

Bridging Gaps In Early Intervention For Preschool Children With Special Needs In Malaysia

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Abstract- As the country moves toward strengthening inclusive education under national agendas such as the RMK12 and Malaysia Education Blueprint, improving the accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaborative functioning of EI services becomes increasingly important. However, data driven evidence on the extent of these challenges remains limited, particularly for preschool aged children who are at a critical developmental stage.

This study adopts a mixed method approach to comprehensively examine the extent of these challenges and to identify opportunities for strengthening EI delivery in Malaysia.

Quantitatively, a structured survey will be administered to early childhood educators, EI practitioners, and parents of children aged 3–6 years who are receiving or seeking EI support. The questionnaire will measure perceptions of service accessibility, waiting time, inclusivity practices, resource availability, and collaboration among agencies, with descriptive and inferential analyses used to identify patterns and relationships between key EI dimensions and overall service satisfaction.

Qualitatively, semi structured interviews will be conducted with selected educators, practitioners, and parents to gain deeper insights into lived experiences, contextual challenges, and perceived gaps within current EI services. Thematic analysis will be used to complement and explain the quantitative findings, allowing for richer interpretation and triangulation of data.

Expected outcomes include integrated evidence highlighting the severity of existing gaps, supported by statistical trends and narrative perspectives that reveal the factors most strongly influencing EI effectiveness. The combined findings will guide policymakers, educators, and service providers in improving planning, coordination, and resource allocation.

This mixed method research is significant as it provides holistic, data driven recommendations to enhance the quality, equity, and efficiency of Early Intervention services for preschool children with special needs across Malaysia.

The questionnaire will measure perceptions of service accessibility, waiting time, inclusivity practices, resource availability, and collaboration among agencies. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses will be used to identify patterns, compare demographic differences, and determine the relationships between the four key EI (**Accessibility, Efficiency, Inclusivity and Collaboration**) dimensions and overall service satisfaction.

Keywords: Early Intervention, Preschool Children, Special Needs, Inclusive Education, Early Childhood Education, Accessibility, Collaboration, Malaysia

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Early Intervention (EI) services are important for helping young children with developmental delays and special needs, especially those in the preschool age group (4 to 6 years).

When children receive support early, they are more likely to improve in areas such as communication, behaviour, social skills, learning, and daily functioning. In Malaysia, more parents and teachers are now aware of the importance of identifying delays early, but the availability and quality of services still differ greatly between urban and rural areas.

Although Malaysia has national agendas such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12), many families still face challenges in accessing EI services. Some centres have long waiting lists, some parents cannot afford private therapy, and some preschools are not fully trained to support children with special needs.

This Master's Project (MFPP 3310) builds on the earlier MECE 3212 research, which examined challenges in inclusive practices and early support within Malaysian preschool settings. Key findings from the MECE 3212 study highlighted gaps in early identification, teacher preparedness, and coordination with support services.

Because of this situation, it is necessary to study how accessible and effective EI services are, and how well different agencies (schools, NGOs, private centres, hospitals) work together. Understanding these issues can help Malaysia improve its early support system for preschool children.

1.2 Contextual Relevance to Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays an important role in shaping children's learning and development during their early years. In preschool settings, teachers are often the first to observe developmental delays, behavioural challenges, or learning difficulties. When preschools understand how to work with EI services, children can receive help earlier and more consistently.

However, not all Early Childhood Education teachers receive proper training related to inclusion, early screening, or supporting special needs children. Some preschools lack specialist support, while others struggle to collaborate with EI providers. This creates gaps in how children transition between home, preschool, and therapy services.

By strengthening Early Intervention within the Early Childhood Education context, teachers can feel more confident, parents can be more supported, and children can have a better learning environment that suits their needs. Therefore, studying Early Intervention is not separate from Early Childhood Education but it is directly connected to ensuring quality and inclusive preschool education in Malaysia.

