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Primary 1 prep classes are still hot, but a principal says focus on these soft skills instead



Ms Jenn Kuan enrolled her son, Siew Yu Hong, in Primary 1 preparation classes at Learning Journey Education Centre. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG



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SINGAPORE – Two years ago, Ms Jenn Kuan realised that her son, Siew Yu Hong, could not read as well as she expected him to.

A three-year-old they met on a bus read the word “seat” in a sign easily, but Yu Hong, then four, could identify only the letters.

Ms Kuan, a financial consultant, 38, then signed him up for a phonics class at Learning Journey Education Centre’s branch in Punggol, with the proviso that if he did not like it, she would not force him to continue.

The class was initially held over Zoom because of social distancing restrictions and physical classes resumed in 2023.

Yu Hong progressed to the centre's Primary 1 preparation class earlier in 2023.

“He learnt quite fast and showed an interest in learning phonics,” says Ms Kuan, who feels that his vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling have improved compared with his peers at his Ministry of Education (MOE) Kindergarten, which has no spelling tests.

Primary 1 preparatory classes are still popular with parents, with most enrichment and tuition centres reporting strong demand after the pandemic and, in some cases, increases in enrolment. Lessons can cost more than \$100 a session.



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This is despite the Government's efforts to play down the focus on grades by removing all weighted assessments and examinations for Primary 1 and 2 pupils since 2019.

Ms Grace Tan, founder-principal of Learning Journey Education Centre, says demand for its physical classes for its P1 preparation programme dropped by about 30 per cent during the pandemic in 2021 and 2022.

The centre pivoted to online prep classes, which had “healthy demand”. The centre charges \$45 for a 90-minute lesson in English or \$60 for a two-hour lesson in English and mathematics.

Enrolment for its physical sessions have since recovered to pre-pandemic levels, she says.

“Ninety per cent of our students were unable to read, spell and write when they joined our programme. Our challenge is to get them ready for Primary 1 in a short period of time, without taking away the joy of learning,” says Ms Tan.

Ms Chrislyn Pillai, managing director of I Can Read, an English language enrichment centre with 20 branches islandwide, says its enrolment has become more robust over the years.

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Students are mostly aged three to six when they enrol in the ability-based programmes, which cost \$56 to \$64 for each 90-minute class.

Similarly, The Learning Lab reports strong demand for its pre-school programmes without citing figures.

Ms Sue Lynn Lee, academic director of early years and lower primary at its United Square branch, says: “Although parents tend to prioritise language development in their child’s early years of development, we have also seen steady growth in interest in our mathematics programmes.”

Dr Lubna Alsagoff, its director of curriculum and pedagogy, adds: “There is a mix of what parents expect and look for. Some are seeking greater focus on school preparedness, while others look for schools that extend learning beyond the academic aspects.”

Its Nursery 2 to Kindergarten 2 programmes start at \$432 for a month of four lessons lasting one hour and 45 minutes each. The centre has nine branches.

Chinese enrichment centre Berries World of Learning School says demand for its P1 preparatory programme has increased by about 10 per cent since 2019. Each weekly lesson lasts 100 minutes and costs \$50.76.

Ms Choong Boon Lee, Berries’ director of academic affairs, attributes the rise to its blended learning model that “combines in-person classroom lessons, delivered via a multisensory approach, with engaging online content” as well as its long-standing relationships with parents who sign their children up for its programmes when the kids are in nursery school.

“Most parents continue to prioritise equipping their children with a solid understanding of the Chinese language, enabling them to effectively tackle the demands of primary school and, eventually, approach the Primary School Leaving Examination with confidence,” says Ms Choong.

Mr Jeremy Ng, business development director of Chinese enrichment school Hua Cheng Education Centre, says it had a spike of more than 30 per cent for its P1 preparatory classes between 2019 and 2022.

The centre charges \$40 to \$50 for each lesson lasting one hour and 45 minutes.

“Demand for P1 prep classes has always been strong, even during the pandemic, as parents recognise the importance of giving their children a good head start in Chinese-language acquisition, so they have an edge over their peers when they enter P1,” says Mr Ng.

Parents also recognise the value of having a bilingual child who can tap the opportunities in China.

Only Kuno Method, which runs an experiential and interactive thinking skills programme for kids aged three to six, says demand has dropped.

It launched its six-month-long online P1 prep classes in maths in 2020 to bridge the learning gap brought about by the circuit breaker that year, says its director Yu Xinlin. Parents pay \$260 for a month of four lessons.

However, demand for its longer-term thinking skills programme, which develops life skills across subjects, has increased 29 per cent from 2021 to 2023, she says.

