

# VITAL VOICES FOR VITAL YEARS

**A Study of Leaders'  
Perspectives on  
Improving the Early  
Childhood Sector in  
Singapore**

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This is an independent research study commissioned by the Lien Foundation. The views expressed in this report are those of leading professionals and independent experts in the early childhood field in Singapore.

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# VITAL VOICES FOR VITAL YEARS

**A Study of Leaders' Perspectives on Improving  
the Early Childhood Sector in Singapore**

**by Dr Lynn Ang**

An independent research study commissioned by



## CONTRIBUTORS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was informed by a select group of key stakeholders from multi-disciplinary fields who work with children on a daily basis, and whose work has a direct impact on children and families. The participants included 27 leading professionals from across a range of sectors: education, health and social welfare. The participants also included representatives from the private, voluntary and quasi-government sectors.

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# FOREWORD

Preschool: behind this word is a universe of converging currents for the child: child rearing meets education and the environment of parents, siblings and home enlarges with the new experience of teachers, friends and school. For young parents, it is also the confluence of caring for their children while leaving the family to go to work.

Preschool is also the place where the child learns to learn and where the foundations are set for the future productive and participative citizen. Given its vital role in a child's development, from linguistic and cognitive skills to socio-emotional and physical capacity, the Lien Foundation has set its sights to work with this critical sector of Singapore's education to catalyse reform.

Towards end 2011, we initiated two studies. At the global level, we commissioned the Economist Intelligence Unit to examine and benchmark early childhood education across the world. The *Starting Well Index* was released this June and placed Singapore 29th out of 45 countries.

At the local level, we commissioned this ground-up study, drawing upon leading stakeholders in the preschool sector: teachers, principals, healthcare professionals, social workers, academics, private and non-profit operators and training providers.

You hold the findings and key recommendations in your hands. They represent diverse voices but a common interest in what's best for the Singapore child. Their proposals reaffirm some of the systemic weaknesses highlighted in the *Starting Well Index*.

Our hope is that *Vital Voices for Vital Years* will provide the platform for an informed discussion among policy makers, educators and parents that will lead to quality education at the preschool level. Ultimately, we envisage *Vital Voices* to be one of many baby steps towards a headstart in life for every child in Singapore.

Our thanks go to the 27 leaders who gave their time and ideas unstintingly. We also thank Dr Lynn Ang, the lead investigator, for her commitment towards this landmark study and to her university, the University of East London, for its support.

Lee Poh Wah  
CEO  
Lien Foundation



**The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born.**

**UNICEF (2007) 'An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries', Innocenti Report Card 7, Innocenti Research Centre: Florence.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is overwhelming evidence from international research to show that a quality preschool experience can make a significant difference to young children's lives (OECD 2006, UNESCO 2000). Research evidence also shows that quality preschool provisions can make a positive difference to children from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds. The preschool years in a child's life are absolutely critical. It is during these formative years, from birth to preschool age, that the foundations are laid for children's subsequent success and achievement. As such, investing in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is crucial.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate leading professionals' perspectives on improving the preschool sector in Singapore. At the heart of this project is to advocate for every child in Singapore to have the best possible chance in life to grow up into happy, healthy, confident and successful individuals. The challenges faced by all stakeholders in the sector – educators, preschool providers, and policy-makers – are: How can we create widespread support for preschool education for the very young? How can we ensure quality preschool services? How can we build a quality workforce of early childhood educators? How can we raise collective awareness of the importance of preschool education? And how can we create sustainable change within the sector for the benefit of all children and families? These questions are faced by many stakeholders in the early childhood field, in the international community, as well as locally in the preschool sector in Singapore.

To address these questions, the Lien Foundation has commissioned this landmark study to investigate the views of leading professionals on moving the sector forward. This report highlights key findings from the research undertaken with 27 local leaders. It provides an overview of some of the issues and challenges that the sector is currently facing, as well as suggestions on what can be done to address these issues. The study reveals that while the preschool sector in Singapore has developed significantly in recent years, more work still needs to be done in terms of both the governance of the sector (the way preschool services

are managed) and the overall quality of the sector. The key lessons that have emerged from the study are:

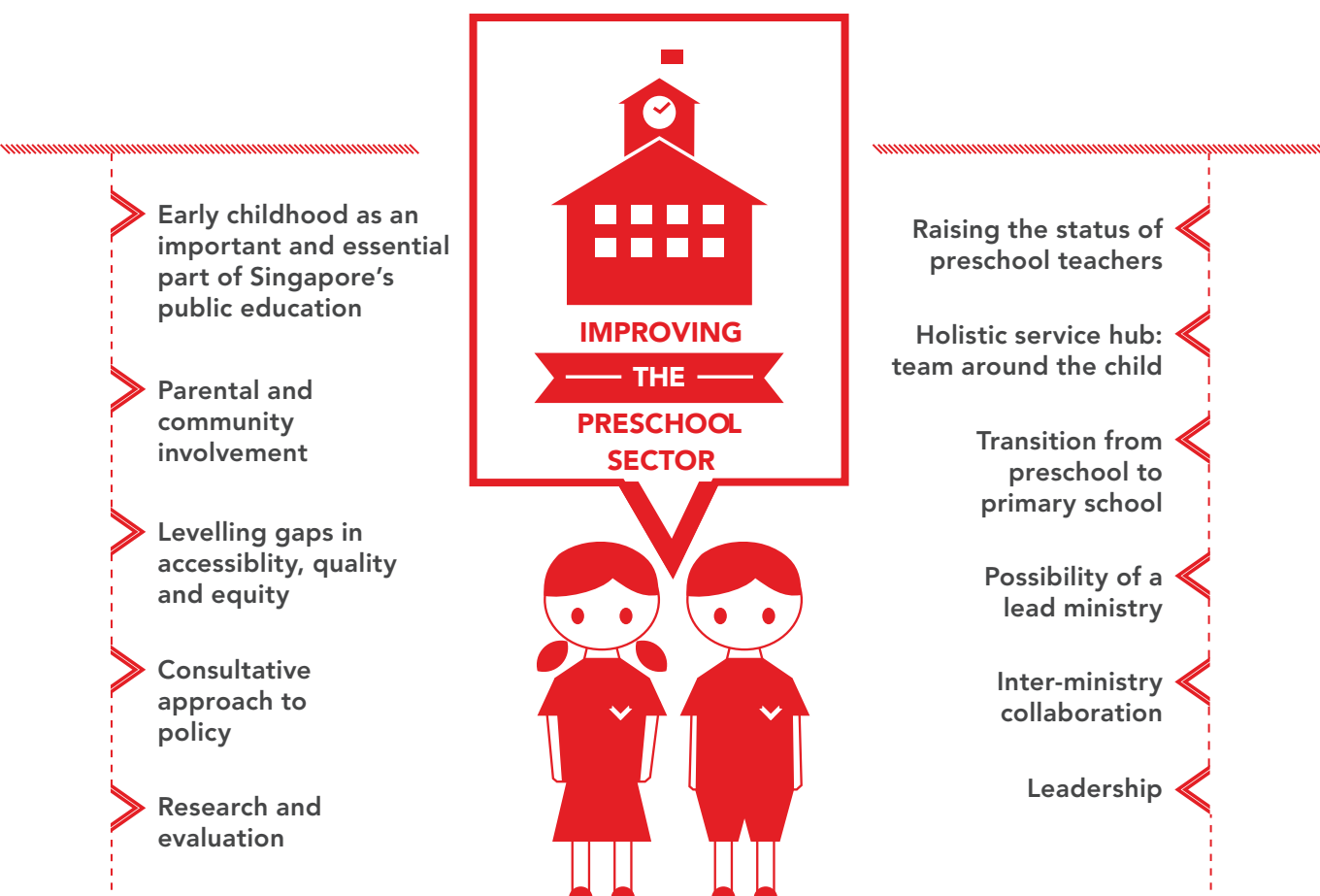
1. In order to improve the preschool sector, early childhood has to be seen as more than just part of an overall national strategy to prepare children for primary schooling, but also as an essential part of Singapore's public education system.
2. Raising the status of preschool teachers and respecting the value of early childhood education as an important issue in its own right, are the first key steps to strengthening the sector.
3. The preschool sector is a complex field which cuts across traditional professional boundaries such as education and care. As such, establishing a multi-layered and holistic approach to preschool services is crucial to advancing the sector at a systemic level.
4. A holistic and multi-layered approach involves coordination and collaboration across all professional sectors and policy fields, including collaboration among different ministries, as well as among diverse professionals. A proposed model is to create a multi-professional front-line service hub within the neighbourhoods to provide a 'Team Around the Child' (TAC), comprising professionals from health, education and social services to meet the needs of children and families.
5. There are concerns that the rapid expansion of preschool services has led to significant gaps in the quality, accessibility and equity of services. Levelling the gaps is important, especially in a privatised preschool sector where the quality of preschool services can be highly variable. One way to address this is to increase public spending in the sector and provide universal preschool entitlement for all preschool children in Singapore.
6. Parental and community involvement are critical to improving the preschool sector. More government funding and investment are needed to support parent education and community programmes. Parents, families and the community can make a significant contribution to the sector by complementing and extending the early experiences that children receive in preschools.
7. As early childhood is increasingly becoming an important part of public policy, it is important to establish a rigorous research culture whereby the impact of policy, policy development and implementation can be measured, evaluated and evidenced.

8. Where the quality of preschool programmes varies considerably, it is important to undertake research to evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programmes, in order to assess their overall impact on children's learning and development. The questions: 'what works?', 'how do we know if it works, and 'has it actually made a difference to children's learning and development?' have to be addressed.
9. The quality of care and education provision is directly linked to the quality of the workforce. However, raising the minimum qualifications of preschool teachers, while important, is not enough to move the sector forward. The quality of teacher training programmes needs to be better regulated to ensure that the quality of the preschool workforce is improved.
10. Professional status, pay and working conditions of preschool teachers are crucial factors in maintaining a quality workforce. These factors can significantly influence the attrition of preschool teachers.
11. The transition from preschool to primary school is one of the most important changes that a child will experience in his or her life. If the benefits of a high-quality preschool education are to be carried over to children's primary school experience, then the two phases of education must offer a holistic and continuous learning experience.
12. While the increasing government involvement to regulate the sector is generally welcomed by most participants in the study, there is a concern that the overwhelming influence of government may stifle the independent voices of preschool teachers and other stakeholders. As such, a consultative approach to policy development and implementation is seen as key in galvanising support and moving the sector forward.
13. One example of a consultative approach could entail the setting up of an independent advisory body comprising representatives from different key stakeholders such as preschool teachers, service providers, teacher training providers, health professionals, family educators, community workers, social workers, parents, voluntary welfare organisations (VWO) and other relevant agencies and experts who are involved in the care and education of young children.
14. Well-coordinated early childhood provision requires different ministries and agencies to work together for the common good of all children and families. Participants in the study welcomed the idea of further inter-ministerial collaboration between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of

Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) as a way of promoting continuity and consistency within the sector.

15. In order to promote better governance, one suggestion emerging from the study is the nomination of a lead ministry (for example, MOE) or the formation of a new, distinct ministry (for example, a Ministry for Children and Families), with the sole focus of overseeing the coordination and regulation of the sector, and combining childcare and kindergarten.
16. Effective leadership is key to improving the sector. It is only by identifying and promoting leadership at all levels that change and innovation can happen to make a real difference to the children and families.

Dr Lynn Ang  
Lead Investigator  
July 2012



# CHAPTER ONE



# THE CURRENT PRESCHOOL LANDSCAPE

Over the last two decades, early childhood has become an increasingly prominent part of the Singapore government's policy agenda. Through the work of two main Ministries, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), the government has put in place cumulative measures to regulate and develop the preschool sector. A key driving goal is to raise the quality and accessibility of preschool services for all young children. Since the 1980s, several policy implementations have included targeted intervention programmes and subsidies for children from lower-income families, and more generic policies to raise the quality of the early years workforce. In 2001, a joint-ministerial Pre-school Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC) recommended that the minimum qualifications for preschool teachers be at least a Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (CPT), with a minimum of 5 'O' level credits including a pass in English language. In 2011, the national accreditation framework 'Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework' (SPARK) was introduced by MOE for all preschool providers as a quality assurance self-evaluation tool to evaluate areas of provisions such as leadership, curriculum, planning and administration. More recently in 2012, a new development framework, the Early Years Development Framework (EYDF), was introduced by MCYS to enhance the quality of care for the very young children from two months to three years of age (MCYS 2012). A timeline at the end of this chapter further outlines the significant developments in the preschool sector. These developments bear witness that early childhood is increasingly being recognised as an area of prominence and importance.

Preschools in Singapore fall under two main categories: kindergartens and childcare centres. The compulsory school age for children is 7 years, with pre-schools catering for children aged 7 years and below. Kindergartens generally provide a 3-year educational-based provision for children aged 4 to 6 years

consisting of Nursery, Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2. Kindergartens are largely perceived as educational institutions which support the academic development of young children, while childcare centres assume a broader function of full or partial day care for children aged 2 months and above. Childcare centres offer a provision of full-time care from 7am to 7pm with a select number of centres providing infant and toddler care for children aged 2 to 18 months. The main function of childcare centres is to provide a service of custodial care for preschool children.

The government estimates that 'more than 99%' of primary one-going children at 6 years of age attend 'at least one year of pre-school in either a childcare centre or a kindergarten' (MCYS 2012; MOE 2012). This increase in participation rates is paralleled by a significant expansion of childcare centres in recent years, driven largely by burgeoning government initiatives. In November 2008, the government announced plans to introduce 200 childcare centres over the next five years, with the aim of expanding childcare services for 14,000 to 20,000 children (MCYS 2008). It has been reported that this targeted increase in childcare capacity is well on track to be achieved by 2013 or even earlier, by 2012 (MCYS 2012, 'Child care & pre-school education media queries'). Policy developments and more players in the sector have therefore led to a proliferation of preschool services in both the non-profit and for-profit sectors.

It is evident from the systemic increase in early childhood services that pre-schools in Singapore have become core institutions. With changing demographic patterns, such as the participation rate of women in the labour force increasing from 50.2% in 2000 to 56.5% in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 'Labour Force Participation Rate', 2011), and both parents entering the workforce being the norm, the demand for early education and care services remains high. The findings from this study show that while the measures undertaken by policy-makers to promote the quality of provision are a welcome step, early childhood care and education remains a challenging area. In the process of accelerating change in the sector, the provision of preschool services remains fragmented and there are still significant underlying issues to be addressed such as the shortage of qualified preschool teachers, high turnover in the workforce, and inequalities in terms of the affordability, accessibility and quality of preschool services.