1.3 Problem Statement

Even though Early Intervention services exist in Malaysia, many families continue to experience difficulties, such as

- Limited accessibility to Early Intervention centers, especially outside major cities.
- Long Waiting times for assessment and intervention.
- High costs for private center services (around RM250.00 per session).
- Lack of trained educators to support children in middle and low ranges schools.
- Weak collaboration between agencies that providing Early Intervention.
- Uneven distribution of resources and supports.

Because of these issues, many children may not receive intervention early enough, which affects their development during a critical period.

There is also limited local data that shows how serious these challenges are, especially from the perspective of educators, parents, and Early Intervention practitioners working with preschool aged children.

This study aims to address this gap by collecting real information about the challenges and opportunities in improving Early Intervention services in Malaysia.

1.4 Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to examine the accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration of Early Intervention services for preschool children with special needs in Malaysia.

Using a mixed method approach, this study aims to gather both survey data and interview insights to understand the challenges faced by families, teachers, and practitioners. The findings will be used to identify opportunities for strengthening Early Intervention services nationwide.

1.5 Research Questions

This project is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the current level of accessibility and availability of Early Intervention services for preschool children in Malaysia?
2. What challenges do families, educators, and practitioners face in obtaining or providing EI services?
3. How can EI services be improved to enhance accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration among agencies?

1.6 Significance of the Project

This project is important for several reasons:

For policymakers:

The findings can help improve planning, funding, and coordination for Early Intervention services.

For educators:

Teachers can better understand how to support children with special needs and strengthen inclusive practices in preschools.

For Early Intervention practitioners:

The study highlights areas that need improvement, such as communication with preschools and parents.

For parents and children:

Better Early intervention services mean earlier support, less waiting, and more meaningful developmental progress for young children.

Overall, this project aims to contribute to a more inclusive, accessible, and effective Early Intervention system in Malaysia, ensuring that every preschool child with special needs receives support during the most important years of their development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The selection and focus of literature in this chapter were guided by findings from the earlier MECE 3212 project, which identified gaps in inclusive preschool practices, teacher preparedness, and early support mechanisms. While the MECE 3212 study focused mainly on classroom-level challenges, the present MFPP 3310 project extends the scope by examining Early Intervention systems, service accessibility, and inter-agency collaboration that support inclusion beyond the preschool setting.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's theory explains how a child develops through interactions within multiple environmental systems such as family, preschool, community, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Early Intervention services fall under the microsystem and mesosystem, where continuous collaboration between parents, teachers, and therapists is crucial. Studies show that when these systems work together, Early Intervention outcomes improve significantly (Guralnick, 2017).

2.2.2 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky suggests that children learn best through guided support known as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Early Intervention practices such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) rely on this concept.

2.2.3 Developmental and Behavioural Theories

Behavioural theory underpins many EI techniques through reinforcement, modelling, and structured routines. Malaysian practitioners highlight behavioural approaches as highly effective but underutilized due to limited training and resources (Rahman, 2021)

2.3 Key Concepts, Models, and Frameworks

2.3.1 Early Intervention (EI)

EI refers to services that support young children with developmental delays or disabilities, focusing on improving communication, motor skills, behaviour, and daily functioning. It includes assessment, therapy, parent training, and educational support.

2.3.2 Inclusive Education Model

Malaysia's inclusive education model encourages children with disabilities to learn alongside typically developing peers. However, successful inclusion requires trained teachers, accessible environments, and strong collaboration between schools and EI providers.

2.3.3 Malaysia's EI Landscape

In Malaysia, EI services are delivered by hospitals, NGOs, private centers, and preschools. Policies such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint and RMK12 emphasize inclusive practices, but implementation challenges remain (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Urban areas tend to have more services, while rural families experience greater difficulty accessing support

2.4 Empirical Findings Relevant to the Study

2.4.1 Accessibility of EI Services

Research shows that many families face difficulties accessing EI services due to distance, cost, limited centers, or lack of awareness. Children in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged.

