

# Lessons for S'pore from Asia's Pre-schools

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As Singapore's early education scene evolves with a series of policy changes, our Asian neighbours have already gone ahead of us in improving their pre-school sector.

From our visits spanning several weeks to five Asian cities last year — Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul, Taipei, Tokyo — we saw many lessons that Singapore could draw on, including how these places managed to create a pervasive all-play environment in their pre-schools despite the pressure-cooker education systems that children subsequently enter.

These cities have embarked on a common strategy to increase public awareness on the benefits of play during a child's early years. In Japan, academics have also devised a transition curriculum to smoothen the process from pre-school to Primary 1, which has given assurance to parents.

In terms of developing manpower in the sector, pre-school educators in Shanghai, for example, have shed the image of being "nannies". Among other things, they are required to pass a national teaching examination and undergo professional upgrading courses.

When it comes to affordability, the Hong Kong authorities offer parents a direct subsidy and impose a fee cap on pre-schools. The South Korean government have gone a step further, by subsidising teachers' salaries in private pre-schools so that the centres' operating costs will not be passed on to parents.

In Shanghai, families also do not have to worry about getting a place in a pre-school. If there are no more places available at public pre-schools, parents can enrol their children in a private pre-school while paying public pre-school fees. The government will make up the shortfall.

Pre-schoolers with special needs are given extra attention in Taipei. A roving team of specialists tracks the development of these children, who are enrolled in mainstream pre-schools just like their peers.

But as our observations show, parents lie at the heart of it all — and they should be the focus of efforts to improve the pre-school sector.

## Lesson 1: Convince parents about learning through play

When Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) announced its updated early childhood curriculum framework last year, parents asked if the learning goals — such as knowing how to count up to 10 — were too easy. And when the ministry started its own kindergartens with a play-based curriculum, the public was also worried about how much learning their children would actually undergo. Unsurprisingly, demand was lukewarm for MOE kindergarten places.

Traditional rote learning is still a mainstay in the pre-school scene here. Worksheets and enrichment classes are common features.

South Korean pre-schools used to be like this, too. But now, five hours are set aside each day for children to play freely. Reading, writing and arithmetic lessons are also banned.

Chung-Ang University's early childhood academic Cho Hyung-Sook explained that there is strong acceptance of learning through play among South Korean parents. This is due to the government's huge investments in pre-school research, including the setting up of the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE).

With evidence to back the benefits of play in early years, South Korean pre-schools were able to implement a play-based education successfully, said Prof Cho.

Likewise, Singapore should embark on studies to prove the benefits of learning through play. Authorities here often cite overseas studies but parents are hardly convinced, as there is a lack of local data and they would be worried about the impact on their children's future performance in the formal education system's competitive environment.

In the meantime, pre-schools should educate parents more on pre-school learning. In Taipei, for instance, pre-schools organise regular workshops and invite academics to explain how children learn through various activities.

Speaking to TODAY, Dr Christine Chen, President of the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore, suggested that teachers be better trained in documenting children's individual development through photographs or written observations, and that they compile these in the form of regular updates to be disseminated to parents. "To reduce tuition or having worksheets in pre-schools, teachers need to give concrete evidence through documentation of the child's progress and development," she said.

Concurrently, the Singapore authorities should also look to improving the transition process from Kindergarten 2 to Primary 1. In Japan, academics noticed a gap between the country's play-based early childhood system and the competitive primary school system. They devised a transition curriculum involving educators in pre-schools as well as teachers taking Primary 1 classes.

Under the curriculum guidelines, both groups of teachers are required to meet and share information on their students. Pre-schools also plan tasks for graduating children to help them become more independent, while primary schools break up longer periods into smaller blocks to ease children into primary school life.

In Singapore, pre-school teachers have shared that it is a laborious task to arrange visits to primary schools and that it is often a one-off event. Tips on improving the transition process can be included into the early childhood curriculum guidelines. The authorities can also consider setting up a proper twinning system, linking pre-schools with nearby primary schools to facilitate activities between pre-schoolers and primary school pupils.

**Lesson 2: Improve trust between parents and pre-school teachers**

In Taipei and Shanghai, the image of pre-school teachers was improved via the setting of minimum qualifications — such as a university degree — and requiring teachers to obtain a teaching licence by passing a national teaching examination.

In Singapore, there have been calls to raise the minimum diploma qualification for pre-school teachers. But given the manpower shortage at the moment, such a move could deter more people from joining the industry.