## NUMBER OF CHILD CARE CENTRES AND CHILDREN ENROLLED

### 2009

785 Centres  
57,870 Enrolled



### 2010

874 Centres  
63,955 Enrolled



### 2012

982 Centres  
74,909 Enrolled



Source: MCYS (2012) 'Statistics on Child Care Services' [http://www.childcarelink.gov.sg/ccsls/uploads/Statistics\\_on\\_child\\_care\(STENT\).pdf](http://www.childcarelink.gov.sg/ccsls/uploads/Statistics_on_child_care(STENT).pdf). The figures stated here are accurate as of May 2012.

## NUMBER OF KINDERGARTENS



### 2007

492  
Kindergartens



### 2011

495  
Kindergartens



### 2012

501  
Kindergartens

There is limited data available on kindergarten statistics and enrolment rates. The statistics quoted here are from several sources: MOE Parliamentary replies; MOE (2011) 'Kindergarten Profile'; MOE (2012) 'List of MOE-Registered Kindergartens'; UNESCO (2007) 'Country Profile. Singapore Early Childhood Care and Education programmes'.

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

All 27 participants who participated the study are long-standing leading professionals in their field. A third of the participants have more than 20 years of experience and another third with more than 10 years of experience in the preschool sector. The participants come from a range of disciplines which includes health, social services and education. A survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews were conducted to elicit the views of the leading professionals. A group interview was also carried out with preschool principals and teachers. The data collected was transcribed independently, with a selection transcribed by two research assistants. The transcripts were then categorised according to emergent themes and analysed by two independent reviewers. The data was also coded thematically and analysed using a qualitative research software, NVIVO7, to ensure the validity of the results.

The participants recognise that more work needs be done in order to improve the preschool sector. At the same time, they also acknowledge that progress is possible with sustained political will and commitment. They express a strong preference for early childhood to be seen as more than just a key part of an overall national strategy to prepare children for primary schooling, but also as an important issue in its own right. A preschool educator with more than 40 years of experience working with children commented that it is important to look at preschool education from a broader perspective *'rather than just looking at it as preparing a child for primary one. We are preparing a child to be successful in life'*.

Significantly, when asked the question why preschool education is important, 90% of participants in the study responded that it is to support children as lifelong learners. 80% of participants responded unanimously that if early childhood is to be recognised as a distinct and important phase in its own right, then preschool education should be recognised as being part of Singapore's public education, at least for the older stages at kindergarten 1 (5-6 years) and kindergarten 2 (6-7 years). The provision of free preschool entitlement for all children in Singapore aged 3 years and above was also suggested as a way forward to ensuring that all children receive the best possible chance of achieving success in their later years.

The issues and challenges raised in this report reflect current attitudes to preschool provisions, as well as current attitudes to the care and education of children. It is important to understand and respond to these changes in order that preschool services can maximise the benefits for children's learning and development, and ultimately develop children to be effective contributors to the community and society of Singapore.

## KEY DATES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SINGAPORE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

- 1983** ..... Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare introduced by the then Ministry of Social Affairs to support working mothers.
- 1988** ..... The Child Care Centres Act and The Child Care Centres Regulations Act, set the standards and licensing requirements for all child care centres.
- 1991** ..... Certificate in Preschool Teaching and Certificate in Preschool Management and Administration introduced by National Institute of Education.
- 1994 – 1997** ..... Training awards for full-time Early Childhood Care and Education courses sponsored by the Ministry of Community Development.
- October 1995** ..... Singapore government acceded to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention came into force in 1990 by the General Assembly of the United Nations.
- 1998** ..... Back-to-Work scheme for low-income families to cover start-up cost of childcare.
- March 2000** ..... Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Desired Outcomes for preschool education.
- January 2001** ..... Pre-school Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC) was set up; a joint ministerial body between the MOE and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports.

**January 2001**

- Committee recommended policy of minimum qualifications for preschool teachers:
- By 1 January 2008, all pre-school teachers must have a minimum qualification of a Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (CPT)
- From 1 Jan 2009, all new teachers must have 5 'O' level credits including English Language and a Diploma in Pre-school Education - Teaching (DPE-T).
- From 1 Jan 2013, all teachers must have a minimum of 5 'O' level credits including a pass in English language and a DPE-T to be employed in kindergartens.

**January 2003**

- Introduction of *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* by MOE.

**2006**

- Subsidies by Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) offered to lower-income families to help with the cost of preschool education: Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS)
- Policy framework by MOE 'Standards for Kindergartens. Pursuing Excellence at Kindergartens'
- Targeted intervention programmes introduced by MOE to enhance the school readiness of preschool children: the Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR) initiative that provides intensive one-to-one and small group language support for preschool children to develop their English language skills and prepare them for primary schooling. FLAiR introduced in 10 kindergartens.

**2007**

- Committee on Improving Quality of Pre-School Education was set up by MOE.

**March 2007**

- The Focused Language Assistance in Reading (FLAiR) initiative extended to 90 kindergartens.

**2008**

- Training bursaries for pre-school teachers by MOE and MCYS. The bursaries offered generally cover 80% of the course fee, including an annual book allowance.
- Preschool innovation grant for preschool providers
- MOE publishes 'A Kindergarten Curriculum Guide' to assist kindergartens in applying the Kindergarten Curriculum to their programmes.
- MCYS announces plans to build 200 new childcare centres in the next five years.

**May 2009**

- MCYS announces the introduction of a new recurrent grant for non-profit childcare operators to help attract and retain childcare teachers.

**October 2010**

- MCYS launches the Child Development Network (CDN) to build and connect the community of stakeholders in early childhood care and education, and as a way of championing the quality of early childhood education in Singapore.

**November 2010**

- Nominated MPs Mr Sadasivan and Ms Wong filed a parliamentary motion urging the government to conduct a comprehensive review of preschool education in Singapore, and addressing issues of continuity to formal schooling, variance in standards and fees, and equal opportunities.
- MOE introduces a national accreditation and assessment framework for preschool services: The Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (SPARK).

**April 2011**

- Increase in the eligible monthly household income criterion for the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), from S\$1,800 to S\$3,500, to allow more families to benefit from the subsidies.

**September 2011**

• Introduction of Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) for children from 2 months to 3 years by MCYS.

**November 2011**

• MOE announces plans to review the Kindergarten Curriculum Framework by the end of 2012, provide additional curriculum resources to support kindergartens in delivering the Framework, and increase professional development opportunities for kindergarten teachers.

**March 2012**

• MOE announces Quality Assurance Consultancy scheme in partnership with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECS) to support Kindergartens in achieving the SPARK certification.

**April 2012**

• MCYS announces funding of close to S\$10m for approximately 600 scholarships and teaching awards over the next two years. The aim is to raise the quality of child care by attracting new teachers and promoting the professional development of current in-service teachers to take up tertiary qualifications and specialist courses.

Sources: MOE and MCYS websites <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/>; <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/>; MCYS (2008) 'Child Care in Singapore. Waves of Professionalism'.

**We have come a long way in a very short time. But there is a lot more work to be done.**

**I think we have seen a lot of development. The development has not just come from the government, which it is good because that means the government is channelling something into the sector. But the development has also started from bottom-up. We have come to see that it is worthwhile investing in early childhood.**

## CHAPTER TWO





# CREATING AN ECOLOGY OF SUPPORT

## Early Childhood at the Heart of the Community

Creating an ecology of support is about ensuring that the holistic needs of children are met and that all children have the very best chances in life to become successful beings and contributors to the Singapore society. The leading professionals who contributed to the study shared a clear, concerted view that preschool services in Singapore should be underpinned by a holistic approach, whereby children and families are supported during the preschool years through high-quality care and education programmes, within an integrated network of family support and social work services, child health and outreach services, with the involvement of parents in their children's development and learning, including the support for families of children with special needs.

The findings of the study indicate that the majority of stakeholders in the field feel that policy and practice have to be informed by the diverse knowledge bases that surround the holistic care and education of children. This includes health, education, social welfare and community outreach services; that is, the whole socio-cultural and ecological system that promotes and supports children's well-being. The main rationale for this is the strongly held belief among those interviewed in the study – and supported in part by their collective experience on the ground – that creating such a holistic service will result in better support facilities and outcomes for preschool children.

The participants recognise that the society's notion of what constitutes 'preschool education' is shifting in that care, learning and education are interdependent rather than separate entities, and are part and parcel of a coherent approach to improving the life chances of children. As an experienced educator commented, *'We are shifting towards a mindset that preschools are more than just childminding.'* There needs to be more recognition of the interdependence of care and education in the work with young children and the importance of having an approach to early childhood that focuses not just on the education of children,

but also on their health, social welfare and overall well-being. Rather than a divided education and care system as reflected in the current 'kindergarten' and 'childcare' services, a more coordinated and holistic service is deemed essential.

**Education, health and social welfare have to work together. The three are in one. It is something that can be done but there needs to be political will to drive this. The best strength that we have is our policy-makers. If there is political will, it can be done.**

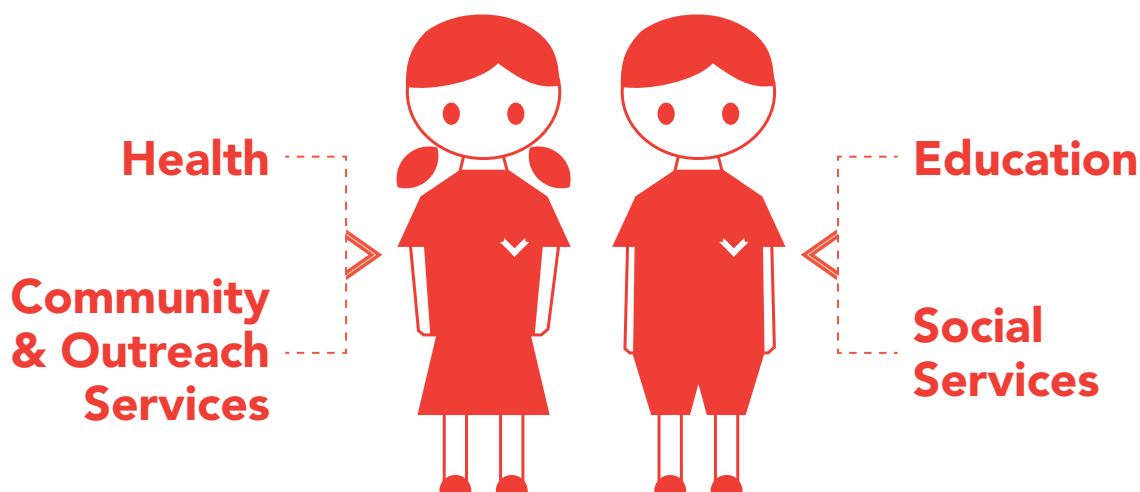
## **2.1 ESTABLISHING A HOLISTIC FRONT-LINE 'SERVICE HUB': THE TEAM AROUND THE CHILD (TAC)**

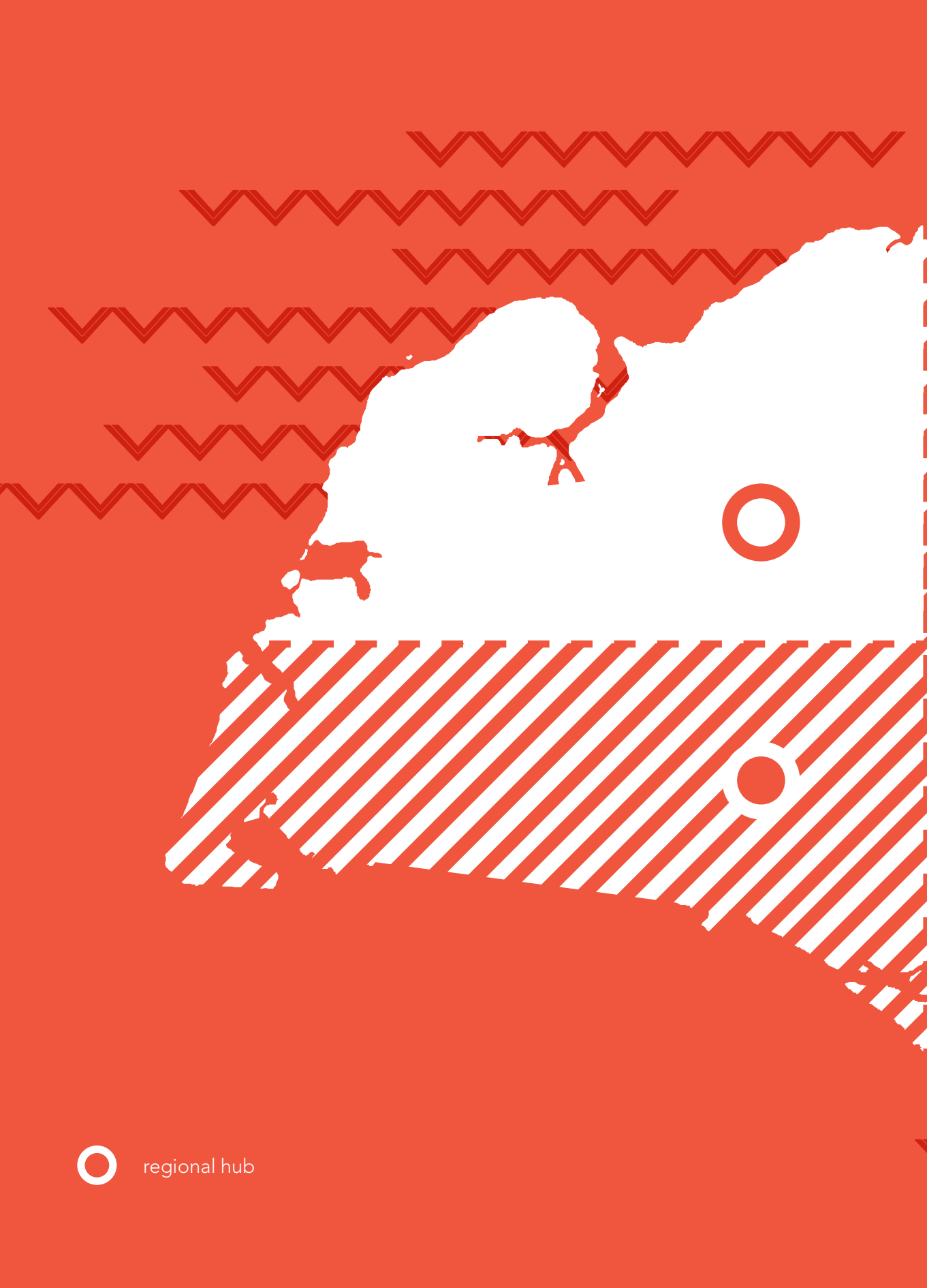
The majority of participants recognise the need to go beyond the boundaries of existing professional roles in order to find new and innovative ways of working together for the benefit of all young children in Singapore. They strongly believe that it would be helpful to have a holistic front-line service with active collaboration among professionals on the ground to extend the role of preschool services. All the respondents shared an active desire to engage with multi-professional teams and agencies across different disciplines at the delivery level.

