

Act now on pre-school education

MOE can take charge of teacher training and set up curriculum to give it legitimacy



**Sunday with
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Opinion Editor

I never went to kindergarten. I spent the period between ages three and six around my parents' hawker stall, trailing my big brother and his friends as they caught spiders, climbed trees and played with kittens. In between, I served plates of char kway teow, washed dishes and played *masak masak* with the coffee-seller's daughter.

I made it to university nevertheless. Maybe I got all my socialisation and cognitive development in the informal play.

Twenty years ago, I would have laughed at the debate on early childhood education that has erupted after a global ranking of pre-school education by the Economist Intelligence Unit, commissioned by the Lien Foundation, placed Singapore 29th out of 45 countries and territories surveyed. Singapore lagged behind not only the industrialised West but also New Zealand, South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Australia.

But I've come to realise that personal experience is not a good basis on which to draw policy conclusions. Hard data matters. And the evidence is incontrovertible. It wasn't always so.

For the benefit of readers too young

to remember, the Singapore Government's stand on pre-school education has long been that "there was no consensus on the benefit of such education or how long the headstart would last", as a Straits Times report in 1998 put it. The Ministry of Education (MOE) took charge of formal schooling from Primary 1, and kept "a watchful eye on the curriculum and programmes offered at all private pre-schools".

So even as other countries ramped up investment in early childhood education, Singapore maintained its rather head-in-the-sand position.

Fourteen years on, there is a growing consensus that quality pre-school education improves not only children's cognitive abilities, but also their learning disposition (perseverance, willingness to learn, curiosity and the ability to focus).

A quick search online will yield plenty of studies indicating the above. A comprehensive literature survey commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education found consistent evidence from international and New Zealand studies that early childhood education is "positively associated" with gains in mathematics, literacy, school achievement and intelligence tests, as well as school readiness and reduced grade retention.

In particular, when it came to "intervention" studies in the United States, where children from low-income families were placed in quality pre-school centres, medium to large effects were seen.

Other studies conclude that investment in early childhood education

pays for itself via workers who earn more, lower drop-out rates and juvenile delinquency.

There's a catch though: Do these findings apply to Singapore?

We don't really know, because there is hardly any real data.

Back in 1999, The Straits Times reported MOE as saying that it was working with the National Institute of Education "to draw up details of an extensive research project to study the impact of early childhood education on children". Was the study done, and what are the results?

Given Singapore's emphasis on human capital, there must have been longitudinal studies to track the progress of children from different pre-schools. What are the results?

Without good data, the public discussion is just so much talk.

Since pre-school education has been on the public radar for years, MOE presumably has some good information on the issue. Now would be a good time to share it, even if the picture revealed is not pretty. More heads in the sand means another generation deprived of the benefits from quality early childhood education.

Now is also a good time for the Government to take concrete steps to boost the quality of pre-school education, beyond efforts to raise teacher qualifications.

What needs to be done?

For starters, rectify the anomaly of pre-school education falling in between MOE and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (now the reorganised Ministry of Social and Family Development).

Park it under MOE. This is about

educating a child, not family development. Having MOE take charge will give legitimacy and clout to this long-standing stepchild of education.

Next, nationalise teacher training and set up a national curriculum.

I don't agree with those who want the Government to nationalise and run pre-school education, because there is value in diversity. Rather than take over pre-schools and reduce choice for parents, the Government can take charge of teacher training to raise and enforce standards.

It can do like New Zealand did and develop a national curriculum with sufficient pathways and diversity for pre-schools to adapt to the needs of their charges. This way, curriculum development cost is centralised and funded by the state.

Third, review pre-school subsidies. These are now given to parents whose children go to childcare centres, and also to some pre-school operators. But only non-profit, secular groups are eligible for the latter type of subsidies – and right now, only the People's Action Party Community Foundation and the labour movement's NTUC First Campus qualify.

The subsidy system should be changed into a grant per child system that all operators can apply for, if they meet quality standards determined by the ministry, and if they are willing to accept fee caps. This way, state money is used to spur any operator who can deliver quality, affordable pre-school education.

The wasted years since 1998, when the issue was last extensively debated, cannot be recovered. To be fair, efforts have been made since then to boost teacher qualifications, but so much more could have been done.

It is now more urgent than ever for action. This is because income inequality and slowing social mobility will make it harder for children from low socio-economic backgrounds to succeed in school and at work in Singapore.

As sociologists know, when a society matures, the accretion of cultural capital hardens. Children from well-off families go to school already speaking well, and develop good cognitive habits and good social skills. Poor children who speak broken English may not know how to seek help when they need it, or how to cooperate with others.

Status difference is passed on to the next generation – so parents with money, good jobs and membership in high-status groups send their children to good schools, and provide resources and connections to give them a headstart in life.

Whether it is on the grounds of equity or efficiency, the evidence is surely strong enough for state action this time.

Catching spiders might not have done me harm 40 years ago, but it is a certainty that a poor child with lowly educated parents today will find it much tougher to break out of the poverty cycle.

Kids from well-off families get a headstart

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