



Six-year-old Lim Qi using her iPad at home (left) and preparing to paint a mask at school (right). Her parents pay about \$1,500 a month for her to attend EtonHouse. ST PHOTOS: RAJ NADARAJAN, DESMOND LUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

At the starting line

Right now, the quality of preschool education is tied to price. **Insight** reports on what that means for children, rich and poor.



Children and parents at dismissal time at St Vincent de Paul Kindergarten, which is located in a void deck in Serangoon North. Kindergartens and childcare centres are run by a wide variety of operators. ST PHOTO: MARIEL VICTORIA MOK

By SANDRA DAVIE
SENIOR WRITER

SIX-YEAR-OLD Lim Qi uses her iPad to watch her favourite cartoon.

It is called WordGirl and she likes it as she can learn many words from the girl superhero who fights crime using her strength and colossal vocabulary.

Among the words she learnt recently is “oxymoron”, and to demonstrate that she knows its meaning, she says: “Cold sun and dark light are oxymorons.”

She says her parents, Mr and Mrs Roger Lim, who run a communications company, helped her to understand the word’s meaning.

Her mum Yvonne, 44, is a design graduate. She attributes Lim Qi’s advanced vocabulary partly to the preschool she attends, EtonHouse along Newton Road.

Mrs Lim forks out about \$1,500 a month to put her daughter there for about six hours a day, but she says the quality is evident in the centre’s graduate teachers, low teacher to student ratio of 1:12, and the International Baccalaureate curriculum that emphasises inquiry-based learning.

Lim Qi also attends weekly art, violin and ballet lessons. The articulate child says she loves to dance and play the violin. “Oh, I also love to draw,” she says, showing off her many colourful drawings.

The six-year-old daughter of

Mr T.L. Lim, 44, a lorry driver, also loves to draw but shies away from saying anything more.

The quiet child, who goes to a PAP Community Foundation (PCF) kindergarten in Bedok, lags behind her peers in reading and writing.

She is receiving extra help from her preschool teachers.

When asked basic questions like how many brothers and sisters she has and what her favourite colour is, she struggles to reply in full sentences. Her father says her main problem is the lack of exposure to English at home.

“We all speak Mandarin,” he says, adding that he worries about whether his daughter, the youngest of three children, will be able to cope when she enters Primary 1 next year.

He admits that he buys only assessment books for his youngest, not story books. “No point, because she cannot read,” he says.

Still, he feels that she will eventually catch up with her peers in primary school. “My older daughter was not good at first, but now she is okay. Her school teacher is very good,” he says.

Nora (not her real name) is also six years old. The soft-spoken girl struggles to find the right words when asked to describe her latest drawing.

“A girl... house... tree,” she volunteers after much coaxing.

Her divorcee mother is 38 years old and works as a cleaner.

She says she cannot afford story books on her meagre monthly salary of \$900.

“I get my children to watch English shows on television,” she says, pointing to a television that was donated by a resident at the condominium where she works.

Besides, she says the child has many books to read at the childcare centre she attends, My First Skool in Kallang Bahru.

She is able to afford the NTUC-run centre for her daughter because with all the subsidies she receives, she has to pay only \$5 a month. The centre charges \$588 a month for full-day care, which includes the kindergarten programme.

The centre, which won the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework or Spark quality mark awarded by the Ministry of Education (MOE), has many age-appropriate books. Nora’s teachers, though, say she hardly picks up books to read on her own.

The centre is offering her extra help through a programme called Flair – Focused Language Assistance in Reading – where a specially trained teacher gives extra attention to children who are lagging behind in their reading and writing.

The wide gap between the development of children from affluent middle-class families like Lim Qi and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds like Nora has in recent years caused

concern that children are entering formal education on an unequal footing.

Why preschool matters

THERE are no published studies but anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the pupils who end up in the learning support programme in Primary 1 either had no preschool education or a patchy one.

The programme is for kids lagging behind in English and maths.

The passionate belief among many child experts and educators is that quality preschool for all can help narrow the gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Dr Lynn Ang, a senior lecturer of early childhood at the University of East London, points to the overwhelming evidence that quality preschool is critical to child development.

She cited the findings of the Perry Preschool Project, a landmark study carried out in Michigan in the 1960s. The project involved providing high-quality preschool education to a group of three- and four-year-old children living in poverty and assessed to be at high risk of school failure.