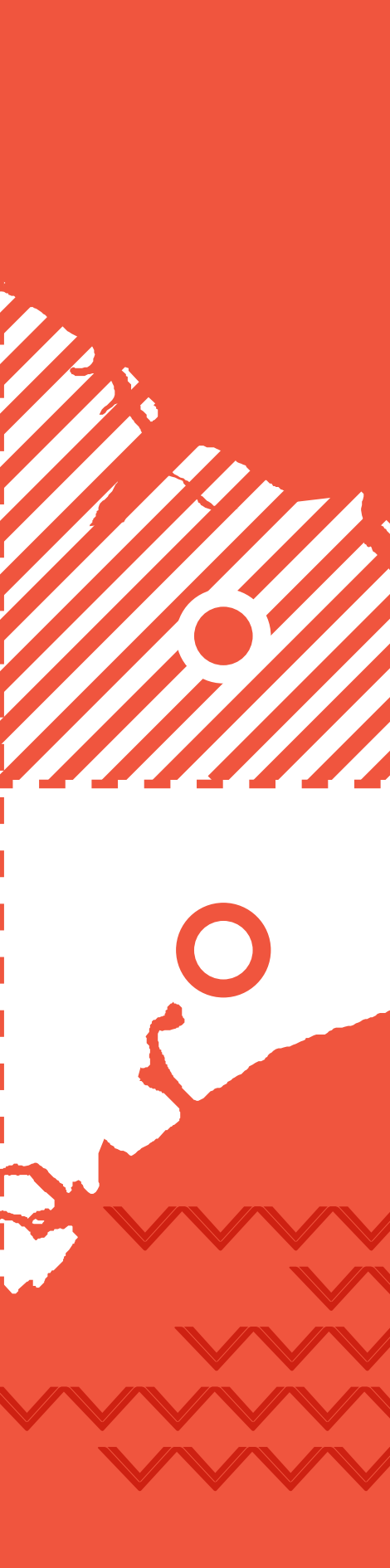
One model of creating an ecology of support is to create a Team Around the Child (TAC), with the child situated within a close network of relationships and connections with multi-professionals, the family and the wider community. In this way, a wraparound, holistic service can be provided to support the needs of children and their families, with professionals from the health, education and social welfare services working together in their specialist roles to provide a front-line 'service hub' within the community. An added strength is to locate these services in the local neighbourhoods to complement the work already taking place in community settings such as a family service centre or community centre. Managers and leaders of these service hubs will then be able to deploy resources as necessary to best meet the needs of the children and families in the community. Locating the service hub and TAC in the heart of the community will ensure that the services provided for children are focused on what families want and need, and that the implementation of any early childhood service is embedded within the community.

A conceptual model of what a holistic front-line service hub could look like is depicted in the diagram below. The model places the child at the centre, surrounded by a multi-faceted support network of core services which supports the child holistically, rather than expecting the child to fit around specific services. In this way, the core service of supporting children, especially those who have been disadvantaged in one way or another, is delivered by a single organisational entity of front-line teams which provide a seamless service for all children and their families. At an operational level, the key to realising such a model of working is the setting up of sound leadership structures and governance, spearheaded by a lead organisation or ministry. Establishing a successful TAC demands a high level of professionalism and management. It requires the commitment of a lead organisation or a group of dominant organisations to forge strong links with stakeholders in the system, while maintaining a clearly defined centralised role in directing and driving the agenda of the team forwards, and ensuring a culture of collaboration and shared understanding to support children and families.

## THE TEAM AROUND THE CHILD (TAC)







In Singapore, we can divide [the country] into certain regions and in each region we set up a hub and the hub will have certain number of sort of early intervention professionals, psychologists and different types of therapists, so that they belong to a centre. And from there on again they will make available outreach services to the early intervention centres and childcare centres, so that these therapists have a sense of belonging. If I belong to a big regional therapy hub, whenever I have a problem I have other professionals to talk to; I'm not working alone.

The majority of professionals interviewed in the study believe that a benefit of having a holistic and layered service such as this is that it entails bringing together systems and people already in place to promote a holistic service that is catered specifically for the needs of young children, especially those from low-income families or those with developmental needs. A holistic service would also have the added advantage of adapting to the changing needs and requirements of children and families. It was felt that with adequate funding and time, and an effective leadership and management strategy to set up such a service, the initiative will have a direct impact on the overall well-being of children. Responses from those interviewed also indicated strongly that there was willingness to be involved in professional collaborative work across agencies at both strategic and operational levels.

Implementing and managing a fully holistic service on the ground can be a complex, costly and lengthy business but there seems to be widespread support for such a service from participants interviewed in the study. Their belief in the benefits of such a service is strengthened by the knowledge that there are examples of such a model of integrated working already taking place in the country. There is, for example, in the health services and through local intervention programmes such as the *Mission: I'mPossible* project piloted in 2009 by the Lien Foundation, KK Women's and Children's Hospital and PAP Community Foundation (PCF). The rationale behind these collaborative approaches is not only to allow local agencies to work in partnerships with one another, but also to provide a structural integration of their services for all children and families. Having a collaborative way of working will also provide the opportunity of sharing best practices and directing the preschool sector as a whole to move in harmony.

**At the end of the day, the child should be at the heart of everything.**

## **2.2 BUILDING CAPACITY WITHIN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

At the crux of this chapter on creating an ecology of support is the message that families and the community are the bedrock of society. It is almost impossible to discuss children in isolation from the home and the wider environment in which they develop and grow. All leading professionals in the study recognise the important role of families and communities as places for nurturing happy, confident and resilient children. All participants feel strongly that family and community involvement is an important dimension in complementing and extending the early childhood experience that children receive during the preschool phase, and that preschools are sites for building capacity within local communities.

**We need to share as much information, knowledge and know-how at the ground level. In this way, we create an ecology of layered support whereby [preschool] teachers feel supported to implement change.**

At the UNESCO World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000, 164 governments pledged their commitment to The Education for All (EFA) goals, one of which is to provide comprehensive early childhood care and education for all children by 2015, especially for those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. As part of this global commitment, the *Dakar Framework for Action* advocates that effective early childhood care and education should include 'the education of parents and other care-givers in better child care, building on traditional practices'. The *Framework* suggests that good quality care and education provides support to parents and families, and that this has 'a positive impact on the survival, growth, development and learning potential of children'. (UNESCO, 2000) There is also convincing empirical evidence of the long-term benefits of involving parents and the community to enhance the educational and developmental outcomes of children. International research such as the High Scope Project in the United States and the Effective Provision of Preschool Education project (EPPE) in England (Sylva, 2003) have identified the key roles that parents and the home environment have on children's overall achievement.

Indeed, children's immediate social and cultural environments are a defining influence in their lives, and the most effective way of improving care and education services for young children is to work with parents and families. It is therefore important that preschool teachers consider not only their relationship with the child that they work with, but also the relationships that they build with other significant adults in the child's lives. Theory also highlights the powerful influence of the environment on children's development and overall well-being. The theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner

**The community comes in because good early childhood education must prepare children to be citizens of the community. It cannot be in isolation.**

(1995) emphasises the importance of a layered system of social, familial, political, cultural and economic conditions in which children grow up. He maintains that the child's family, school, community and government must all be taken into account in a comprehensive and holistic explanation of children's development. Bronfenbrenner uses the term 'ecology' to refer to the multiple settings and institutions that both influence and are influenced by the child. As a primary figure in the child's immediate environment, the role of the preschool teacher is therefore vital, not only in the care and education, but also in the major role that he or she plays in the development of services for whole families and the local community. This underscores the essential role of the early childhood sector as being at the heart of the community, and the need to work towards a model of provision that is based on a holistic 'Family-Community Conceptual Framework', which puts the child at the heart of everything. The diagram shows a visual representation of

## A FAMILY-COMMUNITY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK





the factors that shape children's environment, and the importance of providing a network of support for children and their families. As the popular Igbo proverb goes, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' The crucial role of preschool teachers is not only in their direct contact with the children but also in their support of other adults who know them and are their primary care-givers.

## 2.3 PARENT EDUCATION

Given the importance of parental and community involvement, one way of strengthening the sector is to advocate for more parent education and community outreach programmes. Interviews with the respondents indicate that parent education programmes are currently being offered by some social welfare organisations, preschools and the government. The MCYS website, for example, contains a range of information about the support services available for families through the work of the Family Service Centres. The services include 'The Parent Education in Pre-Schools' (PEPS) and 'School Family Education' (SFE) programmes, which provide workshops and practical guidance for parents and families to help them support the critical phase of their children's development and growth (MCYS 2012 'Family Service Centres to Support Families').

**The childcare centre can be a place where parents learn how to be parents as well.**

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**The family is the first school of the child.**

However, nationally, the take-up of these programmes is somewhat patchy, and it is not exactly clear as to what extent these support programmes are accessed by parents and families who need it the most. The overall message emerging from the study is that there has to be a step increase in the efforts to provide parental outreach programmes, especially within the local heartland neighbourhood, and to do more to extend the opportunities for parental involvement in children's early experiences. In the current rapid expansion of the preschool sector, there are many benefits to be gained from supporting parents in positive family care practices to meet the needs of young children.

All respondents in the study are in agreement on the benefits of having parent support programmes which equip parents or carer-givers with the necessary information and skills to support and care for children, and help them achieve their potential. This may include training and learning activities for parents to support their children's development, or it may go beyond parenting to

include lifelong skills to help parents develop themselves as individuals. Parent support programmes may also include parents working with staff in preschools to support children's learning, or programmes designed to bring educators and parents together to help build a support network in the wider community. Strengthening parents and the role they play in their children's day-to-day lives is also a way of strengthening communities and the wider society. It is therefore important that all participants in the early childhood sector – parents, families as well as educators – share the challenges, as well as the rewards, involved in the care and education of our very young children.

**Preschool education  
has to be within the  
family; the family and  
the community.**

**Parents' participation is very important. We have seen parents not knowing their own children's development. We ask them how old their child was when he/she started walking, they have to call in the domestic helper to ask her. So we need to get our parents to be more involved and of course they also have to understand that starting a family involves a lot of changes in their lifestyle as well.**

# CHAPTER THREE



# LEVELLING THE GAPS

## Accessibility, Quality and Equity

Care and education for preschool children in Singapore is currently serviced predominantly by the private and voluntary sectors. The Singapore government assumes a mainly administrative and regulatory role, through the implementation of policies and legislations which aim to maintain the quality of the sector. In recent years, policies are mainly focused on enhancing the professionalism of the workforce and increasing the participation and quality of provisions, for example, through the accreditation and quality assurance of kindergartens and childcare centres, and the stipulation of national standards for preschool teacher qualifications. In part, as a result of these policy measures, statistics from the government in 2010 indicate a high preschool participation rate, with the percentage of children not attending any form of preschool education at a record low of 1.1%, compared to 5% in 2006 (MOE, 2011, Parliamentary Reply). Arguably, while the increased participation rate of preschool attendance is a significant step forward, the high enrolment rate does not necessarily equate to increased access to high-quality provision. The ultimate measure of any preschool system is not just about the number of children attending preschool, but what – and how well – they are developing and learning. Although the Singapore government has put in place measures to help extend participation, the sector remains diverse and fragmented. This is due mainly to the rapid expansion of the sector in recent years to satisfy the increasing demand for preschool services, and the delivery of early years provisions which remains firmly embedded in a market economy.

There are many competing arguments that underlie the way preschool systems are governed. Proponents for a privatised preschool sector argue that having a market economy of preschool providers offers competition, choice and diversity, and allows providers the flexibility and potential to meet individual family and parental requirements. Critics against the dominance of a privatised early childhood sector contend that the operation of market forces creates deep

inequalities in terms of access, equity and affordability, as well as compromises in quality and coherence of services. The concern is that fragmentations in the private preschool market, unless carefully monitored and policed, will create an 'apartheid' system whereby those who are financially able can afford a choice of 'quality' kindergartens or childcare services while those from the lower-income groups have significantly lesser choice about the type of preschool they choose for their children. As a result, parents, as the main consumers of the preschool market, will inevitably base their choice of preschool first and foremost on their affordability rather than quality. Crucially, all respondents in the study expressed their deep concerns over the current inequalities of the sector, particularly in the following areas:

### 3.1 ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

We know from research evidence that young children have much to gain from good quality child care and education, and that children from low-income or disadvantaged families benefit the most. However, while preschool provisions in Singapore is heavily subsidised by the government, the issue of accessibility and affordability remains a challenge, especially for low-income families. There is a concern among participants in the study that even with current government subsidies and financial aid schemes in place, quality preschool education remains unaffordable and unattainable to the lower-income groups, even though they have the most to gain from it. Despite the childcare subsidies, individual parents still have to pay for their own childcare and kindergarten. As a participant commented, the disparities in the sector is such that *'you can pay \$100 to \$1,000 to put a child in preschool education and each preschool offers you something different'*; thus highlighting the danger of the private sector exacerbating the socio-economic stratifications in

**Provide more funding for school fees so that preschool education is made more affordable.**

society, where good quality preschool services are accessible to children from wealthier families who can afford costly programmes, while children from less well-off families are being excluded by their inability to pay. The participants in the study felt strongly that in order to ensure equality in the sector, it is necessary that the government plays a more major role in either the financing of preschool services or the regulation of preschool fees, in order to ensure the affordability of services.

**If the government is willing to pay, the government needs to invest. The cheapest kindergarten charges S\$100 to S\$120. It is 10 times more than the primary schools. Preschool is so important and you make it so expensive, much more than primary schools.**

### **3.2 QUALITY**

The second major concern shared by participants is the variable quality of early childhood programmes. Given the expansion of the private sector, the type of provision and activities that young children are actually experiencing vary considerably from setting to setting, especially in terms of the programme content, learning experience, and overall teaching and learning approaches. While the government has issued general guidelines about early childhood programmes through the introduction of *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum in 2003* (MOE, 2003) for 3- to 6-year-olds, and recently, the *Early Years Development Framework* (EYDF) for children 2 months to 3 years by MCYS, there is not a mandatory national curriculum that providers have to follow. In the absence of any standard national curricula, kindergartens and childcare centres therefore have the autonomy to set their own curriculum and teaching approaches, and are free to shape their individual programme. It is not uncommon, therefore, that there are great diversities in the type of experience that preschools provide. Some kindergartens, for instance, offer a programme that emphasises literacy and numeracy while others offer a more play-based curriculum that veers away from any academic focus (Ang, 2011). The key questions for parents and educators, then, are, 'how do we know which is the most appropriate programme for children?', 'what should children be learning?' and 'how do we know that the curriculum actually enriches learning opportunities for the child?' A concern shared by the respondents is the use of inappropriate and de-contextualised curricula imported from overseas which are at odds with the overall socio-cultural ethos of the Singapore context.

