

# Critical reflections of early childhood care and education in Singapore to build an inclusive society

Policy Futures in Education

0(0) 1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1478210320971103

[journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe)



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## Abstract

The early childhood years are pivotal as they mark the beginning of a young child's life journey into education. This paper offers critical reflections of the early childhood care and education landscape in Singapore as it has evolved over the last decade. The discussion will draw on findings of the study *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (2019) to explicate the issues, debates and challenges facing the early childhood care and education sector. It argues that recent developments in the sector with stepped increases in government funding and strategic policy development, augmented by the establishment of national agencies committed to improving the quality of care and education, have achieved significant milestones in the country. However, a more critical perspective of the role of early childhood in policy and practice to meet the diverse needs of young children and families is necessary for envisioning education as a pathway to inclusion and social equality, and for building a truly inclusive society.

## Keywords

Early childhood, Singapore, policy, special needs, inclusion, Singapore policy, special educational needs

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## Introduction: an evolving policy landscape

The early childhood care and education (ECCE) landscape in Singapore has experienced a process of rapid change over the last two decades. The importance of high quality ECCE has risen up the public policy agenda and is increasingly recognised in politics as important for achieving national goals. In his 2017 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about the significance of preschool education in the Singapore society: ‘We want every child to go to a good preschool so that all children, regardless of family background, have the best possible start in life. We must do this because every child counts and if we get this right, we will foster social mobility and sustain a fair and just society. So it is a practical thing that we are doing but it is a strategic goal which we are aiming for’ (National Day Rally, 2017). For a country with basically no natural resources, maximising the potential of every individual is considered to be a critical determinant to its economic growth, social mobility and success as a country. The policy prioritisation of ECCE is accompanied by the government’s pledge to significantly increase expenditure in the sector from a SGD360m spend in 2012 (Singapore Budget, 2012) to approximately SGD1b on the preschool sector in 2018, and a further projected annual expenditure of SGD1.7b by 2022 (National Day Rally, 2017). An overview of key policy initiatives is provided in Appendix 1. Notably, the last decade has witnessed key milestones with the establishment of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) in 2012 as the regulatory and developmental authority for the early childhood sector in Singapore, the launch of the Partner Operator (POP) scheme in 2016 to support child care operators to keep fees affordable, and the introduction of the Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC) bill passed in Parliament in 2017 to ensure more consistent standards across the preschool sector.

Yet, while recognising the increasing governmental involvement and investment in ECCE, the sector continues to face a number of challenges. The sector remains diverse in a largely privatised sector with a wide range of services and uneven quality, along with issues of inequality for children by social class, special educational needs and disability (SEND) (Sum et al., 2018). There are publicised reports of a growing demand for full-day care and education programmes for younger children including infants, and parents expecting better-quality services (Chia, 2017; Yang, 2017). There are also reported challenges in the workforce with attraction and attrition, with a high turnover rate of teachers and the sector’s ability to attract and retain qualified early childhood teachers (Chia, 2017). The notion of ‘school readiness’ and changing society’s mindset about the role of preschools as more than just a preparation for primary schooling continue to be perennial issues (Tan, 2017). These challenging issues which emerged from the national study *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019) are critically analysed in the ensuing discussion to advance important ongoing debates in the sector.

## Vital Voices for Vital Years 2: context and background

ECCE in Singapore comprises two main types of licensed provision: the child care and kindergarten sector. Child care centres provide full-day and half-day care programmes to children below the age of seven years. Kindergartens usually offer half-day programmes for children from 3.5 or 4 to 6 years of age. These services are licensed and regulated by the Early Childhood Development Agency, an autonomous government agency jointly overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development

(MSF). When *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019) was published, early intervention (EI) services were offered separately from ‘regular’ ECCE services, and not overseen and regulated by the ECDA, although this is set to change in 2021 to better integrate children with learning needs into preschools. First, there has been a gradual transition of EI services from the Disability Office to the ECDA’s oversight since July 2019; second, efforts have been made to continue to strengthen and expand the various kinds of learning support (LS) and development support (DS) services (piloted since 2012) for children with mild to moderate developmental needs who attend regular preschools; and lastly, a workgroup will look further into creating inclusive preschools (MSF, 2020). Likewise, special education schools in Singapore have been offered as separate services by non-profit organisations, separate from the government-run mainstream primary and secondary schools ever since the nation’s independence. The first known inclusive preschool was set up by a non-profit organization in 2017.