2.4.2 Long Waiting Time

Long waiting periods for assessment and therapy are common in Malaysia. Some families wait months or even years before receiving support. Hospital Kuala Lumpur and University Malaya studies show waiting periods of 6 months to over 1 year for developmental assessment (Rahman, 2021).

2.4.3 Teacher Preparedness in Preschools

Studies indicate that many preschool teachers feel unprepared to handle behavioural challenges, conduct early screening, or support children with special needs. Limited training affects the implementation of inclusive practices.

2.4.4 Collaboration Between Agencies

EI works best when preschools, parents, hospitals, and private centers communicate effectively. However, research shows that inter-agency collaboration in Malaysia remains inconsistent

2.4.5 Family Challenges

Parents often report stress due to financial burden, travel demands, therapy schedules, and the emotional weight of navigating the EI system). These challenges influence a child's attendance and continuation in EI programs.

2.5 Gaps in Current Research

Based on the reviewed studies, several gaps can be identified:

1. Limited Malaysian studies focusing specifically on preschool-aged children (4–6 years).
2. Most local studies use single methods or few apply mixed method designs combining surveys and interviews.
3. There is limited research analyzing EI through four dimensions together which are accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration.
4. Most studies examine parents or teachers, but not both groups together with EI practitioners.
5. Few studies connect EI challenges directly to Early Childhood Education classroom practices.

These gaps show the need for further Malaysian based research that captures multiple perspectives and provides a holistic understanding of EI service delivery.

2.6 Synthesis and Critique of Past Studies

Past research strongly supports the importance of EI and inclusive education. However, many studies focus on isolated issues such as teacher readiness or parental challenges. Very few studies integrate different perspectives or link EI service gaps with policy implementation and classroom practices.

International studies offer strong data, but Malaysian studies often have small sample sizes or limited geographical focus. Therefore, findings cannot always be generalized to the whole country.

This creates an opportunity for a mixed method study that provides broader and deeper insights into the Malaysian Early Intervention landscape.

2.7 Summary Connecting Literature to the Proposed Project

The literature shows that effective EI services depend on accessibility, efficiency, trained educators, family support, and collaboration across agencies. However, current studies reveal many gaps in Malaysia's EI system.

This project responds directly to these gaps by examining EI challenges using both survey data and interview insights.

The mixed method approach allows for a more complete understanding of how EI services operate and what improvements are needed to better support preschool children with special needs in Malaysia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a mixed-method research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative part consists of a structured survey, while the qualitative part consists of semi-structured interviews. Mixed method designs allow researchers to collect both numerical data and detailed personal experiences, creating a more complete understanding of the topic.

This design is suitable for this study because Early Intervention (EI) involves complex issues such as accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration among agencies. These issues cannot be fully understood through numbers alone or interviews alone. By combining both methods, this study can explore patterns as well as deeper explanations behind those patterns.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The study will involve three groups of participants:

1. Early childhood educators working with preschool aged children(4 to 6 years).
2. Early Intervention practitioners such as therapists, psychologists, and special needs educators.
3. Parents of preschool children aged 4–6 years who are receiving or seeking EI services.

Sampling Technique

This study uses purposive sampling, where participants are selected based on their direct involvement and experience with EI services. This method is appropriate for research that requires specific knowledge or experience related to the topic.

Sample Size

Quantitative survey: Approximately 10–20 participants across the three groups.

Qualitative interviews: About 3–5 participants who volunteer after completing the survey.

Although the sample size is small, it is acceptable for a Master's level exploratory study. Small mixed method studies are commonly used to provide focused insights that can guide future, larger scale research.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Structured Questionnaire (Quantitative)

A structured questionnaire will be used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire includes:

1. Basic demographic information
2. Likert scale items measuring four EI dimensions:
 - Accessibility
 - Efficiency
 - Inclusivity
 - Collaboration

The items are adapted from previous studies in early childhood and special education to ensure relevance and clarity (Guralnick, 2011; Hassan & Ahmad, 2022). The survey will be distributed through Google Forms for easy participation.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)

Semi structured interviews will be conducted with selected participants to explore:

Personal experiences accessing or providing EI services

- Challenges faced
- Perceptions of service quality
- Collaboration between schools, therapists, and parents
- Suggestions for improvement

Semi structured interviews provide flexibility and allow participants to express their thoughts freely while still ensuring that essential topics are covered.