Many pre-school educators enter the profession because of passion, and pay is usually a secondary factor. As such, job satisfaction and the respect they get from pupils and parents, as well as society at large, would help to retain and attract pre-school teachers.

In that regard, Singapore pre-schools can take a leaf from their counterparts in Taipei.

At the city's pre-schools, parent-teacher associations are mandatory and all schools have a structured volunteer programme for parents, that could range from reading stories in class to participating in outings. This provides a chance for parents to observe up close teachers at work, allowing them to understand the challenges faced by the latter. Taiwan University Pre-school Principal Tai-Man said such opportunities create a culture of trust between parents and teachers and help to shake off the "nanny" image of pre-school teachers.

We would suggest that Singapore pre-schools work on creating more opportunities for parents and even members of the public to volunteer at their centres. A short stint as a pre-school educator — which one of us underwent in 2012 as part of a work assignment — will change the way laymen view the contributions of pre-school teachers.

Another way to improve the image of pre-school teachers is by getting the Government to take the lead in recruitment ads — in the same way the MOE produces slick recruitment videos to attract prospective teachers, suggested Mr Philip Koh, founder of the Pre-school Teachers Network.

He added that the authorities should also look into the welfare of pre-school teachers. For example, they do not have enough time for lunch breaks and there are no designated work stations for them to plan their lessons, he noted. In this regard, the authorities could set guidelines to protect the welfare of pre-school teachers and highlight good practices.

Over the longer term, the Government could consider raising the minimum qualifications and put in place certification requirements for pre-school teachers. To encourage professional development, it could also look at subsidising the salaries of pre-school educators when they are sent for training. In return, the operators must meet a set of key performance indicators.

Recently, the Seoul government mandated a standard curriculum for both private and public operators. However, the varying qualifications of early childhood educators meant that teaching standards were inconsistent. Seoul's experience showed the importance of improving the quality of pre-school educators before a nationwide curriculum can be implemented.

### Lesson 3: Give parents greater peace of mind

The Seoul government has poured in more money to subsidise fees for pre-school education and enrichment classes for every child between four and six years old, regardless of family income. It also subsidises the salaries of pre-school teachers. In return, operators have to declare their finances. The moves have put a considerable strain on the city government's budget.

In Singapore, the consensus is that subsidies for lower- and middle-income families are adequate. Still, some feel that more can be done, and these calls have some basis if one compares the subsidies here with that offered in the other Asian cities.

National University of Singapore sociologist **Tan Ern Ser** said: "Perhaps the Government could treat early childhood education as an integral part of education, which means providing subsidised education." Parents who cannot afford the fees could apply for further subsidies, he suggested.

The Singapore Government is aggressively ramping up the supply of childcare places. It aims to add 20,000 places by 2017. This will provide enough places for one in two children here, up from one in three last year.

In Singapore, and in the five Asian cities TODAY visited, pre-school is not considered part of compulsory education. But in time to come, when the supply of childcare places can better match demand, the Republic could follow the example of Shanghai, whose government guarantees a pre-school place for every child born into a registered household. If there are no places available in public pre-schools, a child will be placed in a private pre-school, but his parents only need to pay fees equivalent to that of a public pre-school.

Currently, social workers here help children from low-income families find places in pre-schools. However, the attendance rates of these children are not good, said Ms Frances Lee, the Centre Manager at Care Corner Family Service Centre (Toa Payoh).

"For some of them, both parents work, and the (others) who are at home, usually the grandparents who are sick or siblings, are not able to send the children to childcare and the child is left at home," she said.

More should also be done for children with special needs.

Mrs Rachel Lee, Senior Assistant Director of Fei Yue Family Service Centre, suggested lowering the teacher-to-student ratio for children with special needs. A specialised childcare centre could be set up, she said.

"In some of the cases, the mothers find it hard to find childcare places in centres that cater to both normal children and those with special needs ... the parent ends up having to quit her job to look after the child. The situation gets worse if the family has low income," she said.

On top of providing grants and subsidies for families with children with special needs, the Government could also look into mandating priority admission to these children through the anchor operators or provide grants for private centres to build facilities such as ramps and therapy rooms.

In Taipei, the government encourages inclusive learning by funding operators to build infrastructure for special-needs children. Incentives are also given to teachers who attend courses on early intervention.

As Singapore tweaks its early childhood policies, it should also consider what other countries have done. And perhaps, in time to come, our standard of pre-school education will be on a par.

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