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Introduction

Preschool education in Singapore has been established for a number of years, and currently provides full and half day care and education programmes for children from 2 months to 6 years in child care centres and 2 to 4 hour education programmes for children from 3 to 6 years in kindergartens. Historically, this provision was for the care and education for some children of working parents, and, to promote the development of English and mother tongue for those attending kindergartens. More recently, the provision has been extended and is available for all children.

Singapore is a multi-racial country with few natural resources and a rapidly expanding economy. There is therefore an awareness of the importance of social cohesion, the promotion of family values, national identity, and of an educated workforce. As such, the government invests heavily in education. The provision of government financial support for preschool education has resulted in more women being encouraged to rejoin the work place, improvements in physical and curriculum provision, and improvements in teachers' benefits and training opportunities. This paper highlights these developments.
Background

Singapore is a small island state in South East Asia, with people as its only natural resource. Since independence in 1965 the government has pursued a system of meritocracy, which, over the years, has resulted in a highly competitive education system where competition and extrinsic rewards for achievement in school feature strongly. There is considerable investment in human capital with the education system constructed and used by the government in nation building, particularly in meeting economic needs and securing inter-ethnic harmony (Gopinathan, 2001).

Over the 36 years since independence, the aims of education have developed from an initial concern with economic survival and the need to provide basic education for all citizens, to a highly competitive system that, through a rigorous streaming and testing procedure, selects and prepares pupils for vocational, polytechnic and university level post-school education. It is a system in which outcomes and examination qualifications are stressed and highly valued at all levels, with pupils being tested regularly in termly school examinations from the age of seven.
The education system is currently being radically overhauled once again, this time in the name of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy.

Ministry of Education officials speak of the need to shift from what they describe as an 'efficiency-driven' system to an 'ability-driven' system. With the introduction of compulsory education up to primary six from 2003, the intention is to provide for a strong foundation to prepare children for a knowledge based economy, to build national identity and social cohesion, to broaden the notion of talent and to make special provision for it.

Preschool education has been well established since the 1960s, and currently, although it is not compulsory, the majority of children below 7 years of age attend some kind of preschool facility. Mothers are actively encouraged to rejoin the workforce, and the provision of government subsidies for childcare enables them to make a substantial contribution to the combined family income. Furthermore, the social conscience of Singaporeans is influenced by the need to maintain strong family ties and values and preschool provision for all, especially for those of employed parents, is a social priority. Hence parents are anxious to take advantage of
the many preschool programmes available. What then are some of the key features of preschool provision in Singapore?

Context of early years policy and practice

The term "preschool" is used to describe the early years programmes provided for children before they begin formal schooling in the January of the year that they will be seven years old.

The Ministry of Community Development and Sport, has responsibility for promoting and regulating childcare centres and for provision of information and operations. This involves regular monitoring of educational programmes, physical facilities, child health, welfare and management, staff - children ratios, and centre administration. Together with the Ministry of Education, it is also responsible for the accreditation of staff qualifications and training courses.

Presently, there are places in 593 childcare centres for 49,443 children, into which 35,373 are currently enrolled with ages ranging from 2 months to
6 years old, in either half or full day government subsidised childcare programmes for five and a half days per week.

In addition there are 98,096 preschool children, aged between 3 and 6 years old, attending 433 Kindergartens for between 2.5 and 4 hours per weekday. Of these, 74,456 children attend 318 non-profit making kindergartens with 23,640 children attending 115 private kindergartens.

Full child care fees for families range between S$380 and S$1000+ per month per child. A subsidy of S$150 per child is available for up to three children in any one family for full-day care. This subsidy is available to mothers and single fathers who work more than 56 hours per month, irrespective of income. A subsidy of S$75 per child per month is provided for half-day care for working and non-working mothers or for mothers requiring full-day care who work less than 56 hours per month.

Nevertheless, even with the provision of government subsidies, there are a number of families for whom even this is unaffordable, and further subsidies are available for hardship cases. The Centre-Based Financial
Assistance Scheme for Child Care, administered by the Community Development Councils, provides an additional monthly subsidy for low-income families. Further subsidies are available in centres run by voluntary welfare agencies, a number of which also employ social work staff. These subsidies range from S$10 to S$250 per month.