3.3.3 Reliability

Reliability Cronbach's alpha will be used to measure internal consistency, with a value above 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability.

3.4 Procedures

1. Permission and approval will be obtained from the lecturer.
2. The survey link will be distributed through WhatsApp, email, or social media.

3. Participants who indicate interest in being interviewed will be contacted personally.
4. With permission, interviews will be later transcribed.
5. All data (survey responses and interview transcripts) will be stored safely and used only for academic purposes.
6. Quantitative and qualitative data will be analysed separately and later combined during interpretation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in educational research, especially when children and parents are involved.

Voluntary participation: Participants can join or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Informed consent: will be obtained before the survey and interviews.

Confidentiality: Names, school details, and personal information will be kept private.

Data protection: All data will be stored securely and used only for this study.

3.6 Data Analysis Plan

3.6.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey will be analysed using:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, frequency)

Inferential statistics such as correlation or independent t-test, depending on suitability

3.6.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps:

1. Familiarizing with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Writing the report

3.6.3 Triangulation

Triangulation involves comparing the quantitative results with qualitative findings to strengthen the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study. This ensures that conclusions are supported by multiple forms of evidence.

3.7 Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

The sample size is small (10–20 participants), which may limit generalizability.

Self-reported data may be biased based on personal experiences or opinions.

Time constraints may reduce the number of interviews.

Delimitations

The study focuses only on preschool-aged children (4–6 years).

Only three groups (parents, educators, EI practitioners) are included.

The study examines only four EI dimensions which are accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration.

The study is limited to participants who have experience with EI services.

These delimitations help keep the project focused and manageable for a Master's level research project.

4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

4.1 Overview of the Project Idea

This project is designed to explore the current state of Early Intervention (EI) services for preschool children with special needs in Malaysia. Although EI has been recognized as an important support system for young children, many families still face difficulties in accessing services, receiving timely assessment, or getting continuous support in preschools. This project uses a mixed method research approach to gather both numerical data and detailed personal experiences from educators, parents, and EI practitioners.

The project focuses on four key dimensions of EI services:

1. Accessibility
2. Efficiency
3. Inclusivity in preschool settings
4. Inter-agency collaboration

4.2 Setting and Target Participants

This project targets three main groups of participants who are directly involved in EI services for preschool-aged children:

4.2.1 Early Childhood Educators

Preschool teachers often spend the most time with children and are usually the first to observe developmental delays. Their experiences are important for understanding how EI services are linked to classroom practices.

4.2.2 EI Practitioners

This group includes therapists, special needs educators, psychologists, and other professionals involved in children's assessments and interventions. Their insights help explain how services are delivered and what challenges exist within EI centres.

4.2.3 Parents of Preschool Children (Aged 4–6)

Parents play a key role in decision-making, attending therapies, and managing their child's early development. Their experiences help identify barriers related to cost, travel, waiting lists, and support from preschools.

Sample Size

A total of 10–20 participants will be recruited through purposive sampling. This sample size is reasonable for small scale mixed method studies.

4.3 Activities, Instruments, and Procedures

This project involves several clear steps and research activities to collect data effectively.

4.3.1 Activity 1: Development of Research Instruments

Two instruments will be prepared:

1. Structured Questionnaire (Quantitative)

Measures accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration.

2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Qualitative)

Includes open ended questions exploring lived experiences, barriers, and suggestions for improvement.

4.3.2 Activity 2: Data Collection

The questionnaire will be distributed using Google Forms or by hand

Participants who volunteer for interviews will be contacted.