In 2012, the first independent review of the Singapore preschool sector was published. *Vital Voices for Vital Years* (Ang, 2012) was a qualitative study based on interviews with 27 leading professionals in the sector to explore their perceptions of issues facing the sector and to galvanise wider public and governmental support for the importance of ECCE. A key finding was the importance of recognising the early childhood phase as not simply a preparation for primary schooling, but an essential public good for children and society as a whole, and the need for more cohesive governance of the sector (Ang, 2012).

Seven years on, a subsequent study, *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019), assessed the existing national policies and strategies to establish a roadmap for the future of the sector. In light of an evolving policy landscape and shifting societal culture, Lipponen et al. (2019) examined a broader notion of ECCE to provide a more holistic, multi-dimensional analysis of the sector. The study examined the ways in which early childhood policies and strategies have effected change and identified current and foreseeable challenges that were to inform the tone and future directions for the sector. A central focus was issues around EI and inclusion, particularly in relation to children from disadvantaged backgrounds including those with SEND and those from low-income households.

Through in-depth interviews with leading early childhood professionals and stakeholders from a range of disciplines, the study aimed to: (a) examine the developments, trends and challenges facing the preschool sector; (b) review the overall ecology of networks and stakeholders that support children’s learning and well-being; (c) examine key issues and challenges raised by leading professionals that are pertinent to helping all children achieve; and (d) explore strategies on how to better connect disparate early childhood services and early interventions such as educational, health and social services in an overarching framework that could benefit all children in an inclusive manner.

## Methodology

The study was framed by a qualitative design based on individual interviews with 35 professional leaders in the sector to elicit their voices on the ways in which the preschool ecosystem supports children’s learning and well-being, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds by disability, social status and economic circumstances. All participants worked in a range of disciplines spanning the health, social services and education sectors. Interviews took place in April, July and September in 2018, and a standardised set of questions was applied across all interviews to ensure consistency (Appendix 2).

The recordings were transcribed independently and validated. Interview transcripts were then coded, categorised and analysed according to emergent themes. The qualitative research software NVivo was used to conduct the analysis.

## Findings

The findings revealed widespread recognition of the important role of ECCE in Singapore society and the need for improving inclusion in the sector. Participants acknowledged the positive developments and significant increases in government funding over the years. As one participant summed up: 'Change has happened. It is very exciting... but the journey continues.' At the same time, the findings revealed continuing challenges facing the sector in meeting the diverse needs of children and brought to the fore the impact on children who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Three major themes emerged: (a) harmonisation between mainstream and special education; (b) policy and practice alignment; and (c) workforce challenges. An overarching finding is the need for greater awareness to improve inclusive ECCE provision and pedagogical practices to enable equity and equal opportunities for children with differing needs, and the need for a national shift in prevailing perceptions of children with SEND to build a more inclusive society.

### *Harmonisation between mainstream and special education provision*

A key issue raised by participants is the need for greater harmonisation between mainstream and special education, and supporting children's transition from one educational setting to another for those who require access to additional support. At present, preschool-aged children with SEND typically access services provided by voluntary welfare organisations such as family community services, charitable organisations, public hospitals and private organisations. One of the leading organisations is Singapore Enable (SG Enable), a government agency led by the MSF that offers services to support children and families with disabilities. Their services include the Early Intervention Programme for Infants & Children (EIPIC), DS and LS programmes, and Therapy for Young Children.

