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# The Difference between Montessori Curriculum and Malaysia National Preschool Curriculum on Developmental Skills of Preschool Children in Kuala Lumpur

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between authors MB and TS. Author MB designed the study, searched the literature, performed the statistical analysis, and wrote the study under supervision of author TS. Author TS worked on the analyses of the study and general corrections. The two authors jointly approved the final manuscript.*

**Original Research Article**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concern of this study is to find out if Montessori curriculum for early childhood education has any difference with National Preschool curriculum in Malaysia, in terms of growth skills of preschool children. Research methodology was comparative research design. There were two groups; the first group was preschoolers who were trained with Montessori and second group who were trained using Malaysia National curriculum. In this study, independent variable was the curriculum type in each kindergarten and dependent variable was the developmental skills that divided into four major domains of cognitive, language, social and physical development, evaluated by a rating scale for testing developmental skills. The population of the study was all kindergartens in Kuala Lumpur, which were using Montessori approach and National preschool curriculum. The participants were five to six years old children, purposely chosen from the sample. The results indicated that preschool children in Montessori kindergarten performs better in their cognitive, social,

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and language skills while there is no significant difference on their physical development. Therefore, general conclusion of the results obtained is that Montessori curriculum makes positive effects on cognitive, language and social skills of preschool children and is more efficient than current preschool education curriculum.

*Keywords: Preschool education; Montessori curriculum; national preschool curriculum; developmental skills; child development.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Preschool education is one the significant periods in human life and it affects the life of child in the future [1]. Qualified preschool education is a must for the revelation of child's skills, meeting his basic needs and his gaining of basic habits and their best preparation for [2]. One of the most important objectives of preschool education in Malaysia is to improve the child's developmental skills to prepare them for primary school.

There are different categories in various references in categorizing the developmental skills of children. There are three aspects of child's development [3] (physical, cognitive and emotional) and four aspects of children developmental skills [4] which are cognitive, social, language, and physical development were stated psychologists. This paper also reviews four aspects of child's development that are cognitive, language, social, and physical skills that are considered as main domains in child's growth.

As an example in cognitive development child should gain the skills to understand his or her surrounding in different stages such as five senses, memory, reasoning, problem solving, and concentration [5]. Social development contains the experience, appearance, and organization of emotions that a child has as well as the ability to create positive and satisfying interactions with others [6]. According to [7] language development is the early stage in developing of language that a child starts to know and understand language and communicate with others. Two different classes of language development are stated by [8], firstly children speak single words and after that they combine words together to make two-word sentences and then three-word sentences. The second class is that children first speak in long incomprehensible sounds that imitate the rhythm of adult speech. The last one is physical development which is the process of body development begins from infancy into late adolescent and it is also called motor skill. It contains developing the particularly muscles and physical organization.

Studies on this issues indicate that parents and preschool education institutions hold the greatest responsibility for the child's developmental skills. Pre-school creates the base for the abilities that children are going to obtain far along in life. The insufficiencies in the growth of child from birth to six year period is capable of having serious impacts on periods in the future. Regarding to what stated, pre-school training institutes and kindergarten instruction curricula are absolutely vital for getting a child ready for primary schooling [9].

Nowadays there exist numerous substitute pre-school teaching curricula and methods. Every one of these curricula possesses distinct education approach, educator preparation method, material progress and teaching space managing methods [10]. Amongst them the Montessori program is unique and distinctive in numerous characteristics. Based on Montessori's opinions (1964), the basis of this method is the child's freedom and this

freedom is activities within a “prepared environment”. The so called environment is fortified physically and theoretically to cover the needs of a child as to instruct the meaning to his world [5,11,12,13].

Montessori emphasizes that each child is going to have a distinctive growth procedure, and is a distinctive character and is talented of learning consistent with his/her capability [14]. Montessori sets knowledge free from being memorized and made it tangible to a degree that a child at any age is capable of recognizing, and established a technique and chains of resources that are capable of transferring it in an united method. The integrated Montessori program chases a sequential direction constructed on Montessori's Five Great Lessons (MFGL): the history of the globe, the life's timeline, the history of language, the story of numbers, and the timeline of civilization [15,16,17].

