OUR DECISIONS, THEIR LIVES:
ADULTS' CONSTRUCTION OF PRE-SCHOOL
CHILDREN'S LIVES IN SINGAPORE

SIM I LIN MELISSA
(B. SOC. SCI. (Hons.), NUS)

A THESIS SUBMITTED
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2009

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, A/P Roxana Waterson, who has patiently been helping along in this journey, providing me with much needed direction from her wealth of experience.

Second, to all my respondents, both teachers and parents, who have kindly given me their time to answer my questions, in spite of their busy schedule. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. Also, my observations at the pre-schools have been a memorable and enjoyable experience, thanks to the children and staff of the schools.

Finally, I would like to thank my graduate friends at NUS, for being there to push me ahead in doing my work. The fun and memorable times we had together was a very good break from the work, to build up the mood to write again.

To the many people I have failed to mention here, you have been crucial in making my life the way it is. So, I thank you too, especially for being gracious after being left out. ☺

Table of Contents

Summary

Since 2000, Singapore's early childhood industry has seen many policy changes, and the number of centres—both pre-school and enrichment centres—catering to the industry has increased significantly. A simple search on the Directory of Family and Community Services, returns 747 centres for Child Care Services, and 492 centres for Kindergarten Services (MCYS, 2004). This is excluding all other educational services for enrichment purposes. The pervasiveness of the pre-school industry and the impact that education has on the lives of all children growing up in Singapore makes it an interesting subject to study.

This thesis focuses on adults and their expectations of early childhood education. It has two aims: first, I seek to shed some light on the context of childhood in Singapore, from the perspective of adults; and second, I will attempt to offer new understandings towards the sociology of childhood by examining the expectations of childhood through the integration of the analysis of three separate groups of adults—the government authorities, teachers, and parents. By studying the changes in the early childhood industry, I argue that while there has been increasing curricularization of children's lives, there has also been a shift towards a child-oriented approach; both of which are incongruent with each other. There is a great degree of dissonance both in the experience of teaching and the methods of parenting. These discrepancies are significant in the lives of children since it means that they may go through apparently different experiences of childhood in terms of educational intensity, in spite of the general expectation that they all experience a similar trajectory of pre-school education.

List of Abbreviations

AECES	Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore
CIS	Chartered Industries of Singapore
CPT	Certificate in Pre-School Teaching
DPE-T	Diploma in Pre-School Education-Teaching
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
LSP	Learning Support Programme
MCYS	Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports
MOE	Ministry of Education
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
OBLS	Online Business Licensing System
PAP	People's Action Party
PCF	PAP Community Foundation
PQAC	Pre-School Qualification Accreditation Committee
PSE	Pre-School Education
SCS	Singapore Children's Society
TFR	Total Fertility Rate

Chapter 1

Introduction

The early childhood education industry in Singapore has been a rapidly expanding field in the last decade, accompanied by numerous policy changes such as the introduction of the Compulsory Education Act, Chapter 51 (Attorney-General's Chambers [AGC], 2003) and standardization in programmes and quality of teachers of pre-school centres. At present, early childhood education is seen as necessary preparation for Primary One. Only 2.5% of children entered formal education without any pre-school education, as reported by Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the Eleventh Parliament of Singapore (Ng, 19 January 2009).[1] Comparing with international statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)[2], the non-compulsory pre-school education, coupled with the costs involved in purchasing the education, the 2.5% very low rate of non-participation is significant. It also highlights the importance that parents and the state attribute to pre-school education. Attending kindergartens is also promoted by the People's Action Party (PAP) grassroots leaders to the lower income families as they believe it helps the children to "start off in Primary One on an even footing with other youngsters in their class" (PAP, July/August 2007). There has also been discussion during parliamentary debates as to whether pre-school education should be made compulsory, although the response was negative (Zulkifli, 15 February 2007). However, almost all children in Singapore attend pre-school prior to entering Primary One.

Before moving on, I wish to clarify the definition of the child. Comparative studies in sociology and anthropology make it clear that definitions of childhood, and of

who is a child, vary considerably across cultures. Under the Children and Young Persons Act, the child is defined as "a person who is below the age of 14 years" (AGC, 1993); the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines the child as "a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger" (UNICEF, 2008). However, for the purposes for this thesis, as my target group are pre-school children, I will only be focusing on children who are between three and six years old.

Pre-school, in the Singapore context, loosely refers to both kindergartens and childcare centres, both of which provide some measure of formal education to children prior to Primary One. Apart from pre-school, there is a booming business in enrichment classes, which refers to classes that extend beyond the formal curriculum, be it academic, cultural or sports. Together, the enrichment classes and preschool are regarded collectively as part of the childhood education industry in this thesis. The number of institutions catering to the pre-school industry is simply overwhelming. A simple search on the Directory of Family and Community Services returns 747 centres for Child Care Services, and 492 centres for Kindergarten Services (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports [MCYS], 2009a). This is excluding all other educational services for enrichment purposes. The pervasiveness of the pre-school industry, and the impact that education has on the lives of all children growing up in Singapore, makes it an interesting subject to study.

This thesis focuses on adults and their expectations of early childhood education. It has two aims: first, I seek to shed some light on the context of childhood in Singapore, from the perspective of adults; and second, I will attempt to offer new understandings

towards the sociology of childhood by examining the expectations of childhood through the integration of the analysis of three separate groups of adults—the government authorities, teachers, and parents. By studying the changes in the early childhood industry, I argue that while there has been increasing curricularization of children's lives, there has also been a shift towards a child-oriented approach; both of which are incongruent with each other. There is a great degree of dissonance both in the experience of teaching and the methods of parenting. These discrepancies are significant to the lives of children since it means that they may go through apparently different experiences during childhood in terms of educational intensity, in spite of the general expectation that they all experience a similar trajectory of pre-school education. The underlying assumption is that early childhood education is recognized as a form of "work" for the children, a central theme in the edited book, *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, drawing on the research from the international project "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon—Implications for Future Social Policies" (Qvortrup *et al*, 1994). Judith Ennew, one of the contributors, argues that:

> Child energy is not frittered away in idle play or innocent enjoyment. Children work. They are very busy indeed: scheduled in so-called "leisure" activities so that childhood is an ordered, regulated period, where children depend on the clock in a measure comparable with adults (Ennew, 1994:143).

Literature Review

1. Scholarship on Childhood in Singapore

The majority of the research conducted on children in Singapore has been limited to the medical field of children's health such as pediatrics and disease (Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital, 2005; Ministry of Health, 2005; Singapore-Malaysia

Congress of Medicine, 2002), with additional emphasis on dental health (Loh, 1995) and myopia (Saw, 1999). Closely related to the medical approach is the study of growth and development of children, focused largely on their language development (Goh & Silver, 2004: Yeong, 2004). The medical and developmental approaches mainly focus on the physical body of the child, neglecting the social aspect of the children in their environment.

As for the research conducted on children situated in their social environment, there has been a heavy emphasis on the social problems faced by some children, and the need for intervention measures, so as to protect them. MCYS has been at the forefront of such research effort, focusing on the issues surrounding child abuse (MCYS, 2005; Ministry of Community Development and Sports [MCDS][3], 2004). The Singapore Children's Society (SCS) had devoted a significant number of research monographs to child abuse, aiming to improve the care and welfare of children. They examined the different types of abuse and neglect of children, including child abuse and neglect (Elliot, Thomas, Chan & Chow, 2000; Tong, Elliot and Tan, 1996), physical abuse and neglect (Chan, Chow & Elliot, 2000), emotional maltreatment (Elliot, Chua & Thomas, 2002), and child sexual abuse (Elliot, Thomas & Chua, 2003). However, such an emphasis on problems creates a skewed understanding of children—as helpless beings in need of protection. Such research does not look at children and their childhood as a concept in its entirety; "normal" childhoods are thus neglected as a subject for research.

At present, there are only a handful of studies on childhood in Singapore. Ko and Ho (1992) adopted a developmental approach to discuss the experience of growing up in Singapore. They looked at the children's cognitive and social development, focusing on

their communication and literacy skills. From the perspective of fathering, Lim (1990) used an intergenerational approach to illustrate the shift in fathering towards achieving greater communication and affection. Teo (1991) looked at the changing perceptions of childhood in Singapore, showing how childhood is not an ahistorical concept but a socio-cultural construction. On the other hand, Stimpfl (2006) focused on the issue of identity negotiation and compromise, as he studied the Malay youth growing up within the Singapore education system. One of the more significant works came from Wee (1995:184-217), who adopted a historical approach, in tracking Singapore's population policy from its independence, in order to highlight the changes in approach towards children. She discussed the dynamics between the state, children and parents, illustrating their "triangular relationship" (Wee, 1995:199). However, much of this scholarship is already dated since it dates back to the early 1990s. Even Stimpfl's book chapter (2006) is a reprint of his journal article first published in 1997. As such, the impact of the Compulsory Education Act, Chapter 51 (AGC, 2003), and the subsequent importance of the role of education remains unexplored.

In more recent years, there has been a shift in the type of research conducted. This reflects a shift in the perception of childhood to consider the child as an actor. The SCS, in their latest research monograph, recognized that research in Singapore has overemphasized the "physical, mental, and cognitive development" of children, and found research on children's social and emotional well-being to be lacking (Shum-Cheung *et al*, 2008:1). In the interviews conducted with both parents and children separately, they were able to generate a more rounded understanding of the matter, rather than merely accepting reports from the parents regarding the children. However, the

children in their sample were school-going children between the ages of 6 to 12 years, who do not fall into the same age group as that in my research. Another significant piece of research from SCS is entitled *The Parenting Project: Disciplinary Practices, Child Care Arrangements and Parenting Practices* (Shum-Cheung, Hawkins & Lim, 2006). This study, with a focus on parenting, is highly relevant to this thesis as it addresses the same target group, and also discusses childcare arrangements. Nevertheless, it only focuses on the perspective of the parents, a major aspect of children's lives. This approach was also used in one of the most recent works, an academic exercise which looks at the "enrichment phenomenon in Singapore" (Sim, 2008).[4] She argues that parents are pressured by the educational system, causing them to attempt to seek and follow childhood experts' advice in child rearing practices. This had caused them to be "drawn to enrichment programmes due to their belief in the scientifically grounded childhood ideologies" (ibid:iii).

Since almost all children in Singapore attend pre-school and pre-school is seen as a normal part of children's lives, the perspectives of schools and teachers are also important to consider, given their direct interaction with children. Furthermore, the perspective of the state, as seen in the official speeches delivered and the policies introduced, has a significant impact in influencing the children's family and school life. At present, there is a gap in the scholarship on children and childhood in Singapore. As shown in the literature review, very little prior research has been done on childhood per se, particularly on the expectations embedded in the construction of childhood in the minds of adults in contemporary Singapore. In light of this deficiency, particularly in highlighting the impact of education, this thesis aims to study the earlier stages of

childhood, in order to shed some light on the adults' constructions of how childhood should be experienced by children of pre-school age.

2. Childhood Studies: Conceptualizing Childhood

The "new sociology of childhood" is relatively new and it started with an attempt to understand the concept of childhood as a constructed phenomenon. Ariès (1962) was among the first to challenge the concept of childhood as a natural category of society. Instead, his study of the origin of childhood situated childhood as a "product of modern western societies," which developed with the modern nuclear family (Ariès, 1962). Since then, a number of scholars have worked together to understand the child conceptually, and they have argued that children can be understood as a categorical minority in opposition to adults (Wyness, 2006; Prout, 2005). Children's small physical size is commonly taken to typify their undeveloped minds and identity (Corsaro, 2005) and underdevelopment determined by age becomes a "measure of a child's progress towards the completed status of adulthood" (Wyness, 2006:147). It is also discussed in the child as a state of "becoming," as opposed to "being" (an adult) leading to a neglect of the child as a person who also has an existence in the here and now (Prout, 2005:66; Wyness, 2006:147). These analyses allow for a reworking of the concepts beyond the traditional understanding of child-adult relationships, which shows the ways they are situated in society. These include being offspring of parents in families to be socialized and to cared for, students of teachers in schools to be educated and socialized, and subjects of the state intervention to mitigate the effects of disadvantage. Therefore, it is primarily with this

understanding of the constructed nature of childhood, particularly by adults such as parents and teachers, that I frame my research.

3. Developmental Approach: The Dominant Discourse

The field of developmental psychology of the child is the next body of literature that I will review. This is particularly pertinent as it remains the primary discourse about children and has major implications for childhood, which I will discuss in the following section on the role of education. In the field of developmental psychology, the works of Piaget (1932 in Wyness, 2006:123) still possess a strong influence over the conceptualizations of both the physical and cognitive growth of children. Piaget argued that development was natural and biological and that children therefore universally passed through the stages of cognitive development as he described. Over the years, the understanding of how children's skills develop has increased in complexity, as seen from the works of Gardner (1993:17-27), who introduced the theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner's scheme comprises seven components: musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. He provides a more rounded understanding of "intelligence." Similarly, James (1997) discussed the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development aims of education for children, better known as the PIES development. However, the focus on development results in understandings of children as being based on a *deficit model*, as Thomas (2005) argued, resulting in the perception that additional steps need to be taken to make up for the immaturity of children in relation to adults. Furthermore, the developmental psychological approach also creates the understanding that failure to develop the child

places it at risk. This was clearly articulated by Katz, who in the preface of Dowling's book (2000:vii) discusses the need for children to possess a minimal level of social competence prior to the age of six without which they will be "at risk for the rest of [their lives]." Along the same lines, Brown *et al* (2008) highlight strategies for intervention to minimize these risks, of which education is one of the most important. As such, the emphasis on caring for and bringing up a child remains a largely prescriptive approach in terms of what should or should not be done.

The literature on the developmental psychology of children is far more extensive and I have selected only those works that are most immediately relevant to the Singapore context. For instance, the Piagetian framework of development that has been developed in this literature is adopted by schools as a basis for their method in educating children. However, the developmental psychological approach fails to situate the children within their social context. As Wyness (2006:148) explains, the classroom is a "child laboratory [where] children's development is closely monitored and measured against education norms that have been transposed from developmental psychology." This limits the degree of analysis of how childhood has been constructed, particularly as a result of the dominance of developmental psychology.

4. Role of Education in Children's Lives

Finally, I turn to the literature on the role of education. Aries (1962) further reiterated that the development of the role of modern education had the effect of segregating children from adults by age, with the intention of ensuring discipline, care and tuition. Hence, to understand the role of education, we must be aware of the developmental perspective and

the *deficit model* of Thomas (2005) whereby education serves the purpose of teaching the children what their immaturity is lacking, so as to ensure that they develop "appropriately." Osborn and Milbank's study (1987:238) showed the importance of preschool education in increasing children's achievement in "cognitive ability, verbal skills and mathematics." This is reiterated in Ramey and Ramey's (2000:123) *biosocial developmental contextualism* framework, which proposes that development is influenced by the "reciprocal and interdependent processes" of "biology and experience." This framework emphasizes the role of experience, through education, that has to occur at the appropriate time for success in life.

Apart from being used as a means of providing children with the capacity/capability to develop 'appropriately,' education is also a form of investment for the future on various levels. For one, Blau and Currie (2004:23) discuss the state's rationale in having a vested interest in the pre-school education of children so as to free both parents to work, and to provide equitable opportunities for children. Danziger and Waldfogel (2000:1) further discuss the importance of educating children as an investment for ensuring the "productivity of the next generation" when they become human capital for the future. It is also an investment to secure the children's future, through attaining work, given their educational qualifications. Qvortrup (1994:11) argues that the shift in the child's labour to the classroom is a result of the "scholarization of childhood," positing that school work should also be recognized as part of children's labour. Wyness (2006:145) further explains Qvortrup's argument, pointing out that children's school labour is not very different from the classical industrial child labour, as both are "socially

necessary forms of labour," but the school plays a role in "producing children as future economic assets."

A third level is the investment by the parent in order to fulfill a responsibility and as buying into an ideology of parenting. The latter two are significant in that they reflect the "values and beliefs that are held by society and reflected by the government of the day" (Dowling, 2000:xiii). However, these discussions of the investment in education do not look deeper into the issue of how education might affect the children's own experience of childhood, particularly as a result of the rhetoric of education as an investment. Rather, the understanding of the investment in education, particularly pre-school education, highlights the values and beliefs of the society, which has a strong impact on children and their experience of childhood. As such, when education is understood as an investment, it introduces the need for quality to ensure a good return on one's investment.

In the understanding of education, the role of the family has been given increasing awareness and substantial research has been conducted, stressing the importance of parents' involvement in children's development through the support and provision of education (Osborn & Milbank, 1987:238; Dowling, 2000; Cosin & Hales, 1997). Cosin and Hales (1997) argued that the family is also a variable in the inequality of outcomes in education. There are differences, for instance, in the uptake of expert advice on the child's development and needs across social classes. Along the same lines, Vincent and Ball (2006:137) make the point that the middle class's motivation stems from their preoccupation with quality education beginning from babyhood. The parents aim for social reproduction as they "involve investments within the child, through the accrual of

class resources" through education (ibid:159). This understanding highlights the role of educational investment in the "family's transmission of cultural capital" (ibid:160).

This was also remarked by Lareau (2003:1), who introduced the concept of *concerted cultivation* for the upbringing of middle-classe children in America. She uses this term because she found that parents had a large degree of control over the children's activities and "cultivated [their] talent in a concerted fashion," sending them to classes deemed suitable for their growth and development. She juxtaposed this against the attitudes of working class families, who followed the principle of the *accomplishment of natural growth* (ibid:3). At the same time, experts generally have a fixed set of ideas regarding the upbringing of children, which Lareau terms the *dominant set of cultural repertoires*, which "potentially shape the behaviour of a large number of parents" (ibid:4). As middle-class parents are more likely to comply with the accepted cultural repertoires, this results in a *transmission of differential advantages* whereby the social competencies attained by the children from working-class and poor homes are less valuable, as compared to the children from middle-class homes. The children from poorer background displayed a *sense of constraint*, accepting the "actions of persons in authority [and] they generally were unable to make the rules work in their favour or obtain capital for adulthood." On the other hand, middle-class children showed a *sense of entitlement*, acting as through they "had a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings" (ibid:6-7).

The key concepts of social class, inequalities and the role of education remain important in understanding childhood in Singapore. While there are class differences in terms of the affordability of and motivations for sending children to pre-schools, there is

an almost universal uptake of pre-school education, such that only approximately 2.5 percent of children enter primary school without ever receiving pre-school education (Ng, 19 January 2009). For this reason, the environment of the pre-school and its activities have a large role to play in affecting the children's experience of childhood. This literature review has aimed to present the most important current concepts in childhood studies, highlighting the dominance of development psychology and the frameworks it has produced, which are relevant in understanding the role of education. Given this dominance, I seek to explore how far such ideas affect the attitudes of teachers and parents, and whether they are in fact always carried through in practice.