For preschool children aged five and six with mild developmental delays or learning needs, early interventions such as the DS and LS programmes facilitate children's transition to primary schooling. There are also preschools such as the Integrated Child Care Programme (ICCP) that integrate children with SEND within mainstream education; ICCP is an inclusive child care programme for children with mild special needs. Providing these children with a natural learning environment alongside mainstream peers will help prepare them for future entry into mainstream primary education. However, while recognising the available provisions for supporting children with special educational needs, participants in the study highlighted the need for closer collaboration between mainstream and EI providers. Some participants were sceptical about attempts to integrate EI into mainstream ECCE provision and how this can be successfully achieved: 'The government attempts to include early intervention into early childhood, yet there are many difficulties in translating this idea into practice.'

Attempts to bridge the schism between mainstream and special educational provision is challenging, especially given the variability of the quality of EI services provided by different Social Service Agencies (SSAs) which could be affiliated with charities and predominantly reside outside the mainstream preschool sector. Participants reported that child health and

EI service delivery is still largely hospital- or centre-based. For instance, the government-subsidised EIPIC is run by SSAs in stand-alone centres separate from ECCE settings. An estimated three-quarters of children aged five to six who are enrolled in an EIPIC centre are also enrolled in mainstream preschools. This requires parents or carers having to cope with the logistics and costs of shuttling children between the two venues on a daily basis to access EI support as well as the ECCE. According to interviewees, there needs to be more collaboration between EIPIC centres and mainstream preschools to develop a more integrated ecosystem of support and care.

The harmonisation of mainstream and special needs provisions therefore requires close collaboration between all stakeholders in the sector. Participants highlighted a need to build more effective partnerships and improve collaboration between professionals working on EI and those in preschools to ease the fragmentation across the systems. Some interviewees expressed concerns that there exists a power hierarchy between teachers and specialist early interventionists or therapists. An interview excerpt revealed that

to shift to a point where teachers are in a position to (confidently support children with additional needs) is all about power, status, whether we like it or not. So, a lot of the time, there's a pecking order... the teachers are teachers only and then there are the therapists. Shifting or sharing of (responsibility,) removing the barriers of status... At the end of the day, we are all collaborating, to [provide] hope for the family of the child.

Another interviewee encouraged a partnership of interaction and mutual support between teachers and medical or therapy professionals, where, in particular situations, teachers should be given the autonomy to lead in decision-making and to initiate suggestions as they have a better understanding of the child, and the responsibility for care and education should be shared between teachers alongside therapists, and not rely solely on the medical professional. Instead, knowledge exchange and cross-learning should be encouraged by creating opportunities and common platforms to bring together these different professionals across the traditionally separate 'mainstream' and 'special education' boundaries (Walker and Musti-Rao, 2016), and, in particular, to develop ways in which they can work better together as a team. Forging close partnerships is the first step towards creating greater harmonisation between mainstream and SEND. An indication of the sector moving in this direction is the integration of all EI services with preschool services under ECDA by the end of 2020.

### *Policy and practice alignment*

The introduction of the Singapore Compulsory Education Act in 2000 stipulates that all children of compulsory school age at six years and above are required to attend primary schools and special education schools offering primary-level education. The Compulsory Education Act is extended from 2019, stipulating that children with moderate to severe special needs should attend government-funded special education (SPED) schools. Figures from the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) indicate that approximately 80% of children with mild developmental needs attending mainstream schools are included under the Compulsory Education Act (MOE, 2000) while the remaining 20% with higher needs go to SPED schools. The Compulsory Education Act (2000) and the 2019 extension are a part of the government's forthcoming efforts to build a more equal and inclusive

society with learning opportunities for all children in Singapore. A series of programme and policy initiatives was introduced to strengthen ECCE and SEND provisions. In 2013, the first holistic child development and maternal health programme for vulnerable families was set up in the form of the Temasek KIDS (Kids Integrated Development Service) 0–3, supported by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals from Singapore KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital and a community service organisation. A SGD20m government programme, KidSTART, was piloted in 2016 to benefit children from low-income families. Also in 2016, an integrated preschool Kindle Garden was launched to serve children with mild to moderate needs to receive EI and therapy within a natural preschool setting. In January 2019, the MSF increased funding from \$45m to \$60m a year for two new EI programmes for developmental needs – EIPIC for under-tuos and Development Support-Plus. Fees for EI services are also made more affordable for most income groups.