In 2011, MOE introduced a quality assurance framework, the 'Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework' (SPARK), to raise the quality of preschool

Kindergartens are still very much left to the private sector. And when it's left to the private sector, at the end of the day it's the dollar sign, in the sense that at the end of the day it's the money. ... And if the concern is money then the role of government is important, in order to support early childhood education the way it should be.

Many preschools are run as a business. So there are Montessori programmes, PCF kindergartens; there are many different set-ups. When you talk about what you are going to teach all these children, there's a lot of variation.



services. Aimed at providers of both kindergartens and childcare centres, the framework offers them a self-assessment tool to evaluate and improve their services in key areas such as leadership, curriculum and planning. The accreditation also serves as an endorsement of quality for preschool providers as well as parents during their selection of preschools. However, while the assessment framework provides a benchmark of quality, it does not distract from the reality that there still exists a wide spectrum of diversity in the preschool market. In reality, the rating of the 'quality' and effectiveness of each kindergarten or childcare centre is often measured arbitrarily by parents, based on the number of children enrolled, parents' own expectations of what a preschool should provide, and the reputation of each setting, usually spread by word of mouth. Often, these assessments of quality are mixed, depending largely on parents' perceptions and the particular setting's curricular emphasis, educational philosophy and general pedagogic beliefs about what the early years should entail (Ang, 2008; 2011). These differences in preschool services have also been recognised by the government. On 27 January 2007, *The Straits Times* published a front-page feature on preschools, entitled 'Preschool Revolution'. The report highlighted a range of kindergartens and the kinds of provision on offer, with a particular focus on PCF settings. It discussed the ongoing issue of improving the quality and accessibility of preschools in Singapore, especially for the children from low-income families. There is clearly a high demand for quality early childhood education, owing to a growing number of middle-class working parents, whose prevailing expectation is to give their children an early academic start. However, as the report pointed out, preschools are privately run and thus vary considerably in quality.

In this context, the issue of measuring quality, and indeed defining what quality is, remains elusive. It would seem that the underlying tension that policy-makers need to resolve is the extent to which quality preschool education can be truly accessible, equitable and affordable for all while remaining in the hands of the private sector. The pertinent questions are also if preschools should be run as businesses and whether they should operate within a market system. While no one doubts that the political impetus behind the government's drive to raise the quality and participation of preschool education is inspirational, the realisation of this crusade may remain mainly aspirational.

### **3.3 EQUITY**

At a service delivery level, the views that emerged from the study from both for-profit and non-profit preschool providers are that the current levels of government funding do not reflect the true cost of provision in a good quality preschool service, which expects to employ well-qualified staff, a good quality

environment and a low child-adult ratio. In general, preschool providers are ultimately dependent on market demands and the ability of parents to pay. However, in the current marketised sector, non-profit voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) are perceived to be most disadvantaged. As non-profit organisations operating within a competitive private sector, they face the challenge of having to maintain their low fees in order to keep their services affordable for the families that they serve, especially in the climate of rising costs. In addition, staff costs and rental leases make up a significant proportion of the cost of running a preschool. Respondents who are service providers across the board, but especially those from the voluntary sector from the religious-affiliated and social welfare organisations, find it particularly difficult to expand their services because of limited capital and grants available for employing new staff and acquiring new building and facilities. As a respondent from a VWO says, *'We are very clear that we are helping the lower-income families; that is why there are always funding schemes for them. The fee we set is sustainable for our operations and that is it. If we are going to increase salaries, we would go into deficit and [it is] not sustainable in that sense. ... If you have big players who are charging childcare fee close to \$2,000, we don't stand a chance. We are charging just \$500 or \$600, how do you sustain this?'* The response here highlights the very inequities in the sector, where preschools run by VWOs are in danger of being marginalised, as they face the challenge of responding to the demands of a market-driven preschool economy that is becoming increasingly competitive. This is especially the case as VWOs are set up primarily for altruistic reasons and are not driven by the purpose of running a profit-growing preschool business.

**As a VWO (Voluntary Welfare Organization) operator, because we are not governed by profits, we provide childcare more for social ambition, and not so much for profits. ... Our aim is to keep the fees affordable, provide financial assistance for students, and we have to cover operating cost.**

**I feel there should be land or property set aside for preschools, whether it be childcare centres or kindergartens, and the leases should be a lot longer... because we're a not-for-profit school. You [the government] want us to bid with commercial organisations like restaurants. How are we going to compete? Do you not value early childhood education?**

It is clear from the study that VWOs and non-profit providers play an important role in making preschool education affordable and extending access to vulnerable or low-income families. This being the case, the role of the government is therefore critical in addressing the current inequities in the sector, as well as working in partnership with the voluntary sector to help alleviate their associated cost barriers and maintain a more inclusive system. The bottom line is, unless government investment is raised significantly to reflect the actual cost of meeting the quality standards expected of preschools, the problem of accessibility, equity and affordability remains an ongoing issue.

## **Level the playing field between for-profit and not-for-profit organisations.**

### **3.4 UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL ENTITLEMENT FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN SINGAPORE**

It is important that the issue of levelling the gaps is seen as part of a much wider conundrum, in that while early childhood is becoming an important subject of public policy, the responsibility and provision of childcare and education still remain firmly in the private sector. In other words, preschool services are ultimately market commodities to be purchased by parents exercising choice as consumers. This underscores the important role of the government in creating mechanisms to protect the more vulnerable consumers and combat the inequalities that a market economy invariably brings. The challenge for policy-makers is to reconcile the role of the government in supporting early childhood services as a public good, while maintaining a cost-effective, quality and sustainable preschool sector.

International advocacy for early childhood education argues that quality preschool education is invariably publicly or government-funded, rather than being left up to the private sector. At the second World Congress of *Education International*, the global federation of education organisations and teacher unions, held in 1998 in Washington D.C., the resolution on early childhood education states clearly that: *'Early childhood education should be a public service and form an integral part of the education system', and that 'sufficient resources must be made available within the education budget of each country in order to provide for high quality early childhood education, free of charge and accessible to all'.*

The notion of a publicly funded, free preschool entitlement is not a new phenomenon. The determining role of governments in financing their preschool systems is evident in many European countries, such as Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Norway and Sweden, which provide at least two years entitlement of free preschool

education. Some countries have early childhood provisions ('junior infant classes') incorporated in the compulsory school system, while others have integrated the early years in the primary system. Sweden, for example, is an internationally recognised, high-ranking country in terms of its early childhood policies and provisions, offering free preschool entitlement for working parents with children aged 1 to compulsory schooling age, and free universal preschool service for all children from 3 years of age until 5, including children with special needs. In Denmark, early childhood education is an integral part of Danish society where around 97% of all preschool services are financed by public funding. Some services are run by parents and non-government organisations but only 1% is private. In England, free part-time provision is currently available for children aged 3 and over from a range of government-funded, private and voluntary preschool providers, and free part-time places are provided for some 2-year-olds, especially those living in the most deprived areas. (OECD, Start Strong II, 2006)

It is evident that public investment in early childhood education is not only important for children's learning and well-being, but also for society itself. From an international perspective, having a high-quality preschool service for all children requires political commitment. In order to improve the preschool sector in Singapore, one way of levelling the gaps and ensuring a truly inclusive sector is therefore to raise public spending in early years education as an area of priority and provide an entitlement of preschool education as an immediate national objective.

In January 2010, the issue of 'nationalising early childhood education' and making 'pre-primary education compulsory for all' was raised as a question for consideration in the Singapore parliament. The government's response brought up concerns about formalising preschool provision as a downward extension of primary schooling and thereby restricting the diversity and choice of preschools, particularly for parents. Thus was stated in the parliamentary reply: 'Nationalising pre-schools to be part of the formal school system runs the risk of an over-emphasis on academic instruction and uniformity... Indeed a nationalized pre-school sector would tend towards conformity which is not ideal. It would deprive parents the ability to choose from a variety of early childhood care and education models and operators that best fits the needs of their child.' (MOE 2010, 'Nationalising Early Childhood Education'). Yet, while the government raises understandable concerns about the nationalisation of preschool education, the reality of the current preschool landscape is such that the wide diversity of preschool services is already causing a 'trickle-down' effect on the preschool system, which is exacerbated by the differing quality of preschool services being delivered in a sector that is driven by market forces. This in turn has inevitable consequences for young

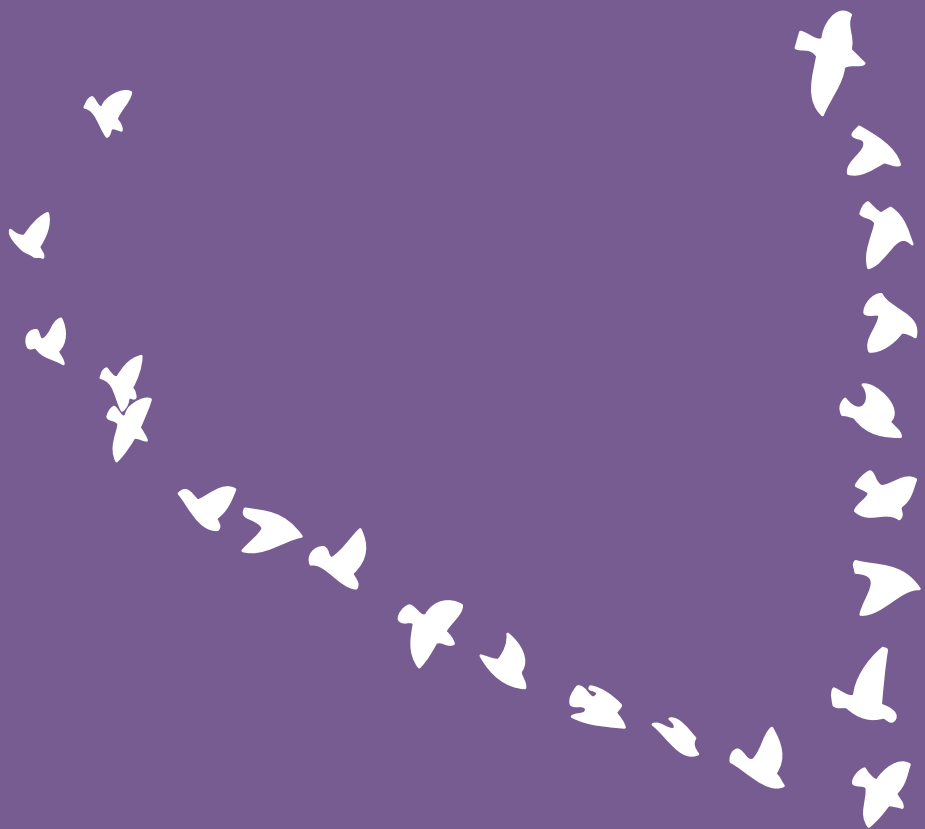
children and families in the face of increasing socio-economic inequalities, and inequities in the affordability and accessibility of preschool services.

The majority (71%) of participants in this study feel strongly that if early childhood services are recognised by the government as a necessary public good, then there should be free preschool education for all children, at least for the 5- and 6-year-olds in Kindergarten 1 and 2. Undoubtedly, the price tag for the mobilisation of public financing on this scale is considerable. The participants recognise that this will require a major increase in government spending, but if early childhood education is regarded as having a major impact on children's outcomes and a key 'social leveller' in bridging the gap between the advantaged and the less advantaged children in society, then it is an investment worth making. Children's overall well-being depends significantly on a country's national wealth and public spending in early childhood services. Given the current gaps in quality, accessibility and equity, the notion of a universal entitlement of preschool education for all children becomes an important and necessary topic of consideration to revisit.

**Early childhood is the most critical period for cognitive and social development, the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Children are active learners from birth, and the first years are vital. Early childhood education should be recognised a first step of basic education, as a fully integrated sector within national education systems. Provision should be universally accessible and free for all children.**

**(Education International, 2006)**

# CHAPTER FOUR





# THE EARLY YEARS WORKFORCE

Raising the Status, Pay and Training of the Workforce

Many research findings indicate that if there is a single most important factor in achieving high-quality preschool services, it is the quality of the workforce. As one of the participants with more than 20 years' experience in the sector says, *'The key to a quality preschool education – there is no magic formula – the teachers are key – teachers who are well trained and passionate will provide the quality education that we desire.'* All participants in the study agree unanimously that preschool teachers play a pivotal role in young children's lives. Preschool teachers are responsible for delivering the high standards and quality of care and education that are needed to meet the needs of children and families. As such, they need to be competent, knowledgeable, committed and passionate in their work with children.

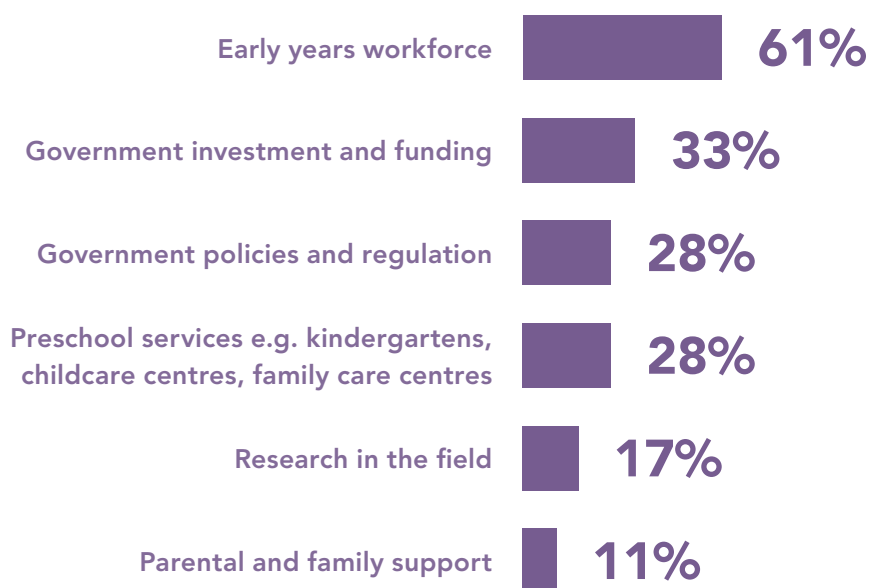
In recent years, the training and qualifications of preschool teachers in Singapore has been the subject of increasing government regulation. The government acknowledges the importance of having professionally qualified early childhood educators: 'The quality of pre-school provision depends greatly on the teachers and the training received by them. Teacher training and qualification offer high leverage opportunities for enhancing standards of training and expanding career opportunities for pre-school professionals in Singapore.' (MOE, <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/teachers/>). A national strategy to raise the qualification levels of the early years workforce was

**The common issue that you are hearing again and again is lack of qualified staff, I think staffing is a huge issue, we are facing the same shortage, we just can't find staff.**

introduced in 2001, with the recommendation that the minimum qualification for preschool teachers should be a Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (CPT), with a minimum of 5 'O' level credits including a pass in English language.