Interviews will be later transcribed.

4.3.3 Activity 3: Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive statistics and simple inferential tests.

Qualitative data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Findings from both methods will be triangulated to ensure accuracy and depth.

4.4 Timeline and Feasibility

The project is designed to be completed within 2 weeks (6th Dec 2025 until 19th Dec 2025) and the activities are manageable, the sample size is small, and data collection can be done online.

Day 1–2 Development of questionnaire and interview guide

Day 3–4 Pilot testing instruments + refinement

Day 5–7 Distribution of survey and collection of responses

Day 8–10 Conducting interviews and transcription

Day 11–13 Data analysis (quantitative + qualitative)

Day 14 Triangulation and writing final report

5. OUTCOMES / FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the expected outcomes of the study and explains how the findings may contribute to Early Intervention (EI) knowledge, Early Childhood Education (ECE) practice, and policy improvement in Malaysia. The mixed-method design is anticipated to generate both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights that highlight gaps, strengths, and opportunities in the EI system for preschool children aged 4–6 years.

5.2 Quantitative Method

A total of 19 respondents participated in this study, representing a diverse mix of parents, preschool teachers, and Early Intervention (EI) therapists. This variety of perspectives strengthened the credibility of the data, as each group contributed unique insights based on their experiences with supporting children aged 4–6 who require Early Intervention services. Before taking part in the survey, all respondents confirmed their agreement to the informed consent letter, ensuring that participation was voluntary, confidential, and fully understood.

At the beginning of the survey, I clearly explained the purpose of this research, which is to understand the current challenges and strengths within Malaysia's Early Intervention system, especially in the areas of accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and inter-agency collaboration. Respondents were informed that their input would help highlight real issues faced by families and educators, and would contribute to improving Early Childhood Education (ECE) practices and EI services nationwide. By gathering honest feedback from different stakeholders, this study aims to support the development of better policies, clearer pathways, and more inclusive support systems for preschool children with special needs.

Section 1 -Consent (APPENDIX 1)

(Appendix 1 – All has been agreed for this survey and has been told)**(Appendix 2 – Their role Parents, Early childhood teacher or Early Intervention Therapist)**

The chart shows the roles of the 19 survey respondents. Most respondents were parents (42.1%), followed by early childhood educators (36.8%), and EI practitioners (21.1%). The survey gathered views from all three key groups involved in Early Intervention, giving a balanced understanding of real experiences and challenges.

(Appendix 3 – Accessibility to reach the Early Intervention Centers or school)

Most respondents (66.7%) said EI centres are far from where they live. Only a small number said centres are nearby or easy to find. This shows that access to EI services is still difficult for many families even I done this survey in SELANGOR places like Kuala Selangor, Kuala Langat and Sabak Bernam still don't have any EI Centers and just depending on hospital therapy which is a long queue waiting list.

(Appendix 4 – Efficiency of EI Services)

The chart shows how respondents rated the efficiency of EI assessments. More than half (52.6%) felt that assessments are done properly, while 21.1% said they are carried out in a perfect or very effective manner. However, 15.8% rated assessments as only fair, and 10.5% felt they were done poorly.

Overall, most respondents believe EI assessments are generally effective, but a small group still experiences delays or poor quality assessment processes.

(Appendix 5 – Inclusivity facilities in preschool in Selangor District)

A large majority (73.7%) felt that preschools still lack fully suitable facilities or experienced teachers for special needs children. Only 26.3% agreed that preschools have appropriate support and resources.

This indicates that most preschools are still not fully prepared to meet the needs of special needs learners.

(Appendix 6 – Interagency Collaboration in Selangor District)

A majority (63.2%) reported that these groups do not regularly share information, indicating weak collaboration in supporting children's developmental needs. Only 36.8% felt that communication happens consistently.

This highlights a major gap where many children do not receive coordinated support because key adults and professionals are not aligned or updating each other.