Chapter Overview

This thesis has six chapters in total. After the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the methodology for this study. It explains the steps taken in my fieldwork and the rationale behind the chosen methodology. I will also highlight some of the problems and limitations I faced. In addition, the chapter introduces my respondents and provides relevant background information that affects subsequent analysis.

Chapter 3 sets the context for the pre-school industry in Singapore. It offers an understanding of children from the state's perspective. As my focus on pre-school education includes both childcare centres and kindergartens, I will explain some of the qualitative differences between them, particularly since they are under the purview of different ministries. There have been significant recent changes in early childhood education, with a move towards increasing professionalisation through state standardization and quality control. Some of these changes include the curriculum,

philosophy, and assessment of children at pre-schools, as well as the pre-school teachers' training and qualification requirements. While changes have been implemented, there exists a tension between recent early learning approaches, which are much more flexible, such as 'learning through play,' and the conflicting demands of the relatively rigid educational system of primary school.

Chapter 4 introduces the teachers, one of the target groups for this study. From my empirical data, I focus on the realities of teaching in the early childhood industry. There appeared to be dissonance between the expectations of early childhood teaching and the actual realities of teaching itself. The realities of teaching impact the children as they are the direct recipients of the teachers' actions within the school institution. I will illustrate how the characteristics of the sector interact with each other to create what I call a 'care work-education paradox.' This has further implications for the relationship between parents and teachers.

Chapter 5 discusses the perspective of parents. Looking at the pre-school and enrichment classes that the children attend, I discuss the expectations of parents regarding childhood, which are seen through the rationales behind the decisions of how the children's time should be spent. There exists a divergence in understanding how children should spend their time. The divergence is a result of differences in family backgrounds, which affect the options available to them, as well as their individual expectations.

The final chapter assimilates the data and discussions from the preceding chapters to shed some light on the understanding of early childhood in Singapore as shown through the actions of adults. There is an interplay in the relationships between the state, pre-school teachers, parents and children. It concludes that the common thread in the

discourse of these three classes of adult actors has significant implications for children and childhood.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This thesis employs qualitative methodology to examine the adults' conceptions of childhood pertaining to pre-school children in Singapore. I have used three different methods to study four different sources so as to provide as much breadth of information as possible: 1) In-depth interviews with staff in pre-schools and parents of pre-school aged children; 2) Participant observation conducted at a kindergarten and a childcare centre; and 3) Non-participant observation at various ad-hoc events and celebrations held at various pre-schools. I wish to highlight that research with children was intentionally not conducted. The length of time given to complete this thesis is incompatible with research conducted with children as it would require a longer span of time in the field interacting with them.

Interviews with Staff in Pre-Schools

I conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen pre-school staff from fifteen different childcare centres, kindergartens, and enrichment centres, including franchise, religious based, state-funded, independently owned, and a social service agency. The interviews lasted an average of two hours and an interview guide was used to draw out the main themes. Purposive and snowball sampling was the means of approaching preschool educators and personnel as they can be identified through the Directory of Family and Community Services for childcare centres and kindergartens from the MCYS website (MCYS, 2009a). All interviews were conducted at the respondents' place of work at the convenience of the respondent. For childcare centres, interview times corresponded to the

children's nap time at 2pm, whereas the respondents from kindergartens generally preferred 2.30pm after the school sessions. While most of the interviews were arranged in advance, a couple of centres entertained my walk-in enquiries. Unlike most other kindergartens and childcare centres, a social service agency and an enrichment centre have a reception counter to answer to walk-in enquiries.

Out of the sixteen teaching personnel interviewed, nine are the principal, supervisor or operator of the preschools; they are the main person-in-charge in the school. The other personnel interviewed include three administrators, a department head of English language, a teacher, and a social worker. Apart from the social worker, the other fifteen respondents continue to teach regularly in their schools, despite their leadership position. Of the fifteen pre-schools, eight are childcare centres, four are kindergartens, and three are enrichment centres. This provides a wide range of responses from teachers, as the pre-schools are situated across Singapore, including old and new estates, and feature private, public and even social service based pre-schools. Responses were largely candid, even though respondents are their centers' spokesperson. Nevertheless, to safeguard their centres' reputation, respondents requested that pseudonyms be used for both the preschools and teachers. I have done this while still presenting relevant details about each of them. Appendix A shows the table with the breakdown of the pre-school background and type.

It is noted that the terms of principal, supervisor and, in once instance, operator of a pre-school are used somewhat interchangeably by the respondents. Compared to mainstream schools where the principal is the head of the school, the supervisor of a pre-school occupies the head position in the school, and is very much in charge of the day-to-

day operations of the school, including the curriculum, staffing issues, and administrative matters. However, the supervisors and principals are still accountable to a higher authority—the owners or the board of directors of the schools. For the operator, there was only one respondent who titled herself as such because she was also the co-owner of the pre-school together with her brother, who was the one in charge of the operations. I encountered few problems in getting responses from teachers. Nevertheless, a major limitation in getting the approval of teachers was their reported lack of time. For instance, teachers from four childcare centres declined to be interviewed due to their busy schedules.

Interviews with Parents of Pre-School Aged Children

Apart from pre-school personnel, the other major group of respondents was the parents. It was harder to locate the parents because they are not collectively situated within a particular type of institution, unlike the teachers. Moreover, parents had to have children from a specific age group of three to six years old. Hence, I had to use snowball sampling instead for the parents. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, lasting an average of 45 minutes to an hour. Out of a total of sixteen responses from parents, twelve were face-to-face guided interviews conducted at different locations at their convenience including their home, shopping centres while they were with their family or waiting for their children to finish classes, as well as their workplace. The first two locations of interview are significant in that they show parts of the physical environment of the children's life. Together, all three locations reflect, to a certain extent, the various parts of the parents' daily life and their different settings. Apart from the face-to-face interviews, four

responses include open-ended questionnaires adapted from the interview guide, which were sent out to one parent who was too busy to meet up, as well as to the parents of the kindergarten one and two class of Childcare L. Appendix B provides a table of parents interviewed, their background, their children's ages and educational details.

Overall, I cannot overstate the difficulties experienced in finding parents as respondents. Apart from the limited sample of parents available as respondents, it was neither easy to obtain the parents' approval to be interviewed nor to successfully schedule a meeting. As they had multiple commitments to juggle—both family and work—many parents had difficulty fitting the interview into their schedule. This difficulty also highlights the contention of time within the family and its impact on the children.

I had sought the help of the two pre-schools—Kindergarten D and Childcare L— where I conducted participant observation. However, the principals provided different means of help which led to very different results. At Kindergarten D, the principal had personally asked a couple of parents to help out, and the parents asked were very keen to do so. It could be likely that the principal selected parents who were more cooperative and inclined to help out. Nevertheless, despite initial agreements to the interview, several respondents (including parents and teachers) pulled out at the last minute with various reasons of work or family commitments. Therefore, there is a distinct possibility that the results would be skewed towards the parents who are more responsive and inclined to help out.

For Childcare L, letters were distributed to all the parents of the kindergarten one and two classes (children aged five and six) to invite them to be interviewed. Unfortunately, there was no response after one month. Upon discussion with the

principal, a new set of questionnaires was formulated and sent out to a selected number of parents. The principal provided information based on her past experience with the parents on the likelihood of the parents' response. Any parents whom the principal believed would not respond were not given the questionnaire. The rationale is that if the school has had trouble getting responses from parents regarding school-related events in the past, those parents would not be any more inclined to fill in the questionnaire. Some of the reasons given by the principal include: the parents have separated, the parents are out of town, the parents are suffering from depression, or the parents are very busy at work. In this way, some of the unheard problems faced by the parents who are not represented through the interviews are brought up and I will discuss them further in the later sections. Out of a total of 30 students, 18 questionnaires were sent out, and only three were returned.

Kindergarten D and Childcare L were the only two schools where I asked the principals to introduce parents, because I had conducted my participant observations there. Therefore, my rapport with the teachers and students facilitated the acceptability of the request to the teachers and parents. All other parents interviewed were introduced to me through snowball sampling and personal contacts. For this reason, there was a greater element of personal contact which facilitated the other interviews, limiting the number of rejections when I approached the respondents. However, a resultant problem is the overrepresentation of a particular group of parents, being the middle class and those of a more cooperative disposition. These are considerations to be taken note of to better understand the context of the respondents' interviews.

Participant Observation in Schools

Apart from the interviews, participant observation was carried out at two schools—Kindergarten D and Childcare L. The observations allowed me to have a clearer picture of the programmes carried out as well as to have a first hand experience of the interactions within the schools, such as that of educators with children, children with their parents, and parents with the teachers. This has allowed me to better understand the nature of interactions between the actors and the dynamics of their relationships. Of the two schools selected, Kindergarten D is a Christian centre located in the central part of Singapore, whereas Childcare L is a member of a larger group located in the northeast part of Singapore. Observations at each school lasted one month each. At the childcare centre, I stayed throughout the full day session from Mondays to Fridays, between 9am and 6pm, in June 2008. As for the kindergarten, I helped out in the morning session from 8.30am to 11.30am, from Mondays to Fridays in August 2008. The time spent provided for an in-depth understanding of the field as I familiarized myself with the curriculum, the teachers, and the children. These two schools have provided highly divergent observations in terms of teacher-student and parent-teacher interactions in light of the significantly different social backgrounds of the student. This further contributes to the increased elements of comparative analysis of the variety of pre-schools in Singapore.

In each school, I occupied a different position in the class, and this helped to enhance the variety of experiences I attained. At Childcare L, I was supposed to be an observer shadowing a teacher in the nursery class. However, due to a lack of teachers, I ended up helping to conduct lessons for the kindergarten one (K1) and kindergarten two (K2) children, each with fifteen students, teaching them English, reading, mathematics

and craft work. This essentially placed me in the position of a teacher to the children. This position increased my understanding of the role of the teacher and allowed me to personally experiencing teaching the children in the school and handling the students during class time. At the same time, I was exposed to the teaching expectations of teachers and various problems that the school experienced.

At Kindergarten D, I was a volunteer helper in the morning nursery class (children aged four years old). It was a big class with seventeen children and only a single teacher. In addition, there were a couple of children in need of special attention. Hence, my role was more to assist the teacher in helping to look out for the students when the teacher was teaching or otherwise preoccupied. In this case, I could take on a more passive position in the classroom, taking the opportunity to observe a different group of students placed in a different setting and the teaching methods of the teacher-in-charge.[5]

The two schools where observations were conducted are diverse in terms of the students' background and the school environment. While it is not representative of all other schools given the wide spectrum of schools available, I would suggest that these two schools offer at least some significant insights into what goes on in a majority of the schools.

Non-Participant Observations at Various Events

The other group of observations conducted can be categorized as events. With the invitation of the various teachers interviewed, I had the opportunity to conduct non-participant observations at various school events: a games' day and a few open houses. In addition, I attended a Primary One Seminar organized by *Young Parents* magazine. The

events from Kindergarten D and Childcare M are excluded in this list and will be discussed separately further in Chapter 3 on pre-schools. Table 1 offers a breakdown of the types of events from the various schools as well as some relevant details ordered chronologically:

School	Event	Details
Childcare I	Games' Day	18 April 2008, 9am-12noon, Parental involvement in games too
Kindergarten B	Open House	4 May 2008, 1.30pm-3.30pm Primarily to introduce a new curriculum adapted from a public childcare system
Enrichment Centre G	Open House	25 May 2008, 3pm-5pm Free tests provided and the Principal explained the rationale behind the programmes (for brain training)
Others	Primary One Seminar	6 September 2008, 1.30pm-5pm Organised by *Young Parents'* Magazine, on preparing children for Primary 1

Table 1: Breakdown of Events and Celebrations Attended

Most of these events are not part of the children's academic curriculum in school, but were introductory sessions for parents, with the exception of the games' day. As such, they provide a different setting to understand the actors—teachers, parents and children—to be studied. In the Games' Day, as parents were involved in the games, a different type of dynamics was observed: the interaction between parents, teachers and students within the same location. Prior to this, my other methods had involved looking at parents and teachers separately, missing out on what happens when these two groups meet. As for the other Open Houses, they helped me to see the ways in which the centres promote their programmes to parents, through the dissemination of information, and the subsequent concerns and questions expressed by the parents. Finally, the seminar presented "expert[6]" advice on the various ways to prepare children for primary school, and parents' personal anxieties were voiced during the questions and answers (Q&A)

session. In all, these were stand-alone events which help to present a more holistic approach towards understanding the presentation of education and schools to parents.

Chapter 3

Background: Situating Singapore's Case

This chapter seeks to set the context for the pre-school education industry in Singapore. Through the use of archival data consisting of newspaper clippings, ministerial speeches and parliamentary debates, particularly from the MCYS and MOE, it first provides a brief overview of the pre-school field in Singapore's earlier years. Next, I delineate the changes that have taken place in the last decade. The pre-school education industry has altered a lot since 1999, and is still undergoing more changes even as this thesis is being written. The changes have been put into effect by the state authorities, which have filtered down to the pre-schools, parents, and ultimately, the children. The final section discusses the general structural similarities and variations in the pre-school sector. Drawing on official material and my fieldwork, the different aspects of pre-schools—the curriculum, philosophy, and assessment of children—will be elucidated.

Although Singapore only achieved independence in 1965, several preschools existed prior to that. For instance, the Chinese Kindergarten, founded in 1921, claims to be the first kindergarten in Singapore. The Nanyang Kindergarten was founded slightly more than a decade later in 1934. However, the exact number of kindergartens at that time is uncertain. There were still only fifteen childcare centres in Singapore in 1979 but this figure increased to 50 by 1985 (Tarmugi, 3 November 2000; Ong, 26 April 1992). In 1979, the government offered a pre-school programme to teach the English and Chinese languages to the children, as many came from dialect-speaking homes. However, the programme was terminated in 1989 as the costs incurred by the government could not be

justified when the private sector was also providing similar services (*The Straits Times*, 18 September 1999).

At that time, the primary reason for the childcare centres, particularly those located at workplaces, was to retain and to "encourage more female participation in the workforce," due to the labour shortage as Singapore underwent industrialisation (Ong, 26 April 1992; Ministry of Community Development, 1985; Ministry of Culture, 30 October 1982). NTUC played a major role in encouraging female participation, when they set up their childcare branch. They took over the running of childcare centres from the then Ministry of Social Affairs in 1977 (ibid). They also sought to make childcare services more available, and encouraged more workplaces to set up childcare centres.

It was only in 1969 that some minimal form of "systematic training of pre-school teachers" was introduced by the Adult Education Board and MOE, offering mainly basic-level training (Tarmugi, 3 November 2000). Moreover, there was no fixed curriculum or method of teaching. When the Chartered Industries of Singapore (CIS) set up their own workplace childcare centre in 1982, a supervisor "who has received specialist training in child care" was hired, and she subsequently planned the Centre's services (Ministry of Culture, 30 October 1982).

Present System of Pre-school Education

The current system of pre-school education is the culmination of a series of initiatives introduced since 2000. The turning point occurred during the Budget Debate of 1998 when David Lim, MP for Aljunied GRC, asked MOE to "adopt a more active role in the pre-school education of children" (*The Straits Times*, 21 March 1998). Subsequently, *The*

Straits Times periodically reported on the developments and views towards the pre-school system at that time. The major issue was that the different preschools, charging different rates, have different programmes and teach the children in different ways. Furthermore, apart from the difference in academic preparation, the children's character varied as well in their level of confidence and sociability (*The Straits Times*, 18 September 1999). Due to the uneven way in which the children were being prepared for Primary One, some were "over-prepared, under-prepared or wrongly-prepared" (*The Straits Times*, 29 February 2000). In an interview with Dr Aline Wong, then Senior Minister of State for Education, she voiced her concerns about the overemphasis on the academic aspect of pre-school education (*The Straits Times*, 1 March 2000). Part of the reason why the disparity was felt so strongly and became an issue could be attributed to the big variation in the fees of pre-schools often correlated with the quality of teaching staff and their pedagogy. In addition, parents who were better educated had greater demands for higher quality education. This has resulted in a major problem: despite parents' wishes to provide their children with a head start for Primary One, it is not always affordable.

Consequently, there was a need to improve the quality of pre-school education, and to formulate a standardized expectation of pre-school education. The Pre-School Steering Committee, chaired by Dr Aline Wong, was formed to look into the matter (*The Straits Times*, 14 November 1999). Shortly after, the MOE and MCYS began to introduce various initiatives to improve the quality of early childhood education, which focused mainly on raising teachers' qualifications, and improving the curriculum. In 2000, the Desired Outcomes of Pre-School Education was introduced by MOE, to state what was

expected of children when they enter Primary One.[7] It was modeled to complement the Desired Outcomes of School Education, the expectations of post-secondary education students, so as to allow for "continuity of objectives and a smooth transition in learning from the pre-school years" (Shanmugaratnam, 20 January 2003). Subsequently, based on the desired outcomes stated, the Pre-School Curriculum Framework was launched in 2003, with an emphasis on the principles that are to be put in place. The six principles are: Holistic development and learning; Integrated learning; Active learning; Supporting learning; Learning through interactions; and Learning through play (MOE, 20 January 2003). The framework is explained in the handbook *Nurturing Early Learners: A Framework for A Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore* (MOE, n.d.). It explains the objectives of pre-school education, the scope of impact, and the methods to be used to achieve the objectives. It is also used as a handbook for teachers and principals to explain to parents about the importance of pre-school education (MOE, 21 September 2004). Another handbook was created to provide more details as a supplement to the pre-school curriculum framework—*Standards for Kindergartens: Pursuing Excellence at Kindergartens* (MOE, 2006). *Standards for Kindergartens* provides a more detailed understanding and explication of the requirements of kindergartens, including the day-to-day operations of care, administration, leadership, and also appraisal of the school and teachers. Together, the initiatives and the print material concretized a change in the understanding of early childhood education as the foundation of lifelong learning. Emphasis is placed on the development of the whole child, beyond simply that of the cognitive and academic skills. Dr Wong (24 August 1999) reiterated the importance of teaching the children developmentally appropriate skills which would affect their

"cognitive … social, physical and emotional developments" and serve as the "foundation education throughout the primary and secondary years."

Apart from the curriculum, there was also a move towards improving the teaching qualification and increasing the training of pre-school teachers. This aims to raise the standard of professionalism among teachers, and the quality care of pre-school education (Tarmugi, 3 November 2000). In 2001, a new Pre-School Education (PSE) Teacher-Training and Accreditation Framework was introduced and the Pre-School Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC) was set up to "oversee the standards and quality of pre-school teacher training" and to accredit training courses for pre-school teachers and other pre-school teaching qualifications (MOE, 2009a; MOE, 18 December 2000). As a result, minimum requirements for the academic and professional qualifications of pre-school teachers were implemented at 3 GCE 'O' level credits including English Language, and a Certificate in Pre-School Teaching (CPT). Over the years, the minimum requirements have been gradually increased. By January 2009, all new pre-school teachers are expected to have 5 GCE 'O' level credits including English Language, and a Diploma in Pre-School Education-Teaching (DPE-T)[8] (MOE, 4 March 2008).