The foundation of the Montessori instruction is to make a child sovereign and organize the most appropriate situation to support child's improvement. Initially, Montessori defined what is essential for the child's growth and then developed the method and materials appropriate for these qualities. In her research, she targeted the growth of children in various aspects by utilizing these resources. These areas are senses, math, linguistic, geography, history and culture, science and nature, benevolence, manners, and sport [12,18,19].

In Montessori classes, resources are designed based on physiognomies of children. There are light, moveable stuff that are appropriate to child's height and balanced to their body, cabinets, coat hanger and locks they have the ability to reach with no trouble, drawers and doors that are easy to open and close, brushes they can simply grip, soaps that appropriate for their hands' size, sweepers with short-straight broom-sticks and clothes they can put on or take off [15].

The Malaysia's National Preschool Curriculum which is known as NPC stresses the importance of child's cognitive development and inspires repeated existing operations of object by means of hands-on activities in order to attain the skills mentioned in the curriculum objectives. NPC empowers preschool children to get elementary communication, social and other constructive skills to be ready for primary school. The goal of curriculum is to promote children's social, intellectual, physical and spiritual skills, and aesthetic values such as creativity and appreciation. The social development in NPC emphasize on children's interaction with the environment and the people in their surroundings, progress of self-concept, discipline, social responsibilities, and good values and outlooks towards learning. The cognitive development focus on physical environment, the concepts of time and space, numbers, alphabets, and also focus on writing, reading and language capabilities. The physical development components concentrate on the physical activities that various parts of the body. The spiritual skill components highlight the values and believe in God. Finally the aesthetical features, teach the children to express themselves through innovative ways such as drawing, creating crafts, music and movement. There some studies that examine the developmental skills of children in different domain among preschool education in Malaysia [20,21].

### **1.1 Purpose**

Based on the advantages of Montessori program, there are lots of studies in different countries that evaluate the performance of children according to their developmental skills solve the stated problems [10,12,22,23,24,25,26]. Montessori program is the most popular international school among parents. However, there is lack of studies delving children's

development and learning in this school. It is seen that many Montessori kindergartens growing all over town, however is there any research that shows the effect of this curriculum on developing of children in different aspects of growth in Malaysia? This study addressed the effect of Montessori curriculum, which used in international kindergartens on preschool children's achievement on their developmental skills.

## **1.2 Objectives**

1. To examine the difference of Montessori curriculum and National curriculum on the cognitive skills of preschool children.
2. To determine the difference of Montessori curriculum and National curriculum on social skills of preschool children.
3. To examine the difference of language development of preschoolers in Montessori and public kindergarten with national curriculum.
4. To determine if there is a difference on physical skills of preschool children in Montessori curriculum and National curriculum.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study was designed with comparing two different groups. On the one hand, a group of preschoolers enrolls in the Montessori kindergarten with Montessori curriculum, and on the other hand, a group of preschoolers in a public kindergarten uses national preschool curriculum (NPC). Comparative research or analysis is a broad term that includes both quantitative and qualitative comparison of social entities. Social entities maybe based on many lines, such as geographical or political ones in the form of cross-national or regional comparisons.

There has been ongoing rethinking and discussion in other comparative social science fields, such as in comparative education [27,28,29,30], therefore the goal of this study is to compare two different curriculum in pre-school education system.

According to [31], quantitative and qualitative comparative design, not only covers a set of techniques, especially suited for small sample size (N), it can also be characterized as a research strategy, which combines features of the case-oriented, and the variable-oriented approach.

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants of the study were preschool children aged five to six years old in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). The sample was two kindergartens, one from Montessori kindergartens and the other from public kindergartens. There were 33 Montessori Kindergarten in KL and the sample was selected randomly from the complete list that includes the name of Montessori kindergartens. Each kindergarten was given a number; then numbers were written on piece of papers and placed inside a box and without any replacement, one of them was chosen. The public kindergarten was selected purposely in the exact area of Montessori kindergarten.

Totally, there were 51 children chosen purposely from the samples, 24 of them were in the first group, which is Montessori kindergarten and 27 of them were in the second group,

which is public kindergarten using NPC, were involved in the study. Children in both groups had almost the same economic background and their parents were educated.

