

Chapter 2

Marketization and Corporation of Early Childhood Care and Education in Singapore

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In this chapter, I pursue an argument that Singapore's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) system—a private, marketised and even corporatised system, is in need of policy intervention and re-thinking because of increasing social inequities within a meritocratic climate that largely emphasises individual choice and responsibility for one's success. This paper is framed by critical and postcolonial perspectives that exist within the international early childhood education discourse (e.g., Cannella and Viruru 2004; Moss 2007; Penn 2007; Sumsion 2006).

The chapter begins with contextual information and an overview of key government policies that have shaped ECCE. It also describes the government's position about leaving ECCE mainly in the hands of private and commercial operators. These sections are then followed by an outline of the chapter's critical stance on neoliberalism in educational endeavours. The remaining chapter builds on this conceptual framework to examine the benefits and limits of having a largely commercial and private ECCE market: if such a market creates opportunities for all children and families to access affordable and quality early care and education, if there is any influence on the status of the profession, as well as teacher preparation and education.

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2.1 Overview of Early Childhood Care and Education in Singapore

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) published the Starting Well Index to compare the accessibility and quality of early childhood provision (for children ages 3–6) across 45 countries, and ranked Singapore 29th overall. The report was published about a decade after a significant government review of the provision of pre-school education, with recognition that the sector was entirely privatised, comprising not-for-profit organisations and for-profit enterprises (Lim *in press*; Ministry of Education [MOE] 2003). The Economist Intelligence Unit report may have provided further impetus for greater government control as the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) was created shortly after that in 2013. It was a positive move to integrate and harmonise government regulation of two previously divided sectors of kindergarten and childcare (Khoo 2010; Tan 2007).

The Singapore ECCE landscape discussed in this paper comprises kindergartens and child care centres. Kindergartens offer 3–4 h educational programmes catering for children aged 4 through 6 and were first created, mainly by churches and mosques, for the purpose of preparing children for Primary One (Tan 2007). Previously, kindergartens were regulated by the Ministry of Education. Child care centres, on the other hand, offer full-day care and education programmes for children from 18 months through 6 years and have been licensed by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), previously known as the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). As a service for working parents, child care centres have been more commercialised, with a wider fee range and a significant proportion operating out of commercial buildings and high rental landed property. To encourage more Singaporean families to have children, the ECDA's first task was to increase the number of child care places and to ensure that fees are more affordable for consumers (Early Childhood Development Agency 2013). The government continues to leave the sector privatised, while encouraging organisations and businesses to pay teachers better, and to provide them with career progression and opportunities for continuous teacher education (Early Childhood Development Agency 2014; Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports [MCYS] 2012).

Moving forward, the ECDA needs to re-consider ways to engage with the ECCE market to better understand its impact on the lives of children and their families from a social equity perspective. While this chapter is contextualised within Singapore's meritocracy and particular locale, its argument contributes to existing international conversations on the neoliberal marketisation and commodification of human care and education (Connell 2013; Eika 2009; Hochschild 2005; Moss 2007; Penn 2007, 2011; Sumsion 2006) as well as the conventional view of ECCE as low-skilled women's work that can be reduced to care routines and basic cognitive tasks (Dahlberg et al. 2007; Whitebook et al. 2014).

2.2 Government Initiatives and Position on Early Childhood Care and Education

To provide an overview of ECCE policy activity in Singapore, Table 2.1 is a list of significant government policy initiatives prior to and during the inception of the ECDA. These initiatives were put in place to address the accessibility, affordability, and quality of a private ECCE market (Lim *in press*). The table shows substantial ECCE policy activity in the new millennium, beginning with the Year 2000 announcement of Desired Outcomes for Pre-School Education, followed by the Ministry of Education's launch of the first national kindergarten curriculum framework (MOE 2003). However, government has continued to take a measured and pragmatic approach by intervening in what it considers to be high leverage areas (Tharman 2013). Four policy initiatives can be clustered according to these high leverage areas.

1. Child outcomes—to spell out the purpose of pre-school education and recommend less academically-focused curricula approaches for young children and encourage centre innovation.
2. Teacher quality and professional status—set higher expectations for teacher qualifications and enhance teacher learning, well-being, and career progression.
3. Government regulatory frameworks—to harmonise the licensing of kindergartens and child care centres; and encourage self-appraisal and provide voluntary quality assessment for programmes that cater for 4–6 year-olds.
4. Policies that increase accessibility and affordability of child care and kindergarten programmes for all families—increase child care places; provide demand-side subsidies based on household income and mothers' working status (Child Care Link FAQs 2016); select Anchor Operators and Partner Operators and subsidise the operation costs of these centres while requiring them to maintain affordable fees and be subjected to quality assessment.