Fees at private kindergartens range from S$70 to S$600 per child per month, depending on the programme content, philosophy, and facilities. Private Kindergarten programmes are not subsidised, unlike those operated by community or non-profit making groups where fees for these programmes range between S$25 and S$120 per child per month depending on duration and provision of certain physical facilities such as air-conditioning and extra recreational provision and computer facilities. Recently, the government has promised means-tested financial assistance of S$600 per child per year from 2003 to low-income families whose children attend qualifying non-profit kindergartens.
Early years curriculum content and organisation

Until quite recently the aims of preschool have focused on bilingualism and preparation for primary one, with the content linked to an academic-type curriculum, typically stressing a subject centred, teacher directed, achievement-orientated environment. Individual childcare centres have been encouraged to maintain their own goals and philosophies about the care and education of young children and are required to follow guidelines provided by the Ministry of Community Development and Sport for licensing purposes. These guidelines include provision for age appropriate learning activities in language arts, manipulative and constructive play, music and movement, art and craft, maths, sand and water play, dramatic play, science, and social studies. Also stipulated is provision for learning corners for experiences in role play/dressing up, block play, science/nature, library/books, and a corner to compliment the current theme. Age appropriate activities to develop the use of English and mother tongue must also be provided. Furthermore, the daily schedule must provide for a balance of indoor and outdoor activities involving individual and group work, child initiated and teacher initiated activities, quiet and active activities, free choice and structured activities, and provision for gross and fine motor skill
development. Other guidelines stipulate criteria for the centre environment including provision for nutritional meals and nap-time arrangements, equipment and materials, safety, health, nutrition and hygiene, teacher-child interaction, record keeping, staffing ratios, and staff development.

For licensing purposes, staffing ratios require: 1 staff to 5 infants aged from 2 to 18 months; 1 staff to 8 toddlers (12 maximum) aged 18 to 30 months; 1 staff to 12 playgroup children (15 maximum) aged 30 months to 3 years; 1 staff to 15 nursery children (18 maximum) aged 3 to 4 years; 1 staff to 25 kindergarten 1 or kindergarten 2 children (25 maximum) aged 4 to 6+ years.

The Ministry of Education, licenses kindergartens, monitors the physical standards and is responsible for the registration of teachers. However, it does not plan to assume total responsibility for kindergarten education, which continues to be provided independently by the private sector and community groups. Kindergartens are free to maintain their own goals and philosophies about the care and education of young children, with the
Ministry of Education providing curriculum guidelines for the education of children between the ages of 3 and 6 years.

Staffing ratios for centre registration require 1 staff (and one assistant) for 15 nursery children aged 3 to 4 years old; 1 staff to 20 kindergarten 1 children aged 4 to 5 years old; 1 staff to 25 kindergarten 2 children aged 5 to 6+ years old

Presently, the Ministry of Education’s curriculum guidelines stress the need to provide for the development of readiness for listening, speaking, reading and writing in English and mother tongue; the development of early maths and science concepts through observation, exploration and discovery; opportunities for creative pursuits through music and movement, and art and craft; provision for the development of self-confidence, control and discipline through the inculcation of moral and social values, habits and attitudes.

More recently, the Ministry has initiated a pilot project to ascertain how this provision can be improved. The project is focusing on features such as
the desired outcomes of preschool education, the design of a new curriculum framework, the improvement of teacher quality and regulatory quality. In addition, a longitudinal study is being conducted into the benefits of the new curriculum for children's learning and development as they progress through primary school.

In line with the policy of strengthening Singapore's human and social capital through its education system the purpose of preschool education has been redefined to prepare children for life-long learning where global mindsets and strong national values will be nurtured. No longer is the focus on an academic curriculum with a stress on bilingualism to prepare children for primary school. Instead children will experience a curriculum, which aims to foster holistic development, and the desired outcomes of preschool education have been identified for this purpose. Hence, by the end of their preschool education children should:

Know what is right and what is wrong
Be willing to share and take turns with others
Be able to relate to others
Be curious and able to explore

Be able to listen and speak with understanding

Be comfortable and happy with themselves

Have developed physical coordination and healthy habits

Love their friends, families, teachers, and school.

