

Inter-Ministerial Collaboration in Early Childhood Training in Singapore

Introduction

In Singapore, childcare centres and preschools come under the auspices of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) and the Ministry of Education (MOE), respectively. The two ministries developed separate and independent policies and administrative systems over the years. In 1999, they initiated inter-ministerial collaboration, including teacher training.

This brief discusses Singapore's development of childcare services and preschool education, the factors that led to the inter-ministerial collaboration, the role of the Preschool Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC), the challenges faced and the outcomes of the collaboration.

Childcare and preschools in Singapore

Childcare centres cater to children from 2 months to 6 years and operate from 7.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. The childcare programme also includes preschool classes for 4- to 6-year-olds. Such classes do not come under the MOE's jurisdiction; they remain within the purview of the MCDS. Preschools under the MOE are for children ages 4 to 6, with daily programmes ranging from two to four hours. Childcare fees are state-subsidised, and poor children are eligible for further financial assistance from NGOs. Preschool fees are much lower and are not state-subsidised, although financial assistance is available for poor children.

The development of childcare centres

Childcare centres have been influenced by Singapore's welfare, economic and population policies. In 1954, the government established two crèches for poor children. During the rapid industrialisation of the early 1970s, additional centres were set up to encourage more women to work in order to supplement family income. In 1977, the government divested its 11 centres to the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and encouraged NGOs and the private sector to offer such services instead.

In 1984, a move to encourage female participation at all levels in the labour force led to new policies and legislation aimed at increasing childcare centres and addressing issues of accessibility, quality and affordability. The Child Care Centres Act and Child Care Centre Regulations of 1988 were established to control, license and regulate childcare centres. The number of centres increased exponentially from 39 centres (2,310 places) in 1984 to 338 centres (25,274 places) in 1994 and to 653 centres (54,238 places) in 2004 (as of January). Utilisation rates averaged 80, 86 and 74 percent respectively.

To raise the quality of childcare personnel, the MCDS introduced a three-tiered government-subsidised training scheme.

The development of preschools

In Singapore, preschools are run mainly by for-profit agencies, NGOs and the People's Action Party Community Foundation (PCF). The PCF caters to the general population, charges low fees and accounts for more than 60 percent of Singapore's preschools.

An attempt to incorporate one year of preschool into the school system was abandoned because of the cost of providing it to all children. The MOE then left preschool education to the private sector altogether, confining its role to registering preschools. Today, more than 99 percent of children in Primary One (Grade 1) have had at least one year, if not two or three, of preschool education from institutions, either under the MOE or the MCDS.

In-service training for preschool teachers was ad hoc and brief when it was first introduced in the early 1970s. The initial 60-hour training programme was later extended to a 90-hour and eventually to a 120-hour programme under the Institute of Education. In general, training of preschool teachers trailed behind that of childcare teachers.

Factors leading to inter-ministry collaboration

In the late 1990s, a review of preschool education led to the MOE's decision to improve the quality of preschool education. As the MCDS was also responsible for preschool education, a high-level inter-ministerial committee was tasked with aligning and improving the quality of preschool education and the training of childcare and preschool teachers.

The Steering Committee on Preschool Education (SCPE) was led by the MOE's Senior Minister of State with a mission to forge a framework for the development of preschool education, define desired outcomes, establish systems and structures for preschool teacher training, design a developmentally appropriate curriculum and regulate the preschool education system.

The Preschool Qualification Accreditation Committee (PQAC)

The PQAC, an offshoot of the SCPE, aims to develop and implement an integrated preschool education framework for teacher training and accreditation of preschool and childcare personnel. The PQAC structure reflects an equal partnership between the two ministries. It has two alternating chairpersons who are directors from the two ministries. Other members include senior ministry staff, operators and advisers representing the childcare and preschool sectors. The PQAC is supported by a Joint Ministerial Secretariat.

The PQAC reviewed all training courses required by the MOE and the MCDS and developed three levels of

mandatory training for both sectors leading to a Certificate in Preschool Teaching (470 hours), a Diploma in Preschool Education -- Teaching (700 hours) and a Diploma in Preschool Education -- Leadership (500 hours).

The PQAC meets regularly to consider applications from training agencies seeking accreditation for their courses and approval for their trainers to teach specific modules of the course. To date, 23 such training agencies exist, compared with four in 1994 and eight in 2000. These are mainly for-profit agencies. The government subsidises 90 percent of the course fees, while employers pay the remaining 10 percent.

Outcomes of the training collaboration

- By drawing on the expertise and experience of both the child welfare and early childhood education sectors, the PQAC developed a more comprehensive perspective on preschool children for both sectors.
- In the past, only those trained by the MOE-approved training agencies could work in both childcare centres and preschools. Those trained by the MCDS-approved agencies could work only in childcare centres. Now, all teachers trained in PQAC-approved courses can be employed in either sector, giving teachers greater mobility between sectors and improving their career opportunities.
- The sharp rise in training agencies produced a corresponding jump in the number of trained personnel for childcare centres and preschools within a relatively short period. This was a remarkable improvement, since both sectors had long faced a shortage of trained teachers.
- Accreditation of courses and trainers ensures that all training meets PQAC standards, contributing to the consistency and quality of the training. In addition, teachers enjoy higher salaries and status with diploma training.
- The two ministries saved costs by developing a joint database to monitor, plan and project training needs in the respective sectors.
- While the two ministries collaborate closely in the area of training, each ministry continues to function independently in other areas, such as registration or licensing, monitoring, programme development and policy-making

Challenges

The successful inter-ministerial collaboration faced challenges during the early years, notably because the two ministries had different perspectives on young children. The MCDS covered a wider age range and breadth of concerns, including safety, health and nutrition as well as children's physical, social-emotional and cognitive development, while the MOE was more focused on preschool pedagogy. The integration of teacher-training courses into three common levels was a remarkable undertaking. Other challenges related to setting standards for training agencies at a time when qualified local trainers were scarce and training targets were high and urgent. Later, when training agencies mushroomed, the PQAC had

to ensure that they maintained standards and satisfied requirements.

Factors that contributed to the smooth working of the PQAC included:

- Joint collaboration at the National Steering Committee level (SCPE);
- The PQAC structure guaranteeing equal partnership;
- The participation of third parties with experience and expertise in the two sectors;
- A clear demarcation of duties of the collaborating ministries;
- The shared goal of improving the quality of teachers; and
- The people factor – the ability of the parties concerned to work together.

Conclusion

Other countries that have separate ministries for preschool education and childcare services may also benefit from inter-ministerial collaboration. One such form of collaboration is the Singapore model, in which the MOE plays a crucial role at the inter-ministerial Steering Committee for Preschool Education, while leadership is equally shared in the more practical PQAC. Other permutations of collaboration are also possible. The first step is to identify key common areas for collaboration that are presently undertaken separately. This will help save time and money, maximise the utility of resources and hasten desired outcomes.

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