

Mind the (achievement) gap

UNEQUAL CHILDHOODS



Qi, Anna and Nora were featured in 2012 by The Straits Times when they were in the second year of kindergarten and about to enter Primary 1. A vast gap separated them then. Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie recently caught up again with the three girls, now in Primary 6, and found that they continue to develop along very different trajectories.



The feature in The Straits Times six years ago.



Commentary To give lagging kids a leg-up, give them a hand much earlier

Sandra Davie
Senior Education Correspondent

What accounts for the different developmental trajectories of Lim Qi, Nora and Anna?
Six years ago when the three children were featured in The Straits Times, there was already a gap between Qi, who had rich learning development opportunities, and Anna and Nora, who had far less support.
At Kindergarten 1, Qi surprised many ST readers with her advanced vocabulary. She is still

referred to as the “oxymoron girl”, because not only did she know the word, but she could also give examples to illustrate she understood its meaning.
Anna, on the other hand, was able to string together only simple sentences. However, her housewife mother and lorry driver father drummed into her the importance of education and ensured that she had two full years at the PAP Community Foundation kindergarten in the neighbourhood.
Although they were not educated beyond primary school, they sought help for Anna from her teachers in pre-school and primary school, as well as relatives and neighbours.

Anna was also coached by her polytechnic student cousin and a neighbour who was attending university.
Nora was trailing, having had a patchy attendance record during her kindergarten years, as her family consisting of her single mother and four siblings have moved house three times since she was two years old. In all, she attended kindergarten for just nine months over two years, and her language and numeracy skills were poor.
She was being helped by a reading programme called Flair, or Focused Language Assistance in Reading, for pre-school pupils struggling in their reading.
In the six years that passed, the

gap between these girls has only grown. Then, as now, experts interviewed attributed the different levels of development for Qi, Anna and Nora to their home circumstances and the varying quality of their early childhood education and care.
National Institute of Education Associate Professor Jason Tan pointed out that not only did Qi attend a good kindergarten, but she also grew up in a home where there is “concerted cultivation”, a term coined by American sociologist Annette Lareau to describe the parenting style used by middle-class parents that enables their children to gain advantages in life.
Calling it “parentocracy”, he said

that parents’ wealth and social capital have greater bearing on a child’s success.
“They are able to use their economic resources and tap their social networks to gain advantages for their children – everything from attending the right schools to getting the best tutors.”
He added: “Anna and Nora, on the other hand, did not have as strong a start because their parents were not well-to-do and were not able to provide their children with a rich learning environment or opportunities.”
So how can Singapore’s education system and help schemes be tweaked to enable Anna and Nora to level up to their

peers like Qi? After all, education at its best is a solution for disadvantages and a route to well-paid jobs and opportunities.
In his recent parliamentary speech, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung spoke on what can be done in schools to lift the children lagging behind.
But, as research and the stories of Qi, Anna and Nora show, this process must start even earlier, and early childhood development and education hold the key in helping poor children level up.
The Ministry of Education (MOE) has studied research on the subject and a few years ago took a big step by launching its own kindergartens to build a good foundation for

children. MOE must be applauded for setting up many of these kindergartens in the heartland, and settings aside 30 per cent of the places for children from low-income homes.
There are now 18 such kindergartens, but by 2023 there will be 50 such centres with well-trained teachers and top-notch facilities providing high-quality kindergarten education.
But is kindergarten too late? Studies suggest that the process of levelling up must start well before that.
A landmark study in the 1990s in the United States found that by age four, privileged children whose parents were professionals would have heard almost 30 million more words spoken in their presence, compared with children from homes on welfare. Not only were these words more complex, but better-off children also heard many more words of praise.
Language is the currency of

education and children who start out with weaker language skills lag behind in school.
Singapore needs to look at community projects, such as the 30 Million Word Gap where volunteers are sent out to homes to educate parents on the importance of interacting with their children – what some experts call the “verbal ping-pong”, the serve and return between the parent and child which develops the child’s brain.
Singapore should heed the advice of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, a passionate advocate of early childhood education, who has argued that the education authorities are also emphasising the wrong things when they target boosting cognitive skills or raising academic scores.
“They ignore a powerful body of research in the economics of human development,” he had stressed in a previous interview with The Sunday Times.
Take, for example, the Carolina

EFFECTIVE LEARNING
While quality can be an elusive goal in education, on the ground level, much of it is dependent on the calibre and ability of teachers to connect with their students, make them feel safe and help them process their emotions and behaviour. It is only when children feel secure and happy that learning takes place most effectively.

