the fire station department, such as introducing the security tools, handling tools, describing the function of control room, explaining how to escape from a fire and to patrol using the fire truck." – R4

Furthermore, there are respondents who creatively introduce a career to the children. There are two respondents who took the initiative to invite parents who are in a specialised career to introduce their respective career to the children. The involvement of parents in teaching and learning activity is in line with the wish of the Ministry of Education in Malaysia who wants the schools to build a positive relationship with the parents. In this activity, the parents will describe the tasks that they perform and the hands-on activity will also be held. The respondents have said that they will usually discuss with the parents first about the activity's plans to ensure that it will run smoothly. Here is the statement of R11:

"I have also invited a parent of the students who work in uniform as a custom officer and nurse. They will share their experience and good moments while at work. Usually students will be excited to ask questions that are sometimes out of our adult thinking." – R11

3.4 Watching Video

For teachers who are working in a rural area, it is difficult for them to make a visit or to invite any representative to the school. Therefore, the only thing that they can do is to show the children a video about careers. Through this activity, the children are able to get a first impression about a career, and the teacher will also explain to the children about the role of each career that is shown in the video. Besides, children are also able to ask any questions about the video that they watch. The respondent has described that children nowadays are categorised as fast learners. Hence, the teacher needs to

be ready to answer any unexpected question. For example, there is a student of R9 who has asked about the requirements to become a pilot. A realistic answer to this type of question will be the motivator for the children to keep being committed in their study in order to achieve their dream job. Here is the statement of R12:

"For example, the teacher can conduct the video watching activity that is related to the career and the role to the children. After watching the video, the teacher can make a Q&A session with the children about the career that has appeared in the video and next, extend it with a singing activity by singing any song that is related to the career such as the career of a teacher- "Kamu Guru Malaysia". – R12

3.5 Interviewing Parents

There is a respondent who has provided an interview task for the children. To complete this task, the children need to interview their mother or father to get the information about their parent's career. The respondent will provide a set of questionnaires for the interview purpose. The children will share the information that has been obtained from the interview in the classroom with their friends. This activity not only can increase the children's knowledge about the diversity of careers, but also tightens the bond between the parents with their child. Here is the statement of R14:

"I asked about the parent's career and told the children to enquire about it from their parents. Then, the children will share the information with their friends during circle time." – R14

3.6 Mini Book

Preparing a mini book about careers is one of the activities that has been implemented by one of the respondents in introducing careers to the children. In the early stage, the respondent will ask the children to choose their dream career. Next, the children need to collect information about their career. The information that needs to be collected is information about the uniform, the role and the working place of the chosen career. They also need to get a few pictures that are related to their career. Besides, children also need to state the reason why they love their career. This activity will be done by children with their parents at home. The collected materials and information are then taken to the school and will be recorded in the form of a mini book. This mini book will be placed in the reading room at the preschool to be read by the children.

3.7 Careers Card

Using careers card is one of the methods that is used by the respondents in career exploration. The respondents have been using career cards in their teaching and learning process. This careers card refers to a card that has a picture of the profession on it, such as a doctor, fireman, nurse, policeman and so on. The children will then be asked to give their opinion about the career that they choose. This questions and answers process between the respondent and the children will stimulate the children to think and find more information about the career. According to the respondent, the purpose of using this card is to identify the tendency of the children in choosing their favourite job.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study found that respondents were very creative in conducting career exploration activities in the classroom. Respondents have implemented a learning approach that has been suggested by early childhood education experts, which uses active learning and child-centered learning strategies. This study has shown that the implementation of these approaches in the classroom will help children to understand better and to grasp learning content easily. This would arouse the children's awareness about the various types of work, where children start to think about what they will be when they grow up (Brown, Ortiz-Nunez & Taylor, 2010).

Results from the interviews show that respondents practise various activities and techniques in order to expose and foster the children's interest about career. Career exploration activities that are practised by the respondents begin with the identification of the children's existing knowledge on career. Then, the respondent will provide and lead the children to more information about the career features. A majority of the respondents will ask the, 'What do you want to be when you grow up' question in order to gauge the children's initial perception about career. This finding is in line with the suggestion that is proposed in the Model of Vocational Identity (Porfeli & Lee, 2011). The Model of Vocational Identity has suggested that the career exploration process should start with exposing children to general information about the career features. Then teachers should encourage the children to search for additional information about the career they are interested in.