Table 2.1 shows the policy activity in these high leverage areas.

These areas of policy influence are levers allowing for varying government control on the availability, affordability, and quality of ECCE services while maintaining a private and commercial industry. The purpose of maintaining the ECCE market is to offer families choice, keep State expenditure low, and prevent pre-school education from becoming overly formalised, while continuing to provide targeted financial support to economically disadvantaged families (Ministry of Education 2003, 2008, 2010, 2012).

A senior government official offered the following explanation during a parliamentary response to a question on the privatisation of preschool education:

...diversity allows for experimentation and innovation by preschool operators in the design of curriculum and delivery of programmes [...] We want a good quality pre-school sector but this does not mean that we should force all providers to be uniform. Unlike formal school education, experts agree that there is room for diverse approaches in the pre-school sector. (Ministry of Education 2010)

Table 2.1 Policy activity in high leverage areas

Area of influence	Policy initiative
Outcomes for children	<p>Created a set of Desired Outcomes of Preschool Education in the year 2000 to dovetail with existing ones for the entire primary and secondary education system</p> <p>Launched a non-mandatory curriculum framework for programmes catering to 4–6 year-olds, Nurturing Early Learners: A Kindergarten Curriculum Framework, following successful 2-year pilot research study of play-based curriculum materials developed by MOE (MOE 2003); a revised version was published recently (MOE 2012)</p> <p>Provided preschools with Innovation Grants, awards, and organised annual events for the sector to share best practices (MOE 2010)</p> <p>Launched non-mandatory framework for infant/toddler services, The Early Years Development Framework (EYDF) (MCYS, 2011)</p> <p>The MOE (2013) created up to 15 pilot kindergartens to explore best curricular practices for scaling up the sector</p>
Teacher quality and status	<p>Increased minimum academic and professional requirements for preschool teachers in preschools (MOE 2010)</p> <p>Created a Preschool Qualifications Accreditation Committee co-chaired by MOE and MSF to decide on content to be included in preschool teaching qualifications at Certificate and Diploma levels (MOE 2010)</p> <p>Launched the Good Employers' Toolkit to improve staff retention (MCYS 2011)</p> <p>Launched a Continuing Professional Development Framework for Early Childhood Educators for leadership and teaching pathways (MCYS 2012)</p> <p>Developed structured competency-based career pathways for teachers and identified Fellows as mentors for the sector (ECDA 2014, 2015a)</p>
Regulatory framework and accreditation	<p>Encouraged quality provision through the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK)—for voluntary self-evaluation and external assessment of centre programmes through a Quality Rating Scale (MOE 2010)</p> <p>To work on a new legislative framework to harmonise the licensing of both kindergarten and child care (MSF 2014); yet to be announced</p>
Accessibility and Affordability	<p>Encouraged and supported preschool attendance among children from disadvantaged families (MOE 2010)</p> <p>Increased kindergarten and child care subsidies to families (Tharman 2013)</p> <p>Increased the number of childcare centres to meet public demand for affordable childcare and created the Anchor Operator Scheme (ECDA 2013), and Partner Operator Scheme (ECDA 2015d)</p> <p>Support selected large anchor operators to create mega child care centres for 300–500 children in high demand areas (ECDA 2015a)</p>

To date, I estimate based on a simple count of public lists available on the ECDA website, that more than half of Singapore's kindergarten sector comprises not-for-profit provision (many set up by religious establishments), while the child care sector is mostly for-profit. Of the combined kindergarten and child care sector, just over half appear to be for-profit. Existing policies of privatising ECCE continues to position young children's care and education as the responsibility of individual families. While providing families with tiered subsidies according to household income, the state continues to support ECCE as a private good to be consumed by families according to their preference, needs, and purchasing power. However, in view of increasing disparities in income and fears that economically disadvantaged children may not be ready for formal school both intellectually and emotionally, there is expanded government spending and regulatory control to raise professional expectations of the ECCE workforce and "quality" of care and education through a voluntary quality rating system called the Singapore Pre-School Accreditation Framework (SPARK) (MOE 2010). While the government recognises the importance of ECCE access, especially as a form of early intervention for children in disadvantaged communities, it is not prepared to have much control over curricular programmes and practices beyond a recommended kindergarten curriculum framework, the Early Years Development Framework for infants and toddlers (MCYS 2011). The government's curricular frameworks are not mandatory, and neither is quality rating and accreditation. From an educational and equity point of view, these policies are all issues of concern in a neoliberal ECCE market.