The children were taught by certified public school teachers with at least a bachelor’s degree. The average child-teacher ratio was 6:1 and the curriculum emphasised active learning. The teachers

also paid a home visit weekly to involve the mothers in the educational process.

These children were tracked for decades after completing preschool and not only did more of them go on to complete high school and enter college, they also had better jobs and earned higher salaries.

Professor Sharon Kagan of Columbia University, quoted in the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) study on preschool education, explains why: “Three strands of research combine to support the importance of the early years. From neuro scientific research, we understand the criticality of early brain development; from social science research, we know that high-quality programmes improve children’s readiness for school and life; and from economic research, we know that high-quality programmes save society significant amounts of money over time.”

The worry is that the current preschool landscape – marked by uneven quality – is not helping but hindering the desired leveling-up.

Bar set too low?

THERE are 500 kindergartens that come under the MOE and some 900-plus childcare centres that fall under the purview of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS).

They are run by a wide variety of operators, from companies to religious groups and community-based bodies like the PCF and National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). They charge fees ranging from as little as \$55 to as much as \$1,800 a month.

Their facilities differ widely, as do teacher qualifications, class size and curricula. All this results in uneven quality.

For years, educationists, politicians and parents have worried over the fallout of leaving the preschool sector to free-market forces, with insufficient regulatory supervision. Some suspect that as a result, many preschool operators cut corners and compromise standards to keep fees affordable.

With few exceptions, those preschools that offer quality charge high fees, which means only children from well-to-do families have access to their services.

Three years ago, an expert study commissioned by government feedback unit Reach called for preschool education to be made compulsory and for the sector to be nationalised.

But the calls died down after the Government stood its ground, saying preschool was best left to private operators and charitable groups like the PCF as they offer choice to parents.

Some parents like Mr Adrian Tan, 34, an accountant, prefer that the Government not take

over as he wants to send his son to a church-run kindergarten. “To me, character and values education comes first. That’s why I am looking for a good church kindergarten for my son.”

Dr Ng Eng Hen, then Education Minister, told Parliament that the Government would instead focus on improving the quality, accessibility and affordability of preschool education.

MOE and MCYS have over the years raised the baseline qualifications that principals and teachers must meet. MOE is also strengthening programme quality by developing and disseminating curriculum resources to all preschools.

Last year, it introduced the quality accreditation framework called Spark to encourage preschool centres to improve. But to date, only 115 centres out of over 1,400 have received the award.

Despite these efforts, the general view is that the bar is still set too low.

How Singapore ranks

JUST last month, debate erupted all over again after a global ranking of preschool education by the EIU placed Singapore 29th out of 45 countries surveyed.

Most know that it is hard to beat the Nordic countries, but Singapore also ranked behind others in the Asia-Pacific region, including New Zealand, South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Australia.

At its core, the survey called Starting Well attempted to assess the extent to which governments provide good, inclusive early education to children between the ages of three and six.

It considered the relative availability, affordability and quality of preschool environments in each country.

And as EIU’s analyst Trisha Suresh points out, Singapore fared well only in one indicator – “social context”. This was a nod to its high literacy rates and standard of living.

But its score was “average” for “availability”, pulled down by lack of a legal right to preschool education. But some have questioned if this is a good indicator, as 99 per cent of kindergarten-age children here are enrolled in preschool.

Singapore also did only “average” for affordability, which took into account the cost of a private preschool, government spending on the sector and subsidies to underprivileged families or centres that cater to them.

Ms Suresh notes that the survey shows fees charged by centres here range from \$100 to \$1,800. “In the Singapore context, fees have become the indicator of quality,” she says.

Another factor that dragged Singapore down in this measure was government spending.

Exact figures for Singapore are not available but going by the EIU ranking of government spending per year on each relevant-age child, Singapore spends less than Norway does – US\$7,620 (S\$9,550) in purchasing power parity terms – and less also than countries such as New Zealand (US\$4,329), Japan (US\$4,029) and Poland (US\$2,635).

Singapore fared worst in “quality”. It ranked 30 out of 45.

Reasons for this included a high teacher-student ratio of 1:20 and the relatively low average wages and low entry requirements for preschool teachers. The top 10 countries in the index have ratios ranging from one teacher to five to 11 children.

Qualifications-wise, preschool teachers in the top-10-ranked economies have degrees. Teachers here need to have only five O-level credits and a diploma in preschool education.

The Singapore Government has already raised the requirements for preschool teachers, but recruiting and training more teachers will take time.

Not all Singaporeans want the Government to take over the preschool sector or even invest more public funds in it.