Apart from formalizing the minimum professional and academic qualifications required of pre-school teachers, the Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES) also helped to develop the Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators (Yu-Foo, 3 September 2004). The Code explicates the core values, professional responsibilities and obligations of early childhood teachers, serving as a "self-moderated standard by which its members abide" (AECES—Code of Ethics, 2008). In this way, the expected behaviour of teachers is regulated as well. Nevertheless, prior to the changes in

the pre-school sector, the general understanding was that pre-school teachers joined the vocation because of their passion for the job and love for children. Such changes have resultant implications for the issue of care work, passion and love for children, and the contradictions with qualification and income, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The initiatives have not been fully implemented, since MOE and MCYS have announced their plans to "develop a voluntary quality assurance and accreditation framework" to be launched by January 2011. It would be useful for schools to "gauge their progress in achieving a higher standard" as an indication of "endorsement and recognition of the quality" of the school (Zulkifli, 4 March 2008). Despite the guidelines put in place by MOE, the pre-schools remain privatized. MOE expressed their stand to "ensure diversity and experimentation in pre-school education, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach" (Shanmugaratnam, 20 January 2003), and the Ministry's decision to play only a "supporting role" (*The Straits Times*, 18 September 1999). Hence, steps have been taken to "foster a pro-enterprise environment," particularly by facilitating process for licenses to set up childcare centres through the Online Business Licensing System (OBLS) (Yu-Foo, 3 September 2004). Instead, to respond to the different levels at which children are entering Primary One, MOE seeks to smooth out the differences by easing the transition. The two initiatives they introduced were the reduction of class size from 40 to 30, and implementing the Learning Support Programme (LSP)[9] in English and Mathematics for weaker students to catch up (Zulkifli, 15 February 2008).

Compulsory Education Act

There have been many significant changes implemented within the early childhood industry. Tan Ching Ting from MOE provides an overview of the reforms, explaining the changes implemented in greater detail as well as the rationale between them and the research conducted in the process of formulating them (Tan, 2007). However, there is one very crucial change that had great impact on the early childhood industry—the Compulsory Education Act, Cap. 51 (2003). It states that:

> A child of compulsory school age who is —
>   (a) born after 1st January 1996;
>   (b) a citizen of Singapore; and
>   (c) residing in Singapore,
> shall attend regularly as a pupil at a national primary school.
>
> <div align="right">(AGC, 2003)</div>

It does not mean that the Act has shifted people's mindsets drastically, as the Committee in Compulsory Education had reported in July 2000, before the act was passed in 2003, that only about 3% of children did not attend primary school (MOE, July 2000:1). In addition, drop-out rates were relatively low, at "0.4% from primary school, and 3.5% from secondary school."[10] Rather, this was a formalization of am already tacit understanding, which was now to be subject to legal sanctions. Parents who refuse to register their children are to undergo counseling with Singapore Children's Society (SCS) to stress the importance of primary school as well as to assist in any difficulties they face (SCS, 2006). In the worst case, if all else fails, the parent would be liable to a "fine not exceeding $5,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or to both" (AGC, 2003). Nevertheless, many parents understood the importance of primary school education and sent their children to primary school even before the law was formulated.

However, when the requirement of children entering primary school became concretized, the understanding of pre-school underwent a change—it became seen as a form of head start to primary school. Moreover, MOE has highlighted the importance of pre-school, particularly for lower-income and non-English-speaking children, to make them more prepared for school. For instance, at the point of primary school registration, parents of children who have not attended pre-school are encouraged to "register their children in PCF kindergartens", and there have been efforts undertaken by MOE, MCYS and several grassroots organisations to go around seeking out children, aged five years old, who are not attending pre-school, and persuade their parents to let them do so (*The Straits Times*, 22 November 2007). As a result, by 2009, only two and a half percent of children had not attended pre-school before entering Primary One, compared to five percent in 2007, when the earliest data were published (Ng, 19 January 2009; Zulkifli, 15 February 2007). Hence, a relatively slow shift in public perceptions seems to have been accelerated by the government's actions, leading to pre-school education being seen as not only necessary, but a crucial part of a child's life in setting the foundation for his or her future learning. This shift in the understanding of the role of early childhood education will be discussed further in the next section, particularly through the various similarities and differences seen across the pre-school industry.

Nevertheless, childcare centres remain important as a means to encourage an increase in birthrates and to encourage more mothers to enter or stay in the workforce. The female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), at 54.3% in 2007, is seen as being relatively low. Coupled with the low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) which is "among the lowest in the world" at 1.29 in 2007, the Government continues to find ways to promote a

"pro-family environment" for better conditions for marriage and family (Wong, 21 July 2008). In fact, at the latest National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong proposed to further increase childcare subsidies to make it more affordable, and said that more childcare centres would be set up—"200 [more childcare centres] in 5 years, or 20,000 places" (Lee, 17 August 2008). This was to give working parents peace of mind when they are at work, knowing that their children are well taken care of at that young age.

Overall, pre-school provision is on the one hand driven by parents' desire to equip their children with the educational skills they need to survive entry to Primary One, and on the other hand by the logistical needs of working mothers, who also see the importance of childcare centres to care for their children when they go out to work. As a result, the expected outcomes of early childhood education remain contested.

The Childcare Centre versus the Kindergarten

In Singapore, the two expected functions of pre-school—for education and to allow mothers to work—nicely fall into the realm of two different types of pre-schools: the childcare and the kindergarten, both with general structural similarities and differences between them. Primarily, kindergartens are bounded by the Education Act, Chapter 87, and come under the purview of the Pre-School Education Branch of MOE (AGC, 1997; MOE, 2009b). On the MOE website, it is stated that kindergartens are recognized as private schools:

> Kindergartens are 'schools' that provide a structured 3-year pre-school education programme for children aged 3 to 6. The 3-year programme consists of Nursery, Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2.
>
> […]

The daily programme of each level includes learning activities that develop language and literacy skills, basic number concepts, simple science concepts, social skills, creative and problem solving skills, appreciation of music and movement and outdoor play. Children will learn in two languages, English as the first language and Chinese, Malay or Tamil as a Mother Tongue language. (MOE, 2009b).

Hence, kindergartens provide lessons for children, lasting an average of three to four hours a day from Monday to Friday. Moreover, the kindergartens follow the formal school calendar which spans four terms of ten weeks with holidays between each term. Nevertheless, from my fieldwork, I learnt that despite the general age of three to six years, the entry age for children is decreasing to as young as 18 months old for the playgroup. In addition, being private schools, kindergartens are not allowed to suggest any relationship to government agencies by having the terms 'Singapore' or 'National' in their names. Instead they are encouraged to include the word 'Kindergarten', so as to highlight the status of the school (MOE, 5 February 2009).

According to the Child Care Centres Act, Chapter 37A, the childcare centre is defined as "any premises at which 5 or more children who are under the age of 7 years are habitually received for the purposes of care and supervision during part of the day or for longer periods" (AGC, 2001). As such, children from as young as 18 months to six years old are sent to the childcare centres which are opened from 7am to 7pm on Mondays to Fridays, and from 7am to 2pm on Saturdays. The centres aim to provide "working parents with reliable care services [and] have programmes aimed at educating and developing pre-school children through effective early childhood education programmes in a safe and conducive environment" (MCYS, 2009b). Therefore, a major difference between the kindergarten and childcare centre is the varying degree of emphasis placed on care and education. The childcare centre focuses on the former

whereas the kindergarten, as discussed earlier, is more concerned with the latter and has to report to two different government ministries: MCYS and MOE.

In addition, I would like to highlight that in relation to the teachers, the children are positioned differently in the two different kinds of centres—the children are seen as children in childcare centres and students in kindergartens. However, while there may be a divergence in terms of the provision of care for the child, the emphasis on education is not necessarily neglected in childcare centres. Increasingly, there are childcare centres which prefer to name themselves "educare" or include educative terms in their name such as 'Montessori', 'Learning' or 'School'. In fact, over the period of time when participant observation was conducted, some teachers shared the opinion that childcare centres are more effective in educating the children. This is because they had the whole day to reinforce and educate the children, instead of rushing to finish the limited syllabus in the three hours of curriculum time. Mdm Loh also shared her reservations when I asked about the implementation of a new curriculum that they were going to adopt from a full-day childcare centre's programme. Concerned with making the childcare's curriculum work for her kindergarten, she explained that:

> Our school cannot be expected to complete as much as the childcare centre (who provided the new curriculum) as we only have about four hours each session with the children... If the children cannot finish the work, we cannot leave it to after lunch to do so. But we'll see how things go next year.
>
> (Mdm Loh, Kindergarten B)

Therefore, I argue that the role of education remains an overarching concern with the centres. At the same time, some parents prefer to send their children to full day childcare centres even though there are alternative caregivers at home with the explicit

intent for the children to learn over the full day. I will be discussing parents' motivations and concerns in greater detail in the next chapter.

Apart from the differences in the governing body of the kindergarten, there are more similarities shared between them due to the requirements necessary for the setting up and registration of the centres. Contrary to the impression that has been created so far, the rules and regulations for childcare centres and kindergartens, despite being under the jurisdiction of MCYS and MOE respectively, are more often in congruence. According to the guidelines given by MCYS (21 April 2009) in the *Guide to Setting up a Child Care Centre*, and those given by MOE (5 February 2009) in the *Registration of New Kindergartens (For Compliance)*, applicants have to fulfil the guidelines before they are granted the necessary license for operation. Some of the criteria that I will discuss include the need for a philosophy, vision and mission, the curriculum implemented, and method of grading. This is to ensure that the teaching staff are appropriately trained and possess the necessary qualifications. They also have to keep to the teacher to children ratio, which is reflected in Table 2.

Age of Children Trained Programme (Childcare Centre)	Staff-Child Ratio	Age of Children Trained Programme (Kindergarten)	Teacher-Pupil Ratio
2 months - 18 months	1: 5*	Nursery (3 - 4 years)	1: 15^
Above 18 months - 30 months	1: 8	Kindergarten 1 (5 years)	1: 20
Above 30 months - 3 years	1:12	Kindergarten 2 (6 years)	1: 25
Above 3 years - 4 years	1:15		
Above 4 years - below 7 years	1:25		

Table 2: Programme Staff-Child Ratio for Childcare Centres versus for Kindergartens
Source: MCYS, 21 April 2009; MOE, 5 February 2009.
* Centres may employ either a State Registered Nurse (SRN) or a trained Infant Care Educarer. Centre is required to ensure that at least one SRN or trained Infant Care Educarer is present at all times during the centre's operating hours.
^ 1 teacher and 1 teacher aide.

Curriculum

As part of the registration and licensing procedure, both types of centre have to follow the strict guidelines and prepare the curriculum and lesson plans, as stated in various publications such as *Nurturing Early Learners: A Framework for A Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore* handbook (MOE, n.d.), *Standards for Kindergartens: Pursuing Excellence at Kindergartens* (for greater details) (MOE, 2006) and *Guide to Setting up A Childcare Centre* (MCYS, 21 April 2009). While the guidelines may have been observed and the appropriate paperwork had been submitted during the license application or renewal, the practices of a given centre are not always in line with theory. For this reason, where divergences occur, I will discuss them in further detail in the next chapter.

There are many similarities between the various schools in terms of approach, curriculum, philosophy and method of teaching. All the schools interviewed employ a thematic approach in their curriculum whereby they follow a particular theme every month, covering various aspects of that theme. For instance, during the time I conducted observation, Childcare L was going through the theme of animals that fly. As such, the whole school was decorated with posters, pictures and information regarding animals that fly including the various types of flying birds and physical parts of a bird. Books pertaining to animals that fly were also borrowed from the National Library and placed at the reading corners, and all activities—both academic and craft—were in accordance with the theme. For instance, the children at the childcare centre had made peacocks and owls as part of their craft projects, discussed about the different birds and whether all birds are animals that fly, studied the stages of the egg's development and filled in worksheets regarding the parts of the owl. From interviews and observations made during

the visits to other centres, it was also noted that the thematic approach was followed by most schools, and the entire premises of the school had been similarly decorated according to the theme of that month.

One word that is commonly repeated by the teachers regarding their curriculum is that of the 'holistic' method. Basically, the idea is to develop the child as a whole, particularly beyond the academic subjects.

> The curriculum's focal point is to develop the whole child in all areas – Physical, Social, Emotional, Cognitive and Language. Various learning experiences are introduced to develop various intelligences in the following areas: Fine/Gross motor skills, Environmental Awareness, Cognitive, Self and Social Development, Language/Literacy, Mathematical thinking, Creative and Aesthetic and Affective. It has to be able to expose the child so that all aspects of the child's development can be recognized, nurtured and developed holistically.
>
> (Mrs Koo, Childcare J)

> We have English language, Malay language which is the main requirement for the children to enter primary school. As for the Islamic part, it is called the moral education actually. It's because we have the 3-in-1 programme, so there is academic, enrichment and Islamic studies as moral education. We also have IT, but investment in it is a bomb. We also have PE outdoors, but if it rains, then we'll have it in the big hall. I think it is very important. … Looking at the 4 aspects in Early Childhood, they need to be good in PIES. Physical, Intellectual (Cognitive), Emotional and Social. They have to be there in these areas.
>
> (Ms Sha, Kindergarten C)

This is also indicated in the *Nurturing Early Learners* reference book, which seeks to equip the child holistically in areas including "language and literacy, numeracy, environment awareness, aesthetics and creative expression, motor skills development and self and social awareness" (MOE, n.d.:15). The similarities of MOE's requirements with the schools' curriculum are rather close. Alternatively, many of the schools adopt an 'Integrated Approach' towards their pedagogy. This means that the individual subjects,

such as mathematics, science, and languages, are not taught separately but are put together into a single class, albeit focusing more on the academic subjects specifically:

> Myself (M): So is it incorporated into a separate class or what?
> Mrs Woo (W, Kindergarten D): No, no. It's just these days, we talk about the integrated curriculum. So like when I teach like, let's say that the insect has six legs. That is science. Then if I teach the shape of the body, that is under maths. Six itself, is under maths. So I thought, that was quite an interesting thing that I learned when I picked up the course. Thought, when I do maths, say six, then write the number six. No. that's not the concept now... I mean, now, we've changed our timetable. Last time, we put down maths, science, music and movement. But now we just put integrated.
> M: Oh! So that it's more flexible?
> W: Of course, it's like, the teacher has to show the lesson plan of what they are going to cover. So these are… Once you see the lesson plan, you know that all these aspects, the subjects are being taken care of.

Another popular method used is Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993:17-27), which comprises seven components—musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. This, it is argued, provides a more rounded understanding of intelligence. Ms Celine explains that her school's curriculum is based on this Theory of Multiple Intelligences:

> So we actually tap on all these intelligence from the kid. So we plan activities that are based on the intelligences. From all these intelligences, we have activities, and we can see whether the child is more on the musical based. You know, some children, they love music, some they love art and crafts. So all these will actually tap on their special intelligences.
>
> (Ms Celine, Childcare I)

Philosophy

> Most of the schools would have this kind of philosophy. I believe that the environment is important, that the holistic development is important, and that every child is unique.
>
> (Mrs Joey, Childcare K)

> Learning through play, to be child-oriented, that teachers are not teaching, but letting the child learn on his own.
>
> <div align="right">(Ms Sha, Kindergarten C)</div>

> Our philosophy is that every child is unique, so they have their own pace of learning. So we should follow their pace. Also, parents are very important in the education of children.
>
> <div align="right">(Mrs Ros, Childcare H)</div>

> We just came up with one. We're not so firm about it yet. That, "when the child is loved, he learns."
>
> <div align="right">(Mrs Woo from Kindergarten D)</div>

The above quotes are some of the philosophies that the schools embrace. In the present day, all kinds of organizations place strong emphasis on the need for a philosophy, mission and vision. In the guidelines, it is stated that it is "essential to outline the philosophy of care and method of operation in a written programme statement" (MCYS, 21 April 2009). While all the schools have a stated philosophy, mission and vision, they are different in the various different schools.

Mrs Woo recently developed her school's philosophy after seven years teaching at Kindergarten D which has a history of 87 years. She argues that the philosophy of the school has to be something that is shared by all teachers, for it to be effective:

> I put it this way. For me, it's a very strong belief. And it infiltrate to my staff. I'm pretty glad to say that most take it up. I sell it to my teachers and it is 90% successful. They take it up. So from the way they handle the children, they don't just scold; they explain why to the children. They don't punish for the sake of punishing. We do have things like time out, but do it in a way that is not damaging to the ego […] Initially, when I was asked to look at the philosophy in theory, it has to come from your staff. If it is from me, it won't work, because it is not what I want to do. In fact, it should be brainstormed from the staff. So, our current one finally works out. Of course I see now that it should come from the people, from the ground people. It has to be bottom up, not top down.
>
> <div align="right">(Mrs Woo, Kindergarten D)</div>

On the other hand, in Kindergarten A, Ms Carol, the English teacher, was not sure about her school's philosophy, and had to check it out from a note that was pinned to a notice board on the wall which said,

> Mission: Learning the fun way.
> Vision: To develop a passion for lifelong learning and strong moral fibre in every child.

When I clarified with Mrs Tay, the principal, regarding the philosophy of the school, she had slightly different expectations of the philosophy, believing that all are generally the same:

> It was set by the previous person in-charge. Since it had already been mapped out, I continued using it. Although they say that whoever who start the school would map out, I don't see it as necessary. But usually, it is for the good of the church. This school was started in January 2002. … I joined only in 2005. But I believe that if you have the good of the children in mind, you can't go wrong.
>
> (Mrs Tay, Kindergarten A)

Given the guidelines provided by MOE and MCYS, particularly in *Nurturing Early Learners* (MOE, n.d), almost all schools possess a similar template of philosophy that revolves around loving the child, that the child is unique, and that the home was also an important partner, albeit phrased in different ways. From the quotes above, for the schools that do not have such an all-encompassing philosophy, it would be articulated through other means such as vision and mission, or otherwise through the ways the teachers say they treat the child in the centre. Moreover, a part of the training of teachers in their accreditation courses requires them to focus on the philosophy such that Mrs Woo suggests that they have been 'brainwashed.'

> When we were educated, we were brainwashed during the course, that at our centre we should have a philosophy and that would bring forth the uniqueness, and people [the staff] would act on it. In the course, we'll

have to write the vision, mission, and philosophy, and submit it to the lecturer, and she'll question every word.

<div align="right">(Mrs Woo, Kindergarten D)</div>

Nevertheless, despite the good intentions of the philosophy put in place, it cannot necessarily always be followed given the limitations of time. Ms Sha from Kindergarten C shared that:

> We try our best to follow the philosophy, but we can't follow 100%. Especially when we're rushing for time, so we can't be child oriented all the time or it would take forever. We only have 3 hours to do everything. Unless you're in the childcare, then you have more time.