5.2.1 Practical Implications for Teaching

Teachers may require additional training in early screening, inclusive classroom practices, and behaviour support strategies. The findings highlight the need for educators to develop stronger skills in adapting lessons and routines to accommodate diverse learners, particularly in settings where formal EI support is limited.

5.2.2 Practical Implications for Learning

Children benefit from structured, predictable environments and differentiated learning activities. The findings suggest the need for preschools to incorporate sensory and friendly spaces, visual schedules, and individualised learning approaches to better support children with developmental needs.

5.2.3 Practical Implications for Assessment

Since EI assessments are not always timely or consistent, preschools play a critical role in early identification. Teachers may need to use observation checklists, simple developmental screening tools, and continuous monitoring to ensure early detection while waiting for formal evaluations.

5.2.4 Practical Implications for ECE Programming

Weak collaboration indicates the need for stronger communication mechanisms within ECE programmes. Preschools may implement shared progress reports, regular parents and teacher also therapist meetings, and coordinated intervention plans. Programmes should embed inclusive curriculum elements aligned with developmental and behavioural needs.

5.2.5 Contribution to Knowledge or Practice

This study contributes to EI and ECE literature by providing Malaysian data on accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration across multiple stakeholders and parents, educators, and EI practitioners. It fills gaps in local research by integrating multiple perspectives using a mixed-method design. The findings also offer practical insights that can guide policy formulation, teacher training, and EI and ECE integration in Malaysia.

5.2.6 Benefits of Educators, Families, and Children

- **Benefits to Educators**

Educators gain greater understanding of EI processes, inclusive strategies, and communication approaches, which enhances their confidence and competence in supporting special needs children.

- **Benefits to Families**

Families benefit from clearer guidance, improved communication, and stronger collaboration with preschools and therapists. These improvements reduce parental stress and promote consistent support for their child.

- **Benefits to Children**

Children benefit the most through earlier identification, more consistent intervention, and better alignment between home, school, and therapy. These improvements support developmental progress and emotional well-being.

5.2.7 Innovative Elements Proposed

Several innovative ideas are proposed based on the findings:

1. EI Collaboration Framework to streamline communication among parents, teachers, and therapists.
2. Inclusive Classroom Toolkit providing teachers with strategies for sensory support, visual aids, and differentiated instruction.
3. Parental EI Pathway Guide helping families navigate referral, assessment, and service options.
4. Early Screening Routine in Preschools using simple observation checklists to identify concerns while waiting for formal assessment.

5.3 Qualitative Method

A total of 4 respondents participated in this study, representing of parents, children aged 4–6 who require Early Intervention services. Before taking part in the survey, all respondents confirmed their agreement to the informed consent letter, ensuring that participation was voluntary, confidential, and fully understood.

At the beginning of the survey, I clearly explained the purpose of this research, which is to understand the current challenges and strengths within Malaysia's Early Intervention system, especially in the areas of accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and inter-agency collaboration. Respondents were informed that their input would help highlight real issues faced by families and educators, and would contribute to improving Early Childhood Education (ECE) practices and EI services nationwide. By gathering honest feedback this study aims to support the development of better policies, clearer pathways, and more inclusive support systems for preschool children with special needs.

(Appendix 7 – Form Interview consent form)

(Appendix 8 – Type of support)

The chart shows the types of Early Intervention (EI) support received by children. Among the four respondents, the most common service was speech therapy (75%), followed by occupational therapy (50%), ABA/behaviour therapy (50%),

and school-based intervention (50%). Only one respondent (25%) reported receiving hospital therapy, while none selected Klinik Kanak-Kanak screening as their support source.

(In Appendix 9 – I have included all the questionnaire question that I asked from the 4 parents)

FINDINGS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE FROM PARENTS

5.3.1 Accessing EI Services

The qualitative findings show that families experience mixed levels of difficulty when accessing Early Intervention (EI) services. Some parents were able to follow the formal referral pathway through Klinik Kesihatan (KK) and move forward to specialist hospitals, while others reported having no challenges at all. However, several parents experienced unclear procedures, insufficient school guidance, or preschool requirements that forced them to seek EIP services externally. These inconsistencies highlight the need for clearer EI pathways, better communication from preschools, and more streamlined referral systems. The findings contribute to practice by emphasizing the importance of early identification training for teachers, clearer parental guidance, and strengthened collaboration between preschools and health agencies.