## **2.2 Instrument**

The instrument utilized in this study is a developmental skills rating scale designed by researcher. The rating scale contains 56 questions with a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=weak to 5=good, divided into four sections relating to each skill, section A was for cognitive skills, section B was for language and literacy skills, section C was for social skills and section D was for motor or physical skills(See appendix 2).

As each part on this rating scale was to measure different developmental skills of a child, test of reliability needed to be conducted on each part separately, the results of which were above the minimum of 0.70 using Cronbach's alpha were acceptable.(The proportions in the study listed in appendix 1.)

Cognitive skills part comprised 18 questions focusing on children's skill in areas of numbers, objects and characteristics, time and sequence, shapes, creativity and memory. The questions were adapted from the work of [32].

Language skills (section B) contained 12 questions designed to measure children's literacy skill in areas of enjoyment of stories and books, verbally communication, and understanding the printed concepts. Most of the questions were adapted from the book "Child Development: A practitioner guide" by [33].

Social skills (section C) also covered 12 questions designed to measure children's social and emotional skills in areas of knowledge of self, self-help skills, behavior, and relationships with others. Questions were adapted from different developmental books [32,33,34].

Physical skills (section D) was designed in 14 questions to measure children's physical activities including fine motor skills which are the small movements relating to small muscles, and gross motor skills which are superior actions that use larger muscles and muscle groups. Questions were adapted from different developmental books [33,34].

## **2.3 Procedures**

At the initial phase, meeting with the principals of the selected kindergartens taken place in order to get the permission for their preschool children's participation. Data collection of post-test took place at the time arranged by the principals of both kindergarten between August and September 2013. During this period, the researcher visited both kindergartens every other day to see their activities and classroom tasks. The main role of researcher was to observe the participant in different activities in class and ask them questions. To avoid bias during assessment in each class participants were put in group of 3 members, so that the researcher could easily ask them questions. Observation of the participants may help the researcher to recognize most of things which are routine to respondents and lead to comprehend the framework [35]. What to observe is guided by the researcher's purpose in conducting the study. According to [35], an observation can either be structured or less structured. In a structure observation, researcher plans ahead of time on aspects to be observed. Once the rating scales completed successfully, each of participants as well as

their teachers and principals, were given a present as a token of thankfulness for their cooperation.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Having collected the data, the score were entered at IBM SPSS statistic software version 22.0, the latest version compatible with windows Seven. The methods of analysis were independent sample *t*-test to comparing the mean score in each area between two groups and descriptive analysis used to reviewed the background of participants such as gender and race. To examine the effect of Montessori on developmental skills of children aged five to six, an independent *t*-test analysis was done between the groups: the Montessori kindergarten and public kindergarten using NPC. Descriptive analysis used for data relating to gender and each of the developmental skills.

## 3. RESULTS

The study sought to answer four research questions, as are mentioned below:

1. Is there a significant difference in preschool children's achievement scores in cognitive development based on their participation in Montessori and public kindergarten?
2. Does enrolling in Montessori kindergarten have any significant effect on developing social skills of preschool children as comparing to public kindergarten with NPC?
3. Is there a significant difference in preschool children's achievement scores in language development based on their involvement in Montessori and public kindergarten?
4. Is there any major difference in physical development scores of preschool children based on their participation in Montessori kindergarten and public kindergarten?

In order to answer these questions a comparative research design was employed to ascertain the outcomes of the Montessori kindergarten and kindergarten using NPC. In this regard, the researcher collected data from 51 preschool children purposely chosen from both Montessori and public kindergarten.

In relation to the first research question, the results in table 1 indicated that there was a significant difference in the mean score of cognitive development between children in Montessori kindergarten and children in public kindergarten with NPC ( $P(2\text{-tailed})=.005$ ) which means the preschool children in Montessori kindergarten perform better than preschool children in public kindergarten with NPC. As an example, children in Montessori kindergarten were more creative when they asked to predict the story from the cover page picture of the storybook. Based on this, it seems that Montessori curriculum has a significant effect on cognitive development of preschool children.