Ms Sha introduces some of the tension experienced when trying to put the teaching philosophy into practice. For instance, from my observations at Kindergarten L, there were occasions when the teacher in charge had been frustrated and scolded the children, saying that they were naughty and slow in learning, causing her a lot of problems and headaches. However, this occurred within the privacy of an enclosed classroom, allowing the teacher to vent her frustration. In addition, the children are not always accorded the necessary attention suitable for their learning needs. For instance, some slower children were given less attention from the teachers. Therefore, in reality, the ideology of equality of education, as well as a caring environment for the instruction of children, is not always upheld. This conforms with Ms Sha's argument that the limitation of time severely impedes the teachers' teaching. Similarly, the teacher in Kindergarten L is unable to cater to all the children's needs, and has many concurrent issues to keep in mind while looking after and teaching the children. For instance, at the point of sending the children home at the end of the week, she has to ensure that all 17 children have their bag filled with the worksheets they did that week and the school circulars that are supposed to be given to parents, keep track of which children are

staying back for additional enrichment classes, ensure that the children are going to their respective school buses home, and confirm that the children have all brought their belongings home with them.

In both examples, the conflict exists as a result of the timetables used in the school, particularly in kindergartens where time is more limited. As Leavitt explains, the use of the timetable is a form of "collective regimentation" and it tells the "day care staff what they will be doing at any given moment and implies that children, left on their own, could not initiate and organize their own actions" (Leavitt, 2006:119, 121). In making the children conform to the timetable, there is very little room and time left, if any at all, for the children's individual learning paces, needs and their wishes.

Assessment of Children

The final aspect that I want to introduce is the grading method of teachers in the schools. When I asked how the children are assessed, most teachers insist that there are no specific tests given. Instead, the children are tested by other means such as asking them informally to spell words out when the teacher wants to write the word on the board. Only Ms Sha said that her school, Kindergarten C, had a proper test. However, she explained that there would be a mock test given the week before, and the same paper would be given on the actual test. She added that she "shouldn't use the word 'test,' or it would stress out the parents." Nevertheless, another method of assessment is the use of checklists of report cards to highlight the progress of the children in various aspects, particularly in the PIES, which refers to the Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, Social

aspect, an approach explained by James (1997) when he explains the uses of nursery education.

The most important method of assessment is the use of the portfolio. Many of the teachers explained that twice a year during the second and fourth school term, they have to create a portfolio to trace the children's development from the first day of school. Ms Joey explained that they had to "keep anecdotal records and summary of the strengths and weaknesses. It is based on the social, emotional and intellectual aspect." Ms Annie also said that teachers had to "take a sample of the children's work, and take pictures of them such as at the playground. Then [the teachers will] talk about their development." Nevertheless, the portfolio requires a fair amount of work as teachers have to compile images and anecdotal information of every child, which is rather time-consuming. This was one of the reasons cited by Mdm Loh for the benefits of hiring a curriculum specialist so that the teachers can spend more time on the portfolio of the children instead of working on the curriculum. From my observations at Childcare L, when the teachers had to prepare the portfolio for their Parents-Teacher Meeting, a lot of time had been spent selecting the appropriate images, and including the relevant captions. Moreover, the teachers had to look at reference books to recall the specific aspects of development that they were supposed to be documenting. They spent their lunch hours, evenings and weekends to complete the portfolio of each child. In addition, over the course of my observations, the school was hiring teachers, and a prospective teacher turned down the offer upon learning that she had to do the portfolio. Coincidentally, that was the main reason why she left her previous job.

The use of the portfolio was somewhat in line with Piaget's developmental approach towards children, where the children are "closely monitored and measured against education norms that have been transposed from developmental psychology" as if in a child laboratory, rather than a classroom (Wyness, 2006:148). This understanding changes the role of the teacher to focus more on the child, better known as a childcentred or child-oriented approach to teaching. Rather than actively directing the children, Wyness explains that "teachers play a more enabling than didactic role in guiding and measuring children to the appropriate level" (ibid).

Overall, there is an emphasis on child-oriented teaching, as teachers articulate their views towards the importance of letting the child control his own pace of learning. This differs from having the teacher tell the child what to learn, which has been the traditional way of teaching. However, as I discussed earlier, there are also the realities of primary school after pre-school where all children have to attend as a result of the Compulsory Education Act (AGC, 2003). In the standardized primary school education system, there is significantly more rigidity in terms of students' behaviour and tests which the adults—both teachers and parents—want the children to be prepared for. Failure within the primary school system generally has an impact on the rest of the children's academic career, due to tests that children have to take. As a result, there is a tension between the pressures to ensure the children are prepared academically for primary school, the desire for them to develop holistically, structural limitations of time, and the wishes for children to enjoy their childhood, and do less rote learning and worksheets. This has led to the concern of the adults in meeting the variety of these sometimes conflicting expectations. In the following two chapters, I will explore some of

these conflicting expectations and experiences first, of the teachers, and then of the parents.

Chapter 4

The Lived Realities of Teachers

This chapter focuses on the realities of teaching in the early childhood sector. I consider three significant characteristics of the sector, and I will discuss these together in order to show how they interact with each other, giving rise to what I call the 'care work-education paradox'. For a start, one of the inherent and unique characteristics of working in the early childhood sector is the care work that teachers expect to be engaged in, which influences the conditions for the performance of their other tasks. In addition, there has been an increasing focus on the education of children at this level, a goal which is complementary to care work. Finally, the early childhood centres are run by the private sector, particularly to encourage competition and diversity, further complicating parent-teacher relationships. Together, the interplay of these contrasting elements in the teachers' job is complicated by structural limitations such as the low pay and poor image of teachers.

In the second part of the chapter, I look at some of the pertinent themes arising from the paradox, which includes an interesting interaction between the expectations of early childhood teachers, structural limitations of time, and the relationship of parents and teachers. From my interviews, trust and credibility stood out as a constant factor affecting the relationship between teachers and parents. The relationship can be broadly categorized along a continuum, at one end of which parents view the school simply as a paid service, while at the other end, the relationship is cooperative. In these relationships, the child-oriented approach of the adults sandwiches the children between the teachers and their parents, impacting them in different ways.

The Care work-Education Paradox

> Care work, when defined as paid care, is viewed as the commodification of the work of housewives, mothers and other family members; their unpaid work is done instead by paid workers. This concept of 'care work' has much in common with another concept—'household services'—which includes care (childcare and eldercare) alongside other household tasks such as cooking and cleaning (Yeandle *et al*, 1999). These tasks are bracketed together as work that has been primarily undertaken within households by female members, on an unpaid basis, but all are potentially capable of substitution by paid workers, when the performance of these tasks becomes 'household services' (Boddy *et al*, 2006:6-7).

From the definition above, early childhood care and education is recognized as a form of care work, as well as paid work. It is from this definition that I have come to understand the realities of the job as expressed by the teachers. As I have explained, the early childhood industry in Singapore was initially situated as a child care service. This was a necessary move to encourage mothers to return to the workforce after giving birth. However, over the years, the emphasis has shifted towards education itself, particularly for children from disadvantaged families for whom education is supposed to be a leveling tool for future success. Hence, the shift towards education had an impact on the early childhood sector, affecting the way that care work is viewed.

One of the tenets of care work is the emotional labour performed by the teachers. Although not explicitly stated or institutionalized, love for children is expected of early childhood educators. From all my interviews, the respondents regularly express their love for the children, citing it as the primary reason why they joined the profession or returned to work in the industry after working elsewhere in the private sector. Ms Joey said that for teachers, "the heart is most important. The intellect, curriculum, all can come later." Her belief was also physically expressed in her displays of affection for the children. She would hug or pat them on the head whenever they passed her to go to the dining hall for

their afternoon snack. Such displays of affection were also demonstrated regularly by the teachers at the centres where I observed. Apart from such physical displays, some other teachers expressed emotional care and concern by talking to the children, asking them how things are at home. This form of care is also displayed to others, including teachers, through discussion as they show their knowledge of the children's background and personality. This display of knowledge about the children alerted me to an interesting point of contention between parents and teachers which I will discuss later.

The teachers' performance of care is not necessarily done on purpose as a means to show off. Rather, these examples are used to illustrate the ways in which care is being performed in the context of the early childhood sector. Moreover, according to Minsky's (2001) theory of attachment-based learning, the teachers become one of the children's imprimers[11] as their actions of care encourage the children to become attached to them. Subsequently, the children ideally pick up concepts faster because they are more interested, and they are also more likely to retain the information that the teacher imparts. This is also reflected in the argument that parents make the best teachers for children due to the emotional bond between them, and that the parent would also know what is best for the child (Doman & Doman, 2001). Hence, through the ideology of the family, the idea that attachment influences learning has already been essentialized and accepted as natural.

However, it is not as easy and straightforward practically. From personal experience during participant observations, I was not successful at getting the children to listen to me. Instead, they preferred to tell me all their stories such as what they did over the weekend, and about their family, even when it is supposed to be class time and I was

doing work with them. In the end, they began to talk louder and louder, disrupting the other classes. It happened partly because I did not want to stop them, but wanted to hear about their stories, partly because I had believed in the importance of letting children freely express themselves, and partly because I simply did not know how to stop them. Subsequently, the other teachers tried to advise me to simply ignore the children and not entertain their stories. It distressed me as I had not wanted to curb the children's expressions. As I reflected upon this problem, I arrived at a couple of important realizations. First, that caring for children in group settings, as well as educating them, was not as straightforward and simple as it was made out to be. Rather, attempting to keep them under control so as not to disrupt other classes could be a real challenge, especially if the teacher does not want to raise his or her voice. Second is the realization that despite the rhetoric of child-initiated learning and that children should be given the opportunity to express themselves, it did not always translate into reality. Although the teachers I interviewed often reiterated the approach of child-oriented learning, there was little evidence of such practices at either of the centres I observed. This begs the question as to how far other schools actually practice child-oriented learning, a question which would require a more extensive study to answer.

The troubles I faced were mentioned by other respondents, who said that not everyone possesses the capacity to love and care for children, even though they may profess to do so. In interviews, fresh graduates often mention their love for children; however, according to Mrs Ros, "out of ten teachers who claim to love children, only three truly love the children." She explained that the new teachers are often not aware of

the challenges of teaching, such as handling children in groups, or dealing with irate parents:

> Now people think that it is very glamorous but can they wash the child when he's soiled? Vomit? We have a teacher who actually caught the vomit from her hands. Many teachers would think that if the child vomit, can call an auntie. But not everyone has the luxury.
>
> (Mrs Ros, Childcare H)

The above example serves to illustrate that the job of teaching pre-school aged children is not as simple as it looks due to the 'hidden' mundane day-to-day requirements of caring for the children, which many of the new teachers have never experienced before.

An implicit assumption here is that many of these new teachers are young adults, mostly young women, who are not yet parents themselves. Actually, hiring recent graduates has not been the trend until recent years. Earlier, a majority of the teachers were housewives who went to teach and work at pre-schools so as to earn some additional income with flexible hours. I met several teachers who have been teaching for at least ten years, who had entered the early childhood industry for those reasons. A significant number of the other teachers decided to teach because they have younger children at home and wanted to spend more time at home with them, or they wanted to better understand early childhood in order to help them bring up their own children. However, with the move to professionalize early childhood educators, more courses have been introduced, particularly at the polytechnics, and this has brought an increasing number of young adults into the industry. Previously, the image was that young adults entered the sector because they did not have the necessary educational qualifications to

get other jobs. Ms Carol shared her views on that earlier perception of teachers, and why change today is necessary:

> In the past, ok *lah*, (if they) cannot make it (anywhere else), (they will) go (to) be a pre-school teacher. MOE has realized that it cannot be this way now. You get teachers saying, "we does." Grammatically they cannot put a sentence together. So at least now they have a minimum grade in English. It is not exactly an industry that is admired. So things are difficult and parents actually treat the teachers that way.
>
> (Ms Carol, Kindergarten A)

Nevertheless, these teachers too are now undergoing the necessary courses[12] to upgrade their qualifications to enable them to stay in the job. Presently, there are cohorts of polytechnic graduates from the Early Childhood Education course who are also entering the industry[13]; there are also an increasing number of young males who are choosing to do this work.

The turn towards professionalization means that now there is a greater emphasis on the educational quality of teachers, whereas in the past, there were minimal barriers to entering the early childhood sector as the expectations and requirements were low. The resultant implication was that caring for children is simple, and that anyone can do it, particularly women. This creates an essentialist argument for care work—that all women are innately capable of caring for young children. It further contributed to the devaluation of care work, particularly as "employment is understood to be 'simply' substituting for unpaid work done by the women in the home" (Boddy *et al*, 2006:8). The shift towards increasing the educational qualifications and professionalization has begun to lead to a slight increase in the status of early childhood educators. This is also reflected in the apparent change in the demographic of the new teachers hired—largely mid-career

professionals and diploma holders from the polytechnic. However, this has yet to fully translate into a change in the attitudes towards the industry.

> I think we're not nannies, but we're professionals. We actually educate them at a very young age. And we are the early educators for them. I mean, we do a lot of stuff for them that will keep them going and will be in their memories.
>
> (Ms Celine, Childcare I)

> Parents scold teachers like the maid! The image of teachers has gone down the drain, no respect at all. …They treat us like maids. They think that, "I pay you to look after my child; you must do a good job.
>
> (Mrs Annie, Childcare L)

While Ms Celine was attempting to upgrade the image of early childhood educators, the experience of Mrs Annie shows that parents' perceptions are slower to change. It will take time for this to improve. Nevertheless, the transactional relationship between the teacher and the parent has a significant influence on the image of the teachers. Since the parents purchase the services of the teacher, the teachers are at the parents' mercy. The transactional relationship may be one factor accounting for the poor image of the early childhood industry, but it is not the only one. Rather, it is due to the low prestige of the service purchased, which is childcare. The industry was introduced to substitute the work once performed by mothers or grandmothers or maids or hired nannies. Hence, the care work performed was considered to be low-skilled and able to be done by anyone. However, the experience of caring for children as a parent, or as an educator is not really the same, as I shall show in the next chapter.

Low salaries are another reason leading to the poor image of the early childhood sector. While respondents reiterated that the salary is meagre, they were less forthcoming with exact details. Instead, they said that general educators could often get the same salary working as an entry-level sales person or administrative clerk, while expending

less effort at the job. One respondent added that the possible range of salary that a teacher with DPE-T could get might be around SGD1200 to SGD 1800, which corresponds with the salary range of sales and clerk positions. This is why many Early Childhood diploma graduates never actually enter the sector, or soon leave it. Ms Carol, who started work as a diploma holder in another field, said that her starting pay in 1992 is the same as she gets now. On entering the profession, "I took a four times salary cut. This is a downtrodden industry." She applauded the steps taken by MOE to improve conditions in the sector.

However, the privatized nature of the sector is a significant structural limitation to any possible quick solutions. Many of the teachers explained that the salaries of teachers are closely linked to the fees that the school charges, and less competitive school fees would hurt their enrollment. Moreover, being privatized and run as a business, profit margins have to be considered. Ms Annie said that:

> "We're under MCYS, not MOE. MCYS says it's up to the boss, because we're privatized. But because if NTUC and PAP don't up their [teachers'] pay, our own boss won't increase also. Who would want to increase their own expenses?"

Similarly Ms Joey and Mrs Ros shared that while certain centres could afford to pay better, the fees they charge are also very high. Because of the high fees, those schools could also hire degree holders instead of the more common diploma holders. As such, it was up to the state-owned pre-schools such as PCF kindergartens and NTUC childcare centres to spearhead the initiative to increase salaries since they have greater financial capability, as well as the political position to legitimize increases to parents. Unless they take the lead, private pre-schools would lose their competitive edge if they were to raise salaries. Nevertheless, early in 2009, the largest provider of childcare services, NTUC

First Campus, has taken the first step towards increasing their teachers' salaries, spending $1.5 million more a year (*The Straits Times*, 15 January 2009).

Yet, with the understanding that passion is the main reason for being a teacher, most teachers have come to terms with the fact that their salary will be low. Ms Joey said, "if you want to be in this field, you got to accept it. But I tell you, the reward is more than the money. If [the schools] want to make big money, I think it's actually cheating."

The following sections will discuss in particular, the time limitations that the teachers face, as well as highlight the relationships they have with parents.

Limitations of Time

As children now spend extended hours at the childcare centre, this has changed the potential for early childhood education and subsequently, the expectations of what should be done, which in turn affects the children's experiences. At Kindergarten B, during the launch of their new curriculum, Mdm Loh expressed her concerns regarding the extent to which they will be able to implement it. The curriculum was adapted from that of another childcare centre, but the hours there were almost twice as long. At Kindergarten B, the teachers would have only half as much time to complete the same range of projects. Kindergarten curriculum time spans only three hours, which also include other miscellaneous activities such as assembly, dismissal and snack time, leaving barely two hours for teaching. Moreover, additional time is spent trying to get the children to settle down, and their attention span is limited. Ms Carol from Kindergarten A similarly explained that the teacher expects to be able to convey a new concept to the children

within five minutes, since the children's attention span will be lost after that. The rest of the time is used to reiterate the concept.

On the other hand, while teachers from Kindergarten D were discussing the educational progress of pre-school children, one of the teachers said that at one of the kindergartens she worked at previously, the students learned a lot and were very smart as the teachers had the whole day to teach and reinforce the concepts for the students. The way that time is used by the school is up to their discretion and some centres are more academically rigorous than others. For Childcare L, during the June holidays, the K1 and K2 children were usually engaged in craft activities in the afternoon after their nap time. After the holidays, a teacher had been hired to teach those two classes, and more time was devoted to drilling the children in their academic subjects. This included making the children practise their spelling and ensuring that they completed the assessment books given to them.

Hence, time is a very strong limiting factor for the teachers in both types of pre-schools. In Kindergarten D, the Nursery teacher I observed kept rushing to ensure the children keep to their schedule, and then has to repeat the same routine after three hours with the afternoon session. Particularly on Fridays, as more than half the class attends a supplementary Chinese Speech and Drama Class, the teacher often lets the rest of the students play with some of the toys while she catches up on her administrative work such as compiling the students' work, filing the students' worksheets and putting the worksheets and other letters to the parents into the students' file for the students to bring home to their parents. Even though she has a fixed curriculum to follow, the teacher's perceived lack of time, unwillingness to put in extra hours after work, and the fact that

she has less than half her class in her charge at that time, made her decide to let the children play amongst themselves instead.

With the move towards improving the quality of pre-school teachers, more teachers have had to undergo various part time courses for their DPE-T and DPE-L qualifications concurrent to their working hours. This further adds to some of the younger teachers' burdens as they have to juggle work and studies. At times the teachers' studies impose a logistical problem for the administration as they have to accommodate the teachers' time to a certain extent and they need to schedule other staff to replace the teacher who has to study. As such, a centre usually cannot afford having multiple staff studying at the same time unless they have additional manpower. Some schools have schemes in place to sponsor the teachers' education[14], and have additional staff[15] to cope with the teacher's leave of absence, but not all schools have that luxury.