Abecedarian Project – better known as ABC – which provided cognitive stimulation to children but also went well beyond that.
From the time they were just a few months old, the children were trained in self-control and social skills. They were also given health checks and their parents were also educated on dealing with them.
This programme was found to have lasting effects on IQ, parenting practices and child attachment, leading to higher educational attainment and more skilled employment.
More recent evidence has shown that quality early childhood programmes can also prevent chronic disease and lead to substantially lower healthcare costs.
Now in their 30s and early 40s, those in the ABC programme have lower blood pressure, less hypertension and less likelihood of metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular conditions than their peers. Also, the benefits of

boosts in their character, self-control and cognition levels percolate all domains of life.
Mr Lee Poh Wah, who heads Lien Foundation which runs the Circle of Care programme for disadvantaged children, said: “While quality can be an elusive goal in education, on the ground level, much of it is dependent on the calibre and ability of teachers to connect with their students, make them feel safe and help them process their emotions and behaviour.”
“It is only when children feel secure and happy that learning takes place most effectively.”
The best programmes help parents become better and provide “scaffolding” for disadvantaged children.
Mr Lee noted that the Circle of Care programme that provides holistic childcare and pre-school education for disadvantaged children also focuses its efforts on helping parents improve their parenting skills.

He said: “Parents’ love for their children is a powerful but underutilised resource.”
“Having to cope with the stresses of daily survival makes it hard for parents to see the need to forge critical bonds with their children.”
“But it is this bond that lays the foundations for learning, emotional regulation and relationships.”
As for the children, it is qualities such as persistence, grit and self-awareness – which can be taught from a very young age – that are more important than efforts to boost academic scores.
As Professor Heckman has said: “Quality early childhood programmes for disadvantaged children are not bottomless wells of social spending.”
The investments we make today in disadvantaged young children will help them to soar and society to reap the benefits.
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Home circumstances give boost to budding table tennis player

LIM QI
Then: Possessed wide vocabulary
Now: A strong table tennis player, who also excels in her studies

Not many children at the age of six would know the meaning of “oxymoron” but, when interviewed six years ago in kindergarten, Lim Qi not only knew the word but could also give examples such as “dark light and cold sun” to illustrate it.
Her vocabulary has only widened since then – she is able to use words like “benchmark”, “gauche” and “resilience” in her conversation as well as describe and differentiate between odours such as “acidic”, “rancid” and “putrid”.
Her parents, Mr Roger Lim and Madam Yvonne Yeo, who run a communications firm and live in a landed home, attribute her wide vocabulary and intellectual curiosity at least partly to her pre-school education at EtonHouse International in Newton. It helped that she read widely and played online vocabulary games such as WordGirl.
She works hard and does not need any prodding from her parents. Whenever she comes across a word

she does not know, she makes it a point to look up the meaning and create sentences using the word.
Throughout her pre-school and primary school years at Nanyang Primary School, her parents encouraged her to have varied pursuits, including playing the violin, dance, ceramic art and drawing, which she proclaimed a great love for in pre-school.
Now, she has become a strong table tennis player, apart from excelling in her studies.
Her parents, who studied in Central Saint Martins in London, says that she and her husband, who has two other children, are not pushy parents. “We really want Qi to explore her interests in as wide an area as possible. The funny thing is we didn’t expose her to table tennis but she tried it in school, really liked it and showed potential in it, and so we have helped her pursue that.”
Her parents take turns to ferry her to training at the Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA) in Toa Payoh five times a week and go to tournaments with her, mostly in the region. Last year, they accompanied her to one in Belgium.



Lim Qi, who is ranked 11th in her age group, at a practice session at the Singapore Table Tennis Association. The 12-year-old excels not only in table tennis but also in her studies. ST PHOTO. LIN ZHAOWEI

Now, at 12 years old in Nanyang Primary, Qi dreams of representing Singapore in table tennis and doing well enough academically to go on to realise her dream of becoming a medical doctor.
She is already in the STTA’s junior development squad and is ranked 11th in her age group.

She is hoping to make it to Raffles Girls’ School through the Direct School Admission scheme by using her talent in table tennis.
Qi remains way ahead of the two other girls who were featured alongside her six years back, when they were about to enter Primary 1. One of the other girls, whose fa-

ther is a lorry driver, lives in a three-room flat and the other, whose single mum worked then as a cleaner, lives in a rental one-room flat.
The gap that had opened up even before the girls went to kindergarten – because of their home circumstances – has only widened. Said Mr Lim, who studied at the

London School of Economics: “We know Qi is fortunate. We are in a position to give her the best opportunities in life.
“But there are many children whose parents are unable or don’t have the means to provide as much. We feel that more should be done for them.”