However, despite clear policy intent in building a more inclusive education system, there remains a dissonance between policy and practice, with a need for greater alignment. In reality, for instance, the majority of children with special needs receive their education in schools separated from their mainstream peers (Poon et al., 2013; Walker, 2016). Participants report cases of preschools turning down children and families as they are not able to provide suitable services for children with special needs or disabilities. Children with SEND are compelled to access services provided by a patchwork of voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs), family community services, public hospitals and private for-profit clinical services. These modes of service delivery are usually based in the home, centres or hospitals (Yeo et al., 2011), and not found within typical ECCE settings, which are generally not equipped to provide intervention. Provision for special education is mainly driven largely by non-profit VWOs rather than mainstream schools. At the same time, there also appears to be an urgent need to improve the quality of pedagogical support within a natural preschool setting, where EI can be most effective for children with a variety of developmental needs. Participants report that there is much variability in the quality of EIPIC provision across the VWOs, with no consistent, nationally recommended curricula for early childhood intervention programmes.

It is therefore not surprising the findings showed that better policy cohesion, translation and implementation is required to effectively support ECCE and SEND. For instance, EIPIC exists separately from regular childcare/kindergartens, is seen as pull-out ‘therapy’ for children and not fully integrated into regular ECCE settings. As a participant suggests, ‘(s)pecialists should move from hospital centred to community centred to support people/children with special needs’. The current practice and delivery of EI are more hospital-centred rather than community-centred. Crucially, there is a need to find new and more effective ways of collaboration and ‘having a more integrated ecosystem to support all children’, as quoted by one participant. Another participant asserted that ‘specialists should move from hospital-centred to community-centred (ways) to support children with special needs’.

Singapore is a unique example of a country that is economically advanced and has the resources and the vision, but needs time to create a systemic design for VWOs to complement one another’s expertise and collaborate with ‘mainstream settings’ so as to more fully include individuals with special needs from early years through adulthood (Walker and Musti-Rao, 2016). This was acknowledged by participants in *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019). With an increasing number of vulnerable children, with approximately 2% of Singapore’s student population of approximately 460,000 diagnosed with

special educational needs (MSF, 2018), the need to create a better alignment between policy and practice becomes more urgent.

### *Workforce challenges*

As demands for a more inclusive education continue to grow, another area of concern encapsulated by the findings is the lack of expertise and resources in the workforce in both EI and regular ECCE settings. This was described by one participant as '(l)acking human resource and knowledge capital to realise relevant strategies such as establishing inclusive schools'. According to Walker (2016), Singapore needs to train early childhood educators to identify and support children who may have disabilities and their early identification. Despite heavy investment in ECCE, specialist training of qualified practitioners in SEND remains limited. Participants interviewed in the study felt strongly that pedagogy and practitioners in ECCE centres could embrace more inclusive practices, but there are perceptual barriers. As a participant states: 'If the teachers on the ground do not think that they can do inclusion, then they wouldn't. Or they think that inclusion is just too fuzzy or it's just too "beyond me".' A challenge raised by interviewees is that smaller-scale ECCE centres may have difficulties supporting children with special needs because of their lack of resources to recruit well-trained professionals compared to larger anchor operators with access to more government funding to employ additional specialist support.

With ECCE settings becoming increasingly diverse, practitioners in the sector need to broaden their skillsets to cater to children with a wider range of abilities and characteristics. A study by Nonis et al. (2016) revealed that Singapore should have teachers who understand that children with developmental needs have different requirements that could be academic, social or emotional. This has implications for assessing the suitability and competency of professionals as well as the quality of teacher training programmes. There is general agreement among the participants that teacher education and professional development are critical to supporting effective and inclusive ECCE.