Next, there is another contradiction within the system in terms of teachers' expectations. The safety of the children is expected to be primary and requires the constant supervision of the teacher. However, when work is being done, particularly with the current style of teaching, there are compromises to the attention given. For instance, at Kindergarten D and Childcare L, it is mostly teacher-directed learning followed by completing of worksheets in small groups. The teacher is expected to constantly keep an eye out on every child, tracking their movements if they go to the toilet while looking through the students' work. However, this is not always possible as there have been occasions when the student wandered off[16] and was not missed till some time later or when another teacher returns the student back to class. Although there was no harm done, these incidences highlighted the realities within the classroom setting—the teacher is

unable to constantly keep an eye out for so many children. Teachers have also agreed that it is not possible to prevent all accidents from happening, citing the occurrences of home accidents, although the parent is merely caring for one child, instead of almost twenty.

The long hours spent at work and preparing for class contributes to the repetitive and mundane nature of the job, especially for teachers working at the childcare centres. Apart from the longer curriculum hours at the childcare centre—from 9am to 6pm—the teachers have to spend extra time preparing the classes such as doing up the worksheets and lesson plan for the class, as well as decorating the class and the centre according to the theme of that school term. The overall decoration of the classroom which encompasses the physical structure of the centre has to be renewed frequently. Regularly, students' work have to be incorporated into the decoration, and this often required additional preparation on the teacher's part such as cutting the craft into shape, or putting it together as younger children are unable to do so. Usually, particularly for the various learning corners which most centres have, the teachers, such as Mrs Gill, also have to think up additional worksheets and new material to be included for the students to do:

> I change every two weeks. It was shapes and now it's measurements. So we do things like weight, length and volume, and now, the table's too full. The children are learning and interested in doing it. Then you feel good and do up more information. That's why it becomes overcrowded. There's no hard and fast rule that they have t o do it. But they just do it in between the activities.
>
> (Mrs Gill, Childcare N)

As such, the time spent doing the additional work usually takes place after curriculum hours, after the children return home, or even over the weekends. Nevertheless, apart from the limitations of time, the relationship between parents and teachers has constantly remained a source of tension, as I discuss in the following section.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

The School as a Paid Service

> Mrs Woo (W): What we have done just this term is that the teacher will send the book back every week. Let's say, I've only taught two pages. They'll send it back to the parents and tell the parents with a note, saying these are the pages taught this week. Maybe to reinforce and make the parents sign. I mean, those parents who really follow up would actually read with their child. It reinforces learning too.
>
> Myself (M): So do many parents actually read it? Do you know?
>
> W: I haven't actually got the response from the teachers. But I saw them… I mean, only a handful does really… And we know who they are. These are the people who… They are really busy at work. You can send the whole bag home, and they'll send the whole bag back to you.
>
> M: Really? So there are not many responses?
>
> W: Not many. It's just a handful. Then, when you look at this… When they give me the names, I roughly know what kind of jobs the parents do. Sometimes they can be pretty busy. But I thought the least they can do was to clear the bag for the child.

The excerpt above suggests that some parents view the pre-school as a service to be purchased, akin to that of domestic labour. Moreover, upon the purchase of the service, parents expect the problems of their children's education and care to be solved without the need of their interference. While some parents do attempt to try to work with the child, it appears that more are likely to ignore the work to the extent of not clearing the child's bag, or even asking the child to empty it. As such, the perception of the pre-school as a purchased educational service appears to widen the uneven power relations between the parent and teacher, favouring the parent. By further extension, there are implications for the child when the relationship is smooth or otherwise.

Since pre-school education is purchased as a commodity, the duty of educating the child is at times transferred completely to the school. Teachers strongly recommend that parents should engage in and revise their children's work with them, particularly for the kindergartens where the children only attend three hours of lessons. However, this

was often not done. Mdm Loh shared some of her experiences at school when work was assigned for the children to do with their parents every two weeks, and the teachers expected the work to be returned. While she acknowledged that the parents may be busy with work, she realized the negative impact it may have on the children's self-esteem—that they feel left out as their parents do not do the work with them. Instead, the teachers take the time to go through the work with them in class. Here, it suggests that by paying for the service, the parents have passed on the role of teaching to the pre-schools because they are too busy with work and subsequently, they perceive themselves to be exempt from the duty.

Hence, there was tension resulting from a conflict in the parent-teacher relationship. This was most explicitly expressed by both Ms Annie and Ms Joey. Ms Annie was more open about her frustration with parents and grandparents finding fault with the school, and at times, according to her, being beyond reason. She emphasized that at least half of the children had parents who caused problems, and occasionally, the children also contributed to the troubles caused. She gave an example of one instance when the parent had falsely accused the teacher of not doing the child's spelling with him, based on the word of the child. When the teachers showed evidence to prove that they had, the parents changed the subject. While this exemplifies the extent of trust that the parent places on their children, that they can do no wrong, it also highlights the extent to which the authority of the teacher is severely undermined, particularly in the presence of the child. As such, this had led to cases where the child challenged Ms Annie's authority, and even dared her to scold them, believing that their parents would be angry

with her for it. Nevertheless, she reiterated the importance of being firm, and for teachers to exert their authority, while maintaining composure and not being abusive.

Another result of the undermined authority of the teacher is the phenomenon whereby the children take advantage of their parents' emotions to behave in certain ways. In fact, Ms Annie shared examples in which children "as young as three years old" exhibited different behaviours when in the presence of their parents. She gave an example of a three year old girl who only starts to cry and scream whenever she sees her parents, projecting the image that she disliked a particular teacher. In fact, her mother had even told the teacher that "[her] daughter doesn't like [the teacher], she likes the other teacher."

On the other hand, Ms Joey discussed a few occasions when parents deliberately sought to find fault with the teacher. The example she gave was of an infant who had a nappy rash. While she assured the baby's father that the times of the baby's diaper changes were all recorded down, the father had accused the school saying, "How [do] I know, you can just write it in without doing it!" On another occasion, a teacher had given the children an ink stamp on their hand as a reward. However, when a mother saw her daughter's hand, she did not see clearly, and asked why her child has a bruise. Ms Joey had to tell her to look carefully that it is an ink stamp. Hence, when the parents were insistent on finding fault, they accused teachers unreasonably, causing a fair amount of stress. As a result, Ms Joey had to let the children leave the school and refused to accept the children back even after the parents changed their minds. While she acknowledged that such an action was unfair to the child, it was inevitable as the stress placed on her teachers was uncalled for. Ms Joey attributed such fault-finding to the parents' lack of

trust. This suggests that the problems that Ms Annie is facing at Childcare L could stem from the parents' lack of trust in her, despite her numerous years of experience, as she has only been with the centre for two years, which is relatively recent. This notion of trust is also expressed by the other teachers, albeit in other forms.

The Trusting Relationship

Ms Joey constantly reiterated that it was trust in the relationship that made the difference, saying that "because [the parents] trust, they don't find fault with [me]." Apart from her few minor problems with parents discussed in the earlier section, she mostly portrayed her relationships in a positive light. She gave numerous examples such as the child who was transferred to her school even though he was at the Kindergarten Two level. She also pointed out how the parents were willing to send their children from the west side of Singapore to her school which is located in the north, even though the journey took an hour each way every day. The parents had even paid her $200 a month to bring their children back home every day, and they are friends until now although their children already left the school two years ago. However, the difference in trust can be seen from the handover of Ms Joey's previous after-school care center:

> Ms Joey (J): It boils down to trust. All parents have expectations. Like when I first started (the before/after school care), for the first 3 months, I only had 1 child. But over the year, it became 40. When I gave up, it was 30. I had a meeting with the parents to talk to them to stick with the new operator. All the parents had all trusted me, never questioned me. But within 1 year, all left (the new operator). I asked them, why are they so fussy? They never did question me like that before. It's because I really care for the children and love the children.
> Myself (M): I can imagine… Then what happened to the new owner? Did she complain or something?
> J: I've already handed over for a year. She should know how to handle it herself. But so, you see, because they trust, they don't find fault with me.

Apart from Ms Joey, all the other teachers also expressed similar sentiments. Mdm Loh said that she made it a practice to befriend the parents, by simple gestures of greeting them, saying hello, and asking them how they were if she has not seen them in a while. To her, such a practice helped with her relationship with the parents, particularly when they have an issue to bring up against the school. She shared that the parents at her school generally were satisfied with just speaking to herself and her teachers to clarify matters, because they have a "good working relationship." Mrs Ros also displayed the same simple gestures of talking to parents when she met them, and I also observed that at the sports' day, after the event was over, she had casual conversations with the parents, talking to them about their children's progress.

While only Mrs Ros', Ms Joey's and Mdm Loh's examples are discussed here, the importance of this concept of trust kept recurring throughout many of the interviews. Hence, while the understanding of trust suggests cooperation between the parents and teachers, it also brings forth the question of how it comes about, and what are the methods of teachers to project an image that would inspire trust in the parents.

In certain cases, the teachers employed various means to get the parents to comply with their wishes. To illustrate this, I start with the case of Mrs Ros who confided that she had to apply pressure on the parents to comply with the school's activities, more specifically, the celebration of 100 days of school, and the games day. For the celebration of 100 days of school, parents were asked to contribute 100 items of the same kind and it would all be pooled together. The children were then asked to pick up ten sets of ten different items in a "buffet style" so that they can also learn the concept of 100. Mrs Ros shared her experience as some parents were very nice and provided three sets of 100

items, and others spent a large amount buying the items such as glittering pens. However, there were other parents who had brought old colour pencils from their homes, and one parent purchased a big bag of jelly beans, insisting that she has never seen individually wrapped sweets. As a result of parents who were 'uncooperative', their children had to sit out of the game and only got to bring home the leftover items. When asked about how the children reacted, she said that it was only logical that as other parents contributed to the event, the children could get the returns whereas those children whose parents did not contribute appropriately could only take the remainders. However, it is important to note that this pre-school is somewhat unique as only an estimate of about twenty percent out of 150 students are Singaporean. The majority of the children, approximately seventy percent, are Japanese. Moreover, she highlighted how the Japanese parents are very supportive of the schools' activities as opposed to the Singaporean parents. Therefore, with the standards set by the Japanese parents, the Singaporean parents face greater pressure to comply with the school's instructions.

Most of the other teachers explain that as they maintain a good relationship with parents, the parents are generally more supportive in helping out when the teachers ask for certain things. However, a teacher from Childcare L complains that things are not easy for her as she has to continuously call and chase the parents to return consent forms and letters. Although she is a relatively new teacher to the school, most of the teachers there similarly had a hard time getting responses from parents. In this instance, as Ms Annie explained, the parents face various types of problems such as suffering from depression, or they have a broken family with complicated family relations, or they are very busy. For this reason, apart from the personal relationship of parents and teachers,

the class background of the children and their families has implications for the extent to which parents cooperate with teachers. This was more obviously seen in the case of Childcare M which caters to lower-income, less priviledged families. Another unique aspect of Childcare M is that they have a social worker to work with the families, and this also assists the teachers in getting the cooperation of the parents to a certain extent.

Having discussed the realities of teaching and some of the resultant implications of the care work-education paradox, I will focus on the parents' perspective in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

On Parents and their Expectations

Having discussed the experiences of teachers, I turn next to the other group of adults—parents of the pre-school children. While teachers provide a perspective on what children are like in school, the parents are the active consumers of the early childhood industry, since they usually make the decision of selecting the centre and extracurricular activities for their children. As such, the reasons for the parents' decision present an insight towards their expectations of childhood, particularly as it is reflected in how the children's time should be spent. Regarding children's time, I consider the components of children's school time and their extracurricular time. In addition to the interviews, I will also include relevant data from my observations of the children and their family's choices.

Children's Time

School Time

One of the major themes to be explored is the way parents make use of children's time. By sending their children to either childcare centres or kindergartens, parents have expressed their immediate expectation that the children will be educated in an institutional setting—the pre-school. This also reflects a "curricularization" of these children's childhood, as their time becomes subjected to the demands of a timetable that the children have to follow (Ennew, 1994:126). As explained by some of the respondents, in deciding on the centre to send their children to, the parents had highlighted the importance of the curriculum and the need to prepare their child for primary school. Mr

Lee and Mr Raj, who both sent their sons to PCF kindergartens, specified that they had selected PCF because it reflects the "normal stream of education in Singapore" and is "more in tune to the MOE syllabus". Similarly, the rest of the parents had concerns about the educational quality of the school. Mrs Lim had selected her son's school because it offered the Montessori curriculum, which was the trend at that time; and Mrs Fern's choice of pre-school offered programmes from different parts of the world for each subject, and she had been very happy with her son's results, affirming her decision to let her younger two children continue in the same school:

> He came out [from the kindergarten] very well prepared for P1. They prepared him very well for phonics, spelling. I don't even have to go through with him.

On the other hand, Mrs Pereira had been dissatisfied with the principal's attitude towards her daughter when she was studying there, which was further excerbated by the principal's "broken English". As a result, Mrs Pereira decided against sending her son back to that school, and had remarked that the "level of teachers were very different" at the next school she chose, and particularly that the principal speaks well.

The other major reason that parents give for selecting a school is also because of their familiarity with the school and the teachers, contributing to greater trust in the school. This aspect was also discussed briefly in the previous chapter about the teachers. However, the issue of trust can be better understood when we look at it from the perspective of the parents, particularly in considering the factors influencing their initial decisions. Most of the time, trust in the school and the teachers have been established prior to the child's admission to the school. Mrs Su and Mr Goh decided to send their children to schools which have close relationships with their family. Mrs Su's husband

had worked with the principal of her son, Fausan's school before, and they trust the principal's working style and expectations. Hence, their trust in the principal significantly contributed to Mrs Su's decision to send Fausan to that school, although it was located further away. In Mr Goh's case, the principal of the kindergarten they chose was his wife's godmother, and a close family friend.

Apart from close personal relationship with the teachers, good recommendations from friends who had positive experiences at the pre-schools spark the trust between interested parents and the pre-schools. Nevertheless, the persistence and nurturing of this relationship depends on the principal, the teachers, and the parents themselves. This was seen in the case of Mrs Fern and Mrs Oh. Mrs Fern had been introduced by a colleague to the pre-school her son attended. When she went to take a look at the pre-school, she had been pleased by what she saw; she liked the events provided by the school, and the approach the principal took towards her staff and her philosophy of early childhood education:

> We went in, I liked the principal. When we heard her speak, she's the best orator ever. … We could actually sit in the same training as the teachers did, although we had to pay. She was very forward thinking, this lady. Don't know about other school principals, but I think not.

Similarly, Mrs Oh's neighbour had given her "good comments" about the pre-school her son attended, telling her that the environment was ideal, convincing her to send Yu Fang, her daughter, there.

Apart from the academic expectations, parents also explicated their wish for their children to hone their social skills, and to learn independence among other things. Parents recognised that such skills would be lacking if they stayed at home in the care of

grandparents or themselves. Below are some of the expectations regarding the children's learning of independence, from parents, as well as from teachers:

> Mrs Lim: I hoped that Ezekial would learn to take some responsibility (for his life) too, such as learning to push in the chair after meals.

> Mrs Foo: I like it that they put out a kettle out there, only half filled for the K1 and K2 children. If their water bottle is empty, they can top it up themselves. Like teaching them to do it. It's more hands-on, rather than being very protective. Normally, this kind of schools, they are very protected. So a lot of things, they do for them. It's good that my children are being cared for. But on the other hand, I think it's not so good that who's going with him when he's in Primary one. I cannot get a helper to follow my son wherever he goes.

> Ms Annie (Childcare L): (About a pair of twins who was sent to the kindergarten programme at three years old). The twins' parents want them to learn to eat. At home, they don't eat certain types of foods, so they sent them here to try.

These examples reflect an interesting aspect of parents' expectations: that they expect the pre-schools to teach and instill certain values that are not usually within the realm of academic education. In fact, such forms of independence can also be taught at home, which begs the question, why not? Ms Annie explained that parents are generally softer when dealing with their children, and are less willing to push their children to do things that they do not want to do. As a result, parents often leave such aspects to the pre-school to handle.

In considering the notion of children's time and parents' expectations, I wish to borrow from Lopata's (1993) argument about a dual-sphere ideology of work and home, to suggest that children's lives can also be looked at from a dual-sphere ideology of school and home. With the formulation of the dual sphere, Lopata argued that children require "care, education and freedom from work" (1993:177). Hence, mothers had to take care of them, limiting them both to the private sphere of the home. However, from my

observations, I suggest that as more mothers go out to work, and the children attend pre-school, they experience the dual sphere separation of the home and their 'work', which refers to the school in this case. Rather than an "artificial polarity that ignores continuum of social relations in real life," it is the intrusion and invasiveness of the public sphere of work which has generated anxieties among adults and parents (ibid:176). It has made them chose to bring the children out from the private sphere, to engage the children in academic related activities so as to prepare them for their school life in future. As a result, the dual sphere for the children overlaps each other, and in this case, the polarity become blurred, whereby the private home is also where much work is done, and in the cases of childcare centres, the public school is also where many private activities are conducted. Illustrating the intrusion of public into the private, Mr Lee has his two children in the care of different caregivers—his mother and a nanny—because his wife and he are busy at work during the week until at least 7pm. The couple's jobs require them to travel as well, and there are times when they are unable to pick their children up from the caregivers' home because they both finished work late. As they feel that they lack the time to teach their children, they are enrolled into various academic classes—Chinese, mathematics, and phonics—throughout the weekends. On Sundays, Mr Lee likes to pursue his hobby of model plane flying, in which he also enters international competitions. As a result, he and his wife have to schedule their children's time, and family time, around their busy schedules, which he admits is very difficult.

As for the involvement of the public sphere into private activities, this is easily seen in the childcare centres. Moreover, parents depend on the pre-school to teach the children life skills and behaviour, although this could also be done at home. This shows

the transference of responsibility from the parent to the pre-school, through the purchase of pre-school services. With the increasing focus on the holistic development of the child, the pre-schools are involved in nurturing children in ways that go beyond the academic and cognitive, towards the socio-emotional, and even to the overall character development of the child.

Beyond parents' expectations for good quality and their trust in the pre-school to educate children both academically and socially, there is also a qualitative difference in the parents' decision to send the children to a kindergarten or a full day pre-school programme. This is when considering the assumption that the primary role for childcare is an alternative care option for the children when both parents are working. On one hand, parents' choices amidst other options reflect the expectations of parents that children's time has to be spent fruitfully. On the other hand, the family background affects the parents' range of choices for the provision of care and the perceived importance of one option over the other.