However, although considerable progress has been made to raise the standards of the workforce, the findings of this study show that the scale of the task ahead remains immense. More than half of participants in the study voiced their concerns about worrying trends that are currently facing the workforce. When asked the question about which aspect of the sector needs urgent improvement, 61.1% of respondents pointed to the early years workforce. Follow-up interviews highlighted three major concerns: 1. Shortage of qualified teachers as a result of high turnover rates 2. Low pay and pay differentials within the sector 3. Professional status of preschool teachers. All three factors present imminent challenges that need to be addressed if the quality and sustainability of preschool services are to be improved.

## PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IDENTIFYING KEY AREAS OF THE PRESCHOOL SECTOR NEEDING URGENT IMPROVEMENT



#### 4.1 TURNOVER OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

Participants in the study share an overwhelming concern over the turnover of qualified and experienced preschool teachers. This is largely the result of either preschool teachers moving from one setting to another, or leaving the profession altogether. This turnover of teachers reflects the changing needs of the sector. With the increase in the number of preschool centres in recent years, the current demand for preschool teachers is high. Some participants felt that the raising of preschool teachers' qualifications, while a necessary and welcome step forward, has exacerbated the issue of attrition in the workforce as preschool teachers are able to take advantage of the expanding private sector to move from one centre to another for marginally more pay, and this has created a volatile employment market. According to a preschool provider, *'To employ and retain diploma teachers are quite difficult because it is so competitive out there. They (diploma teachers) will just go for \$100 or \$50 more. Higher pay is the governing factor.'* At the same time, the increase in the number of qualified teachers does not necessarily equate to more dedicated teachers.

The turnover of preschool teachers has far-reaching implications on the early childhood profession as a whole, as it creates an unstable workforce with high attrition rates that will ultimately contribute to leaving the sector vulnerable, as it undervalues the work of preschool teachers as professionals. The turnover of teachers can also have a negative effect on the quality of preschool services and

**But the whole, you know the change to getting higher salary and better working conditions, more perks, you know, has, I think, superficially raised the standards of the sector. So yes, more trained teachers but in fact you may not have as many dedicated teachers.**

**I think one of the problems that we are facing is that we are going through a rapid expansion for childcare centres. There are more vacancies than there are teachers to fill the positions. Teachers end up going to the highest bidder, moving around different centres... and that of course has implications on the children.**

in turn, the impact on children and families, and this presents the sector with a considerable challenge for the future quality of preschool services.

#### **4.2 PAY AND STATUS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS**

The issue of pay and status are inter-related in that the professional status of preschool teachers is invariably associated with qualifications and pay. The participants in the study raised the issue of the level of pay and the need for more opportunities for career progression within the field. At present, there is no national guidance on commensurate levels of pay for preschool teachers that ensures parity with professionals from other sectors with similar qualifications (e.g. diploma level), and who are undertaking a corresponding level of responsibility. The Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), a statutory board set up by the Ministry of Manpower to support employability in the country, outlines the salary range for childcare and kindergarten teachers as S\$1,500 to S\$2,200, and for childcare centre supervisors and kindergarten principals, from above S\$2,500. In reality, the range can be much wider and it is unclear how the level of pay correlates to the individual job role, experience or even qualifications (WDA, 2012 <http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdaweb/L101-ForIndividuals/L402-JobDescriptionforIndividuals.html>). What is clear is that all participants in the study commented that the salary for preschool teachers working in both childcare centres and kindergartens is generally low. There are also considerable pay differentials within the sector, between the salaries of preschool teachers working in for-profit settings and those working in non-profit settings. Early childhood educators working in for-profit settings are known to receive much better incentives and salaries, compared to those working in the

voluntary sector where the level of pay for teachers is kept to a minimum due to the organisation's agenda in servicing low-income families and keeping fees to a minimum.

Adding to the complexity of differential pay within the sector is that of working conditions. A few participants commented on the differences between the working conditions of childcare centre staff and kindergarten teachers, with respect to annual leave, hours of work and job roles. This is reflected particularly in the different age groups of children that childcare centre teachers or kindergarten teachers are managing. According to the job descriptions on the WDA's website, childcare teachers provide routine care for children aged 18 months to 6 years, or sometimes even younger if they are working in infant care centres, while kindergarten teachers usually work with children aged 4 to 6 years. Catering to the needs of such a diverse age range will inevitably reflect a wide difference in the responsibilities and roles of teachers (WDA, 2012 [http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdawebbsite/L101-ForIndividuals/L402\\_JobDescriptionforIndividuals.html](http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdawebbsite/L101-ForIndividuals/L402_JobDescriptionforIndividuals.html)). Generally, kindergarten teachers are perceived to have better working conditions as they have more annual leave during the school holidays and are not expected to take on custodial responsibilities for the children such as nappy changing, feeding or bathing. A senior personnel from a non-profit organisation commented that her organisation has to compete for qualified staff with major kindergarten providers, and this has partly to do with differences in the job roles: *'We lose teachers to kindergartens; the school holiday is always a pull factor. In a kindergarten, children come for three or four hours, then they go home; while in childcare, there are longer hours. Childcare teachers are on routine care like shower, nappies.'* The current lack of parity in pay and job roles is exacerbated by market forces in the sector where salaries and working conditions depend ultimately on which kindergarten or childcare centre teachers are working for.

Related to the issue of pay is also the status of the early childhood profession. Those interviewed felt strongly that sustaining a strong early years workforce is tied

**Paying the teachers a decent salary, like a professional teacher's salary that has been put in place for primary schools. This kind of professional recognition is one way to attract good teachers into the field.**

**We find that a fresh diploma holder will enter the field and after two years they find that it is not attractive anymore because the pull factors in other sectors are very strong. These teachers who have the foundation and training can easily move to another job, so that is one big issue.**

closely to preschool teachers' long-term career trajectory as a recognised profession. In other words, there needs to be recognition of the profession in order to raise the quality of the workforce. Despite the strong evidence on the importance of early childhood education, work in the preschool sector is widely perceived by participants as that of low pay, low status and with low prospects, and the current low retention rate and recruitment shortage reflect this. It is only with raised status and pay that the sector is able to recruit and retain early childhood professionals who can provide the highest standards of care and education for young children. The challenge, as a participant states, *'is how do we continue to build on the momentum of attracting people into the sector, retaining them and building a sustainable pool of educators and workers to meet the rising demand?'* It is therefore important that the government works closely with stakeholders in the sector on this issue, to alleviate the deep anxieties about the status, pay and long-term future of the profession.

### **4.3 ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL PAY SCALE**

Pay in the sector is a long-standing issue. Moves to strengthen the workforce will continue to be a challenge without a correlating improvement in pay structure. There are concerns among respondents in the study about how preschool teachers can achieve parity of pay and conditions with their professional peers in other sectors, especially in the educational industry, with a similar level of qualifications. If early childhood is to be recognised as an integral part of the education system, then the government needs to explore ways of progressively increasing the salaries of preschool teachers, with the aim of establishing a national pay scale that will match those of mainstream teachers. This is especially the case given the diverse roles and responsibilities of preschool teachers and the variety of kindergarten and childcare centre settings that they work in. There is also a real need to encourage preschool employers to remunerate preschool teachers appropriately. However, this cannot be done without significant investment and backing from the government.

The development of a more formal pay structure, including the setting of a minimum salary, will invariably raise the status and identity of the profession. This is vital if the government wishes to ensure that preschool teachers are attracted to and retained in the sector. Pay and working conditions are a key way to motivating high-quality staff, but they also present a major hurdle at present as they are subject to market forces of demand and supply. However, if the issue of pay is not addressed, the drive to improve the quality of preschool services in Singapore may well falter before it has even begun.

**The most common complaint amongst the teachers is this disparity in pay. The early childhood teacher's pay is a big difference compared to that of mainstream teachers. It has an impact on the people who stay and who enter the sector. Well, a very simplistic answer would be maybe in terms of policy, if the government could issue a policy about a minimum wage for early childhood teachers.**

#### **4.4 CREATING PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS**

If better qualifications are likely to lead to higher salaries, and which in turn increases the attractiveness of the profession for more qualified teachers and encourages the retention of those already in the sector, then another strategy of addressing the issue of high turnover in the workforce is to further extend the role of the preschool teacher. This is crucial in order to sustain high-quality practitioners who will go on to adopt professional roles and responsibilities, and maintain longevity in their profession. The Singapore government recognises the importance of strengthening the professionalism of the workforce. In March 2012, the Ministry of Education announced plans to develop a guide on professional pathways for kindergarten teachers, in order to provide a developmental map for educators to aspire towards different specialist career pathways and training opportunities. The possible career paths include areas such as teaching, mentoring, specialist or leadership for preschool teachers (MOE 2012, 'Raising the Quality of Kindergartens: Greater MOE Support').

It is significant that the issue of professional pathways is reinforced in the findings of this study. The participants' responses substantiate the government's efforts to raise the professionalism of the workforce. More significantly, it highlights the importance of enhancing the professional careers of not just kindergarten educators, but also for childcare practitioners and the preschool workforce as a whole. The majority of participants emphasise the importance of providing opportunities



for career progression and new career pathways in a fast-evolving early childhood landscape. As a participant responded, it is important that the role of the preschool teacher involves more than just 'technical competence' in caring for children, *'It is not enough just to be good teachers, just technicians doing the right techniques.'* Rather, preschool teachers need opportunities to develop their roles beyond the classroom. They should also be challenged and supported in their pursuit of higher levels of competence, education and training.

Preschool teachers are often at various points along a continuum of their professional development, depending on their age, stage in their career, and level of training and qualifications. Creating professional pathways for preschool teachers is therefore likely to increase the possibility of retaining quality teachers. One way of broadening the role is to provide different pathways for training which enables practitioners not only to work across different but related sectors (for example, as a family educator, social worker or community support worker), or across a wider age range (for example, infants, children under 3 or 3 to 8 years), but also to specialise. With the appropriate training and professional development, preschool teachers could be offered the chance to pursue additional accreditations in specialist areas such as child development, child health, community studies, social work, special educational needs or other related fields pertaining to children and families. With new and flexible career routes to develop their professional expertise, early childhood professionals may also embark on further training to become primary school teachers, or undertake Master's degrees and Doctorates to re-enter the workforce as lecturers. Continuing in-service training should also provide preschool teachers with the option of either staying in the setting or moving into leadership or management posts. In this way, practitioners are not only able to extend and diversify their practice but move into a wide range of professional roles which may be open to them in the wider workforce.

Another possible strategy to raise the quality of the sector is to move towards a graduate workforce. In England, New Zealand, Denmark, as in many OECD countries, the early childhood workforce has experienced successive waves of

**It is not just about having a national pay scale, but having a competitive pay scale, with more investment by the government so that the cost of childcare will be affordable.**

reforms. In Denmark, for example, 60% of all early childhood educators hold a bachelor's degree from a university, comparable to teachers at the primary school level (OECD 2006, 'Denmark Country Profile') In England, the UK government through the work of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), has developed a new graduate leadership role in the form of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) to raise the standards of the workforce. The government's target is to have at least one graduate Early Years Professional (EYP) in employment in a full day-care setting by 2015 (OECD 2006, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*; Children's Workforce Development Council CWDC, 2011 <http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/early-years/childcare-careers/training-and-qualifications>). The overall drive is to build a workforce whose primary work of caring and educating young children is undertaken by qualified staff with the high level of competence, education and training expected at graduate level.

The notion of implementing a national strategy to establish a graduate early childhood workforce can be a contentious one. While some advocates may feel strongly that preschool teachers need to be educated to university level because anyone who is responsible for the care and education of young children at such an important phase of education should be as qualified, if not even more qualified than mainstream teachers, others may argue that a non-graduate route needs to be maintained for those who are less academic but who possess strong skills and experience for nurturing and educating children; moreover, not everyone in the workplace may wish to go on to obtain a degree. Nevertheless, despite the controversy, it is a debate that needs to be had, in order that a new workforce vision and strategy can be developed for the long-term benefit of the sector. It is a debate that needs to take place at policy and practice levels, in consultation with all stakeholders including preschool providers, training providers, principals, policy-makers and practitioners. In this way, new policy goals can then be developed to help preschool teachers develop their roles in the longer term and be provided with the level of training and development that are tailored to their needs and abilities right from the outset of their entering the profession.

#### **4.5 A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO RAISE THE STATUS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS**

If early childhood is to be valued as an important part of children's lifelong education, then preschool teachers should have the same status and recognition as teachers in primary school. Given the complex needs of children in the preschool age, preschool teachers need to be recognised and valued as important educators in their own right, and as trained and qualified profession-

als with the specialist expertise in supporting the development of children in this age group.

Participants felt strongly that efforts must be made at a national level to enhance the professional image and status of preschool teachers in order to attract more people to the profession. The study suggests that the current perceptions of the early childhood profession is that it is an easy option, *'People still think that it's not a difficult job. It is like babysitting. It is not as highly regarded compared to say being a teacher in the primary school or in other professions. I think we need to uplift this.'* This is reinforced by a training provider, *'In the eyes of the public, childcare teachers are seen as babysitters; you don't need good qualifications to enter the field.'* Such attitudes towards the profession not only devalue the importance of the profession, but create barriers to raising the status of preschool teachers.

One way forward might be to initiate a national campaign to enhance the public profile of preschool teachers and the early childhood profession. There needs to be more public visibility of the valuable work undertaken by preschool teachers, and increased recognition, both within the local community and by policy-makers. In this way, potential recruits who are thinking of entering the sector, will see what an important profession they are seeking to join, not only in the difference that they can make for young children and families but for the nation as a whole.