## **Discussion**

The issue of inclusion in ECCE is particularly poignant given the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which foregrounds inclusion and equity as fundamental for quality education (Goal 4) (United Nations, 2015). Like countries around the world, the impetus for Singapore is to garner collective resolve between now and 2030 to achieve this target and create the conditions for an inclusive and sustainable educational sector that caters for the needs of all children, not just the majority. While the findings of our study showed a strong consensus among participants about the important role of ECCE in building an inclusive society, significant issues and challenges were raised. The interviews drew out a number of tensions facing the sector that may hinder or catalyse progress in achieving the universal agenda of inclusive education. ECCE in Singapore has to be understood within the wider societal goals and policies that inform how education and the educational culture are constructed in the country. Singapore's education system lies strongly embedded in meritocracy and parentocracy (Tan, C, 2017), concepts which are deeply intertwined and have implications for key societal issues of equality and inclusion. A major tension that emerged from the study is the striving to move towards an inclusive society versus keeping up with meritocracy.

Singapore is recognised as a global leader in education. One success factor is the country's reliance on the 'best and brightest' citizens (Quah, 2018). Singapore students have consistently performed better than their peers from other countries in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre, 2016), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement)) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2015). The Singaporean national narrative on education which is deeply rooted in meritocracy is crystallised by Singapore's Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam in his statement: 'Whoever your parents are, whatever your situation is, if you work hard, you can succeed, even (for children of) single parents, it depends on your determination' (Singapore's Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, 2018). This narrative of meritocracy as a measure of achievement and success prevails in the education field. Some may argue this has inadvertently contributed to a narrowly defined understanding of learning as primarily focused on academic skills rather than a broader range of social and emotional skills to nurture educated individuals who care about bringing social change and creating social equity and other improvements in society. This was aptly summed up by a participant:

there is still a lot of focus amongst parents on the traditional '3Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) and academic outcomes take precedence over all other domains of development, like social, emotional and creative expressions. Private operators and government agencies should continue to advocate to parents the significance of inquiry and play-based learning and the long-term benefits of giving children the time and space to learn and grow at their own pace.

The findings from *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019) revealed some interviewees' strong concerns about 'schoolification' – that is, the emphasis on preschool as a preparation for primary schooling. A competitive education system based on the rhetoric of meritocracy may add to the societal pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age, at the expense of more appropriate ECCE pedagogy such as a play approach that is engaging and developmentally appropriate for young children's learning. The transition from preschool to primary school, with a highly structured learning environment, stricter school rules and larger class sizes, can already be daunting for typically developing children, let alone children with special needs. Participants reported that parents and caregivers often face a dilemma when choosing between sending their child to a SPED school or a mainstream school. For Lim and Pang (2018), meritocracy is not the solution but is one of the main conundrums of inequality in Singapore. It entrenches hierarchy, and can inversely reinforce a systemic inequality to which social mobility can at best contribute slightly more diverse members at each level of the pyramid. Overall inequality does not decline, and, at worst, those who fail to 'make it' up the ladder are considered to 'deserve' their inferior position on the social as well as income scale. In the post-industrial society to which Singapore is inevitably transitioning, a ladder meritocracy and the social divide it subtends may impede further economic progress.