Out of the eighteen parents interviewed, seven send their children to full day centres, citing various reasons. The conventional pragmatic reason that both parents are working and no one can care for the children at home was only given by one working mother, Mrs Tan, although her husband does not work due to medical reasons. Amongst the children who attend full day care, the rest of the parents can be grouped into two types of care giving arrangements in the day: those by the parent, and those by the grandparent. In Singapore, hiring a domestic helper is common as a means of care for the children. However, for some reason, in my sample of parents whose children attend full-day childcare, none had domestic helpers as the alternative care giver; most depended on

grandparents. The parents include Mrs Chen, Mrs Lim, and Mrs Ong. They all agreed that the grandparents could care for their children and they could easily have been registered for the kindergarten programme instead. However, it was due to other reasons that they decided to send their children to day care. Primarily the parents wanted their children to make good use of their time, rather than wasting their time watching TV all day:

> Mrs Lim: At home, he would be watching TV all day long. So, if he stays in school, he would have to follow the system, and there would be a curriculum to follow also. Also, I heard that at the kindergartens, there is almost no homework nowadays as they try to focus on more creative learning, which I feel is useless.

> Mrs Chen: I would rather Yee Ren attend the full day childcare to keep him fruitfully engaged, and learn new things at the same time.

The wish to make full use of children's time was also expressed by the other parents who eventually decided to send their children to kindergarten. However, often, the parents chose to utilise the children's time in a different way, focusing on specific subjects and activities through enrichment classes, which I will discuss further in the next section. Ultimately, children's day becomes somewhat an extension of the pre-school—being timetabled—as activities are planned throughout the day, creating what Ennew explained as "activity rhythms" (Ennew, 1994:131).

The second theme to be considered is that of class status of the family. This has a great impact on the range of services and schools that are available to parents, whether it is real—within their financial means—or perceived—their expectations of what is necessary. For the more well-to-do families, their decision making process is not limited by financial considerations. Rather, their expectations regarding the child's perceived needs affect the way they articulate their choices, which include curriculum expectations.

In these cases, certain aspects of education become explicated as needs, and become major considerations in parents' search for pre-schools, and their expectations of them.

> Mr Kang: We wanted him to have a good platform of Christian faith. The kindergarten is one. And also, he was getting a bit big. There's nothing to occupy him at home. So, outsource a bit. That's the second.

> Mrs Fern: Montessori was some big thing. But my husband don't really care. He is not as 'educated' as I am in paper qualifications, only 'O' levels I think. So it doesn't really matter to him. If more educated, you would want them to have the standards. So I was the one who insisted on the standards.
> I actually read up about Montessori. And for my students who come into Sec 1, their records show that the Montessori girls are ok, but more self centred in that sense. Because Montessori, it doesn't matter what level you are in. When you finish the stuff, you move on to the next one. If you do not know, you ask someone else and the teacher is supposed to take care of you. That is problematic because in school, it is very structured. You have to sit down when the teacher wants them to, not do work at their own pace. So I said cannot. And Montessori is very expensive.

More importantly, the parents who are more well-to-do have greater expectations. They also have more flexible working arrangements and are able to accommodate a wider range of options of childcare arrangements.

Mrs Foo is working in her father-in-law's company, and can afford the flexible hours to take her two sons to and from school, regardless of the time as she also takes them to a multitude of enrichment classes. She perceives the enrichment classes to be necessary for exposure, particularly for Chinese, which she deems her children to be weak in. As a result, even her younger son, Cavall, attends Chinese Speech and Drama class with the Nursery Two students aged five years old, even though he is only four years old, and in Nursery One.

Similarly, Mr Kang is a real estate agent, while his wife is an investor managing some properties, allowing them to personally care for their two sons. This way, both

parents can spend more time with them. They take their older son to and from school, accompanying him on school excursions, and also take time to play toys and read to them in the day time.

Mrs Su uses her flexible work arrangements to spend more time with her three sons individually. As a free lance beautician, she is able to look after her three sons on her own with the help of her sister. Her eldest son, Fausan, attends daycare at a Muslim childcare centre from around 9am to 3pm, although he is registered under the full day session. Fausan's attendance at day care, although for shorter hours, enables her to devote her attention to her two younger sons, Rowshan and Imran at home. She was also planning to send Rowshan to day care next, so that she can then spend more time with Imran. She explained that she "can't handle them both and time won't be productive."

On the other hand, in the case of Mrs Nora and Mrs Hasi, both are housewives, and care for the children themselves. However, their children are at a childcare centre because the families have been recognised as high risk[17] and are accepting financial aid in addition to meeting with a social worker. They were referred by a social worker to attend the day care programme as part of an early intervention method. This illustrates the way in which education is used as a method to help the children of high risk or low income families escape the poverty trap. Studying the efficacy of such programmes is not within the scope of this thesis. However, these cases illustrate one more facet of why and how education has come to play such an important role in the lives of children. In this case, education is seen as a tool that children should be armed with, as early as possible, so as to maximise their potential for achievement, and their chances of finding a route out of poverty. It is with this intention that Mrs Nora accepted the help, and Mrs Hasi had even

actively sought out the social service agency so that her daughter could go to pre-school at minimum cost.

Overall, parents' decision to send their children to school reflects their expectations of how children should spend their time, and what they should be learning. Their decisions are also affected by their income levels, family background and class status. Financial capability opens up more options to the better-off, while class attitudes or religious requirements may affect perceptions of a child's educational needs.

Children's Extracurricular Lessons

If school time was one major component of a child's day, a second component is the children's extracurricular time. Here, I look at the different additional activities that the children are involved in, alternatively known as enrichment lessons. These activities can be broadly categorised into two types: those supplementing school-based subjects and those engaging the children in non-academic activities. Understanding of parents' perceptions of how children's time should be utilised, and to what end, is further developed when I look at the type of activities the children are involved in, and the reasons given by parents for their choices. I also consider types of activities in relation to age. The closer the child is to entering primary school, the greater the parent's anxiety about preparing the child for school. At the same time, older children are more able to engage in activities independently.

It is worthwhile noting that most of the children who attend childcare have significantly fewer enrichment lessons, as the parents prefer to spend the weekends spending time together and resting, as they are busy during the week. Mrs Lim's son,

Ezekial is an exception as he has four different lessons, which she explains is largely due to convenience. Ezekial's elder brother, aged nine years old, attends music, swimming and Chinese classes at the weekend. Mrs Lim sends Ezekial for those classes at the same time. As for the phonics class, when her elder son was younger, she had been concerned with his progress in reading, and was then referred to a phonics teacher. After attending the classes, the boy appeared to have made significant progress. Hence, she decided to send Ezekial for the same programme as well.

Concern with the issue of reading makes phonics one of the most common classes chosen by parents. Out of the seventeen parents, seven send their children to English language-related classes, in the form of phonics or speech and drama classes. Many a time, it is because the parents felt that their children were not sufficiently prepared in their reading ability to enter primary school. More often, parents are looking to widen the children's vocabulary, and give them additional exposure because the enrichment centre is able to convey the learning "in a fun way", a recurring term that is used not only in relation to reading classes, but almost all other classes. As Ennew (1994:138) explains, play is also often considered "children's work," which has been changed such that these activities are purposeful and to "economic ends." Beyond engaging the child, it is also used to "[structure] experience and [lead] to understanding" (ibid:139). When parents register their children for enrichment classes as the classes can teach "in a fun way," it suggests two things: play is viewed as a polar opposite activity from the work that adults do, and parents do not know how to teach them in a fun way; and parents tend to 'outsource' the job to external bodies, suggesting the commoditization of children' play and studies.

This was slightly different for Chinese lessons, the next most common enrichment class. Most of the parents cite their own lack of ability in the language. Mr Lee said his own and his wife's Chinese "is very weak, and it is difficult to teach them to read. These places can teach them in an interesting way." Mrs Pereira referred to her "others" racial status, and Mrs Fern cited her marriage to a Eurasian. These categorisations which were manifested in their non-Chinese family names were mentioned as the primary reason for their inability to teach their children the language sufficiently.

As the children are still young, and most of the parents are working full-time, there is a need to coordinate the child's classes so that the parents are free to bring them or even to accompany them in the class in some cases. As a result, most of the children end up going for classes on the weekend. It becomes significant that as the child becomes busy with classes on the weekends as well, parents are also occupied with shuttling their children to and from class. However, after the busy week at work, the parents are also often tired out and need more rest. Coping methods are then employed so as to better balance between work and rest. One method is to send all their children for classes nearby that are scheduled at the same time, since most of the parents have at least two children. However, this method does not always work as some classes require the parents to be in attendance with the children through the lesson, such as music and swimming classes. The other is for the parents to take turns in taking or accompanying the child for classes. This highlights the fact that while the children are preoccupied, the parents are even busier, as they have to juggle their schedules between their personal needs and their children's activities. Further, it shows that parents view those classes as necessary, something they are not willing to sacrifice even though they are tired.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that most of the children who attend kindergarten also attend enrichment classes, although mostly of an academic nature. Of the two children who are not attending enrichment classes, their parents felt that they were still relatively young and have plans to start sending them in the next year. Enrichment lessons can be further divided into two groups of exercise or cultural activities. For the former, it was usually swimming, with the exception of Dora's son, who played squash. Their interest generally stems from teaching the child a life skill, since not being able to swim can be dangerous.

Hence, in sending children to enrichment lessons, parents are concerned with either supporting the child's education, or maximising their potential, or exposing them to a wider range of activities. The former is the most common reason cited by my respondents, suggesting that it is the parents' more pressing concern.

Intensive Parenting: Concerted Cultivation and Accomplishment of Natural Growth

The issue of 'intensive parenting,' where children attend many additional enrichment lessons, is a pertinent one to consider. The concept of intensive mothering is discussed by Hays as a "gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children" (1996:*x*). However, in recent years, it is not only the mother, but both parents who spend a lot of resources doing so. As such, I use the concept of intensive parenting loosely to include both parents, although the data shows that it is usually the mother who engages the children in the activities. I consider intensive parenting to occur when the children attend three or more enrichment lessons, as they are usually conducted at the weekends.

Of the parents, six appear to fall into the category of intensive parenting—Mr Lee, Mrs Fern, Mrs Koh, Mrs Lim, Mrs Oh and Mrs Lam.

> Mrs Fern: Dylan's talented in a way for sporting abilities, very good. He swims, and is now playing squash. The squash coach adores him, says this boy is magical. Squash because the school has a squash coach. He's very good at soccer. The uncles, our own friends will say, wow, probably because they see other kids. And he can run and kick…
> We did piano with him, piano teacher says very good, grasp very fast, but very short attention span. He'll go, why do we play the same piece over and over again, can we learn something new? He picks up very quickly, but he doesn't want to practice. So I said, no, don't force. And he likes to draw. But both kids like to draw. Their dexterity (fine motor skills) are very good, these two. Can write, and draw, and draw lines and circles very early. So we try to give them what they need.
> The older one (Damien), because he was very good musically, he has a very good ear. So he has piano and violin. And then, bring him out for concerts, to the Royal Philharmonic. Every year, at least once, I'll bring him to just watch either violin playing or whatever. He enjoys it, but is very lazy to practice. At this age, you just have to be a big task master and say practice, yell at him.
> The younger one, sports, so that's where we will push him.

> Mrs Lam: Yes, she is also attending ballet because she likes dancing, phonics to learn to read, cello mainly because I think it would be good to able to play an instrument and art for right brain development like creativity.

> Mrs Koh: She does ballet is because I'm interested in it. I think it's a good exercise. So I let her start on it also. … Violin because I wanted to learn violin so I wanted her to have the opportunity to learn. … She is also learning piano now. But when she was younger, I used to teach her myself. I used to know piano. … As long as they grow up as an all rounder, anything's fine.

The above excerpts show that the parents have rationalised the activities engaged in as either being in their child's personal interest, beneficial to the child or activities that the child is inclined towards. Nevertheless, the children experience a greater degree of curricularization as they have more activities scheduled in their timetable of things to do. This also coincides with the concept of "concerted cultivation" of childhood, although the

parents may not think of it in these terms. Lareau had similar findings of parents who were "firmly committed to the strategy of concerted cultivation, [but] did not seem especially conscious of their approach" (Lareau, 2003:239). She explained that parents' approach towards the children, such as using reasoning and less directives, have a direct impact on making the children appear more curious about life to the parents. However, parents fail to notice that it is their actions that have created the curiosity in children, thinking that their children are naturally inquisitive.

Apart from parents, I observed four girls (including one pair of twins) from Kindergarten D and Childcare L who exemplify the "concerted cultivation" type of childhood. At age five, apart from attending Kindergarten D, Lea also attends five different classes—maths, I Can Read (phonics), piano, violin and Chinese speech and drama—of which only the Chinese speech and drama class is held in school. Apart from Wednesday when she does not have extra lessons and Friday when she has Chinese speech and drama, after school is dismissed at 11.30am, I usually see Lea sitting below the school, having her lunch with her maid. After her lunch, her maid usually carries her down to take a taxi to the location of her next enrichment class.

In the other case I came across, Jingwen[18] attends Childcare L for the full day session. From the other teachers, I learnt that she also has another five types of enrichment classes to attend, aside from school. These include I Can Read (phonics), abacus, piano, swimming and *hanyu pinyin* (romanized system for Standard Chinese). On top of her classes, the teachers have told me that her parents are generally involved and concerned in her studies, as shown when both her parents came down to meet her teacher at the end of the first semester in June; most other parents did not do so. When the school

asked me to test the children on the English words they know, based on the High Frequency Verbs, it was only Jingwen who got all correct. All her classmates performed significantly less well. This suggested a correlation between her parents' involvement, her attendance of the enrichment classes on top of her full-day childcare, and her performance.

In another case, there was a pair of twins at Childcare L, aged four years old, who were registered for the half day kindergarten programme. Their mother had signed them up for all the additional enrichment classes that the school has, such as computer, and speech and drama. However, according to the teachers, she never sends her daughters for excursions as she does not deem it necessary. During Racial Harmony Day, she did not bring her daughters to school for the celebration when she found out that they were not having lessons as she thought it was a "waste of time". This illustrates the educational expectations and priorities of that parent, who decided that the children should not attend any additional activities outside of the academic curriculum.

On the other hand, many of the parents talked about the friends or relatives they knew who fit the description of 'intensive' parents who send their children from lesson to lesson. They are uneasy with the practices of intensive parenthood, and commonly said that they wanted their children to "just grow":

> Mr Kang: My brother-in-law and my sister have already given their children all the best, with pressure. Like drawing, swimming, piano. That is my brother-in-law. My sister-in law on the other hand, is the type that when the daughter don't want to play the piano, she'll just whack the hand. And she'll say that they have an interest in it, don't know how though. And they have a lot of tuition, like pressure cooker that kind. You get the idea…

> Mrs Su: As much as we all say that Singaporean parents are very kiasu, first financially, they must be able to afford it. Also, so many classes, like

a friend of mine, her daughter has violin, piano, ballet, Kumon and phonics classes. Every day, my friend just sends and picks them up. I think poor child, no time in life. Children need to roam around.

Mrs Ong: Like for a colleague of mine, it is tuition all the way. I thought it was too much. She said that after come back from childcare, just go for tuition. It is better to keep [her son] busy. That one [is] very stressful. But we didn't want to do it that way.

This shows two opposite camps in the way parents feel that children should be brought up: to let the children grow at their own pace, or to make full use of the children's childhood to educate and prepare them for their future. These two camps illustrate the "sets of pairs of beliefs and actions" which Lareau explains as offering a "cultural logic of child rearing" (Lareau, 2003:236). However, the division is not always so clear. Some parents say that they do believe in letting the child grow at their own pace, and that they do not wish to push their children too hard at that age, but their children nevertheless end up attending numerous classes of various types. Hence, I would like to further explore this claim in order to understand the reasons behind that decision.

Consumerism

The phenomenon of intensive parenting appeared to occur in opposition to another observation among the parents, namely the extent to which they spend on consumer good for their children. It appeared to occur more commonly in the lower income families. At Childcare L, the material objects that the children carry, such as their bags, water bottles, pencils, and stationery, change on a relatively frequent basis, more so than at Kindergarten D. Particularly once when there was a *pasar malam* (night market) in the neighbourhood of Childcare L, all the children were sharing stories about the new toys they have. The teachers remarked that the children change their water bottles every

month. Mrs Hasi told me that both her daughters, Seri and Nordini, generally get new pencil cases, slippers, and stationery every month. Believing in the importance of education, she said that she was willing to buy her daughters stationery to encourage them to attend school. Moreover, she added that these items are generally very cheap and easily affordable for her.

At Childcare L, there were numerous instances when the children had pestered their parents to buy food and tidbits for them, and parents will often give in, giving them everything they wanted. These are two such cases:

> Case One, told to me by the teachers:
> They had been closing up at 7pm one evening, when a mother stormed back to the centre, pulling her son by the ear, asking the teachers to discipline her son. They had made six trips from the school and provision shop to the bus stop because her son had wanted to buy more tidbits every time they were halfway to the bus stop. Apparently, this was common and occurred on an almost daily basis. When telling me about it, the teachers questioned why the mother did not discipline her son, and even entertained him by travelling back and forth[19]. Often, she gave her son everything he wanted, sending him for excursions, and buying him a radio, even when she was unable to pay her electricity bills.

> Case Two, as I observed:
> I was in the provision shop buying some tidbits myself, after leaving the centre. A student walked in with his father, wanting to buy a variety of tidbits, particularly chocolates. The father had been in the midst of completing the purchase, when the boy pointed to another chocolate he wanted. At this moment, one of the boy's teachers came in, and saw what was happening. She scolded the boy for being greedy, particularly since he has a medical condition that makes his skin dry and more susceptible to nose bleeds. It made me wonder if the parent was overcompensating for his son's condition.[20]

Both cases showed the parents' willingness to give in to the child's requests and wishes, spiraling out of control. It stood out more prominently amongst these children who are in lower income families. This is not to discount such occurrences in the better-off families, but instead, I question the reason for its prominence. The difference

exhibited itself in the discourse of the parents: amongst the lower income families, they verbalised their incidences of spending behaviour significantly more than that of the higher income families. This was also observed when at the childcare and the kindergarten, where the children came from lower-income and higher-income backgrounds respectively. Coincidentally, Lareau had similarly observed the "almost constant talk about money" amongst the lower-income families, which tended to engage in the "accomplishment of natural growth" (2003:239).

On the other hand, the families of higher-income backgrounds had a greater tendency to discuss their educational experiences. On several occasions, I observed the children in Kindergarten D discussing their piano lessons, such as naming the book they were using, or what they did in class. They had slightly fewer occasions for conversation with each other compared to the children at the childcare centre primarily because of the fewer hours spent in the kindergarten.

