

Singapore's pre-school sector: Assessing its growth amid challenges ^[1]

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When Ms Ho Zhi Li was looking for a pre-school for her first-born son Clyde, she paid special attention to its environment and surroundings.

"I wanted to see if there's space for the kids to explore and run around," said the mother of two. "Some of the operators I saw were very cramped, and all the kids were packed together. I looked at their teaching materials and toys as well."

"As a parent, you need to feel comfortable, and in some places, the toys were old, dirty and worn out, and you just won't feel comfortable putting your child there," she added.

Her eventual choice: An EtonHouse pre-school near her home in Mountbatten.

As for another parent, Ms Jorelin Lee, it was a simple, pragmatic consideration that tipped the balance in the favour of Citikids Edventure: Whether or not dinner was provided for her daughter.

"There were many pre-schools around our area, but very few of them provided dinner," she explained. "They usually only provide food up to tea, which is 3pm, and give the children small bites like bread or biscuits if they are hungry."

"Both my husband and I work, and we didn't want my daughter to go hungry in case we get stuck at work or caught in a traffic jam while on the way to pick her up."

Both parents' choices reflect the growing diversity of pre-school offerings in Singapore, which can be seen in the fees they pay: While Ms Ho pays about S\$1,900 a month for full-day childcare, Ms Lee pays S\$1,000 - before the government subsidy of S\$300 a month is factored in.

At an even more affordable level, pre-school operators like PCF Sparkletots and NTUC My First Skool come under the Government's Anchor Operator scheme, which require them to cap their fees at S\$720 a month for full-day childcare.

Pre-school education has come under the spotlight in recent weeks, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighting in his National Day Message that the Government will create more pre-school places, raise the quality of these schools and upgrade the profession of pre-school teachers. Mr Lee has also said that he will speak on the issue at the upcoming National Day Rally on Sunday (20 Aug).

IMPROVEMENTS OVER THE YEARS

That's not to say pre-school education isn't already a hot topic.

In 2012, a study commissioned by the Lien Foundation ranked Singapore 29th out of 45 countries in early childhood education, behind countries like South Korea, which was ranked 10th, and Hong Kong, 19th.

Nordic countries like Finland, Sweden and Norway took the top spots in the Starting Well Index, and did well largely due to their "deeply embedded, sustained long-term investments and prioritisation of early childhood development in their societies", said the Lien Foundation then. "Other key drivers for quality pre-school education are high teacher standards and training, curriculum guidelines and parental involvement."

According to the study, Singapore's performance for the categories of "affordability" and "availability" was average, but scored lowest in terms of "quality". This category includes factors like the student-teacher ratio, average wages of a pre-school teacher, pre-school teacher training and linkages between pre-school and primary school.

But progress has been made on several fronts to help keep fees affordable and raise the quality of pre-school education.

The Anchor Operator scheme, which was first launched in 2009, provides funding support to selected pre-school operators. These operators, who also get priority in the allocation of sites in HDB estates, have to keep to a fee cap, and ensure that any fee increases are kept affordable for parents.

In 2014, the scheme was further enhanced with the appointment of three more anchor operators. The Partner Operator scheme was also launched in 2015 to support mid-sized and smaller childcare operators, where the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) said it

would give these operators funding to reduce their current fees, invest in improving quality through the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (SPARK) and develop their staff professionally.

To tackle the manpower crunch in the sector, an Early Childhood Manpower Plan was launched late last year. It provides more opportunities for individuals to join and develop in their careers, including recognising working experience for existing early childhood educators. ECDA hopes to attract another 4,000 educators to join the current pool of 16,000 by 2020.

On the teachers' part, too, progress has been made.

Head of Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS)'s early childhood education programme, Dr Dora Chen, noted the "increasingly visible efforts" by teachers to make disposition goals part of their lesson planning. These dispositions, she explained, include perseverance, inventiveness, appreciation and engagement.

"More and more teachers seem to have reached a new level of comfort in listing them alongside the content goals in their lesson plans," she said.

She added that understanding what to teach is an important first step, and the next step would be to help them deepen their understanding of how to teach. "This includes strategies for nurturing the development of the dispositions that will enable children to have the right learning attitude," she said.

HOW TO CHOOSE A PRE-SCHOOL

Amid the diverse landscape and sheer number of options in the market, pre-schools are distinguishing themselves in a number of ways.

NTUC First Campus, which operates 150 pre-schools across Singapore including anchor operator My First Skool, highlighted three areas it has strengths in: A high quality programme for the early years from birth to three, its focus on the Mother Tongue language curriculum, which has an "almost equal split" between English and Mother Tongue, and its child support services for pre-schoolers with learning needs.

PCF Sparkletots, another anchor operator which runs 363 pre-schools across Singapore, provides a programme known as the "Dual Service" in certain areas, where both kindergarten and childcare services are provided in a single centre.

And EtonHouse, which runs 13 pre-school campuses in Singapore, highlights its inquiry-based pedagogy and unique learning environments as part of its strengths.

"What also differentiates us from other pre-schools is that we offer a through train pathway all the way to secondary school both within and outside of Singapore," said executive director Ng Yi Xian. The education group also runs 10 E-Bridge and two Hampton pre-schools under the anchor operator scheme.

But with so much diversity in the pre-school landscape, what should parents look out for when choosing a school?