Enhancing the professional status of preschool teachers entails looking beyond a narrow definition of a preschool teacher as one who works 'only in a kindergarten or childcare centre' or as one who works in a 'babysitting job', but as a qualified professional who makes a significant contribution to children's lives. Improving the status and image of preschool teachers will lead to far-reaching reforms. It will not only encourage educators to take a more active role in their career development but also promote a sense of pride and empowerment within their profession.

**We really need to create professional pathways. We can look at ways to create specialists out of the practitioner, so that the preschool teacher can teach in special schools; in fact, why not the primary schools, the lower primary schools?**

**Besides salary,  
status and recognition  
would make the preschool  
sector attract the right  
kind of people with a lot  
of passion to work with  
young children.**

Unless the status of preschool teaching as a profession is enhanced in the wider public arena, preschool teachers will continue to be perceived as those working on the margins of mainstream school settings, and such a perception will continue to alienate preschool teachers or deny them of a legitimate

place in the wider educational landscape in Singapore. If, as a society, the care and education experience of our very young is truly valued, then early childhood education needs to be recognised as equally important, or even more important, than primary and secondary schooling.

**Both Ministries could come out a bit more with public education about what early childhood really should be about.**

#### **4.6 QUALITY OF PRESCHOOL TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMMES**

The onset of new training programmes at certificate, diploma, and even degree levels in the sector are leading preschool teachers into a new realm of professionalism. The importance of training and qualifications is not only to equip practitioners with the necessary competency skills to work with young children, but to understand the theory and higher analytical thinking skills that underlie their practice. Research shows that preschool educators working with young children need to develop a critical perspective about their work with children in order to validate their practice.

As such, quality pre-service and in-service training for early childhood professionals are vital and necessary to advancing the workforce in Singapore. However, a key

**Pay doesn't stand alone because in a country that is so materialistic, pay and image tie in together. ... So this job and this career path is the last consideration for people.**

issue facing the sector at the moment is that early childhood training programmes are provided by a spectrum of diverse providers, from the local polytechnics, private agencies affiliated with overseas universities to private preschools. Such diversities have inadvertently resulted in differences in training experiences and training routes. For example, some early childhood diploma courses incorporate curriculum content and professional experience that are aimed at training teachers to work with children aged 0-8 while others provide training more appropriate for 3-8 years, with little known commonality or differences between the programmes. The range and variety of training providers also mean that there are differences in the rigour and quality of the training in terms of the content (what is being taught), pedagogy (how it is being taught), and philosophy (whose ideas are being taught). For

example, some training programmes provide a more practice-led experience which rely mainly on placement or workplace experience, while others offer a more research-based, theoretical type of learning experience. The placement experience on these training programmes, a key component which entails students being attached to a preschool as part

of their training, also varies in terms of length (how much time the student spends in placement) and quality (how well the student is assessed and supported during placement). There are also variations in the mode of study offered by different training providers depending on how flexible they are in meeting the learning needs of the students. Interviews with participants in the study reveal that some private preschools develop their own in-house training and employ free-lance trainers or consultants to meet the professional needs of their own teachers.

There are therefore great variations in the type of training offered by different institutions. Consequently, the quality of preschool teachers who graduate from these training programmes, the quality of their teaching practice, and in turn the impact on the children they work with, are also variable. A participant response from a non-profit organisation raises concerns about the quality of newly trained teachers, *'you can see different agencies deliver differently. When they [preschool teachers] come in with applications for jobs, some come from different training agencies and different backgrounds. Training agencies come to us and they gave us those teachers, but they [the teachers] don't know how to manage; it is really like that. What happened with your learning and training?'*

**I think the main challenge is having quality teachers, especially the training of teachers.**

Given the concerns raised by participants about the quality of training, the study highlights an urgent issue, which is the need to ensure more consistency and transparency in the way teachers are trained. One possibility of addressing this issue is to carry out a mapping exercise; an independent review of current training programmes available in the sector, in order to gain an overview of training provisions. The independent review can be undertaken with the aim of reviewing key aspects of workforce development, such as the content of qualifications and training courses, career progression of the workforce, and the development of a range of differentiated qualifications to meet the needs of preschool teachers at every stage of their career. In theory, this should strengthen the training, qualifications and career opportunities of the workforce and help to develop the underlying core principles on which high quality preschool training should be based. One suggestion put forward by the study is that a single government body oversee the training of the workforce, the way that MOE is the lead ministry which oversees the training of primary school teachers. *'One way to ensure the quality training is to let MOE do the training so that the private agencies that are motivated by profit will not just take on any students who come. [That is,] if they want a certain kind of consistency in the quality of teacher training. I guess that is what they do for primary school teachers and that will make a very strong statement to say that we want to regulate teacher quality.'*

This chapter has focused on the key issues and challenges facing the early childhood workforce in Singapore. The findings show that in order to create a sustainable workforce and strengthen the sector, preschool teachers' salaries and status must be enhanced, the quality of training maintained, and career incentives developed. It is also clear that in order to influence the quality of the preschool workforce and to change attitudes towards the profession, it is necessary to work for change at a national level.

**The quality of the lecturers is another question. Some don't even have experience in the field they are teaching and they honestly tell the students, I really have not taught a preschool class, I am only teaching music.**

**As a privatised sector, priorities tend to be slightly different. [It] tends to be a bit more commercial and having the enrolment in order to survive as a training agency. So on the ground, I've heard teachers telling me that they go for the quickest and easiest programmes even though they are all PQAC-accredited. The teachers know which programmes are easy.**

Children need and deserve the best educators. Preschool teachers are the ones who are involved in the day-to-day interactions with the children and are doing their best for the children and families. It is therefore vital that they are supported as professionals in the work that they do.



One way to ensure quality training is to let MOE do the training so that the private agencies that are motivated by profit will not just take on any students who come. [That is,] if they want a certain kind of consistency in the quality of teacher training. I guess that is what they do for primary school teachers and that will make a very strong statement to say that we want to regulate teacher quality.

## CHAPTER FIVE



# TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

The transition from preschool to primary school is one of the most important changes that a child will experience in his or her life. Research studies show that quality early childhood provision can help to prepare children for this phase of transition, as well as adapt to their new environment. Children who attend high-quality preschools are better prepared for school and are more likely to achieve their potential in their future progress, not least because the preschool experience equips them with the social, emotional, cognitive and overall competency skills that will contribute to their readiness for school.

One of the important issues raised by participants in the study is the crucial need to support children's transition from preschool to primary school, especially in a competitive educational environment like Singapore. The participants identified two key challenges – the downward pressures of the primary school curriculum and parental expectations of preschool education as a way of preparing children academically for formal schooling. A response from the study sums up the dilemma that many practitioners face as professionals who are caught between supporting children to become lifelong learners on one hand, and meeting the demands of parents on the other, exacerbated by an education system driven by academic achievements. *'We are tied to parents' demand. In their eyes, they want their children to be ready for P1 [primary one], but we are not teaching P1 but teaching the children to be lifelong learners. I think this is quite a big challenge. At the end of day, children still need to face exams like the PSLE [Primary School Leaving Examination], which is beyond my control, and I feel that if I don't train them to be ready for P1, I am always in this dilemma.'*

The participant response above reinforces similar findings from an earlier study carried out in 2008 (Ang, 2008) on preschool teachers' responses to *A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* in Singapore (Ministry of Education, 2003). The study showed that parental demands for a more formal and academic

approach to the curriculum are directly influenced by the downward pressures of a primary school system, and all 15 teachers interviewed in the study felt compelled by parents to deliver an academic-driven curriculum which focuses on numeracy, literacy and other formal aspects of learning. The teachers noted that parents believe an academic-oriented preschool experience will put their children on the right track to a successful education. The challenge for policy-makers and educators then, is to withstand the pressures of societal demands, and maintain an educational provision that supports the all-rounded development of children, from birth to schooling. If the benefits of a high-quality preschool education are to be carried over to children's primary school experience, then the two phases of education must offer a holistic and continuous learning experience.

## **5.1 CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY CURRICULUM**

A crucial factor that facilitates the transition for children is continuity between the preschool and primary school curriculum. If early childhood is conceptualised at policy level as providing an important link to primary schooling, then there must be cohesive national policies and government support to facilitate children's transition from preschool to primary school. This is especially the case where there are different ministries and administrations responsible for pre-primary and primary, as in the case of Singapore through the MOE and MCYS; political commitment and collaboration becomes all the more crucial to enhance the links between the preschool experience and primary schooling for the benefit of children entering the educational system.

In order to develop continuity between the preschool and primary curriculum, it is important that educators cultivate a shared professional understanding of the learning approaches and culture that underpin a curriculum that is appropriate for young learners. One strategy is for policy-makers and educators to agree on common educational philosophies and goals, based on a thorough review of the curricula for both phases

**To me, true education is about making people a better person and a happy person ... Parents are more concerned about their children doing well in primary one. Education is about more than doing well at school, but also in life.**

**Many parents are still, I think, a little short-sighted in what they consider to be outcomes and many are just ensuring that their programmes meet primary one. And I don't think that is how early childhood should be. That we teach to test and that we prepare children just for primary one. I think that is a bit myopic.**

of learning at preschool and primary levels. These goals should include more than just cognitive or academic attainment, but also broad social and personal goals for children's development such as self-confidence, enjoyment of learning and learning how to learn. In this way, the focus of both the preschool and primary school curricula moves from an over-emphasis on preparing children for academic skills such as literacy and numeracy, to also preparing them socially and emotionally for schooling. A second strategy to enhance the continuity between the preschool and primary curriculum is to conceptualise early childhood as covering the age range from 0 to 8 years, so that preschool and primary school teachers alike can build on a common body of knowledge and professional practice to create a holistic environment which supports children's continuous learning from preschool, up to at least the first two years of primary schooling in primary one and two. The primary school curriculum can then evolve from children's previous knowledge and learning, while providing exciting and challenging experiences in a new learning environment.

The 2000 Dakar Framework for Action reinforces the importance of 'promoting flexible, adaptable programmes for young children that are appropriate to their age and not mere downward extensions of formal school systems' (UNESCO, 2000 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf>). The Framework reminds us of the inter-connectedness between preschool and primary education, and the need to view the curriculum for both phases of learning as part of a holistic, continuous education process. Participants in the study feel strongly that there has to be some form of continuity between preschool and primary school, at the level of policy as well as in practice, in order to mitigate the stress, anxiety, and other negative effects that children sometimes experience at the

beginning of their primary education. Any reform of the early childhood sector will only be effective if considered in the context of Singapore's wider education system, not least because the preschool sector invariably faces the 'trickle-down' effects of the primary school system. A consistency of routine between preschool and primary school will help to lessen the anxiety and enhance the transition for new primary school children. This should entail more than just helping children to adjust to their new physical environment, such as a larger class size, new classroom layout, new routine, teachers and new peers. Just as important is the need to support children as they adjust to the new curriculum, learning experiences and learning expectations in primary school.

Linking the early childhood and primary curricula entails seeking a balance between preparing children socially and emotionally for school-readiness and equipping them with basic literacy skills to enhance their entry into primary school. It also entails recognising the importance of maintaining an appropriate curriculum that is holistic and flexible enough to cater for young children entering formal education for the first time, many of whom come from a variety of settings and who have very diverse learning needs. In a country where preschool services are provided largely by the private sector, there exists such a wide variety of kindergarten and childcare programmes that it is inevitable that there will be differences in the ethos and curriculum approaches offered. This means that by the time children arrive at primary school, they will have been exposed to different learning experiences, expectations and value systems which are contrasting to that of formal schooling. It is therefore all the more important that these differences are mitigated, and continuity between preschool and primary school is well supported.

In addition, it is also important that primary schools value the pedagogical input that children gain from their early experiences in preschools. Policy-makers and those at the helm of curriculum development and implementation should ensure that both the preschool and primary school curricula are holistic and consistent

**I feel that the primary school sector still needs to understand early childhood. The primary school sector does not have to see us as people preparing everything for them.**

with current professional knowledge of appropriate pedagogies, and are not merely a formalised academic-based structure of learning. There needs to be a strengthening of the role of preschool teachers as an important part of mainstream schooling, and vice versa, for primary school teachers to be trained and engaged in preschool practices and pedagogies. One way forward is to develop an open, ongoing dialogue between preschool and primary school teachers, to explore the underlying educational philosophies between the two groups of educators, and find common ground in their approaches to teaching and learning. Above all, preschool and primary school teachers should work towards a greater understanding of each other's ideas of children's learning so that children's needs can be met more effectively. There is no doubt that children's early learning experiences during preschool should lay the foundations for what follows during primary school; and likewise, children's experience in primary school must 'follow through' and reinforce the learning that has occurred during preschool. Preschool as well as primary school teachers must liaise regularly, so that they can work together effectively and actively to prepare children for a smooth transition. This is crucial as without a secure start to primary school life, it is likely that children will struggle to progress.

Ensuring continuity between the preschool and primary school curricula therefore entails a rethinking of education across the levels. It also entails a rethinking of the overall goal of education – what it is for and the role it plays in society, in order to ensure that every child achieves his or her potential. A curriculum that supports transition should be geared towards the developmental needs of the child and provide a content of learning that is progressing along a continuum, with sufficient flexibility to ensure that the individual development and interests of children can be met in a holistic way.

The government's current curriculum policy for kindergartens is explicit. In the *Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum* in Singapore introduced in 2003, the government makes it clear that the preschool curriculum is not meant as 'just a preparation for the next stage', and that the kindergarten stage is to be regarded as important in itself and 'should not be confused with trying to accelerate learning in the kindergarten years by providing children with a simplified primary school curriculum' (Ministry of Education 2003, p.11). In reality, however, the task of providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum is a challenge, and often aspirational. The crux of the debate is that while some believe it is important to let children enjoy their preschool years without pressure and argue that schools should be ready for children, and not the other way round, others may feel that failing to prepare children for the realities of formal schooling, where skills

**Our education system has always been only one way – climbing Mount Everest – but now our Prime Minister has come up with a mountain range. A range of mountains – a mountain can be academic but the other mountains can be [about] other talents, like music, sports or a different kind of vocation. ... I always said that our education system is like everyone climbing Mount Everest, but how many people can actually reach the peak? So we need a mountain range.**



such as literacy and numeracy are prioritised, is only setting them up for failure. The challenge for policy-makers and educators in Singapore, in supporting children's transfer from preschool to primary school, is to therefore address the complex dichotomy and tensions that surround the role of preschool education; where the pedagogic vision for many educators is for a less academic and an informal experience of learning, but parental and societal pressures are forcing the curriculum into a more formalised model of learning (Ang L. 2006; 2008).