2.3 Neo-Liberalism in Early Childhood Care and Education

Singapore's ECCE market, in the hands of a largely for-profit industry, is a neo-liberal endeavour. Neo-liberalism emphasises free market principles and minimal government intervention even in the social welfare affairs of a state; it focuses on individual choice, autonomy, meritocracy, productivity, business competitiveness and efficiency (Connell 2013; Harvey 2005). When these principles are translated to the provision of care and education in schools, kindergartens, and child care centres, the needs of children can become overshadowed by the need for institutions to focus on being competitive in a free market, being attractive to consumers, and becoming financially profitable. A privatised and marketised care and education sector has led to the tendency to concentrate on market competitiveness, shaping consumer choice, profit generation, business expansion, and entrepreneurial innovation (Sumsion 2006; Lloyd 2012).

As businesses, ECCE centres do not necessarily focus on the best interests of young children because such services are created to meet the needs of adults, and as such, a privatised ECCE sector cannot always provide optimal conditions for the care and education of young citizens within diverse and socially stratified societies. A marketised care and education sector thrives on competition while

promising consumer choice (Brennan et al. 2012). This market competition foregrounds adults' needs and desires because they are the fee-paying consumers, and not their children. As a result, a marketised care and education system leaves little room to prioritise young children's actual desires and agencies as learners (Cannella and Viruru 2004; Eika 2009; Moss 2007; Penn 2007). And in the process of commodifying care and education as a product for sale, child care centres and kindergartens position themselves first as businesses, emphasising particular kinds of teacher performance that could reduce the educational process into a series of mechanical tasks to be completed (Connell 2013). Moss(2007) argued that neoliberal markets over-emphasise the importance of monetary value in societies and reduce the process of education and care into managerial and technical practice.

Not many countries gather data on private, for-profit and not-for-profit organisations; in the UK, a market research firm generates data on the child care market but it is made available at a prohibitive cost (Lloyd 2012). Global discussion and more research is needed as little is known about the consequence of national and international child care markets on the everyday lives of the ECCE practitioners, children and their families. Little is known also about how these businesses and corporations create or sustain affordability, availability, and quality of ECCE (Lloyd 2012). A study of the New Zealand context has shown that teacher professionalism is shaped by corporatisation, defined and used as a business tool so much so that questions are raised about the ability of the for-profit and corporate sector to provide sufficiently high quality and professional ECCE to benefit children (Duhn 2010). And in the Hong Kong voucher system, increased parental choice has preserved conventional public perception that ECCE teachers are caregivers with a job scope that does not really require intellectualism or a university education (Yuen and Grieshaber 2009).

2.4 Discussion

The remaining chapter examines: (1) ECCE when it is business-focused; (2) how such businesses influence perceptions of quality as well as accessibility and affordability, and (3) how business focused ECCE shapes teacher education and professional status.

2.4.1 Early Childhood Care and Education as Business Activity: Franchises, Mergers and Acquisitions

The Singapore government's increased involvement in ECCE (as shown through the multitude of policies listed in Table 2.1) could be read as an indication that it is beginning to view ECCE as an essential provision to society—important

for working adults and to the proportion of children who may face difficulties upon entering an academically challenging primary school system. Culturally, Singapore society has always placed great importance on children's education (Goh and Gopinathan 2008). This was demonstrated by the fact that in the 1970s, within the first decade of independence, 100 % primary school attendance was achieved without it being made compulsory (Goh and Gopinathan 2008). Even the Prime Minister has commented on Singapore being a nation preoccupied with enrolling children in tuition programmes outside school (Lee 2012). Families supplement their children's kindergarten education with academically-oriented enrichment programmes (e.g., phonics, math) on weekends or week nights. Given improvements in many families' economic circumstances and ambitions for their children to succeed in school, the nation's commercial shadow education industry has been instrumental in creating what Gee (2012) terms in the title of his report, an educational 'arms race'.

Internationally, there have been calls for public investment in early years learning and development, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged children, so as to reduce future social costs to societies (Barnett and Masse 2007; Heckman 2006; Rolnick and Grunewald 2003; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). This positions ECCE as something that is necessary for the good of society, not too different from basic primary education and healthcare. This then begs the question of whether it is ethically right for such an important public good to be offered by a mix of more for-profit than not-for-profit private operators. Competitive consortiums and corporations are able to freely market and brand their services to possibly inflate their image, potentially misuse market power, charge higher fees, poach teachers, and inflate salaries unreasonably to push out small, independent providers (Tay 2013).

In the absence of systematic data in Singapore, I present issues that have been raised in local news and discussed by scholars examining childcare corporatisation and marketisation elsewhere (Brennan et al. 2012; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Penn 2007; Sumsion 2006) to illustrate how the competitive unpredictability of a global business environment has caused large child care businesses to fall and rise behind the façade of popularity and branding success.

