

# Tackling preschool challenges in S'pore

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**I**MPROVING Singapore's preschool environment can, over time, help to boost birth rates, reduce social inequalities and better prepare people for work in a knowledge economy.

These are some of the findings from a new report, *Starting Well*, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit and commissioned by the Lien Foundation. The research ranks the preschool environments in 45 countries. Singapore ranks 29th, below countries such as Chile (20th) and Greece (27th). The Nordic countries – Finland (1st), Sweden (2nd) and Norway (3rd) – are rated as having the world's most inclusive and high quality preschool environments.

Singapore's poor showing in the report has provoked debate. A closer look at the findings suggests areas for improvement.

The index scores countries across four categories: "Availability" (25 per cent of total), "Affordability" (25 per cent), "Quality" (45 per cent) and "Social Context" (5 per cent). Singapore performs well only in the social context, which looks at the broader socio-economic environment for young children, including their health and nutrition levels.

Singapore ranks 25th for availability, largely because there is no legal right to preschool education here. A legal right does not imply that it is mandatory, but simply that a government has an obligation to provide it to those who want it. The research argues that such a right is an important sign of a long-term, stable commitment to preschool. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between the presence of a legal right and overall index performance.

For instance, South Korea (ranked 10th) enacted its Early Childhood Education Act in 2004. Among other things, it stipulates that the government "offers one year free early child education immediately before entering an elementary school, and requires the central and local governments to bear the cost for the free education". By contrast, Singapore has no similar Act supporting the preschool sector.

Singapore ranks 21st in terms of affordability, pulled down by relatively low government preschool spending and insufficient subsidies for preschool providers.

## Higher quality for all

**FINALLY**, Singapore ranks 30th in terms of quality, with low scores for, among other things, student-teacher ratios and preschool teacher wages.

While Singapore has some excellent preschools, they tend to be expensive. More affordable programmes, including those run by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and the PAP Community Foundation (PCF), are of varying quality. As a result, children of richer parents typically receive a much better preschool education and are subsequently more

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## EARLY PREPARATION

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prepared for primary school, with greater social awareness, confidence and group interaction skills.

"From neuro-scientific research, we understand the criticality of early brain development," Professor Sharon Kagan, who teaches early childhood and family policy at Teachers College, Columbia University in the United States, explains in the report. "Early childhood education contributes to creating the kinds of workforces that are going to be needed in the 21st century." Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page, among others, have attributed their achievements partly to their good preschool education.

So, what can be done to improve the preschool environment here?

## Raise teacher qualifications

**FIRST**, the research suggests that Singapore must raise minimum teacher qualifications. Experts agree that a well-trained workforce is the most important determinant of quality. Singapore last revamped its preschool teacher requirements in 2008, stipulating that from 2009, new preschool teachers must have five O-level credits and a two-year diploma in preschool education. (Before that, only three O-level credits and a teaching certificate were required.)

Though a good step, this progression is well behind the requirements of other countries. In Finland, for instance, all preschool teachers have a three- or four-year bachelor's degree in education. Greece, similarly, made the decision to turn kindergarten training into a graduate profession in the 1990s. Singapore must raise the bar aggressively while providing financial assistance to help current teachers retrain to meet the new requirements.

This adjustment has to be aligned with primary and secondary school requirements, and will have to be part of a broader push to raise the status and wages of all teachers in society. At the top end, preschool teachers in Denmark earn an average of nearly US\$50,000 (S\$62,800) a year in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms – compared with less than US\$19,000 in Singapore.

According to the Ministry of Manpower, preschool teachers are the lowest paid profession within the "Associate professionals and technicians" category, which includes, among others, social workers, display artists and dental nurses. The median gross monthly preschool teacher wage (\$1,840) was

just 63 per cent of Singapore's overall median gross wage (\$2,925) last year.

## Teacher shortage

**SECOND**, the research indicates a preschool teacher shortage in Singapore. The current student-teacher ratio here is 20 to 1, well above places such as Denmark (5.5), Canada (12) and Taiwan (12.6). Although there is some disagreement about what class size is optimal for better developmental outcomes, smaller classes are certainly more manageable for teachers.

While higher salaries should naturally attract more people to teaching, Singapore can also make strong efforts to attract qualified working professionals from other careers to transition into the profession, as Britain has done.

## Greater parental awareness

**THIRD**, there is a need to bolster parental awareness and involvement in early childhood education. The top performing countries have extensive parental education programmes to ensure that parents understand the importance and role of preschool, and can provide a supportive home environment, including adequate social, emotional and motor-skills training that is "age-appropriate" – matching the developmental level of children as they grow.

Other ways to improve quality include creating better links between preschool and primary school, and putting robust data collection mechanisms in place to enable more accurate preschool programme quality assessments.

## Increase state spending

**FINALLY**, as these measures will result in higher costs, more public money will have to be spent. In terms of government spending per year on each relevant-age child, exact figures for Singapore are not available, but it is understood to spend less than Norway does (US\$7,620 in PPP terms), and less also than countries such as New Zealand (US\$4,329), Japan (US\$4,029) and Poland (US\$2,635).

Singapore's privatised pre-

school education sector is currently funded through subsidies given directly to families, who can then secure preschool places for their children – or a "demand-side" approach. In some countries, subsidies are given directly to providers, with specific mandates about the need to accept all children – or a "supply-side" strategy.

Singapore's limited supply-side support is highly targeted. It is offered only to non-profit providers with no ethnic or religious affiliations which have the ability and reach to provide services to all children, including those from low- to middle-income families. Currently, only the NTUC and PCF groups qualify for support, which is calibrated to help them keep their fees affordable.

While the Nordic countries have a nationalised, supply-side approach, the research shows that there are other countries, such as New Zealand (ranked 9th), that have achieved success with a private sector, market-led strategy, through subsidies both to providers and disadvantaged families.

A common assumption is that higher public spending on preschool will necessarily mean higher taxes and/or a diversion of public money from elsewhere. But a third way could be for preschool investment to come under deficit spending, with any possible tax hikes left for future generations, who are in any case the main beneficiaries. In other words, perhaps little children can pay for their own quality preschool when they grow up and start earning.

And yet they may not have to. According to the research, some studies suggest that preschool investment can yield annual returns ranging from 8 per cent to 17 per cent. These accrue partly to the children themselves – largely in the form of higher lifetime earnings – but more significantly to the wider community, in terms of a reduced need for later remedial education and spending, and lower crime and less welfare reliance in later life, among other things.

In many countries, preschool investment often forms part of a broader package of family support to increase female participation in the workforce and maintain birth rates.

The research also indicates that greater preschool availability, affordability and quality can help reduce social inequality. This is not only because parents can work more, but also because quality preschool better prepares children for primary school, improving educational and professional outcomes later on in life, thereby enhancing their future earning potential.

There is currently much debate in Singapore about how best to address social inequalities. One possible way is by giving all children, regardless of background, their best shot at life – starting from preschool education.

The writer, a Singaporean, is a senior editor with the Economist Intelligence Unit. He was the editor of the *Starting Well* report.