From the children's conversation, there appears to be a difference in the type of activities that feature in the children's lives. This observation also coincided with the parents' interviews, when they discussed their children. Children and parents from lower-income families more often discussed material objects, whereas those from the higher-income families discussed more about their educational experiences. Hence, the objects and activities that feature in those children's lives are education-related; whereas the former group's lack of those activities results in an emphasis on the other, more basic aspects of life, which is the material objects such as stationery, sweets and small items. However, this is not to imply that the lower-income families discount the importance of education. Their approach towards education is largely limited by their financial ability,

and they do not consider those lessons as necessary. Moreover, these parents lack much knowledge, the resources to find out more about early education and expertise about the school curriculum and subjects beyond the basics. As such, the children and their families tend to focus most of their energies on the basic pre-school experiences and school work. For the children from higher-income families, their consumption of enrichment classes shows consumerism occurring in a different method—through the commodification of leisure and education. The lower-income families are less able to do so with their limited finances. Instead, their purchase of material toys, stationery and sweets are within their budget, and their children are kept happy.

This chapter has attempted to look at the expectations of parents for their children, as seen through the ways children spend their time, and the reasons they gave. Parents generally were seeking out ways for children to occupy their time through education, recognising its importance. Beyond that, there is a wide difference in extracurricular enrichment activities because of the income levels, background and expectations of the parents regarding childhood and how children should spend their time. In considering Lareau's (2003) argument about class and the adult perspectives on childhood, there appears to be a certain correlation whereby the middle-class families are more inclined towards engaging the child in "concerted cultivation" whereas the working class families leave the child to their own devices through the "accomplishment of natural growth". Hence, in the next chapter, I will attempt to integrate the perspectives of both the parents as discussed in this chapter, and the teachers discussed in the previous chapter, to shed some light on the nature of childhood as viewed and played out in Singapore.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to show the various aspects of pre-school education, as seen from the perspective of the government ministries, pre-school teachers, and the parents of pre-school children. In describing my methodology, I have recognized that the small sample size of this study and subsequent limitations arising from the difficulties in locating parent respondents would limit its representativeness. Hence, I reiterate that it cannot be fully generalized to the rest of Singapore. However, I would not discount the validity of the findings, as both teacher and parent respondents came from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, albeit not based on representative proportions. This provided a variety of perspectives and allowed me to steer away from a more simplistic understanding.

Starting from the state's perspective, as expressed through the ministries, I have highlighted the changes that have been taking place in the Singapore government's policies towards early childhood education. The government authorities have a concern to mold the future generation of adults who will be the workers, particularly since they have constantly reiterated the importance of human capital as Singapore's only natural resource (MCYS, 2009c). Education and scholarization appear to have taken over a large part of childhood. However, there are some parents who still believe in allowing the children to grow at their own pace, although they are often concerned about their children's future in school.

In the last decade, there have been rapid changes with a huge expansion in the early childhood education industry. Concurrently, there has been increasing

standardization and formalization of the curriculum of pre-school education and operational standards for early childhood centres. These changes in the running of kindergartens and childcare centres were instituted by the MOE and MCYS respectively, which points to certain differences in the understanding of education, on one hand, and childcare, on the other. These two aspects generally coexist within each centre albeit in different proportions. Although pre-school education remains privatized in order to encourage "diversity and experimentation" (Shanmugaratnam, 20 January 2003), there is in fact a large degree of standardization due to the changes effected, such as some of the fixed guidelines for curriculum and the common training that pre-school teachers undergo. Moreover, a main goal of pre-school education is to prepare the child for primary school, which was made compulsory in 2003 for the cohort of children born in 1996. As the primary school has a fixed syllabus, there is a baseline that the pre-schools are expected to prepare the children for. However, there remain some differences in the methods used in this preparation and some children end up being more prepared than others. While this was a common concern of the state which had led them to increase the standards of pre-school education, there appeared to be little change in the different abilities of children when they start school, largely due to the different quality of education that different pre-schools provide, as well as different extent to which parents work at preparing their children for primary school, such as through the type of pre-school they send their children to, and the additional enrichment lessons that they make their children attend.

Another common change in many of the centres is the shift towards child-oriented learning, and an emphasis on "learning through play." However, this is not always

translated to reality. Child-oriented learning suggests that the teacher is able to accommodate the progress of all the children, and they are given the agency to direct their own learning. As such, the teacher requires time to be able to attain such goals, which is a scarce resource as the programme is subject to the strict timetabled schedule. This dissonance is usually resolved through a compromise with the child-oriented learning, which also contributes to revealing some popular misconceptions of pre-school teaching as being simple and easy.

Using what I term the "care work-education paradox", I have shown that conflict exists for early childhood teachers as the realities of teaching are not always conducive towards meeting idealized expectations. Apart from teaching, the teachers are also inevitably engaged in care work, or emotional labour, both of which lend a different image to the sort of work they are doing. A general perception of care work as unspecialized "women's work" tends to give pre-school teachers a low-status image in the eyes of the public; but as higher levels of professionalization are instituted, this has had some effect of raising the status of what is actually a challenging profession. Yet significantly, this shift in status has not yet been fully accepted throughout the industry or by parents. Since parents differ in their perceptions of the profession, this can noticeably affect the relationship they have with teachers. In this way, a wide gap is created with respect to the status of the different types of pre-school centres: those able to provide better education for children at the top, and those seen as merely providing daily care for the children at the bottom.

Some parents trust and are satisfied with the care and education that the pre-school is providing, whereas some other parents question and undermine the teacher's

efforts at every turn. In both cases, it does not always reflect the real quality of teaching, but the perceived quality that is often affected by the unstable dynamics between parents and teachers due to varying levels of trust. While trust in the teachers eases the relationship, there are many potential opportunities for conflict, particularly as parents and teachers each have their own approaches and expectations towards early childhood education. There are disagreements regarding the knowledge of the children themselves in terms of their behaviour, character, strengths and weaknesses, and the best way to educate and care for them. Parents believe themselves to know their children best, and thus, to be the best teachers, whereas particularly in full-daycare centres, teachers spend long hours with the children, and through their professional qualifications, are expected to have the expertise to educate them. Often, the children themselves are aware of the disagreements, and there have been occasions where they take advantage of that conflict and manipulate it in their favour.

Yet, ultimate control over the way children spend their time remains in the hands of the parents. All the parents, and in fact, all the actors studied, see early childhood education not only to be necessary, but also a priority that all children should go through. A large amount of children's time was dedicated to learning, either at pre-school or at enrichment lessons to improve their academic proficiency or to increase their exposure to additional sporting or cultural activities, with a generally greater stress on the importance of academic preparation and proficiency. Hence, they are subjected to the timetabled structure of their pre-school experience, which is extended into the rest of their lives, particularly as they engage in additional enrichment activities. This has resulted in what has been termed the curricularization of childhood. Ennew (1994:131) discusses how the

curricularization of childhood has invaded all parts of children's lives beyond the academic, including their leisure. This trend is clearly reflected in my data which showed that the children's time has often been compartmentalized into a timetable by the parents. Enrichment lessons also include sporting activities and cultural activities, which tend to be considered part of the leisure curriculum. This is also considered to contribute to the holistic development of the child. Thus, parents' choices of activities are largely influenced by the perceived "socialization imperatives for children" which extend beyond academic requirements (Ennew, 1994:133).

Although many parents stressed that children should not be overly taxed, their children's schedule indicated that actually the expectation of *concerted cultivation* was more commonplace. At the same time, some parents explicitly rejected sending their children for additional lessons, wanting them to "enjoy their childhood". They battle within themselves, feeling somewhat concerned that their children may be losing out by staying home. The tensions and divergence in expectations reflect the fact that ideas about how children should spend their childhood are in a state of transition presently. Often, parents acknowledge and wish to let their children grow at their own pace, but the stressors of the education system around them often force them into deciding otherwise so that their children will be able to keep up with their peers when they start school.

In studying the experiences and expectations of both teachers and parents, there are multiple points of conflict. The rapid changes in the early childhood industry and parental expectations have formed new ideals about childhood which are incongruent with the structural limitations of time and parents' anxieties about preparing children to stay ahead. Whatever their misgivings, my observations have shown a high incidence of

concerted cultivation by parents, as discussed in Chapter 5. A second point of conflict arises from the persisting low status and image of teachers, illustrated in Chapter 4, which I suggest reflects the dominant social values in Singapore society at present. Teachers of very young children do not as yet enjoy the generally high status accorded to the teaching profession in general.

However, the present state of the early childhood industry is still in flux as the new ideals continue to take hold. It will prove to be interesting to see how the industry and the realm of childhood will change further within Singapore over the next decade, when the changes presently implemented will have been taken up to a greater extent. New issues may also arise as a result of those changes, particularly with the further development of early childhood education theories. This thesis has attempted to start looking at the state of childhood in Singapore, from the perspective of the adults. It also has opened up many new issues to the case of Singapore that had not been discussed, such as more in-depth studies regarding the realities of early childhood teaching, the 'curricularization' of childhood and the wider and long term impact of the policy changes regarding the early childhood education industry. I hope that future researchers will go further in studying the field of childhood within Singapore.

Endnotes

[1] The earliest data I could find regarding pre-school attendance had been in 2007 from the Singapore Parliamentary response by Mr Zulkifli, the Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education. He estimated that 95% of children had attended pre-school prior to entering Primary One (Zulkifli, 15 February 2007).

[2] It is inappropriate to compare Singapore's pre-school participation rates to that of the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA) as their formal schooling begins at 5 years old, compared to age 7 for Singapore children. Hence, their kindergarten participation at 5 years is at 100% and 90% respectively (OECD, 2006). Nevertheless, comparing across 37 OECD countries, although more than half have at least 80% participation, Singapore's 97.5% pre-school participation rate is only less than that of France, Spain, Italy and Belgium (OECD, 2009). Italy, France and Belgium all have strong government support, all public schools are free, and formal education only begins at 6 years (ibid). No additional information on Spain could be found. On the other hand, when we look at the Asian countries, China only has about 41% participation (PRC MOE, 2010), and the rate is less than 40% in Korea (ibid). Hence, given the different governmental regulations, and resources allocated, Singapore's achievement is significant. A significant number of parents still feel the need to send the children to pre-school, despite the costs involved, and the lack of obligation, which is indicative of parents' view of the importance of pre-school education.

[3] The Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) was renamed Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) in 1 September 2004 as an initiative by the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he first took over the position in 12 August 2004. He had wanted to involve the youth in the planning for Singapore's future (MCDS, 14 August 2004).

[4] In her thesis, an enrichment programme is defined as "a non-mandatory structured programme targeting at various cognitive, social or physical skills development that is taken up outside the existing school curriculum" (Sim, 2009:2).

[5] The teacher is very experienced and has been teaching in the school for more than twenty years.

[6] In this case, the experts refer to a primary school principal, a mathematics teacher who also lectures at the National Institute of Education (NIE), an English language lecturer from NIE, and a parent who also owns enrichment centres. This would be discussed further in the forthcoming chapters.

[7] The Desired Outcomes of Pre-school Education, as stated on the MOE website is:

> 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 be able to explore;
> Be able to listen and speak with understanding;
> Be comfortable and happy with themselves;
> Have developed physical co-ordination and healthy habits and;
> Love their family, friends, teachers and kindergarten. (MOE, 2009c)

[8] Most of the respondents refer to the DPE-T as DPT, and DPE-L as DPL. Apart from the DPE-T, which is required for teaching, pre-school teachers who want to become the principal of a pre-school has to have two years working experience and have a Diploma in Pre-School Education-Leadership (DPE-L). The DPE-T is going to be changed to DECCE-T (Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education-Teaching), and DPE-L is going to become DECCE-L (Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education-Leadership). The change in the term suggests a shift in the mentality towards the work required of pre-school teachers. Also, their job industry is suggested to undergo a change in name from pre-school to the early childhood. For more details regarding the training pathway of pre-school teachers, refer to the MOE website (2009a).

[9] The Learning Support Programme (LSP) is to improve the students' reading for English and basic arithmetic skills for Mathematics. It happens during school hours and the weaker students are taken out from class of the same period to attend the LSP with their peers. Students are placed into the LSP based on a test they take when they first enter Primary One.

[10] The reason for the recent implementation was because there appeared to be no need before, given the relatively high attendance rates of about 97%. However, MOE became concerned the children who did not attend school were not "being equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to be productive citizens in the knowledge-based economy (KBE)" (MOE, July 2000:1). Moreover, after researching on the

suitability of Compulsory education, the committee also recognized that on top of equipping the students with skills necessary for the KBE, compulsory education reinforces the "common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion.

[11] According to Minsky (2001:30), a "child's Imprimer is one of those persons to whom that child is attached; and Impriming is a 'special way to learn a new goal that occurs when a child's Imprimer is present'" The terms, imprimer and impriming are derived from word "imprinting"—a term that psychologists long have used for what keeps young animals close to their parents.

[12] In Childcare L, of five teachers who are still in the school after my observations, apart from the supervisor who has the DPE-T and DPE-L, the other older teacher will stop teaching from 2013 as she does not have the requisite five CGE 'O' level passes to take her DPE-T. Of the remaining three younger teachers, one is presently doing her DPE-T part-time, another is applying to retake her GCE 'O' levels so that she can subsequently take her DPE-T, and one other teacher is taking her CPT.

[13] Although it was not included in the thesis, informal conversations had been carried out with three graduates from the Early Childhood course from a local polytechnic. I highlight it here as it presents an interesting case to keep in view as a possible direction for future research. The respondents shared that a couple of their course mates who are teaching in the early childhood sector are caught in the contradiction of possessing necessary qualifications of the DPE-L to fill the supervisor position, yet they lack working experience of two years. However, as few other teachers have the necessary paper qualifications, the fresh graduates have been made to fill the position of the supervisor, albeit at an entry level salary. More significant is that the new teachers are embroiled in the school's politics, having upset more senior teachers as they are given the position.

[14] There are several organizations that work together to provide a full set of services regarding early childhood education and care such as the pre-school centres and teacher training. One prominent example in Singapore is Learning Capital which focuses on training teachers, while Learning Vision is the organization in charge of the pre-schools, and Learning Horizon which concentrates on enrichment classes. Another company is that of the Crestar Education Group where they have Kinderland Educare Services for childcare services, KLC School of Education (Early Childhood Teacher Training), and Crestar Learning Centre for enrichment programmes. From the public sector, there is NTUC First Campus providing pre-school services, and the Regional Training and Resource Centre (RTRC) in Early Childhood Care and Education as a training arm.

[15] The staffing issues varied from centre to centre, although centres which provide better working experience a lower turnover rate and subsequently, less staffing issues. For instance, Kindergarten D saw a collegial and enjoyable working experience where the staff were treated well. Although there was no excess staff, the turnover of teachers was low. Similarly was Childcare K, as most of the teachers formed a close knit community belonging to the same church, or had taken their Diploma together. On the other hand was Childcare L, where they constantly faced a problem of a lack of staff. It was partially due to the significantly low salary, as well as the way that the administration treated the teachers. Teachers were expected to have little to no choice as to where they were teaching, although this was exercised occasionally. When the other centres of the group were facing a lack of staff, particularly when they are applying for license, teachers are transferred to fill the position. Another way in which the teachers had felt unfairly treated was the way the management regularly made the teachers take up additional burdens of teaching different levels or concurrently teach two levels, exceeding the supposed child to teacher ratio. This has led to a high turnover at the centre, where at least three teachers had left over the course of half a year. On the other spectrum, Ms Celine had shared that her centre had no staffing issues as they had hired additional teachers, so they could fill in the positions when necessary.

[16] At Childcare L, as it was the open concept, there are no doors between classrooms, making it easy for children to leave the area. This was more common among the younger children under four years old. However, this also raises questions about safety particularly as the children were younger. As for Kindergarten D, the students had their own enclosed classrooms, so such wandering off was less common. However, there was an autistic boy who was in the class, and had that tendency to leave the classroom. Usually another teacher would find him either in the principal's office or walking along the corridor, and return him back to his classroom.

[17] Mrs Nora is living in a rented three bedroom HDB (Housing Development Board) flat with her family which includes her five children whose ages range from 2 years to 21 years old. She is a housewife and her

husband is a contract worker, taking home under SGD 1000 a month. Her in-laws are also living with them in the flat.

Similarly for Mrs Hasi, she lives in a rented three bedroom HDB flat that she moved in to recently as her application for the rental in the area was approved and they allotted her the flat. Before that, her family shared a single room within a relative's flat. In addition, due to her family's poor status, she had given away her youngest daughter to stay with another family.

[18] Jingwen's family had actually responded to my survey questions, as the teacher informed me, but the survey form had been misplaced within the school before I could collect it. However, once again, despite her knowledge of the words, and her good performance in class, she was also very arrogant, and there were greater incidences of conflict with her classmates as she had tended to believe herself correct in all matters.

[19] For this case, the teachers also added that this student came from a very complicated background as his biological father was incarcerated, and his mother was presently living in a rented flat with her boyfriend. She only started work recently as a cleaner on shift duty at the community centre where the childcare was located. Even though she worked nearby, I learnt that she was often late in picking her son up, and was under the influence of alcohol. Nevertheless, the mother tended to give her son everything he wanted.

[20] The son had a medical condition whereby he had dry skin on his scalp and around other parts of his body. Usually, the teacher has to apply cream for him after his shower.

There had been one occasion when his parents allowed him to go for an excursion to Labrador Park. The teachers had been very concerned because he might become dehydrated under the sun. His parents did not provide any form of shade or covering for the boy's head. Throughout the excursion, the teachers had made sure he drank a lot of water and kept to the shade as much as possible. Shortly before returning to the centre, he exhibited signs of dehydration, and the teachers worked hard to cool him down and to hydrate his body. This showed a point of contention between the parent and the teachers, when the teachers had to accept the parents' decision, and try to work with the situation as much as they could.

References

Ariès, Philippe. 1962. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Random House.

Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore (AECES). 2008. *Code of Ethics— Guidelines for Professional Responsibilities in Early Childhood Education*. (Date Accessed: 21 February 2009) <http://www.aeces.org/COE.pdf> Singapore: Association for Early Childhood Educators Singapore.

Attorney-General's Chambers. 2003. *Compulsory Education Act, Chapter 51*. (Date accessed 25 February 2008) <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg> Singapore: Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Statutes Online.

_____. 2001. *Child Care Centre Act, Chapter 37A*. (Date accessed 25 February 2008) <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg> Singapore: Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Statutes Online.

_____. 1997. *Education Act, Chapter 87*. (Date accessed 25 February 2008) <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg> Singapore: Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Statutes Online.

_____. 1993. *Children and Young Persons Act, Chapter 38*. (Date accessed 25 February 2009) <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg> Singapore: Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Statutes Online.

Blau, David & Janet Currie. 2004. *Preschool, Day Care, and Afterschool Care: Who's Minding the Kids*. Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Boddy, Janet, Claire Cameron & Peter Moss. 2006. *Care Work: Present and Future*. London; New York: Routledge, 2006.

Brown, William H, Samuel L. Odom, & Scott R. McConnell. 2008. *Social Competence of Young Children: Risk, Disability, & Intervention*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Pub.

Chan, Jasmine, Yvonne Chow & John Elliot. 2000. *Professional and Public Perceptions of Physical Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Corsaro, William A. 2005. *The Sociology of Childhood*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Cosin, Ben and Margaret Hales. 1997. *Families, Education, and Social Differences*. London; New York: Routledge, in association with the Open University.