Additionally, a system of 'parentocracy' – in which parents' socio-economic capital strongly affects or even determines their children's success and educational outcomes in school and society more than their children's own hard work, effort and abilities – brings another complex dimension to a meritocratic society (Tan C, 2017). As pointed out by



C Tan (2017: 326), '(p)arentocracy involves a socio-political logic that underscores parental consumer choice and free-market mechanisms as key ingredients for educational success and school improvement. Parentocracy is one of the characteristics of Singapore's education landscape. Higher-income and well-educated parents invest more in private tuition, and extracurricular enrichment activities. This further improves their children's school performance, and gives them better chances of getting into 'good' schools and universities, thus receiving qualifications that are rewarded by employers with 'good jobs' and high salaries (Lim and Pang, 2018); 'The consumer choice aspect of parentocracy is witnessed in parents' freedom to pay for private supplementary tutoring as well as other measures such as choosing a school and transporting their child to school' (Tan C, 2017: 317). In a country that is highly focused on educational achievement and excellence, having a dual education system and people with specific mindsets, attitudes and practices, developing an inclusive society can be challenging (Walker, 2016).

Amidst the complexities of parentocracy and meritocracy, a key challenge raised by participants is 'changing the mindset and societal perceptions' about equality and inclusion. As one participant contends:

I think we need to change ourselves from a consumerism society to one that cares a little; there is a danger that we are... a very performance-oriented society; They (society) need to have this mindset change . and say every child actually can learn; The child needs to be respected and supported; I think it's an entire culture that needs to be cultivated to look at inclusion as a way of life.

Lim and Choo (2002) contend that it is rather common in Singapore to consider disability as a personal tragedy and a private burden to bear. Traditionally, the care of people with disability is considered the responsibility of the family, with institutionalisation as a secondary alternative (Komardjaja, 2001). As such, there are contentions around commonly held perceptions of disability and of individuals with disability about how they should be 'helped', and who should be responsible for their care. One participant expressed concerns that society continues to hold on to a traditional view of disability that has been shaped by a medical diagnosis of a mental or physical inadequacy or 'defect', with a special education system that almost predetermines individuals' future almost wholly by their disability, and there is a need to create more strength-based environments for individuals rather than reduce individuals to their medical deficits. Such a deficit view of human development places unfair limits on the potential of individuals with disabilities, shifts societies' attention away from respecting the strengths and dignity of all people, and instead emphasises how typically developing people should take on a 'charity role' to help others acquire what they need (Carrington, 1999; Hehir, 2002; Skrtic, 1991).

Engendering a shift in societal mindset about difference and disability entails rethinking the foundations of a meritocratic and highly competitive educational culture, its institutions, logic, and principles that guide the decision-making. Yenn (2018) argues that Singapore needs to change the narrative of meritocracy because people have different opportunities and different conditions that can prevent their ability and opportunities to move out of poverty. Participants in this study highlighted the need to have a clearer shared vision of what inclusion means, before institutional practices can change to accommodate human diversity. Singapore's 21st-century social fabric requires more than the traditional narrative of meritocracy with its focus on academic competition, and the 'many helping-hands' or

'charity' approach which could perpetuate a deficit image of children with special needs. As reminded by Nussbaum (2004), we are all vulnerable but not in the same manner. It is important that society understands this nuanced concept of vulnerability, or it runs the risk of endorsing a form of charity and condescension toward those who are 'vulnerable', 'dis-advantaged' or socially and economically marginalised.

In this paper, we argue that enacting meritocracy and inclusion to the fullest is challenging. Meritocracy, interlinked with parentocracy, is likely to sustain a selective education system in which the greatest effort is focused on the 'best and brightest', but not others with different or special needs. It is hard to produce true inclusion without changing the underlying socio-economic and neo-liberal structures. The critical question is how to move towards a 'social-experiment model' (Miettinen, 2013), directing institutions and policies to support a new vision of education to develop alternative, inclusive perspectives of quality ECCE. The leading social economist Amartya Sen (2001) describes education (and health) facilities as social opportunities that promote social and economic participation, and ultimately human development. He uses the concept of 'valuational priorities' to describe the process of development which recognises the important role of social values and prevailing mores, where individuals are active agents and participants in society:

With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programmes. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognising the positive role of free and sustainable agency. (Sen, 2001: 11)

Although Sen is writing in the context of development studies, the notion of valuational priorities provides a useful theoretical lens to inform our rethinking of inclusion. To narrow the social gap and build a truly inclusive society, it is perhaps timely that debates about inclusion are mediated by values and move beyond dichotomous views of 'mainstream' and 'special' education to focus on the opportunities and agency for individuals and communities, as they work towards an ideal vision of an inclusive society with inclusive schools in ECCE settings. As a participant states: 'We need to be inclusive of everyone, not leaving people behind in policies and making sure their voices are heard and represented... It's a lofty goal, but inclusion is not letting differences hinder relationships and a sense of unity.'