**Table 1. Independent samples t-test for cognitive development and the two kindergartens**

Cognitive	Mean	SD	df	t	P(2-tailed)
Montessori	80.67	6.58	48.97	2.98	0.005
NPC	74.70	7.60			

Note: N Montessori=25, N NPC=27,  $p < 0.05$

Regarding to research question two, data on table 2 showed there was a statistically significant difference between social development of children in Montessori kindergarten and children in public kindergarten with NPC ( $P$  (2-tailed)=.019). In other words, children in Montessori kindergarten perform better in terms of their social skills than children in public kindergarten with NPC. According to this, it can be seen that Montessori curriculum has an important effect on social development of preschool children.

**Table 2. Independent samples t-test for social development and the two kindergartens**

Social	Mean	SD	df	t	P(2-tailed)
Montessori	55.79	1.89	47.09	2.43	0.019
NPC	54.56	1.74			

Note:  $N$  Montessori=25,  $N$  NPC=27,  $p < 0.05$

The data on table 3 presented that again there was a significant difference in the mean score of language development between children in Montessori kindergarten and children in public kindergarten with NPC ( $P$  (2-tailed)=0.002). Therefore, it can be concluded that Montessori curriculum has a significant effect on language development of preschool children.

**Table 3. Independent samples t-test for language development and the two Kindergartens**

Language	Mean	SD	df	t	P(2-tailed)
Montessori	55.38	1.68	46.12	3.26	0.002
NPC	53.07	1.35			

Note:  $N$  Montessori=25,  $N$  NPC=27,  $p < 0.05$

Analyzing the fourth question, the  $P$  value on table 4 revealed that there was no significant difference between children's mean score in both Montessori and public kindergarten with NPC in terms of physical development ( $P$  (2-tailed)=0.396) . It means that Montessori curriculum has no significant effect on physical development of preschool children.

**Table 4. Independent samples t-test for physical development and the two kindergartens**

Physical	Mean	SD	df	t	P(2-tailed)
Montessori	47.63	1.92	47.46	0.87	0.396
NPC	47.07	2.59			

Note:  $N$  Montessori=25,  $N$  NPC=27,  $p < 0.05$

As far as we know, this is the first study to document the effect of Montessori curriculum on preschool children's developmental skills in Kuala Lumpur. Findings clearly show that Montessori curriculum has a significant effect on developmental skills, except the physical development of preschool children in order to prepare them for primary school.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The findings of this study have brought light implications in relation to Montessori and National preschool curriculum and its effects on developmental skills. The findings revealed that children in Montessori curriculum have a higher score in cognitive, social and language development than children in public kindergarten with NPC. By looking at the activities in both kindergartens it is shown that preschool children in Montessori are love to play in groups, participate in class activities, love to accept responsibilities, and maintain relationship with their classmates.

The present findings were the same as the previous studies [10,12,16,25,36,37,38,39,40,41], which have reported that there is a difference between Montessori and traditional kindergartens in cognitive, language and social skill development. While a study by [42] concluded that there is no difference between traditional and Montessori day care in terms of language development. Also it was mentioned that day care project curriculum with an emphasis on play showed more positive effects toward language learning and self-esteem.

The environment and materials provided for children are much more in both quantity and quality in comparison to public kindergarten. The children in Montessori are educated to do and solve the problems by asking and searching and it will improve their cognitive skills. However, the physical skills in both groups have no significant difference, due to exercises and crafts activities time, children showed great ability in both fine and gross motor skills.

These finding may be observed with a few limitations in mind. To the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first attempt to determine the differences between Montessori curriculum and Malaysia National curriculum on developmental skills among preschool children in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Although the Montessori method of education has received a great deal of interest in the worldwide, still it needs to evolved carefully as different findings reveal some different status about this theory. Finally, the research sample of the study covers only two kindergartens: Montessori and public with NPC. Data were collected from sample group of 51 preschool children in Kuala Lumpur, and represented only two kindergartens of country. Therefore, the findings may only be generalized to those preschool children in Kuala Lumpur.

It is recommended to Malaysia Ministry of Education and Curriculum Division to provide training courses for teachers and curricular planners should considered the needs of children as well as religion, language and cultural backgrounds, and economic position. The system of assessing and evaluating should be planned in a way to examined whether learning objectives are being achieved. It is also recommended to teachers to help children participate in expressive tasks within a faithful background, and record the children's modifications over time.

