



Partnership with Non-Public Actors: Singapore's Early Childhood Policy

In Singapore, Preschools and Child Care Centres - the two main early childhood services - are run by individuals, communities, NGOs or enterprises. The government monitors and finances the non-public services, but does not involve itself in delivery, that is, the management and operation of services. There are no public early childhood services in the country. To learn about how the government has arrived at such a policy and how it ensures equity and quality in non-public establishments, an interview was arranged with Mr. Lee Kim Hua, Director, Family Services Division, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), in Singapore. The interview was conducted by Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO, Paris, who prepared the following excerpts.

But first, a profile of early childhood care and education in Singapore: The area of early childhood concerns children aged 0–6 years.¹ Children enter primary school at 7. The Child Care Centre and Preschool are the two main forms of service.² Child Care Centres, which come under the responsibility of the MCYS, cater for children from 2 months to 6 years. They also run preschool classes for 4 to 6-year-olds. Preschools, on the other hand, cater for 4 to 6-year-olds only and are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The MCYS and the MOE are the two main ministries involved, and they have recently agreed to develop a common training framework for preschool education, with services offered by both ministries.³ About 90% of children ages 4-6 years are enrolled in preschool education. Twenty three percent of this age cohort attend MCYS's Child Care Centres. Ninety nine percent of children in grade 1 have at least one year of preschool education.

Choi: Have Child Care Centres⁴ always been non-public establishments in Singapore?

Lee: No. The government established public Child Care Centres⁵ for poor working mothers in 1949 and ran them until 1979 when it handed responsibility for the operation over to the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC),⁶ a non-public

organisation for union workers. Since then, Child Care Centres have maintained the status of non-public establishments.

C: Why did the government give up ownership?

L: The running of Child Care Centres as public establishments was considered costly. Making a non-public actor responsible for the management and operation of services, with the government providing financial support, was considered a better option.

C: How did the NTUC manage the financial responsibility that was deemed burdensome for the government?

L: A cost-recovery system was introduced, with part of the cost being absorbed by the parents.

C: Couldn't the government introduce the same system to its public services?

L: It could have, but in a reflection of the Singapore administration's penchant for a small government, it opted out of responsibility for provision, which, if kept within the government, could have necessitated a large government workforce in Child Care Centres.

C: So the decision was prompted in part by the financial burden, but more so by the policy favouring a small government.

L: Yes, and underlying the small government policy is an emphasis on efficiency. We believe that if a service can be better delivered by the non-public sector, it should be left to the non-public sector.

C: What do you think is the biggest advantage of having services delivered by non-public actors?

L: Expansion of services is certainly easier. Services can be set up in a variety of settings. Recruitment and separation of personnel are also simpler.

C: Ensuring quality, however, could become an issue.

L: Indeed. To that effect, an important quality control mechanism that we have is the licensing system, which issues licences of different tenures, depending on assessment results. There are also regulations for the set-up and operation of services.

C: Was this system in place from the beginning when the NTUC took over the provision responsibility?

L: No. The NTUC still uses some of the quality standards inherited from the government. But over time, as other non-governmental organisations began to open Child Care Centres, it became necessary to develop a proper licensing system. The concerned legislation was passed in 1988, about 10 years later.

C: So the monitoring system was developed over time?

L: Yes, it evolved gradually as the non-public actors involved in the delivery of Child Care Centres multiplied.

C: Besides the licensing system, what quality measures do you have for Child Care Centres?

L: The MCYS makes regular supervision visits to the Child Care Centres, which follow various guidelines to evaluate and monitor their own work on a daily basis. There are visits for licensing, supervision, health check and investigation of the observations and complaints received at the Centres. Most importantly, we developed and implemented clear qualification and training requirements for the staff at the centres.

major task of providing child care services in housing estates and big companies.

¹ In this note, 6-year-olds refer to children who passed their 6th birthday. 0-6-year-olds are inclusive of 6-year-olds.

² There are also stand alone Playgroups offered by businesses, but Child Care Centres and Preschools are the major services, with Child Care Centres' enrolment covering about 21% of total cohort.

³ See: Inter-ministerial Collaboration in Early Childhood Training in Singapore, # 24, UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood, 2004.

⁴ The discussion of this note focused on the Child Care Centres because it is one of the services for which the MCYS is responsible, but the policy of delivering early childhood services through non-public actors applies also to Preschools falling under the Ministry of Education.