# CHAPTER SIX



ACCESSIBILITY



AFFORDABILITY



QUALITY

# BETTER GOVERNANCE OF THE PRESCHOOL SECTOR

Governments have a paramount responsibility in developing quality early childhood services. In a policy brief on early childhood care and education, the international organisation UNESCO makes a strong case for the role of good governance in promoting quality services:

*Good governance can ensure that services attain quality standards, are affordable, meet local demand, promote cost-effectiveness and achieve equity goals. As the early childhood field expands and becomes increasingly complex, policymakers need to address governance to ensure more coherent ECCE policy across government agencies, levels of government and programmes.'* (UNESCO, 2007, 'Good Governance of early childhood care and education: Lessons from the 2007 EFA Global Monitoring Report.' UNESCO Policy Briefs on early childhood No. 40. Paris: UNESCO)

According to UNESCO, 'strong governance' involves the accountability and responsibility of decision-making and delivery of all matters concerning early childhood education and care, across all sectors and levels of government. Good governance in terms of efficiency, transparency and accountability is the 'glue' that holds the early childhood system together, and is a key element in meeting the diverse needs of young children and families.

International research has shown that well-coordinated early childhood provision requires that different ministries and agencies work together for the common good of all children and their families. In reality, however, this can sometimes be fraught with different ministries and multi-agencies having contrasting approaches to preschool services and differing agendas. Hence, a more consolidated approach has been adopted by some countries. For example, a few governments have nominated a lead ministry, usually Education, to coordinate and oversee early childhood care and education services. This is

**I think where parents are concerned, it would be a lot simpler, because every time I have to answer their questions – Why are there no subsidies for kindergartens? Aren't we Singapore citizens too? So I say, well, it's two different Ministries. And people say why? And I can't answer that question. I think it would help streamline things.**

the case for New Zealand through the Ministry of Education, in England with the Department for Education, and Vietnam through the Ministry of Education and Training. Other examples of such models of governance through the appointment of a lead ministry include the Nordic countries in Europe, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (UNESCO 2007; OECD 2001). Within the international community, the general perception is that having a consolidated and participatory approach to the governance of early childhood services is highly desirable as it entails less fragmentation and greater accountability.

## **6.1 INTER-MINISTERIAL COLLABORATION**

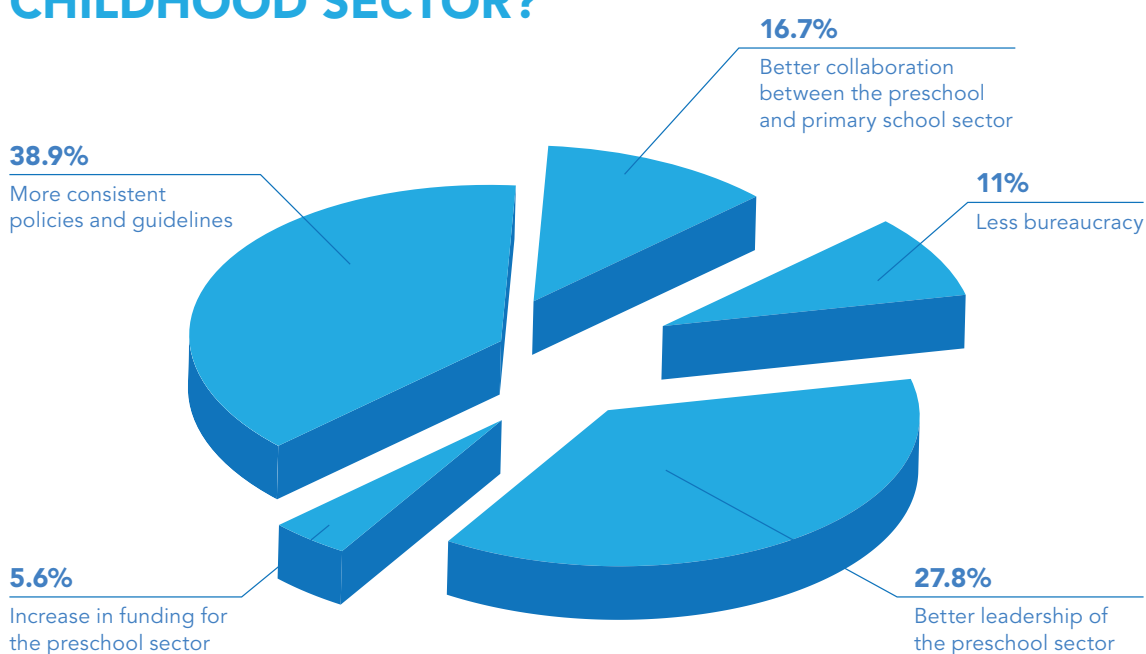
In the preschool sector in Singapore, direct responsibility for early childhood currently falls under the charge of two main Ministries, MOE and MCYS; where childcare regulation and policies are managed by MCYS, and kindergarten policy and management falls under MOE. All 27 participants interviewed in the study felt strongly that more cohesive governance of the sector is vital, at a policy as well as operational level. When asked the question in the online survey on 'how will inter-Ministry collaboration between MOE and MCYS help to improve the early childhood sector?', 38.9% of participants responded 'more consistent policies and guidelines'; 27.8% of respondents suggested that inter-ministerial collaboration will lead to 'better leadership of the preschool sector' and 16.7% felt that there will be better links between preschool and primary school.

On the whole, participants welcomed inter-ministerial collaboration between MOE and MCYS as a way of promoting continuity and consistency within the sector. At a policy level, it was felt that public policy formulated by both Ministries need to recognise early childhood education as an essential part of Singapore's national

education system. Having both MOE and MCYS working together to underscore the status of preschool education as an important part of the country's mainstream education is the first key step to strengthening the sector.

At an operational level, it was felt that this can be achieved through more cohesive collaboration between the two Ministries, where the split between childcare and kindergarten can be bridged in the likelihood that it will lead to less bureaucracy and better leadership of the sector. While participants in the study acknowledged that there has been growing collaboration between MOE and MCYS in recent years, for example, through joint ministerial initiatives such as the setting up of the Preschool Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC) in 2001, it was felt that the sector still remains divisive, with each Ministry working towards its own policies and agenda for different segments of the sector in terms of childcare and kindergarten education. The main concern among participants is that having two Ministries will cause an increase in bureaucracy, overlap of administrative structures, and in the longer term, a diffusion of responsibility. In addition, the study also highlights the importance of recognising the inter-connectedness

## HOW WILL INTER-MINISTRY COLLABORATION BETWEEN MOE AND MCYS HELP TO IMPROVE THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR?



of cross-sector policies and Ministries, not just between MOE and MCYS, but also with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Manpower through the Workforce Development Agency (WDA), voluntary and private sectors. This is so that the effects of policy planning and actions taken in one sector will be relevant to other sectors, and public policy as a whole for preschool services will be better applied and understood. As a participant asserts, *'Better collaboration between MCYS, MOE, VWOs, Private Sectors and MOH.'*

## **6.2 LEAD MINISTRY**

One suggestion emerging from the study is the nomination of a lead ministry or the formation of a new, distinct ministry (for example, a Ministry for Children and Families), with the sole focus of overseeing the coordination and regulation of the sector combining childcare and kindergarten. A couple of participants suggested designating *'a co-ordinating minister'* or *'a national coordinating body'*. It was felt that having one national body, or a lead ministry, would lead to better ownership of the sector, greater accountability and more targeted policy changes to improve services in the long term. As one of the participants raised the question, *'Can MOE take over because there will be more resources, more equality and everyone will be go through the same channel from preschool education to primary school?'*, while another participant is unsure about the current division of preschool services between two Ministries, *'Two Ministries for two sectors, why don't have one Ministry for all? I don't see why the separation between kindergarten and childcare!'*

The strategy of appointing a lead ministry can be a contentious issue, but is nonetheless an important one to consider. In 2009, the issue of a lead ministry was raised by a policy study work group under REACH comprising key stakeholders to explore ways of advancing the sector. A key recommendation proposed by the group was having MOE as a lead ministry as a way of standardising the quality of provision and enforcing higher standards of early childhood education.

Revisiting the debate in this study, it is worthwhile to consider the arguments for and against the proposition. The supporting arguments for such a model is that with one ministry overseeing the sector, there will be a clearer delineation of the accountability and responsibility of early childhood services, and more coherent policy development and implementation. Having a lead ministry in Education may also entail a clearer focus on the transition between preschool and primary school, and a more united management system and an overall more cohesive approach to teacher training and information sharing. Integrating early childhood within a single ministry is also likely to improve the capacity for managing change and diversity in the sector, and strengthen synergy with

The good thing is the Ministry is stepping in and there've been a lot of positive changes, improvements and raising of standards. I think everyone can see that. But ... I feel there is a lot of emphasis on paperwork and filling in forms and meeting standards. I understand the need for accountability but what is happening in reality, is that it is translating to us, as principals of schools, as a lot of administration and paperwork.

other sectors, especially health, social welfare and special developmental needs. This will inevitably lead to better regulatory frameworks and administrative systems for managing all aspects of preschool services. UNESCO asserts that designating a lead ministry *'makes it easier to develop and implement policies and reduces some inefficiency'*, and that selecting Education as the lead ministry often means that once early childhood becomes *'part of the school system, it is more likely to be seen as a public good, which can lead to increased resources and greater access'* (UNESCO, 2007). Citing Sweden as an example, UNESCO's report suggests that when the Swedish government

## **Consider a co-ordinating minister (like the Coordinating Minister for National Security) to coordinate/streamline the work of MCYS and MOE.**

transferred the responsibility of early childhood from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education in 1996, free preschool entitlement was introduced for children from age 12 months and above, and free preschool services was provided for all 4- and 5-year-olds. However, at the other end of the spectrum, one of the risks of having a lead ministry such as Education is that early childhood may be in danger of being overly structured and influenced by the primary school sector. The concern is that integrating early childhood within the education system may lead to an over-emphasis on preparing children for primary schooling.

There are therefore both opportunities and challenges of having a lead ministry, especially one that is led by Education, and these have to be weighed up carefully for the benefit of the sector. What is clear is that as developments in the preschool sector in Singapore garner momentum, there is much to be gained in considering the strengths and limitations of the evidence that underpins the models of governance that different countries have adopted. There are trends and practices within the Asia-Pacific region and further afield which suggest the need for more innovation and an open-minded approach to the way the early childhood sector is governed, and particularly in the way preschool services are delivered. The notion of having a more consolidated approach to promote better coordination, accountability and governance across the sector can only lead to an overall improvement of the sector, and is certainly a worthy goal to achieve.



### 6.3 AN INDEPENDENT ADVISORY BODY: A CONSULTATIVE APPROACH TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A key component of improving the preschool sector is the relationship between the government, policy-makers and stakeholders. While the increasing involvement of the government to regulate the sector is generally welcomed, there is a general perception among participants that policies are changing too frequently, particularly with the rapid implementation of new policies. There is also concern that the overwhelming influence of government regulations and rapid changes in policies may stifle the independent voice of preschool providers, preschool teachers, teacher-training organisations, researchers and other stakeholders in the sector. As such, a consultative and participatory approach to policy development and implementation is seen as important to ensuring the buy-in of those working on the ground to make policy effective and move the sector forward.

The study highlights the importance of striking the right balance between centralised governance and localised autonomy in the sector. As a participant articulates her dilemma in the climate of increasing government's regulation of the sector: *'It is difficult. Because if there is so much autonomy, then you can't really regulate it so tightly. But when you do regulate, for those who can actually fly you clip their wings a little. ... Over the years I see it's so positive, but with all this development I think there are always two sides. And again I think it's that balance, you know. Over-regulation, I think, would be a big mistake. ... I would like there to retain autonomy for early childhood education.'*

To establish a more decentralised and participatory approach to policy development, one strategy is the setting up of an independent advisory body consisting of key stakeholders such as social workers, health professionals, educators and other multi-professional practitioners for their feedback on current issues and challenges that the sector is facing, in order to enhance the development and implementation of preschool policies. As the leading professional of a preschool says, *'I would like to see more opportunities for teachers themselves to come together and to voice their concerns, their difficulties and the issues that they face on the ground level; because a lot of policies, as you know, are made by people at the top but often they can miss the point or they may come up with ideas that are actually not all that practical.'* The response here is explicit that policies emanating from policy-makers must be developed in direct consultation with preschool teachers and other professionals on the ground.

**[For] any government changes that are implemented, do it in a consultative way but also give it time. Policies don't have time to be trialled properly, evaluated or given a chance to work before it's been thrown out and something else has been put in. And the teachers ... in the end I think they just get really demotivated and say, "oh God, not another new thing", you know.**

In order to accelerate progress in the sector, a consultative and participatory approach to the decision-making and policy-implementation process is essential. Early childhood professionals must be given a voice in the sector in which they work. Providing a forum to include the voices of professionals who are directly involved in the lives of children and families on a daily basis will ultimately lead to greater advocacy and give legitimacy to the cause of raising the quality of early childhood services; with the likelihood of more efficient resource mobilisation, knowledge generation and exchange within the field. In essence, effective collaboration and equal partnership among stakeholders, governments and policy-makers must be encouraged, in order to bring about genuine engagement and dialogue on meeting the needs of all young children in Singapore.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



# THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Research offers a crucial source of knowledge and understanding about children's learning and development, and richly enhances our understanding of the effectiveness of policy and advocacy. Further research into various aspects of the preschool sector needs to be undertaken at a local and national level. Responses from the study suggest that there is a compelling need to underpin preschool practices with robust, high-quality research. Research within the sector is important in order to build a strong knowledge-based position on the impact of preschool services, on the quality of the workforce delivering the service, and the types of childcare and kindergarten programmes being established in the country. Given the diversity of the current sector in Singapore, systematic research and evaluation must be undertaken to monitor the impact of different early childhood programmes on children's long-term development and progress. Research has shown that the implementation of new preschool programmes, new learning approaches and teacher training programmes does not automatically lead to positive benefits on children's learning and development. It is therefore all the more important that parents, educators and policy-makers need to know how and if policies are working, and which programme or type of service benefits children the most. What is important is to build a body of evidence-based research over the short and long term that will measure and evidence the impact of preschool services, policy and practice in the sector, and the ultimate benefits for children and families.