Dr G Kaveri, a lecturer from SUSS's early childhood education programme, noted that good pre-school education should provide meaningful experiences through which young children can gradually develop self-regulation, which is a child's ability to provide appropriate responses to their environment.

"Meaningful experiences allow children to make connections between home, community and classroom, and thus a nurturing environment is required," she said. "Opportunities for pro-social behaviour like turn-taking and sharing should also be in abundance.

"These are essential for their growth and development as well as transition to mainstream education."

SUSS' Dr Chen also stressed that there is "no reliable correlation" between fees and quality.

"Parents should look for the match between their child's personality and individual needs as well as their own beliefs and values, and the structure of the pre-school programme and its philosophical approach," she said. The philosophical approach refers to the belief in the way young children learn and the way the adults interact with and provide guidance to the children.

She added that parents can visit the pre-school to check out its programme, speak with the principal about the centre's practices and ask to observe classes in progress.

"They should take a look at the nature of teacher-child interactions and decide whether they match their own beliefs about how adults should talk to and treat young children, and the way the teachers respond to natural, typical and developmentally appropriate young children's behaviour like snatching, putting things in their mouths or wandering off from group activities."

ARE PARENTS HAPPY?

Fees aside, parents Channel NewsAsia spoke to were happy with the outcome of their choice.

Madam Sridharan Bhuvaneswari sent her four-year-old daughter to the newly-opened PCF Sparkletots pre-school at Cashew. "I found that the school has very interesting and beneficial activities for my child," she said, including the learning of rhymes, exploring art and simple baking.

She added that she was "most impressed" with her daughter's teachers, and receives regular updates on her progress. "There is a Communications Book where teachers give updates on how my daughter is doing, and she brings the book home almost every day," she said. "Through the book, I can receive updates and also ask any questions on her studies or behaviour."

"The fees are also affordable and reasonable," she added.

Ms Lee, whose elder daughter has since entered primary school, said she was happy with how Citikids Edventure managed to prepare her daughter for the education system.

"The teachers started her on Chinese hanyu pinyin, spelling, and a bit of science," she said. "They covered all the fundamentals, and I didn't have to send her for extra lessons outside."

As for Ms Ho, whose son Clyde is now in K1 at EtonHouse, she said he has done gardening, learnt to harvest vegetables and also exposure to the Japanese language as part of his pre-school programme.

She also receives detailed updates on what Clyde does in school. "It seems like every other day I see emails from the teachers," she said. "And every two weeks, they also send out a newsletter, where they take pictures of the children doing things, tell you what they learnt about, put in quotes from the children and the teacher's reflections as well."

"It's 11 pages just for the English part ... there's so much effort put in."

Yet at S\$1,900 a month before subsidies, she admitted that it does not come cheap.

"He's happy, confident and very inquisitive, sometimes to the extent of asking the teacher why he has to sit down and do his homework," she said. "I know it's expensive, but at the end of the day, we chose to send him there so we just have to suck it up and pay."

She also plans to send her second son, 15-month-old Elliot, to EtonHouse as well.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT, RENTALS CHALLENGING

Moving forward, pre-school operators are focusing on strengthening professional development and improving their curriculum, in a bid to continue providing quality, affordable childcare.

"More than 5,000 of our early childhood educators and staff have undergone more than 200,000 hours of continuous professional development in the past 12 months, including attending conferences and training stints at international schools both in Singapore and overseas," said Mr Victor Bay, CEO of PAP Community Foundation, which operates PCF Sparkletots.

He added that PCF Sparkletots has officially opened two large childcare centres this year to accommodate more children, and they are due to open its largest childcare centre in Punggol by mid-2018.

NTUC First Campus is also working to raise the standards of their staff.

"In the last two years, we've created a series of job positions with more progression opportunities," said CEO of NTUC First Campus Chan Tee Seng. "Things like deputy centre lead and lead teacher ... so the teachers feel there is more progression and they are better supported by training and mentoring by the centre leaders."

And being part of the anchor operator programme, he said, plays a "big part" in enabling these initiatives.

He explained that the fees My First Skool charges – S\$690 a month for full-day childcare – do not reflect the true cost of running the services. As an anchor operator, My First Skool receives additional subsidies from the Government, which includes highly subsidised rentals.

"Without these grants and subsidies, we wouldn't have been able to pay our teachers better, invest in raising quality and also be able to continue to expand our services," he said.

But even as the various pre-schools continually upgrade themselves, the struggle to attract and retain trained pre-school teachers remains a perennial challenge across the entire sector.

"It is a manpower-intensive service, and people need to have a certain passion, interest and disposition," said NTUC First Campus's Mr Chan. "They also need to qualify, and to qualify, they also have to undergo very intensive training."

EtonHouse's Mr Ng added that shortage of trained teaching staff is still an "immediate challenge", particularly when it comes to Chinese teachers. This is despite the many "commendable initiatives" launched by the Government aimed at growing the pool of qualified pre-school teachers.

"We need to work together to encourage more passionate people to enter this meaningful profession and give more recognition and appreciation to the teachers and caregivers," he said. "It may be necessary to allow more qualified foreign teaching staff to alleviate the immediate shortage."

He added that for private players like EtonHouse, high rental costs of operation remains the biggest challenge. "It is challenging to find suitable sites with a long-term lease, and being in the education sector, we have a responsibility towards our families to ensure continuity and stability of our pre-schools," said Mr Ng.

"A longer lease with a stable rental will help pre-schools make longer-term plans, and will also create a sense of stability for the children and their families."

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