5.3.2 Waiting Time for Assessment or Therapy

The responses reveal that long waiting periods are a major barrier, especially in government hospitals where families reported waiting up to five months for assessments or therapy appointments. Some parents chose private services to avoid delays, although the cost created financial strain. This demonstrates that waiting time affects not only children's developmental progress but also family stress and financial burden. The findings contribute to EI practice by identifying the need for increased government staffing, expanded therapy slots, and improved triaging systems to ensure timely intervention for young children.

5.3.3 Preschool Understanding and Support

Parents reported a wide range of experiences with preschool support. Some preschools were described as unhelpful, refusing to accommodate children with special needs or lacking understanding of developmental differences. Others provided strong support, including having ABA trained teachers or offering consistent guidance. This inconsistency shows that inclusive preschool practices are not yet standardized across Malaysia. The findings reinforce the need for mandatory inclusion training, improved teacher competencies, and school-wide policies to ensure equitable support for all children, regardless of developmental needs.

5.3.4 Communication With Teachers, Therapists, and Professionals

Communication across agencies was inconsistent. Some parents reported excellent communication from teachers and therapists, while others felt unsupported or uninformed. Weak communication from school staff, combined with long public-hospital waiting times, created frustration for families. These findings contribute to knowledge by highlighting the need for structured communication frameworks, including progress notes, regular updates, parent–teacher–therapist meetings, and clear follow-up plans. Strengthening collaboration can ensure continuity of care and more meaningful progress for children.

5.3.5 Overall Practical Contribution

The qualitative results contribute valuable insights into how EI and preschool systems function in real Malaysian contexts. They underscore the need for:

- Clearer EI pathways
- Reduced waiting times
- Stronger inclusive practices in preschools
- More consistent communication between all stakeholders

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study investigated the accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and inter-agency collaboration of Early Intervention (EI) services for preschool children in Malaysia using a mixed method approach. The quantitative findings showed clear patterns.

Most respondents indicated that EI centres were far from their area, making accessibility the most significant barrier. Although many respondents believed assessments were conducted properly, a portion still experienced poor or inconsistent service quality. Inclusivity in preschools remained low, with the majority reporting that preschools lacked adequate facilities and trained teachers for special needs learners. Inter-agency collaboration was also weak, as teachers, parents, and therapists did not consistently share information.

The qualitative findings reinforced these patterns. Parents described a mix of smooth and challenging experiences in accessing services. Some followed the referral pathway successfully through Klinik Kesihatan and hospitals, while others faced unclear guidance or preschools that were unable or unwilling to support their child without external EIP involvement.

Long waiting times, up to five months in government hospitals were reported as a key challenge, forcing some families to seek expensive private therapy.

Experiences in preschools varied widely while some schools provided strong support and even ABA-trained teachers, others demonstrated limited understanding, with one parent reporting that a school refused to accept their child.

Communication among professionals was equally inconsistent, ranging from excellent collaboration to complete lack of updates from teachers.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative data provide a consistent picture families face substantial barriers in accessing timely, coordinated, and inclusive EI support, and experiences vary widely depending on location, school environment, and availability of trained professionals.

6.2 Significance to Early Childhood Education (ECE)

These findings hold important implications for the Early Childhood Education field in Malaysia.

First, the study highlights the urgent need for stronger inclusive practices in preschools. With many teachers lacking sufficient training in child development and special needs, professional development must become a priority. This includes early screening skills, behavior support strategies, differentiated instruction, and collaboration with EI professionals.