Businessman R. Maniam, whose two sons attended PCF kindergartens, says: “The quality may not be that good but it is good enough and improving.”

He adds: “I would rather the Government spends its money on the universities to create more places.”

But Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive officer of the Lien Foundation which commissioned the EIU study as well as a second report on how to raise preschool standards here, worries that the sector as it is now only serves to widen the gap between children.

He says: “We need to look into providing good, high-quality education that will close the gap between children like Lim Qi and No-ra.”

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The Starting Well Report

The report was published by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The research studied preschool environments in 45 countries. Countries were measured on four indicators: social context (5% weightage), availability (25%), affordability (25%) and quality (45%).



Social context
This measures the broader socio-economic environment for young children, including their health and nutrition levels, and literacy rates.

Rank	Place	Overall score
1	Finland	91.8
2	Sweden	91.7
10	South Korea	72.5
19	Hong Kong	66.2
29	Singapore	58.8



Availability
This measures access to preschool for low-income families taking into account the proportion of children enrolled in preschool, whether children are entitled by law to preschool education, and state policies to promote early childhood development.

Rank	Place	Overall score
1	Belgium	99.7
5	Finland	94.9
11	South Korea	82
25	Singapore	64.3
26	Hong Kong	60.9



Affordability
This measures whether families of all incomes can afford to send their children to preschool. State spending on preschool education and subsidies to low-income families and to institutions catering to low-income families are taken into consideration.

Rank	Place	Overall score
1	Belgium	92.4
5	Finland	84.2
11	South Korea	64
25	Singapore	60
26	Hong Kong	59.8



Quality
Indicators used to measure quality include student-teacher ratio, teachers’ salaries, teacher training, scope of curriculum guidelines and level of parental involvement.

Rank	Place	Overall score
1	Finland	93.5
10	South Korea	69
11	Hong Kong	68.9
29	Chile	53
30	Singapore	50.6

Preschool in Singapore

Preschool education in Singapore is provided through kindergartens and childcare centres. MATTHIAS CHEW looks at what’s available.

CHILDCARE CENTRES		KINDERGARTEN	
Number	987	Number	502
Pupils aged 4-6	45,000	Pupils	67,000
Monthly full-day fee range	\$330 to \$2,500	Monthly fee range	\$55 to \$1,800

EtonHouse International Group

A chain catering to the higher end of the market, with mainly graduate teachers and a low student-teacher ratio.

Monthly fee range	\$1,300 to 1,800
Number of centres for pupils aged 4-6	11
Pupils aged 4-6 attending EtonHouse centres	1,500
Spark-certified centres*	3

NOTE: * Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework

PAP Community Foundation

The largest player in the preschool scene, with roughly half of the kindergarten-age cohort attending its centres.

Monthly fee range	\$60 to \$320
Number of kindergartens	242
Number of childcare centres	84
Pupils attending PCF kindergartens	40,000
Pupils receiving kindergarten subsidy for low-income families	25%
Spark-certified centres*	39

Sources: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT YOUTH AND SPORTS, MINISTRY OF MANPOWER, PAP COMMUNITY FOUNDATION, ETONHOUSE

GRAPHICS: MIKE M DIZON
PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Salaries compared	
Starting pay of graduate school teachers	\$2,900
Starting pay of non-graduate school teachers	\$1,920
Median pay of preschool teachers	\$1,840
Median pay of general office clerks	\$1,840
Median pay of warehouse labourers	\$1,748



PAP Community Foundation preschools, which take in half of all kindergarten-age pupils, vary in quality.

Many in favour of Govt taking over preschool sector

MRS Denise Lai has been in the early childhood education business for over 15 years.

Her two preschools – in Tanglin and East Coast – charge parents about \$1,200 a month for the four-hour kindergarten programme.

The 42-year-old mother of three, who is enrolled in National Institute of Education’s (NIE) doctorate in education programme, is surprisingly an ardent advocate for the Government to take over the sector.

She says: “It has become evident to me that the costs of providing a good quality programme are beyond the means of the average family.

“And it is just not possible for operators to keep the fees low and still run a quality school. Take a modest-sized preschool with five classrooms for 75 children. The rent, teachers’ salaries and the experience-based materials the children need can easily add up to \$50,000 a month. Which means, just to break even, the centre would have to charge \$700 per child.

“Now that’s a lot of money for the average family.”