## **Limitations**

The study offered important insights into the Singapore ECCE sector and its ongoing issues: challenges as well as opportunities for the future. However, as with any research there are also limitations. It is important to acknowledge the inherent bias that is inevitable in qualitative studies whereby interview data is generated from a defined number and group of participants. Where relevant in the course of reporting, the interview data is substantiated with citations from academic literature, policy documents and media reports to triangulate the data and offer a more comprehensive view of the issues that have been raised from the study.

## Concluding remarks

In a 2016 publication, *State of the World's Children* (United Nations, 2016), is the statement that ‘the soul of a society can be judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members’ (United Nations, 2016: 1). This statement resonates strongly with every society, not least a country such as Singapore in its drive to become a more inclusive society. This necessitates enacting policies and practices that are ‘child-centric’, which place children at the centre of policy decision-making, development and implements. It is also about asking challenging questions such as whether accepting a certain policy direction in ECCE as the status quo has been to the detriment of the most disadvantaged children. All societies must confront the difficult questions of *how* should early childhood services be organised and delivered to reach the most vulnerable children? *What* do we value about education and what is it for? And *will* children be marked as educational failures if they do not fit into the normative system? As educators, we have a responsibility to open up the discussion about the shared fundamental values and purposes of ECCE – values based on social justice, ethics, care and empathy.

As educators, we must also be unrelenting in our galvanisation of ECCE and in the quest for excellence for the highest-quality care and education for our young children. The overarching message from *Vital Voices for Vital Years* (Ang, 2012) and *Vital Voices for Vital Years 2* (Lipponen et al., 2019) revealed that everyone at all levels of society must play their part. No one person, organisation or government agency alone can shoulder the responsibility for ECCE. While the government’s role is vital in setting the necessary policies and standards, the preschool sector must also play a role in determining how these policies and standards can be realised in the strive for equity, quality and equality. It is only this collective commitment to ECCE that will ensure that every child in Singapore has the best start in life regardless of their circumstances, ability or disability.


## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Lien Foundation and all participants in *Vital Voices 2* who generously contributed their time and commitment to the study.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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### Author biographies

**Lynn Ang** is Professor of early childhood and Head of department of the Department of Learning and Leadership at UCL, Institute of Education. Her expertise includes the interdisciplinary fields of early childhood education and international development, early learning and early childhood across cultures particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. She has led major research grants from the British Academy, UNICEF, National College for School Leadership (NCL) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK. She is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and fellow of the ESRC Peer Review College.

**Lasse Lipponen** is Professor of education, with special reference to early childhood education, at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. His research work is directed to empathy and compassion, play, and organisational development. He has authored over 100 research articles on teaching and learning and supervised 13 doctoral dissertations. He has received several awards, such as the first prize in the educational technology competition of the University of Helsinki 1999 for the 'Future Learning Environment', and 2008 he was the recipient of the Helsinki University 'Good Teacher' award. He has numerous international and national responsibilities and assignments.

**Sirene Lim** continues to be humbled by young children's curiosity and ingenuity. She is currently associate professor, the vice dean of the SR Nathan School of Human Development and the programme head for the undergraduate and graduate early childhood education programmes. She has enjoyed working with a range of pre-service, in-service, masters and doctoral students and strives to balance her academic insights with a realistic view of what teachers face daily. Her vision is for Singapore to strengthen its early childhood education teacher education and research, to develop a cohesive learning community of professionals.