Second, the results emphasize that preschools should take a more active role in early identification and referral. Since accessibility to EI centres is limited in places such as Kuala Selangor, Kuala Langat, Sabak Bernam, Klang and some other town in Selangor district.

For many families and teachers are often the first to notice developmental concerns. Empowering educators to identify, document, and communicate developmental red flags can significantly improve early detection.

Third, weak inter agency collaboration shows that children benefit most when preschools, therapists, and families work together. ECE centres must implement structured communication systems such as progress notes, regular case discussions, and shared intervention plans. These practices ensure consistency, reduce parental stress, and allow children to receive unified support across settings.

Finally, the findings underline the importance of child-centred inclusive environments in preschools. Creating sensory-friendly classrooms, flexible teaching strategies, and supportive school cultures directly contributes to better developmental and learning outcomes for children with diverse needs.

6.3 Final Reflections and Research Potential

This research demonstrates strong potential for informing policy, improving EI services, and strengthening inclusive preschool practices. The mixed method design allowed the study to capture both statistical patterns and real family experiences, producing a holistic understanding of current challenges in Malaysia's EI landscape.

Future research may expand on this study by including larger samples across different states, comparing rural and urban gaps, or examining teacher attitudes toward inclusion. Longitudinal studies may also be useful for tracking developmental outcomes of children who receive EI support at different ages.

Overall, this research contributes valuable evidence to Malaysia's growing focus on inclusive education and early childhood development. It reinforces the need for improved EI accessibility, stronger educator training, reduced waiting times, and enhanced inter-agency collaboration. Most importantly, the study highlights that early, coordinated, and inclusive support can significantly improve the developmental trajectories of preschool children with special needs making EI a critical component of quality Early Childhood Education.

6.4 Strengthening EI Through Strategic Collaboration and Partnerships

Based on the findings of this study, strengthening Early Intervention (EI) services in Malaysia requires not only improvements within preschools and government systems but also strategic collaboration with established organisations and corporate partners. Collaboration between public agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and private sector stakeholders can significantly enhance service accessibility, teacher competency, and sustainability of EI support.

One important collaborative initiative is PERMATA Kurnia, which provides early intervention and inclusive support for children with special needs. Collaboration between preschools, Early Childhood Education (ECE) providers, and PERMATA Kurnia can support earlier identification, smoother referral pathways, and continuity of intervention services. Such partnerships may help reduce long waiting times in hospitals and provide families with clearer guidance during the early stages of developmental concerns.

Similarly, collaboration with Early Autism Malaysia, a well-established non-governmental organisation specialising in autism intervention, parent education, and professional training, can strengthen EI service quality. Partnerships with organisations like Early Autism Malaysia can provide access to evidence-based practices, parent support programmes, and professional development opportunities for educators. These collaborations directly address the study's findings related to weak inter-agency communication and inconsistent preschool preparedness.

In addition, corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnerships, such as sponsorships from Sime Darby, can play a crucial role in building educator capacity. Sponsorship of teacher training programmes, including Applied Behaviour Analysis Training (ABAT), can increase the number of preschool educators equipped with foundational behavioural and inclusive education skills. This directly responds to the study's findings that many preschools lack trained personnel to support children with special needs.

By investing in educator training through sponsored programmes, corporate partners contribute to long-term system strengthening rather than short-term solutions. Such initiatives align with Malaysia's national goals under inclusive education and human capital development, while reducing financial barriers faced by educators seeking professional certification.

Overall, structured collaboration between government initiatives (such as PERMATA Kurnia), non-governmental organisations (such as Early Autism Malaysia), and private corporate sponsors (such as Sime Darby) presents a practical and sustainable pathway for improving Early Intervention accessibility, efficiency, inclusivity, and collaboration. These partnerships can help create a more coordinated EI ecosystem that benefits educators, families, and most importantly, preschool children with special needs.

7. REFERENCES

Note: All references are formatted according to APA 7th edition guidelines.

Source: GOOGLE SCHOLAR / GOOGLE RESEARCH MODE.

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