⁵ Previously they were called crèches. They were later known as Day Care Centres or Child Care Centres in 1980 when the Day Care Section of the then Ministry of Social Affairs was set up to improve day care services for children, in a bid to encourage more married women to join or remain in the workforce.

⁶ The NTUC is a national federation of trade unions of workers in the industrial, service and public sectors. As of April 2005, it had 63 trade unions and 6 associations affiliated to it. In 1969, in modernising the labour movement, the NTUC opted for cooperation instead of confrontation in dealings with management. It also chose to set up cooperatives so as to better meet the social needs of union members. Among the cooperatives, the NTUC Child Care Cooperative took up the

C: In other countries, when the provision responsibility is delegated to the non-public sector, the government may assume responsibility for monitoring but not necessarily for financing. In fact, when government resources are scarce, partnerships with the non-public sector are often promoted as a means of reducing or withdrawing governmental financial responsibility. What has been the case in Singapore?

L: Even after Child Care Centres became non-public establishments, we continued our subsidies for the families using Child Care Centres.⁷ At the moment, government subsidies cover about 30% of the fees. This entitlement is extended to all families, while for poor families there is an additional financial assistance programme.⁸

C: What is the rationale behind the government's financial support for non-public Child Care Centres?

L: In the beginning, the purpose was to make the services affordable to all families.⁹ Affordability was our strategy for expanding early childhood services. But as the economy has developed, the focus has shifted to the promotion of female participation in the labour market.

C: Do you provide financial help for the providers of the centres as well?

L: Yes. We make government premises (e.g., disused government buildings and offices) available for use as Child Care Centres, and government funding is provided for the conversion of such premises. There are also capital grants for set-up and for furnishings and equipment.

C: Is there a ceiling on the fees that can be charged by Child Care Centres?

L: There is no fixed fee ceiling as such, but the government has devised "soft" measures to keep the fees at an affordable level. For example, in order to receive the set-up grants from the government, the Centres must choose an affordable fee level. Also, when they increase their fees, they must consult the government, which requires the providers to justify the rise. If they cannot provide adequate reasons, they have to moderate the increase. We find these "soft" measures to be effective as well as helpful in promoting partnerships.

C: Are there any new policy directions being pursued to further progress?

L: We are working towards outsourcing monitoring tasks to the non-public sector so that the government can concentrate its efforts on formulating policies.

C: Is this another effort to further reduce the government's responsibility for Child Care Centres?

L: Not exactly. First, we will outsource the actual visits to the centres, while the government will maintain the authority to issue licences. Second, the plan reflects the government's continuing emphasis on efficiency in public administration. We believe that such fieldwork can be delivered more cost effectively by the non-public sector. What we are after is not so much outsourcing per se, but "best sourcing" -- the best way to deliver services more efficiently and effectively.

C: So, the question is not who, but whether the concerned actor, be it a public or a non-public one, can deliver efficiently and effectively.

L: That's right. That is the fundamental principle on which we have been operating.

C: Related to the matter of efficiency and effectiveness, I wonder if there has been any discussion in the country about the fact that responsibility for 4 to 6-year-olds is currently shared by the MCYS and the MOE.

L: There has not been serious debate about the issue. Our concern has been rather how to ensure that children, wherever they are, receive quality-controlled services. That's why we developed a common scheme of training and qualification requirements for preschool teachers working in Child Care Centres and Preschools. For now, it works. But if there is a need for a different arrangement, that will certainly be addressed, again from the point of view of efficiency and effectiveness.

C: What advice do you have for other countries considering delegating early childhood provision to non-public actors?

L: In order for the partnership to work best, there has to be a critical mass of non-public actors who can take up the responsibility on behalf of the government. If there are such partners, in our experience, it is better for the government to reduce its intervention in the delivery. But when that is not the case, initial intervention by the government is necessary, during which it sets examples for non-public actors to follow.

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⁷ Previously, when Child Care Centres were public services, about 40% of the fees were covered by government subsidies.

⁸ The Child Care Subsidy, available for all children through Child Care Centres, totals 150 Singapore dollars (or 92 US dollars) a month for full-day and S\$75 for half-day programmes. The Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme, available only for poor families, pays out S\$110-S\$265 per month.

⁹ Unlike in most other countries where government subsidized care services tend to be attended by poor children, in Singapore the Child Care Centres are attended by both poor and rich children and they are located in the neighbourhoods of both groups.