Take care not to over-prepare

While parents' anxiety over their children's readiness for the academic rigours of primary school are understandable, overdoing it can backfire.

Mrs Lay See Neufeld, principal of Tampines Primary School, says: "A student was disengaged and refused to listen in class, explaining that he already knew what his teacher was teaching.

"When the form teacher spoke with his parents, we realised that the student had already completed the P1 'A' textbook and worksheets during the vacation. Thus, the lessons became repetitive and boring for the student."

She adds that pre-schools usually prepare children well for English, mother-tongue languages and numeracy under the Ministry of Education's Nurturing Early Learners Framework.

"For English language, children should be able to write their own names, recognise letters of the alphabet, their corresponding sounds and some simple words. For mother-tongue languages, children should understand simple instructions and respond to simple questions in the language.

"In numeracy, children should be able to count numbers accurately up to 10, compare the quantity in two groups of objects within 10 and use 'more/less than' appropriately."

On the other hand, being under-prepared for the soft skills required in a school setting can also present challenges for seven-year-olds and their teachers. This has become more of a challenge since the pandemic.

"The recent batches of P1 students had much of their pre-school learning disrupted by Covid-19, and had spent more time at home in the last two years as compared with previous batches. Hence, they may tend to be more individualistic and need more assistance in developing their social skills," says Mrs Neufeld.

She recalls hearing complaints after a P1 child started taking stationery items and snacks from her friends without asking them first.

Her teachers contacted the pupil's parents and found out that was the normal behaviour in their home.

"Our teachers worked closely with her parents to counsel the pupil on how to build positive relationships with her peers in school. As a result, she was able to better appreciate that school has different social boundaries when compared with home."



(From left) Ms Jenn Kuan and her son, Siew Yu Hong, with Ms Grace Tan, founder-principal of Learning Journey Education Centre. ST PHOTO: RYAN CHIONG

Ms Tan, who holds a master's in education (early childhood), agrees that over-preparing children is counterproductive.

“Unlike other centres, we do not teach the entire P1 syllabus in our classes as over-teaching will kill a child's interest in what's going to take place,” she says.

Homework and worksheets are kept to a reasonable amount at Learning Journey Education Centre.

Dr Lubna of The Learning Lab adds: “Our K2 classes are strong programmes that prepare children for P1, not only in terms of academic grounding, but also in the softer skills that develop positive learning dispositions and soft skills to manage the new challenges that face young children as they enter school.”

Ms Kuan believes that her son's preparatory classes have also helped him socialise beyond his usual peer groups. “He's definitely okay for P1. He's very independent,” she says.

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The soft skills your kid needs for Primary 1

“Soft skills and positive dispositions are critical for children to successfully transition to P1. These can be summarised as: be safe, be a good friend and be curious,” says Mrs Neufeld.

She explains that to be safe, children must be able to express their needs, seek help, follow simple instructions and ask simple questions.

Being a good friend means having social and emotional competencies, such as learning how to manage his or her emotions and getting along with classmates, taking turns and looking out for one another.

And finally, curious children are motivated to ask questions, persevere in tasks and have a sense of wonder, she says.

It may be six more months until the start of P1 in 2024, but parents can already begin preparing their children in simple and practical ways.



Enrichment centre The Learning Lab reports "strong demand" for its pre-school programmes, without citing figures. PHOTO: THE LEARNING LAB

Read for pleasure

Take your kids to the library and help them choose books they enjoy, Mrs Neufeld suggests. It is all right to start with picture books, audio books or books on their favourite characters.

You can read to them, graduate to reading with them, encouraging them to eventually read for pleasure by themselves.

Role-play scenarios

Does your child know what to do if he or she forgets to pack a ruler and needs to borrow one from a classmate? What if he or she needs to use the toilet? Can your kid tie his or her shoelaces if they come undone?

Mrs Neufeld recommends drawing up a list of possible scenarios that could happen in school and role-playing what your child should do.

This also extends to making friends, what happens during recess and what food choices to make in the canteen.

“All these imaginative role-playing sessions will help in building good parent-child relationships as well as encourage the child to look forward to coming to school. Role-playing can also get the child to appreciate the importance of time management and the need to stay focused on the task at hand,” she says.

Let the kids decide

Allow your children to choose their school bags, stationery, shoes and other equipment, within your budget. This helps them hone their decision-making skills, she says.

Grab that pencil

Encourage your child to practise his or her handwriting by drawing, copying the alphabet and writing words or short notes. This will build a good foundation for writing skills in P1, she says.

Time for bed

The school day may start much earlier for some children in the morning session, so help your child to adjust to a new sleep schedule gradually.

This story has been edited for accuracy.

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