## **7.1 EMBEDDING RESEARCH IN EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND ADVOCACY**

In many parts of the world, there is a strong emphasis on evidence-based policy-making and ensuring that policy development and implementation is based on high-quality research. There is also increasing interest in how research undertaken globally and cross-nationally may differ from or overlap with each other,

**There is a need to review and evaluate current training programs that are for training preschool teachers. The other point is to ensure that within the training programmes, there is strong evidence of implementing review planning, and embedding research-based practices in the programmes.**

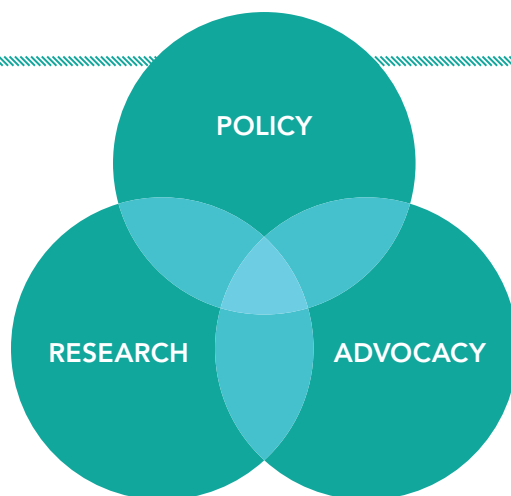
in order to gain a broader, comparative understanding of the factors that influence children's lives and well-being. There are many competing arguments and perspectives in the development of quality early childhood services, and these are influential in informing the way policy is shaped. The only way of judging the efficacy of the sector in meeting the needs of children and families is by exploring the internal and national research evidence pertaining to preschool services. Embedding high-quality research in evidence-based policy is therefore about evaluating the impact of policy and ensuring that those directly involved in the development and implementation of policy are able to support their decisions and practice with evidence from research. There is ample international research on the impact of high-quality early childhood services on children's development, and there needs to be comparable research undertaken locally within the Singapore context. The pertinent questions 'what works?', 'why it works?' and 'what impact will it have on the children and families?' should be firmly embedded in policy and practice. It is therefore important that as the field matures, and more research-active professionals enter the profession, research and evaluation will gain significant traction in moving the sector forwards.

About 16.7% of participants in the study indicated that 'research in the field' is a key aspect of the preschool sector which requires further improvement. Some of the participants recognise that research is an invaluable leverage in raising the quality of preschool services. This is especially the case at policy level, where research evaluations and analysis undertaken will help to ensure that early childhood policies and programmes are effective and sustainable. At the level of practice and advocacy, systematic and methodologically rigorous research about children's development and the factors that influence development can form a powerful impact on the ongoing advocacy for quality early childhood

practice and services. Teacher educators must face the demand for sustained and systematic research into their programmes and their work with children. To this end, early childhood research needs to be supported at a national level by the government and policy-makers for the purpose of continued quality improvement of preschool services. It is important that preschool professionals embed 'research-based practices' in their training to develop the expertise to successfully implement and evaluate their own practices.

Independent, high-quality evidence-based research must be valued across the sector as a way of monitoring the long-term impact of preschool services on children's development and attainment. If the Singapore government is to allocate more funding to the sector, then the conduct of systematic and contextually relevant scholarly research is all the more important to support policy development to achieve value for money for preschool education. One way forward is to create a 3-way network of evidence-based policy, research and advocacy, where policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and providers work together to strengthen research and innovative practices in order to achieve the common objective of supporting the needs of all young children. An inter-connected network of policy, research and advocacy can also facilitate ease of access to research information, the process of conducting research, and the systematic review and evaluation of research findings. If research is defined as a way of gaining more detailed information, raising questions for analysis, measurement and accountability, then this will undoubtedly improve advocacy for the sector. This requires a rethink of how research can best serve present and future generations of children. Research is vital, not least because research evidence and findings can ultimately lead to many new interpretations of policy and practice.

## CREATING A NETWORK OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY, RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY





# CHAPTER EIGHT

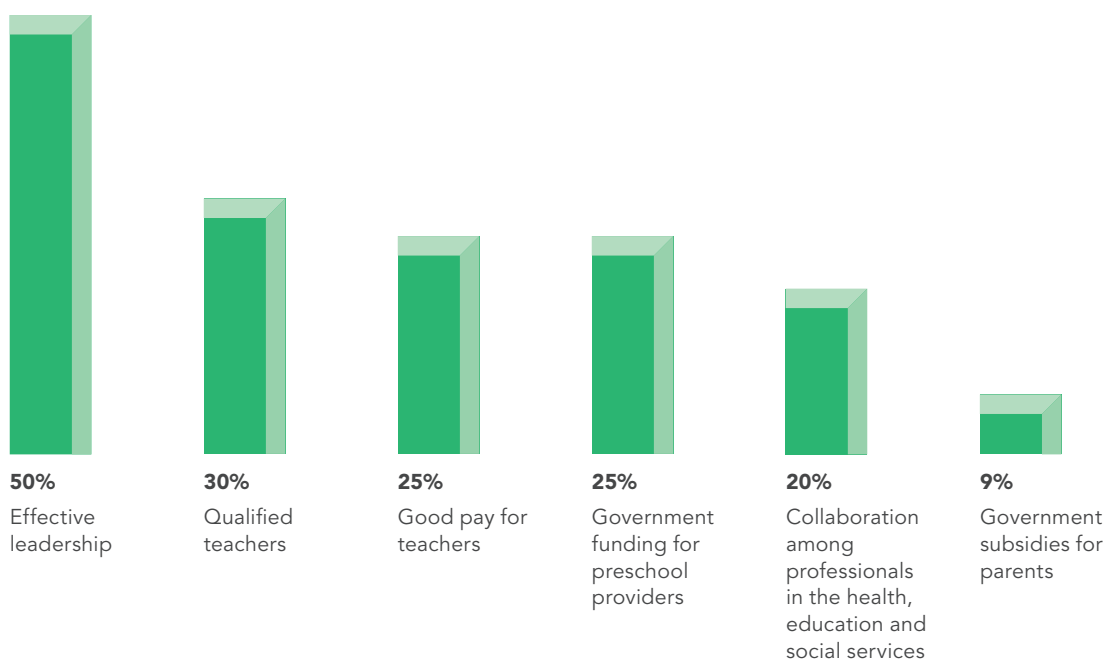




# LEADERSHIP

At the crux of this final chapter is the message that the long-standing issues relating to quality and sustainability of the early childhood sector are acutely related to leadership. Strong leadership and political commitment are crucial to the successful implementation of early childhood services. Across the board, responses from participants in the study indicate that effective leadership is needed to drive the preschool sector forwards in a clear strategic direction, in order to bring about accelerated progress in the sector. A preschool provider is unequivocal in the assertion that a key driver in improving the quality of the sector is invariably 'the quality of the leadership'; not least because effective leadership is at the heart of leading change. Strong and effective leadership can promote greater ownership, transparency and ultimately advocacy of high-quality services for children and families.

## HOW CAN THE QUALITY OF KINDERGARTEN AND CHILDCARE SERVICES BE IMPROVED?



## **What is going to drive [the] quality of the sector is really the quality of the manpower, and the quality of the leadership. Getting a pool of talent, professionals within the industry, and developing professional or managerial leadership plays a key role in upgrading the sector.**

More than 45% of the participants indicated 'effective leadership' is crucial at every level – in practice, policy development and service delivery.

Current research in the field shows that effective leadership is key to maintaining a quality early childhood service (Robins and Callan, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008; Muijis, Aubrey, Harris, and Briggs, 2004; Ang, 2012). As early childhood takes on an increasingly high profile on the policy agenda of the Singapore government, there is growing recognition of the complex and multi-faceted role of early childhood professionals. Preschool practitioners are not only called upon to provide quality care and educational services for young children but also, increasingly, to manage, respond and lead in the delivery and implementation of these services. As research indicates, *'[the] development of leadership skills continues to be a vital and critical challenge for early childhood practitioners around the world if the provision of socially and culturally responsive services for young children and their families is to be successful'* (Rodd, 2006). There are many different definitions and measurements of what constitutes 'good leadership', but in general, an indicative list of qualities includes:

- the ability to articulate and promote a shared vision and objectives;
- building shared understandings and goals for the advocacy of children and families;
- acquiring a high degree of know-how and expertise about the sector;
- building a learning community and team culture;
- the ability to recognise and manage change;

**A leader is someone  
who influences;  
someone who influences  
children, influences  
other teachers. I tell  
teachers that every  
teacher is a leader.  
You are influencing 20  
children in your class.  
You are a leader in your  
own setting. Do you  
know the influence you  
have on these children?**

- encouraging reflection for ongoing professional learning and development; and
- the capacity to influence others into action.

In all these qualities, developing a culture of effective leadership and creating the conditions where effective leadership can take place is crucial. This is all the more pertinent as research shows that one of the main obstacles to impeding improvements to the early childhood sector is the resistance or hesitation to change. If change is needed to improve the sector, then the role of the leader can affect the success or failure of these changes. Bold and effective leadership is therefore vital, not only for recognising the inevitability of change, but for driving forward and managing change, and improving the sector in the long term.

## 8.1 LEADERSHIP IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT

While good governance and political will are crucial to the development of quality early childhood services, perhaps the most important ingredient is strong political leadership to take the sector to the next level. In the regional report from the 2009 regional seminar organised by the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), *'Early Childhood Development: From Policy Idea to Implementation to Results'*, the issue of leadership was highlighted as a key driver in achieving the targeted outcomes for children. The report states that while national governments across the region have adopted or are in the process of adopting policies to improve the lives of children and families, there is a need to ensure that these policy ideas are actually transformed into practice:

*'[v]ery often, a highly visible person helped to champion ECD from idea to policy. The next stage in the idea-to-results chain, and often least understood and developed, is the need to make and respond to critical decisions about how ECD policies and programs are governed. Strong implementation depends on being able to answer who is responsible to accomplish what outcomes at all implementation points in the system.'* (ARNEC, 2009).

The report suggests that driving the early childhood agenda forward carries with it social responsibility and commitment, as well as a strong sense of public service in making critical decisions about local policies and programmes. In this respect, strong leadership in policy development is crucial. What the report suggests is the need for not only a committed and 'highly visible' individual but an effective leader who is competent, accountable and responsible for moving policies onto the implementation stage. Such a leadership role entails not only working at a policy level to make ethical, strategic decisions but at a more local level, to lead

and oversee the implementation of policy in what is described in the report as the 'idea-to-results chain'.

The impact of preschool services advocacy for children and families will only be realised if it is underpinned by strong political leadership, as this is arguably the best means of ensuring that policy and practice have a direct, positive impact on the lives of young children and their families. Leaders – policy-makers and politicians – are the ones who are responsible for creating the long-term vision of the sector. They are the ones who identify priorities (especially with regards to budgets and funding), develop strategies, and make decisions to seek improvement and change for the benefit of all stakeholders. At the level of policy development and implementation, effective national leadership and good policies can therefore make a difference to the

**One very important thing is the leadership; in the government, in the sector and in the schools.**

overall sector. As one of the participant says, *'[Ultimately] it goes back to our leaders; how they place the importance of preschool education.'*

## **8.2 LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE**

Anyone who is involved in the care and education of young children has to undertake a complex range of roles and responsibilities which requires them to exercise leadership acumen and judgements on a daily basis. There is now recognition in the international community that something as important as the care and education of young children, a task so pertinent to the future of society, should only be undertaken by professionals with a high degree of professionalism, knowledge and leadership abilities. Early childhood professionals who are directly involved in the implementation of policy are expected to translate strategic policy vision into practice, and respond to government initiatives. Preschool teachers are in a unique position to influence the lives of young children, parents and families. This requires qualities such as confidence, commitment, professional experience and specialist knowledge, all the very characteristics that leaders need to develop. Hence, establishing strong leadership in practice is as crucial as it is in government. Effective leadership in practice is about championing the work and role of early childhood professionals in the kindergartens and childcare centres, many of whom contribute to the leadership role on a daily basis.

**Professional leadership is important, because very often if you have a very good leader in a centre, it makes all the difference. It's just like any school, if you have a good principal, and good leaders they are able to bring up the quality of that school.**

### 8.3 DEVELOPING FUTURE LEADERS

If leadership is a key indicator of the quality of early years services, then part of ensuring quality preschool provision is about developing future leaders and learning to be a leader. Leaders make an enormous difference to the effectiveness of a kindergarten or childcare centre. Participants from the study recognise that an important element of providing quality kindergarten and childcare services is about nurturing good role models to become effective leaders. As a preschool trainer says, it is about the *'training and a mentoring system'*, and nurturing present and future leaders.

The role and work that preschool educators have to assume are diverse, complex and demanding. At various junctures, often simultaneously, early childhood leaders are educators, motivators, strategists, decision-makers, administrator and entrepreneurs. Preschool teachers who often assume leadership roles must not only be committed to taking on board the latest government policies but be clear on what those policies are about and what they might mean in

practice. Importantly, the sector must continue to develop leaders of the future, in order to continue the vision and the cycle of knowledge exchange and generation, especially in a field that is changing all the time. Developing leaders of the future is about supporting high-quality and sustainable provision, and setting the vision of delivering a world-class preschool service for all young children in Singapore.

**I think training, the mentoring system, and really working with good role models on the ground would nurture good leaders.**

# CONCLUSION

There is considerable research to show that quality early childhood services can make a significant difference to young children's lives and overall well-being. It is also irrefutable that quality early education is directly associated with children's learning and educational attainment, and that investment in high-quality preschool services is likely to yield high economic and social returns for a country. If early childhood education and care are valued, it is crucial that it is sufficiently prioritised, funded and resourced. If there is a single formula or blueprint for making a difference to young children's lives at a systemic level, it is that achieving and maintaining quality early childhood services require commitment at both local and political levels.

The findings in this study provide compelling rationales for increased government investment and funding of the sector, in order to ensure that underlying issues such as the high turnover of the workforce, pay disparities and inequalities in the sector are redressed. Those at the forefront of working with children and families recognise they are dealing with a sector that abounds with complexities and challenges, but also possibilities and opportunities. The collective viewpoints of the leading professionals who have contributed their voices to this study, coupled with developments already taking place in the sector, will likely bring about a transformation of the preschool sector, and consequently, a better future for all young children and families.

As the early childhood landscape in Singapore continues to evolve, at stake is the challenge to improve the life chances of all young children in Singapore, especially those who have been disadvantaged in one way or another through their disability or socio-economic status. It is too important to fail. As a country, the journey towards achieving an inclusive, high-quality and sustainable early childhood services has just begun. As the Confucius saying goes, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' The scale of the task facing the Singapore government to improve the sector is immense, but with preschool providers, educators, training providers, the government, local community and all stakeholders playing their part, every child in Singapore will have the best start in life to a successful future.



**Children are the future of the nation. If you don't take good care of your children and their education, I think you're jeopardising the future.**

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