Provision is being made in the curriculum for experiences in:

Aesthetics and creative awareness

Language and literacy

Motor skills development

Numeracy

Environmental awareness

Self, social and health awareness

The teaching approach will be integrated providing opportunities for meaningful interaction and play. The children will experience both large and small group as well as individualized activities. Teachers will be encouraged to monitor the development of children’s aural and oral skills, social skills,
and problem solving skills. Both childcare centres and kindergartens will be encouraged to follow the new curriculum eventually.

Assessment of progress

Although primary school education for children aged 7 to 12 years of age will become compulsory in 2003, there is no formal link with preschool education, which is not compulsory. Reports on children's progress are provided for parents and there is no requirement for these to be passed on to primary schools. The new curriculum provision will continue to require teachers to monitor progress. This will be an informal process including a number of approved methods of observation, providing centres with the flexibility to select the most appropriate means to reflect children's progress.

Staff qualifications training and salaries

In order to support the implementation of the new curriculum from 2003 in non-profit kindergartens, which are the major providers of preschool education, assistance will be provided in the form of annual recurrent grants of S$15,000 per staff who is diploma trained and S$7,500 per staff who is certificate trained. These grants may be used to modify salary structures in
order to attract and retain suitably qualified staff, to encourage upgrading,
and to support the kindergartens' administration and teaching resources.

In line with these initiatives, new requirements for teacher qualifications
will be introduced from January 2008, thus requiring centres to comply
before this date. By 2005, all preschool principals and supervisors will be
required to obtain diplomas in preschool education - leadership. By 2008, the
minimum requirements state that one in four teachers with 5 GCE ordinary
level passes including a credit in English or mother tongue for mother tongue
teachers, will need to obtain diplomas in preschool education-teaching. Other
teachers will need to obtain certificates in preschool teaching, where the
minimum qualifications remain at 3 GCE ordinary level passes including
English, or mother tongue for mother tongue teachers.

Training is conducted at the National Institute of Education and at a number
of accredited profit and non-profit training agencies. Currently the training
is mostly in-service with preschool centres sponsoring fees, 80% of which
can be recovered from the Government's Skills Development Fund. Trainees
over 40 years of age are funded 100%. In addition, the Skills Re-
development Programme provides funding of S$6.15 per hour to trainees over 40 years who have GCE "A" levels or below attending during office hours, or S$5.10 per hour for attendance after hours. In general, preschool teachers receive salaries based on structures devised by individual centres and neither ministry regulates these. In general qualified teachers may earn up to S$2,051 per month and principals and supervisors may receive up to S$3,500 per month.

A new framework for teacher training and accreditation is already in place. It is jointly administered by the Ministry of Community Development and Sport and, the Ministry of Education. The two-tier diploma training for staff in both childcare centres and kindergartens is 700 hours initially for teachers and enables them to train subsequently as supervisors or principals. The core components of this diploma include child development, curriculum pedagogy, health nutrition and safety, personal and professional development. The second level diploma of 500 hours incorporates an expansion the core elements and also includes management and administration. Teachers with a minimum or 3 GCE "O" levels are eligible for
the 470 hour certificate course which parallels the diploma course albeit with less rigorous assessment and coverage.

Regulation and quality assurance

It is the government's intention to improve the quality of preschool education especially in the non-profit centres. Whilst quality assurance is subsumed under licensing regulations for childcare centres, the new curriculum framework will provide all centres with guidelines for monitoring the effectiveness of teaching approaches, curriculum content, resources, and children's learning and development. For the new curriculum to be effective, the government recognises the need to provide teachers with continual opportunities for professional upgrading. Hence the new teacher training and accreditation framework, jointly administered by both ministries, is designed to support the continuing efforts to improve the overall quality of preschool education.

Looking to the future
The key issues affecting the development of preschool education in Singapore include the government's strong commitment to invest in education. As with the teaching profession in general, there remains a dearth of manpower especially for preschools. This problem is tied to salaries and the provision of affordable preschool provision for all. The proposal to provide annual recurrent grants to non-profit centres may go some way to improving benefits and this may well attract more into the profession.

Finally, the current issue of the development of the new curriculum is a positive step in the improvement of quality of preschool education in Singapore. The development involves a range of professionals who are working closely with teachers in pilot centres to test ideas, to monitor effectiveness of the plans, to review teaching approaches, to observe the communication, problem solving and social skills of the children, and to try out a range of resources. After one year some clearly observable changes have been recorded which augurs well for preschool children in Singapore.
References


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