Danziger, Sheldon and Jane Waldfogel. 2000. *Securing the Future: Investing in Children from Birth to College*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Doman, Glenn & Janet Doman. 2001. *How to Multiply Your Baby's Intelligence: More Gentle Revolution*. Towson: Gentle Revolution Press.

Dowling, Marion. 2000. *Young Children's Personal, Social, and Emotional Development.* London: P. Chapman Pub.; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Elliot, John, Joyce Thomas & Chua Yee Sian. 2003. *Child Sexual Abuse in Singapore: Professional and Public Perceptions.* Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Elliot, John, Chua Yee Sian & Joyce Thomas. 2002. *Emotional Maltreatment of Children in Singapore: Professional and Public Perceptions.* Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Elliot, John, Joyce Thomas, Jasmine Chan & Yvonne Chow. 2000. *Professional and Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore: An Overview.* Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Ennew, Judith. 1994. "Time for Children or Time for Adults." In Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy , Giovanni Sgritta & Helmut Wintersberger (eds). *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics.* Aldershot: Brookfield USA: Avebury, pp 125-144.

Gardner, Howard. 1993. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Goh, Christine C.M. and Rita Elaine Silver. 2004. *Language Acquisition and Development: A Teacher's Guide.* Singapore: Longman.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

James, C. 1997. "Why Nursery Education." In Ben Cosin & Margaret Hales (eds). *Families, Education, and Social Differences.* London; New York: Routledge, in association with the Open University, pp. 67-48.

Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital. 2005. *A Healthy Start for Women and Children: 1st Combined KK Women's and Children's Hospital Annual Scientific Meeting, Royal Children's Hospital (Melbourne) & Ministry of Health Update 2005, 8 to 10 July 2005, Singapore.* Combined KK Women's and Children's Hospital Annual Scientific Meeting.

Ko, Peng Sim & Ho Wah Kam. 1992. *Growing up in Singapore: the Pre-school Years.* Singapore: Longman Singapore.

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leavitt, Robin Lynn. 2006. "Power and resistance in infant-toddler day care centers." In Gerald Handel (Ed). *Childhood Socialization.* New Brunswick : Aldine Transaction, pp 115-136.

Lee, Hsien Loong. 17 August 2008. *Speech by Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister, at National Day Rally 2008 (Speech in English), 17 August 2008, 8.00 pm at NUS University Cultural Centre.* (Date accessed: 2 February 2009) <http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/mica/press_release/P-20080818-2.html> Singapore: Government of Singapore.

Lim, Siew Tin Nancy. 1990. *Chinese Fathering Patterns in Singapore: an Intergenerational Comparison.* Academic exercise—Dept. of Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

Loh T., Chan J., & Low C. N. 1995. *Survey of Oral Health of Singapore School Children 1994.* Singapore: School Dental Service, Dental Division, Ministry of Health.

Lopata, Helena Znaniecka. 1993. "The Interweave of Public and Private: Women's Challenge to American Society." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55:176-190.

Ministry of Culture. 30 October 1982. *Press Statement—Workplace Child Care Centres.* (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

Ministry of Community Development. 19 January 1985. *Press Statement—Demand for More Child Care Places.* (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

Ministry of Community Development and Sports. 2004. *Protecting Families & Children from Abuse.* Singapore: Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Singapore.

_____. 14 August 2004. *Youth: Creating Our Future.* (Date accessed: 18 May 2009) <http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/corp_press_story.asp?szMod=corp&szSubMod=press&qid=433> Singapore: Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Singapore.

Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. 21 April 2009. *Guide to Setting up A Childcare Centre.* (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) < http://www.childcarelink.gov.sg/ccls/uploads/CCC_Guide.pdf> Singapore: Family Services Division, MCYS, Singapore.

_____. 2009a. *Directory of Family and Community Services.* (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/serv_dss_main.asp> Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore.

_____. 2009b. *Childcare Centres.* (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/faml_nurture_childcarectr.asp > Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore.

_____. 2009c. *About Children and Youth.* (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/indv_abtyouth.asp > Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore.

_____. 2005. *Protecting Children in Singapore.* Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore.

Ministry of Education. 2009a. *Pre-school Teacher Training and Qualifications*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/teachers/> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 2009b. *Pre-School Education*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 2009c. Desired Outcomes of Education. (Date accessed: 17 June 2009) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/desired-outcomes/> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 5 February 2009. *Registration of New Kindergartens (For compliance)*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/preschool/files/presch-registration-geninfo.doc> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 4 March 2008. *Improving the Quality of Pre-school Education*—MOE Press Release. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2008/03/improving-the-quality-of-presc.php> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 2006. *Standards for Kindergartens: Pursuing Excellence at Kindergartens*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.edu.sg/education/preschool/files/standards-for-kindergartens.pdf> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 21 September 2004. *Parliamentary Replies—Pre-School Education*. (Date accessed: 28 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/parliamentary-replies/2004/pq21092004.htm> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 20 January 2003. *Launch of Pre-School Curriculum Framework—MOE Press Release*. (Date accessed: 28 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2003/pr20030120.htm> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. 18 December 2000. *New Framework for Pre-School Teacher-Training & Accreditation—MOE Press Release*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2000/pr18122000.htm> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. July 2000. *Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore*. (Date accessed: 28 October 2008) <www.moe.gov.sg/initiatives/compulsory-education/files/ce-report.pdf> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

_____. Not Dated. *Nurturing Early Learners: A Framework for a Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore*. (Date accessed: 15 October 2008) <http://www.moe.edu.sg/education/preschool/files/kindergarten-curriculum-framework.pdf> Singapore: Ministry of Education, Singapore.

Ministry of Health. 2005. *Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases in Child Care Centres/ Kindergartens/ Pre-school Centres/Student Care Centres.* Singapore: Ministry of Health.

Minsky, Marvin. 2001. "Attachment and Goals." In Giyoo Hatano, Naoyuki Okada, Hirotaka Tanabe (eds). *Affective Minds: A collection of papers based on presentations at the 13th Toyota Conference, Shizuoka, Japan, 29 November to 2 December 1999.* Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp 27-40.

Ng, Eng Hen. 19 January 2009. *Written Answers to Questions—Pre-School Attendance.* (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/parlweb/hansard_search_latest.jsp> Singapore: Parliament of Singapore.

Ong, Teng Cheong. 26 April 1992. *Speech by Mr Ong Teng Cheong, Secretary-General, NTUC and Deputy Prime Minister, for the Inauguration of NTUC Childcare Cooperative LTD on 26th April 1992 at Marina Mandarin at 7.30pm.* (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2009. *PF11: Enrolment in day-care and pre-schools.* (Date accessed: 25 February 2010) <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/46/13/37864698.pdf> OECD.

_____. 2006. *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care.* (Date accessed: 25 February 2010) <http://www.oecd.org/infobycountry/0,3380,en_2649_37455_1_1_1_1_37455,00.html> OECD.

Osborn, Alex F. & J. E Milbank. 1987. *The Effects of Early Education: A Report from the Child Health and Education Study.* Oxford [Oxfordshire]; New York: Clarendon Press.

People's Action Party. July/August 2007. *Petir—Knock Knock, is Your Child in Kindergarten?* (Date accessed: 20 September 2008) <http://www.pap.org.sg/articleview.php?folder=PT&id=2301> Singapore: People's Action Party.

Prout, Alan. 2005. *The Future of Childhood: Towards the Interdisciplinary Study of Children.* London; New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

People's Republic of China, Ministry of Education (PRC, MOE). 4 March 2010. *Ba xueqian jiaoyu naru fazhihua (Qin He and Committee Members: Placing pre-school education into the legislative framework)* (Date accessed: 10 March 2010) <http://www.wei.moe.edu.cn/article.asp?articleid=18982> People's Republic of China: Ministry of Education.

Qvortrup, Jens, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta & Helmut Wintersberger. 1994. *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics.* Aldershot: Brookfield USA: Avebury.

Qvortrup, Jens. 1994. "Childhood Matters: An Introduction." In Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta & Helmut Wintersberger (eds). *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics.* Aldershot: Brookfield USA: Avebury.

Ramey, Sharon Landesman & Craig T. Ramey. 2000. "Early Childhood Experiences and Developmental Competence." In Sheldon Danziger & Jane Waldfogel (eds). *Securing the Future: Investing in Children from Birth to College.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 122-152.

Saw, Seang-Mei. 1999. *Risk factors for the Progression of Myopia in Singapore Children.* Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms International.

Shanmugaratnam, Tharman. 20 January 2003. *Speech by Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry & Education Official Launch cum Seminar of MOE's Pre-School Curriculum Framework at Nanyang Polytechnic Auditorium at 9.00am on 20 January 2003.* (Date Accessed: 21 February 2009) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2003/sp20030120.htm> Singapore: Ministry of Education.

Shum-Cheung, Hoi Shan, Tan Annie, Chua Yee Sian, Russell Hawkins, Alex Lee Ka But, Maria Shiu & Daniel Fung. 2008. *Children's Social and Emotional Well-Being in Singapore.* Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Shum-Cheung, Hoi Shan, Russell Hawkins & Lim Kim Whee. 2006. *The Parenting Project: Disciplinary Practices, Child Care Arrangements and Parenting Practices in Singapore.* Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Sim, Lynn. 2008. *Re-Conceptualization of Childhood and Parenthood through the Lenses of the Enrichment Phenomenon in Singapore.* Academic exercise—Dept. of Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

Singapore Children's Society (SCS). 2006. *Singapore Children's Society—Services, Preventive.* (Date Accessed: 21 February 2009) <http://www.childrensociety.org.sg/services/preventive.htm> Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine. 2002. *Achieving Gold Standards in Child Health and Surgical Rejuvenation: 36th Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine, 1-4 August 2002, Raffles City Convention Centre Singapore: Abstract Handbook/ Organised by Academy of Medicine, Singapore.* Singapore: The Academy.

Stimpfl, Joseph. 2006. "Growing up Malay in Singapore." In Lian Kwee Fee (Ed). *Race, ethnicity, and the State in Malaysia and Singapore.* London; Boston: Brill, pp. 61-94.

Tan, Ching Ting. 2007. "Policy Developments in Pre-School Education in Singapore: A Focus on the Key Reforms of Kindergarten Education. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 1 (1): 35-43.

Tarmugi, Abdullah. 3 November 2000. *Speech by Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, Minister for Community Development and Sports at the Opening Ceremony of Child Care Seminar 2000 Friday, 3 Nov 2000 at 9:00 am at Orchard Hotel*. (Date accessed: 2 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

Teo, Seok Huang Eliane. 1991. *Changing Perceptions of Childhood Among the S.ingaporean Chinese*. Academic exercise—Dept. of Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

Tong, Chee Kiong, John Elliot & Patricia Tan. 1996. *Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Children's Society.

The Straits Times. 15 January 2009. "NTUC rebrands and expands its childcare services." In *The Straits Times*. Singapore: The Straits Times Press Limited

_____. 22 November 2007. *Grassroots Outreach Efforts Help Put 56 Kids in Preschool*. In *The Straits Times*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings Limited.

_____. 1 March 2000. "Changing the: Interview with Dr Aline Wong." In *The Straits Times,* Home 50-51.

_____. 29 February 2000. "Some Kids are "Over-Qualified' for Primary 1." In *The Straits Times*, Prime News 3. Singapore: The Straits Times Press Limited

_____. 14 November 1999. "Panel to Look into Pre-School Education." *The Straits Times*, Home: 27. Singapore: The Straits Times Press Limited

_____. 18 September 1999. "Pre-schools: More Level Playing Field?" In *The Straits Times*, Insight: 66. Singapore: The Straits Times Press Limited.

_____. 21 March 1998. "Study Early Education, MP urges." In *The Straits Times*, Budget Debate: 40. Singapore: The Straits Times Press Limited.

Thomas, Nigel. 2005. "Interpreting Children's Needs: Contested Assumptions in the Provision of Welfare." In Jim Goddard, Sally McNamee, Adrian L. James & Allison James (eds). *The Politics of Childhood: International Perspectives, Contemporary Developments*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13-31.

UNICEF. 26 February 2008. "Guiding Principles: General Requirements for All Rights." In *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*. (Date accessed: 2 February 2009) <http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Guiding_Principles.pdf> UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund.

Vincent, Carol and Ball, Stephen J. 2006. *Childcare, Choice and Class Practices: Middle-Class Parents and Their Children*. New York: Routledge.

Wee, Vivienne. 1995. "Children, Population Policy, and the State in Singapore." In Sharon Stephens (Ed). *Children and the Politics of Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, pp. 184-217.

Wong, Aline. 24 August 1999. *Speech by Dr Aline Wong, Senior Minister of State for Education, and Chairman, Board of Trustees, NTUC Childcare Co-Operative Ltd, for the RTRC Asia Graduation Ceremony 1999 on Tuesday, 24 August 1999, 2.00 pm at PSB Building*. (Date accessed: 2 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

Wong, Kan Seng (for the Prime Minister). 21 July 2008. *Oral Answers to Questions—New Incentives for Married Couples to have More Children*. (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/parlweb/hansard_search_latest.jsp> Singapore: Parliament of Singapore.

Wyness, Michael G. 2006. *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yeong, Hui Min Stephanie. 2004. Home language and spelling development in Chinese bilingual children. Academic exercise--Dept. of Social Work & Psychology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

Yu-Foo, Yee Shoon. 2004. *Speech by Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports, at the Child Care Seminar 2004 "Bridging Hearts: Strengthening and Empowering Families", 3 September 2004, 9.00 am at Raffles City Convention Centre, Stamford Ballroom, Level 4*. (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

Zulkifli, Masagos. 4 March 2008. *FY 2008 Committee of Supply Debate: 7th Reply by Senior Parliamentary Secretary Mr Masagos Zulkifli BMM on Pre-School Education*. (Date accessed: 22 February 2009) <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2008/03/04/fy-2008-committee-of-supply-de-5.php> Singapore: Ministry of Education.

_____. 15 February 2008. *Oral Answers to Questions—Early Childhood Education*. (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/parlweb/hansard_search_latest.jsp> Singapore: Parliament of Singapore.

_____. 15 February 2007. *Oral Answers to Questions—Pre-School Education*. (Date accessed: 9 February 2009) <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/parlweb/hansard_search_latest.jsp> Singapore: Parliament of Singapore.

Respondent	Designation	Name	Type	Background	Location[1]
Mrs Tay	Principal, Teacher (when needed)	A	Kindergarten	Catholic	North-East
Ms Carol	Teacher, Department Head				
Mdm Loh	Principal, Teacher (when needed)	B	Kindergarten	State-funded	West
Ms Sha	Administrator, Enrichment Class Teacher	C	Kindergarten	Muslim	East
Mrs Woo	Principal, Teacher (when needed)	D	Kindergarten	Christian	Central
Ms Iris	Owner, Teacher	E	Enrichment Centre	Franchise	North
Ms Neil	Assistant Manager, Administrator	F	Enrichment Centre	Franchise	East
Ms Tay	Staff, Teacher	G	Enrichment Centre	Franchise	Central
Mrs Ros	Supervisor/Principal, Teacher	H	Childcare Centre	Independent	Central
Ms Celine	Teacher	I	Childcare Centre	Franchise	Central
Ms Koo	Principal, Teacher	J	Childcare Centre	Franchise	East
Ms Joey	Operator, Teacher	K	Childcare Centre	Independent	North
Ms Annie	Supervisor, Teacher	L	Childcare Centre	Group	North-East
Ms Joy	Social Worker	M	Childcare Centre	Social Service	West
Mrs Gill	Teacher	N	Childcare Centre	Franchise	Central
Mrs Kit	Principal, Teacher	O	Childcare Centre	Franchise	East

[1] The locations of the pre-schools are categorized according to the general location of the nearest Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station.

Respondent	Employment	Children's Age, Gender[1]	Caregiver[2]	Child's School, Type	Enrichment Classes Attending	
					Academic	**Supplementary**
Mr Lee	Full Time	7, Girl **5, Boy**	Nanny	Kindergarten, State-Funded	Chinese, Phonics, Mathematics	Nil
Mr Gopal	Trainee Teacher	**5, Boy**	Parents	Kindergarten, State-Funded	Nil	Nil
Mr Raj	Educator	**4, Boy**	Wife	Kindergarten, Hindu	Phonics (Reading)	Nil
Mr Goh	Trainee Teacher	3, Boy **5, Boy**	Mother in-law	Kindergarten, Church	Chinese	Piano
Mrs Pereira	Full Time, Banking	7, Girl **5, Boy**	Domestic Helper	Kindergarten, Church	Chinese	Nil
Mrs Foo	Family Business	3, Boy **5, Boy**	Mother in-law	Kindergarten, Church	Abacus, Chinese Speech & Drama	Nil
Mr Kang	Flexible, Real Estate	**3, Boy** 1, Boy	Self	Kindergarten, Church	Nil	Nil
Mrs Fern	Educator	9, Boy **6, Boy** 3, Girl	Father	Kindergarten, Church	Chinese, IT	Squash, Piano

[1] The age and gender of the child I focused on in the interview is in bold.
[2] This is in relation to the respondent. Also, it refers to the caregiver of the children during the daytime when the parents are at work. Generally, the parents take care of the children on their own at home.

Name	Occupation	Children (Age, Gender)	Caregiver	Childcare	Phonics (Reading)	Enrichment
Mrs Koh	Homemaker	**6, Girl** 2, Girl 2, Boy	Self, Domestic Helper	Kindergarten, Private	Phonics (Reading)	Violin, Piano, Ballet
Mrs Hasi	Home Maker	12, Boy 9, Boy **6, Girl** **5, Girl** 1, Girl	Self	Full Day Childcare, Social Service	Nil	Nil
Mrs Nora	Home Maker	17, Girl 13, Boy 7, Girl **6, Girl** 2, Boy	Self	Full Day Childcare, Social Service	Nil	Nil
Mrs Lim	Full Time, Banking	9, Boy **5, Boy**	Mother	Full day Childcare, Private	Chinese, Phonics	Swimming
Mrs Su	Flexible, Beautician	**5, Boy** 3, Boy 2, Boy	Self, Sister	Full day Childcare, Muslim	Nil	Nil
Mrs Ong	Full Time, Banking	**3, Boy**	Mother in-law	Full day Childcare, State-Funded	Nil	Swimming
* Mrs Oh	Flexible-Administrative, Sales	**6, Girl** 4, Boy	Domestic Helper	Half day Childcare, Group	Speech & Drama, English Reading	Art

* Mrs Chen	Engineer	8, Girl **6, Boy** 1, Girl	Mother	Full day Childcare, Group	Nil	Nil
* Mrs Tan	Cosmetic Sales	9, Boy **6, Girl**	Husband	Full day Childcare, Group	Speech and Drama	Art
* Mrs Lam	Homemaker	9, Boy **6, Girl**	Self	Kindergarten, Private	Phonics (Reading)	Art, Ballet, Cello

* Respondents from Questionnaires