### Appendix I. Key policy milestones

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2013 Introduction of ECDA	To harmonise a previously divided ECCE sector where kindergartens were regulated by the Ministry of Education and childcare centres by the Ministry of Social and Family Development. The combined ECCE sector now has over 1800 licensed centres, and is expanding.
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2013 Introduction of ECDA	To harmonise a previously divided ECCE sector where kindergartens were regulated by the Ministry of Education and childcare centres by the Ministry of Social and Family Development. The combined ECCE sector now has over 1800 licensed centres, and is expanding.
2013 MOE kindergartens	Launched with the intent of exploring pedagogies and curricula, there are 22 such government-run kindergartens (half-day programmes) to date and the number is set to increase to about 50.
2016 POP scheme	Not all childcare centres and kindergartens are financially supported by the government. Along with the Anchor Operator Scheme (AOP) launched in 2009, the Partner Operator (POP) scheme is another government financial support available to selected child care operators to keep fees affordable, and programmes of reasonable quality.
2016 Early Childhood Manpower Plan.	This is part of the national SkillsFuture movement and is a collaborative effort by ECDA, the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), as well as key industry partners and reflects the inputs and suggestions from educators, employers and parents. The plan is part of ongoing efforts to attract and retain early childhood teachers in the industry.
2016 Skills Framework (SFw) for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)	In tandem with the manpower plan, this is a competencies framework to guide individuals, employers and training providers in promoting skills mastery and lifelong learning in the ECCE sector.
2017 Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDC) Bill	A common legislation created for both kindergartens and childcare centres (the two distinct types of services) licensed by the ECDA.
2018 Early Childhood Industry Transformation Map (ITM)	The ITM is a roadmap that promotes ECCE innovation and productivity so as to better cater to the rising demand for quality early childhood services and maximise available resources in a sustainable manner.
2019 National Institute of Early Childhood Development	National Institute of Early Childhood Development: A centralised training institute for pre-school teachers at the diploma level took in its first batch of students in 2019. The NIEC was set up by the Ministry of Education to bring together existing certificate-level and diploma-level pre-school teacher training programmes offered in Temasek Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and the SEED Institute. The national requirement for all ECCE teachers is below the undergraduate degree level.

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## Appendix 2. Interview schedule

VV2.0 Interview Guide – max 45 minutes, conversational

Along these lines, asking for examples, experiences and other elaboration

How would you describe the current state of the early years sector in Singapore? (if answer is short, explore more with the following questions)

1. How do you think Singapore is doing in terms of:
  - i. provision of ECE?
  - ii. ensuring the accessibility and affordability of ECE services?
  - iii. improving the quality of ECE services for all children and all families?
  - iv. the transition into primary school?
  - v. teacher education and professional development?
  - vi. advocacy and public education?

2. If you think back to when the first edition of *Vital Voices* was launched, how has Singapore's ECE developed over the last 6 years?
  - If answered yes, continued with: How?
  - If answered no, continued with: Why not?
3. Which of the recent initiatives, government, private or other, you think have impacted Singapore's ECE the most? Why that/those? How have they impacted?
4. What do you think are the most important areas in which Singapore's ECE still needs to improve? Why?
5. Which in your view, are the most important institutions and organisations in Singapore that are working to improve ECE? What are they doing? Do they collaborate, and if so, how?
6. Some policy documents have raised inclusion as an important goal for Singapore. How do you understand inclusion and is it important for Singapore in your opinion?
7. Do you think there are children who are excluded from ECE in Singapore? If answered yes, continue with:
  - i. Who are they and how did they become left out?
  - ii. How does this exclusion impact their life, or their family's life?
  - iii. What do you think needs to happen for them to be included?If answered no, continue with:
  - i. Why do you think this is not an issue in Singapore?
  - ii. In your view, how is inclusion is achieved such that no children are being excluded?
8. What do you think needs to happen in Singapore to create more inclusive early childhood settings?
9. Is there something else that you would like to add that you feel is important to raise in the forthcoming *Vital Voices* report?