Extra help from teachers helped pupil lift her marks

ANNA
Then: Shy. Her parents spoke to her and her siblings only in Mandarin and dialect
Now: Her English has improved greatly and she is aiming for the Normal (Academic) stream

Like Lim Qi, Anna too loved to draw and colour pictures when she was six.
But when we asked her at that time about the drawings she had produced for her kindergarten teacher, the quiet child hid away.
She also offered little information when asked basic questions like how many brothers and sisters she had and what her favourite colour was.
Her housewife mum and lorry

driver father said her shyness was due to the fact that they spoke only in Mandarin and dialect to their three girls, including Anna.
But fast forward six years and Anna’s English has improved by leaps and bounds, thanks to her teachers. She now readily recounts how all the “extra help” she got from her teachers helped to lift her marks across all subjects.
Anna’s parents have asked that her school not be identified to protect her identity.
Said the slightly-built girl in a soft, but confident voice: “My teacher in Primary 3 was very kind and gave me a lot of help. She was always caring and will give me extra homework to help me. She will also always encourage me.”

She is aiming for the Normal (Academic) stream in Broadrick Secondary, a 30-minute bus ride from her home, a three-room HDB flat.
Her housewife mum said she is very grateful for the pre-school and primary school teachers who helped Anna. She said in Mandarin: “My two older girls studied hard and got into Normal (Academic) and I am hoping my youngest one will also be able to do that. Her teacher said she can.”
She added that although she and her husband did not study beyond primary school, they feel education is very important. “I will be very happy when all my three girls make it to poly. Then they can go and get good jobs, maybe in nursing, and take care of my husband and me,” she said, adding that they are even thinking of sending Anna for tuition at a neighbourhood tuition centre.
“I told her to go for tuition for two months before PSLE,” she said. The family had set some money aside to pay for the tuition.
Anna said she struggled with her English and Mathematics in lower primary. But the Learning Support Programme helped her do better after Primary 3.
It also helped that she attended the student care centre located on the school premises, after school hours. “We eat lunch, play games and get help to do our homework. I stay there until I come home at 6pm. My mother and father cannot help me in my homework, only my older sister can help.”
Beyond making it to Normal (Academic) stream and on to polytechnic, she said she really doesn’t know what job would interest her in the future. “I sometimes think I want to be a teacher, but my teacher told me that to become a teacher I have to make it to Express stream and then junior college.”
“I have improved in my studies but I don’t think I can make it to junior college. I think I can make it to poly and maybe become a nurse.”
“As my mother says, I have to study hard.”

Hoping to land spot in Normal stream with her running ability

NORA (NOT HER REAL NAME)
Then: Struggled to find right words to describe drawings despite receiving help from a specially trained teacher; patchy school attendance
Now: Still shies away from answering questions but school attendance has improved

Six years ago, when Nora was attending kindergarten, on her way to Primary 1, she struggled to find the right words to describe her drawings. “A girl... house... tree,” she volunteered after much coaxing when The Straits Times spoke to her.
This was despite receiving help through Flair – Focused Language Assistance in Reading – where a specially-trained teacher gives extra attention to children who are behind in their reading and writing.
Her kindergarten fees after subsidies were only \$5 a month, but Nora’s teachers said she did not improve much because her attendance was patchy.
Her mother, a single parent with five children who was working as a cleaner, had to move homes three times before settling into a one-room rental flat.
Nora still shrugs her shoulders a lot and shies away from answering questions, but her school attendance has improved a lot.
Nora’s family has asked that her school not be identified to protect her identity.
When asked about which secondary school she hopes to enrol in, Nora said she hopes to enter the Normal stream at CHJ Toa Payoh using her talent in running.
She has not heard of the Junior Sports Academy, which offers free,

professional coaching to talented athletes, but has won a clutch of medals for running.
“My teacher spoke to me about getting in through Direct School Admission, but I don’t know,” said the girl who is studying Mathematics and Science at Foundation level, which is meant for students who are weak in the subjects.
She added: “I am also OK to enter Normal (Technical) at a school nearby.”
Her single mum, who now works as a dishwasher, admitted not having much time to attend to her five children.
“The older children have to look after the younger ones,” she said, also shrugging her shoulders.
Despite earning only about \$1,000 a month, she buys her children assessment books from the neighbourhood bookshop.

But she also said her children “cannot study so well”.
Still she hopes Nora will not end up like her eldest sister who had to drop out of school at Secondary 4 earlier this year after becoming pregnant. This means Nora’s mother is poised to become a grandmother while still in her 30s.
“Nora is not bad... Her English is OK. It is her maths that is no good,” she said, adding that although her daughter was being helped by special programmes such as the Learning Support Programme for pupils lagging behind, she has not been able to pass Mathematics.
But she insists education is important, and that she stresses that to her children. “I keep telling them to study hard. That is the only way they can have a good job.”
“But if your children cannot study, what do you?”

