

For our children [MY] ^[1]

Author: Lim, Richard

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EXCERPTS

From national policy to hothouses of imagination, the spotlight is now on preschools, parental expectations and the road ahead.

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Welcome to preschool.

Preschool 101

Once a novelty to most families, preschool is now regarded as a norm - especially to urban folks.

Simply put, preschool literally means "before school" but there is more to it.

"Preschool isn't just something that occurs before school, it is school but not in the traditional sense - at least in most cases," says Institute CECE programme coordinator Yap Kooi Siam.

"Many view it as a preparatory stage for school and while there is a link, preschool actually addresses a child's immediate educational needs.

These include cognitive development, a child's first steps in decision making and the all-important socialisation process.

Under the National Preschool Curriculum (NPC) - the standard guideline for all providers - preschool is designed for children aged four to six.

"The Education Ministry recognises that early childhood development is crucial and the formative years are a sensitive period," explains Dr Ng Soo Boon who heads the ministry's preschool unit.

"Four-year-olds are naturally curious about things and this is the best stage for them to learn about language, attitude, habits and manners."

Today, most middle-class families insist on sending their children to first-rate preschools and some even take the phrase "starting them early" to a new level by enrolling their three-year-olds.

While it's an artifice of parenting to pinpoint a period of a child's life and say that it changed everything, it is undisputed that the formative years are vital.

Numerous neuroscience findings show that the first few years of a child's life offer the best opportunities for them to learn well and preschools are thriving as a result.

Call to action

And concerned parents are not the only ones on the beat.

Preschool has always been there or thereabouts in Government policy and the Education Ministry is reaching out to 168,830 children through more than 7,700 preschool centres which are run from schools nationwide.

Factor in more than 8,000 preschool centres run by the Welfare and Rural Development Ministry and the 1,500-odd centres operated by the National Unity and Integration Department in the Prime Minister's Department and you're talking about a massive operation.

However, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak upped the ante when he announced the Education Ministry's KPIs recently.

By 2012, at least 80% of Malaysian children must have access to preschool education and the onus is on the ministry to deliver.

One man's staple

Najib's announcement could not come at a better time for some.

The National Tamil Headmasters' Association general-secretary M.S. Muthiah is one of them and he hopes that more preschool classes will

be set up in partially-aided schools.

"Parents in rural areas have been complaining that there are no preschool classes in nearby Tamil schools," he relates.

"Rural children need preschool education. They don't have the options their urban counterparts have and even if they did, their parents can't afford to pay the fees.

"Students won't have to travel to government schools located faraway if preschool classes were available in partially-aided schools. A smooth transition to Year One is also ensured."

While agreeing that things would be more convenient, Dr Ng points out most preschool classes are in government schools for the same reason.

No land and legal disputes would arise in government schools but the same can't be said if space and facilities were to be used in partially-aided schools.

"We have little say when it comes to a Tamil school which is located in a plantation if the land doesn't belong to the government," she explains.

"We can't just walk in and decide to use the premises or build new classes. Having too many stakeholders complicates things sometimes.

"Likewise, we would have to get approvals from the Chinese school boards.

"Many Chinese schools are crowded as they are and lack room for expansion."

Moving on, Dr Ng explains that rural children are the priority of the ministry's preschool efforts and more will be done to ensure that they receive good grounding before Year One.

The immediate snag is the long waiting list of preschools and time is needed for more extensive nationwide coverage.

The parent trap

Unlike their rural counterparts, urban parents are spoilt for choice and their problem revolves around the orientation they want their children to receive.

Some parents prefer a more academic orientation and as a result, various private preschools are raking it in by offering replicas of the Year One - and even Year Two - syllabi.

"The ministry doesn't want to introduce tests and grading too early but some parents want it," opines Dr Ng.

"These preschools reflect the demand from certain parents and as long as private providers follow the NPC, they are free to provide extra elements."

Others feel that the scholarisation of childhood is something they would like their children to miss and this has become a burning issue that provokes opinion from both sides of the fence.

"My child is learning ahead because I want him to be the best," says a mother who declines to be named.

"He'll stand out in primary school if he knows everything beforehand and that will give him the confidence to do even better in the future."

Apart from preschool, the five-year-old only child also attends piano, art and swimming classes.

"The world is competitive and it is good to instill discipline in children when they're young," continues the housewife who was a financial consultant.

While admitting that didactic learning has its place, father-of-two Denming Ho Koon Guan is apprehensive about regimentation.

Finding the "right" pre-school took him months and often a time, it wasn't the lack of control that turned him away, but rather, an overbearing presence of it.

"The word 'control' scared me," he says with a chuckle. "Many preschool providers would ask me to look at their students and they described them as being 'under control, well-managed and problem free'.

"They gave me the impression that their students were regimented armies and I didn't want my children to lose their childhood. Growing up is a process and everything has its time."

Don't forget the 'F' word

Ho's views are shared by housewife Ranjita Roy who prefers play-based and themed-based learning over drill-and-skill variants.

The former teacher at an international school believes that forcing children to read and count before they are ready only turns them against learning a language and maths.

"We can't leave out the fun and joy of learning," she says. "Having fun is as instinctive as breathing for children.

"By linking fun activities to reading and writing, we can capture their imagination and maintain their interest in learning. Also, children perform best when they're not under pressure."

And fun could very well be the element that fosters independence in a child.

At Institute CECE, children are at liberty during play time - from selecting the activities they would like to do to the toys that they will play with.

"It is an early stage of decision making," says Yap. "They make choices and learn from the good or bad experiences.

"If we don't provide opportunities for them to make decisions, they will grow up following whatever they're told.

A similar approach takes place at Beaconhouse's preschool and childcare centre in SS19, Subang Jaya, when it comes to character building as children play - and behave - together.

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One small step for them

From Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget to the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, proponents of hands-on learning and experiential education advocate that children learn mainly from interacting and not listening, understanding and not memorising.

The NPC addresses this through its four teaching and learning approaches, namely, learning through play, a theme-based curriculum, integration and child-centredness.

According to Dr Ng, the four approaches enable children in theory to internalise experiences which involve them and appreciate concepts that they can relate to such as the basic anatomy of their body and the study of nature.

Subjects are not taught per se and the objective is to achieve a continuous flow of learning.

Malaysia's push for greater preschool opportunities can be seen as an encouraging move to appreciate the future custodians of the nation for who they are today.

Of course, quality requires money and the availability of well-educated teachers who will not just wing it.

Another key to achieving satisfactory results is that classes must also be of the right size in order to generate the optimum effect.

The stage has been set. All that is required now is the implementation.

- reprinted from The Star Online

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