She is just one of the many child education experts who, in recent years, have called for the Government to bring the preschool sector under its ambit. That was also one of two main recommendations in the second Lien Foundation report, released last week.

The 27 education experts surveyed called on the Government to take charge of preschool education, and offer it free to all children.

There was also a strong call for the Ministry of Education (MOE) to train preschool teachers the way it recruits and trains mainstream school teachers through the NIE.

On MOE running preschools, which would mean nationalising the sector, Mr Lee Poh Wah, 41, chief executive officer of the Lien Foundation, says only the Government has the resources, financial and otherwise, to raise standards in the sector.

Dr Khoo Kim Choo, who runs the Preschool for Multiple Intelligences along Newton Road, is also for the Government running kindergartens, at least the K2 level. That would standardise the curriculum and ensure all children have a smooth transition to primary school.

When there was a similar call to nationalise preschool education three years ago, then Education Minister Ng Eng Hen said there was no universally accepted model for kindergarten teaching. Imposing one would deprive parents of choice.

He also argued that bringing preschools into the formal school system runs the risk of an over-emphasis on academics.

The Government had a similar reasoning back in 1999 when it conducted a review of preschool education. Dr Aline Wong, then Senior Minister of State for Education, said the Government would not take over the sector but would look into ways to encourage kindergartens and childcare centres to improve the quality of their programmes.

In 1979, the Government started a pre-primary programme to help children from dialect-speaking homes learn English and Mandarin.

About 2,500 children in K2 spent a year in the programme. It was available at 31 schools at a nominal cost of \$4 a month. The ministry subsidised every pupil to the tune of \$120 a month.

But the Government could not justify to the Auditor-General the cost of running a programme that cost \$80 million a year, and which was already offered by the private sector. So in 1989, it was announced that from 1990, the popular pre-primary programme would cease.

Are experts now calling for a reversal of that decision?

Not quite. Dr Khoo and Ms Ho Yin Fong, academic

director of the National Trades Union Congress-run Seed Institute, say they are not calling for all children to go to state-run kindergartens.

“The Government could provide good preschools for the majority of children. But it could also allow and support private operators who have a proven record of providing high-quality education. This way, parents will still have a choice,” says Dr Khoo.

Ms Ho notes that the Government gives subsidies to working mothers who send their children to childcare centres, and there is a further subsidy for those from low-income families.

In some countries, subsidies are given directly to childcare providers.

Singapore’s subsidies to preschool operators are limited and offered only to non-profit providers with no ethnic or religious affiliations, and which have the ability and reach to provide services to all children. Currently, only the NTUC and PAP Community Foundation (PCF) groups qualify for support.

Dr Khoo points out that countries such as New Zealand have achieved success with a private sector, market-led strategy, through subsidies both to providers and parents.

Mr Lee says compared to its “well-endowed step-sisters”, namely primary and secondary education, which are fully supported by the Government, “preschool education is a Cinderella, left to fend for itself as a 100 per cent private system”.

He points out the plight of St James’ Church Kindergarten. It is faced with the prospect of having to shut down because it cannot find affordable new premises. One site it considered would cost \$101,000 in monthly rent.

Says Mr Lee: “It is a good quality kindergarten that charges just \$300, but if it had to pay \$100,000 a month in rent alone, then it would have to charge its 200 children \$500 a month just to cover rent. Then what about their teachers’ salaries?”

As for MOE taking over the training of preschool teachers, Mrs Lai says: “Right now, primary school teachers who teach kids seven years of age onwards are recruited and trained by MOE, but this important task is left to the private sector for those teaching younger kids.”

But where would that leave current preschool teachers, many of whom are not degree holders?

Kindergarten teacher and diploma holder Serene Lim, 48, who switched to preschool teaching a few years ago, said: “What happens to people like me? It would be difficult for me to switch careers at my age. I will be out of a job.”

Parent Carol Choo, 33, who wants only graduate preschool teachers for her children, says these teachers can upgrade their qualifications or become teaching assistants.

Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong last week said the Lien Foundation study provides useful inputs as the Government further refines policies. He also noted the considerable progress made in preschool education.

Mr Wong, wearing his hat as chairman of the PCF executive committee, also recently announced the foundation’s plan to bring all its 328 kindergartens and childcare centres under a centralised system.

That would help address the problem of uneven standards across the different PCF schools, he said.

There is broad agreement that more must be done to raise preschool education standards.

The challenge now is finding the resources needed to fund this costly enterprise, and recruiting and training enough qualified teachers who can make a difference.

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