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## **APPROVAL**

This paper entitled "The Difference between Montessori Curriculum and Malaysia National Preschool Curriculum on Developmental Skills of Preschool children in Kuala Lumpur" was approved by University Putra Malaysia senate on March 2014.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

I declare that the article is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other journal for publication.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1. Reliability statistics for the rating scale

Developmental Skills	Cronbach's alpha
Cognitive Skills	0.899
Language Skills	0.878
Social Skills	0.808
Motor Skills	0.921

*Note: Cronbach's alpha more than 0.07 shows high reliability.*

### Appendix 2. Rating scale for developmental skills of preschool children

Gender: .....	Age: ..... Y.....M	Kindergarten Curriculum: .....
Race: .....		

#### Description of Scoring

1	2	3	4	5
Weak	Quit weak	Neutral	Quit Good	Good

#### Researcher Notes

**Good (5):** The child can perform exactly as it was asked in the rating scale. 100% correct.

**Quit Good (4):** The child can perform as it was asked but have some delays in performing.

**Neutral (3):** The child can perform as it was asked but with one or two mistakes.

**Quit weak (2):** The child can perform but not the same as it was asked.

**Weak (1):** The child cannot perform at all.

*\*Note: Neutral in psychological aspect does not mean zero. It is continuous and here it means acceptable performance of child toward good.*

### Developmental skills rating scale

<b>Section A: Cognitive skills (5 to 6 years old)</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Quit good</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Quit weak</b>	<b>Weak</b>
1	Can count up to 20 in order.				
2	Counts ten items.				
3	Know at least name of 8 colors.				
4	Identifies an item that doesn't belong with a particular group.				
5	Identifies some shapes such circle and square.				
6	Can solve simple problems verbally, like "Can explain how we can open a box?"				
7	Can complete an 8 pieces puzzle.				
8	Understand the concept of comparative adjectives, like "taller, smaller".				
9	Draws a person in detail.				
10	Can recognize a missing part of a picture.				
11	Know the animal names.				
12	Can say the name of days of the week in order.				
13	Identifies sun, moon, and stars.				
14	Knows about things used every day in the home (money, food, etc.)				
15	Identifies the manner in which different animals move.				
16	Can predict the story from the cover page picture.				
17	Answer the questions such as "what happened if...?" (What happen if the egg drops?)				
18	Places 3 pictured event in sequence order.				
<b>Section B: Language skills (5 to 6 years old)</b>					
19	Can say 3 syllables word in English.				
20	Say the past tense of verbs correctly.				
21	Repeats songs, rhymes.				
22	Understands the concepts of "same" and "different".				
23	Say his or her name and age.				
24	Describe what is happening in the picture.				
25	Look at books independently and tell a story.				
26	Use sentences with 4 or 5 words. (I want to play with blocks.)				
27	Ask questions for more information.				
28	Name articles of clothing.				
29	Use language to express needs and feelings.				
30	Recognize all alphabetical letters.				

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**Section C: Social and Emotional skills (5 to 6 years old)**

- 31 Identifies self by name, age and gender.
- 32 Wants to play with friends.
- 33 Showing interest to the differences between gender (male and female).
- 34 Uses materials in appropriate manner.
- 35 Plays the role of "mom "or "dad".
- 36 Help to clean up masses.
- 37 Follow classroom rules.
- 38 Participate in decision making and accepting responsibilities.
- 39 Show understanding of moral values such as what is accepted as good behavior or what behavior is probably bad.
- 40 Become more aware of other people's feelings.
- 41 Identifies way in which people are alike or different.
- 42 Shares appropriately his materials or space with others.

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**Part D: Physical Skills (5 to 6 years old)**

- 43 Can move backwards with his/her toe or heel.
- 44 Can jump 10 times without falling down.
- 45 Can write the alphabets.
- 46 Put on a T-shirt without assistance.
- 47 Catch a large ball with two hands.
- 48 Can climb up and down.
- 49 Can cut out some simple shapes with scissors.
- 50 Can color inside lines.
- 51 Can do gluing and pasting the paper properly.
- 52 Make some shapes like snakes, or ball with clay.

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