Boost pre-school quality by focusing on teacher training

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A round the world, there is widespread recognition that investing in high quality early childhood education (ECE) yields high returns for individuals and societies. In the long run, ECE can help create a well-trained and competitive labour force.

In Singapore, the commitment to improving ECE runs deep. In his National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that we need to improve the quality of our pre-school education. We know how important the early years are... It will provide many long-term benefits later on in life.

There are numerous markers of quality pre-school education including small classrooms, challenging curricula and an encouraging environment for problem-solving. A particularly important one is the training of the teachers. Evidence and research around the globe show that learning and child development in pre-school depend on teachers’ preparation.

Better trained teachers are able to deliver individualised responses to children’s developmental needs and to develop the kinds of curricula and activities that will lead to improved language, mathematical and social skills.

Cross-national research has found that higher levels of language ability at age 7 depend heavily on the level of education of the pre-school teachers that children had at ages 4 and 5.

To quote one report by the National Institute for Early Education Research in the United States: “The most effective pre-school teachers have at least a four-year college (bachelor’s) degree and specialised training in early childhood.”

Singapore has focused on raising the requirements for the instructional staff and leadership of pre-school institutions. Come January, the minimum standard for all newly certified kindergarten and pre-school teachers will be a relevant diploma.

But if the countries with highest ranking early childhood education systems are a guide, over time both the training required of teachers and, not coincidentally, the prestige attached to the profession will rise further. For example, in Finland a bachelor’s degree is a requirement for pre-school teachers. Many knowledgeable observers of education policy in Singapore assume that at some point in the future, a bachelor’s degree may be a requirement for new Singaporean pre-school teachers as well. At least higher percentages of future degree holders will be expected among staff.

Even before Singapore gets to the point of imposing official requirements, more could be done to ensure pre-school teachers have the degrees they need. Right now, the path to a bachelor’s degree in ECE for most students requires getting an ECE diploma first.

Many diploma students are bonded and required to work immediately after the award of their diploma. And once a student enters the workforce, the real world intervenes. It is difficult to go back to school once you are used to earning a pay cheque. And after you start a family, it is even harder.

While some employers are willing to extend the bond so that students can continue their degree studies, others are not. Although it is in the short-term interest of employers to have bonded diploma students come to work, the long-term interests of childcare centres would be better served by allowing students who have a passion to deepen their skills to postpone employment for two years while they earn a further degree.

Employers would get more highly trained teachers who would then be a source of mentoring, leadership and best practices for others. Since many ECE degree programmes require students to do a research project with practical applications, centres that think creatively could benefit from the investigations of their bonded students and the experts who supervise them.

Another way to increase the number of degree holders among pre-school teachers rests with parents of the pre-school children. Singaporeans are recognising that the professionalisation and advanced training of childcare workers are important for their children’s education. For too long though, many have not known what qualities to look for when it comes to selecting a pre-school.

Last year, the Education Ministry instituted the Spark programme, or Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework, a quality assurance mechanism that supports the efforts of centres to improve teaching and management.

Thus far, almost 150 of the over 900 pre-school centres in the country have achieved a Spark certification. Seeing the brightly coloured Spark logo is one data point parents have to consider when selecting a centre.

Parents should also be asking questions of potential childcare centres. Becoming an educated and demanding consumer is one way to help improve quality. If parents press the question “How many degree holders do you have on staff?” and then vote with their feet (and wallets), centres will be forced to respond to market forces.

It will take time and resources to increase the qualifications and percentage of degree holders in the childcare labour market, and it cannot be expected to happen overnight. While the Government, via the MOE and Ministry of Social and Family Development, is committed to improving the quality of learning in Singapore’s pre-schools, citizens and parents need to do their part to move the sector forward as well.

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