The second step that is practised by the respondents is by stimulating the children to find and get more information about their careers. This step involves the implementation of activities such as role playing, referring to role model, watching video, interviewing parents, making mini book and careers card. Through these activities, children are asked to do some homework to get more information about their careers. There are also activities that need the children to work

together with the parents in order to complete it. The involvement of the parents in the career exploration activities is important as parents are the main role models that are referred to by the children (Oliveira, Porfeli, Taveira & Lee, 2020; Celik, 2019; Chifamba, 2019; Mahbib et al., 2017; Cahill & Furey, 2017; Gallivan, 2003). The literature has also suggested that career exposure at an early age give positive impacts to the development of self-concept, internal locus of control, career planning, career self-efficacy and academic achievement of the children (Oliveira, Taveira, Taveira & Porfeli, 2016). A good practice on career exploration will help children to be more focused and aware on career selection during elementary school.

Comparison between these research findings with other countries has found that culture plays an important role in career exploration in childhood. These differences are explained by theories in early childhood areas. The Ecological System Theory by Bronfenbrenner, and the Social cultural Theory by Vygotsky emphasised on culture influence in the shaping of children's identity and personality. These theories describe how beliefs and practices that are practised give significant impact to children's development. Taking this into consideration, it can be anticipated that every country would practice different approaches and strategies in the implementation of career exploration.

In the United States, scrutiny on career exploration during childhood started from the 1900s and a career-relevant curriculum has been embedded in the school curriculum (Akos, Charles, Orthner & Cooley, 2011). Scholars have reported that teachers in the United States implement various activities during career exploration learning. Some of the activities are similar to the activities that are practised by teachers in Malaysia, which include introducing careers and referring to role models. However, the United States had a more comprehensive procedure on how career exploration activities should be carried out compared to Malaysia.

In China, systematic reviews about career exploration during childhood are carried out by Liu, McMahon and Watson (2014). The researcher has reported that childhood education in China aims for children to acquire good academic achievement, where they are encouraged to study hard and get good grades in examinations. Their society believes that good academic achievement would help children to get high-status occupations in the future. This beliefs and practices contribute to a lack in perspective about career among children in China. Children had been identified with limited understanding of the world of work and only one-third of the children could clearly state their parents' career (Liu, McMahon & Watson, 2014; Li & Xu, 2007; Yan, 2011).

According to the discussion above, preschool teachers in Malaysia are aware about career exploration and they have implemented various activities in the classroom to arouse the children's awareness about career. But there is still room for improvement. It is recommended for stakeholders in early childhood education to come forth with a comprehensive and clear procedure on how career exploration should be carried out. Comprehensive and clear procedures will help the teachers to plan and implement effective career exploration activities with the children. Research shows that effective career exploration activities would give a significant impact to lifelong career development. This plays an important role to help Malaysia to produce skilled workers in accordance with the nation's vision to become a developed country by 2025.

5. Conclusion

Preschool teachers are a unique profession with great responsibility. The main objective of preschool education is to lay a strong foundation for the children, which covers all developmental areas such as cognitive, motor, social-emotional, language and social-communication. A strong foundation at an early age will help children to be good learners, shaping positive identity and personality. Childhood has also been identified as a crucial period to teach children about career. The main goal of career education at this age is to introduce career and to create awareness among children about the types of occupations. This existing knowledge will urge children to search and gather additional information about the types of occupations and occupation features. Basically, children are easily attracted to careers that can be seen by them, such as occupations where workers are in uniforms. At this age, the children's cognitive development is still in the pre-operational stage, which means that they are facing trouble in understanding abstract things. This explains why a majority of children at this age tend to name the policeman, fireman or a soldier as their ambition. Children are also easily attracted to the careers around them, such as a teacher, doctor and their respective parent's career. Considering the children's prior knowledge about career, it is the preschool teacher's responsibility to promote, nurture and foster the children's knowledge about career. Accordingly, appropriate approaches and strategies that are implemented by the teachers will help the children to be more consistent in the pursuit of their ambition.

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