In a globalised commerce environment, businesses are prone to acquisitions and mergers and it becomes inevitable to prioritise business innovation and profit generation; this is also true for commercial child care (Sumsion 2006). For instance, Busy Bees (UK's largest nursery chain) now owns three popular Singaporean child care brands (about 50 centres in Singapore) and the Asian International College (Farrell 2015). Looking back a decade ago, in 2006, the Australian conglomerate ABC Learning acquired Busy Bees, the fifth largest UK nursery provider. But after ABC Learning went into receivership in 2008, Busy Bees was sold to the American-owned Knowledge Universe in 2009. In Singapore, Knowledge Universe acquired three popular brands of child care centres and the Asian International College in 2007 to become the largest private ECCE provider in Singapore at the time. Presently, Knowledge Universe no longer exists in Singapore, and its centres now come under the Busy Bees umbrella. The former

CEO of Knowledge Universe in Asia (now at Busy Bees), had this to say about the ECCE enterprise when interviewed by journalists:

Our whole approach to developing the business is about hand picking the best in the market, focusing on institutions that stand out with innovative and cutting-edge practices [...] We then formulate customised solutions to address the needs of our customers and partners, adding value to what they have. (Phillips et al. 2013, paragraph 7)

The above quote is representative of what businesses do, that is, cater for the needs of their customers. But as businesses, it is inevitable that they would also have to look into the interests of their business partners who may be shareholders (Moss 2007; Penn 2011). By their very nature, commercial child care centres cannot exist with a sole priority to serve the needs of society or that of disadvantaged children, but focus on monetary profit.

Another example of ECCE as business is a home-grown enterprise called the Cherie Hearts Group International. At one point it was considered the largest and fastest growing private child care chain in Singapore, with franchises outside the country (Suhaimi 2009); and its founder had earned a reputation as a successful local young entrepreneur with a unique franchise model (National Archives of Singapore 2005). In 2011, Cherie Hearts was bought by G8 Education's Singapore subsidiary, along with two other brands and now has more than 50 child care centres; in Australia, the company manages over 200 centres across the continent and is one of the largest child care operators listed on the Australian Securities Exchange (G8 Education, n.d.). Cherie Hearts in G8 Education Singapore has earned the Singapore Prestige Brand Award and Promising Franchisor Award (Cherie Hearts Awards 2016). But two of G8's three child care brands do not have SPARK-certified centres (ECDA 2015b). This illustrates the argument made in this chapter about the fluid nature of child care quality in a commercial market and how "word-of-mouth" advertising can shape public perception of quality.

2.4.2 Popularity-as-Quality: Rich-Poor Divide in Accessibility

Eika (2009) has argued that in the industry of care provision, whether it is the care of children or the elderly, marketisation has its limits because consumers often do not know enough about "quality," nor do they have access to sufficient first-hand information; care services are not purchased frequently and are often required by families under pressure and time constraints; and not all consumers can exercise their choice fully, because it depends on how much they can afford.

Given the free market nature of ECCE in past decades, "quality" has been defined by the market providers and consumers who popularise certain kindergartens and child care centres by word of mouth. Over the years, programmes have marketed themselves in increasingly innovative ways to appeal to children and families. For instance, there are programmes that enhance brain functioning

through patented approaches and equipment, develop multiple intelligences, include yoga for children, and motivate children with a playground inspired by a popular online game. These centres appeal to families who want to pay for unusual programmes rather than the average not-for-profit offering.

Such marketing and branding of “niche” and innovative programmes has not changed much with the government’s quality rating tool for self-appraisal, external assessment and eventual accreditation (MOE 2010). A search on the government child care portal reveals that popular and well-known ECCE brands tend to charge the highest fees in the entire sector (Child Care Link 2016), but there is no research evidence to show that they offer higher quality ECCE than centres charging half or less. Even though the government has established SPARK, the voluntary preschool quality accreditation framework (MOE 2010), and has been encouraging preschools to be externally assessed for continued improvement, there may not be sufficient incentive for centres that are already popular, to do so. A preschool centre with children on a long waiting list may not find it necessary to show proof of its quality by going through a time-consuming quality rating exercise by external assessors. And centres that are part of large for-profit chains may have their own ways of convincing the public of their quality, such as obtaining a franchisor award, or a prestige brand award. It is, therefore, not surprising that the government is way off its original target of having 85 % of all preschools participating in the SPARK external assessment by 2013 (MOE 2010). Instead, less than 20 % were reported to be SPARK-certified: 1 in 4 kindergartens and 1 in 7 child care centres (Chan 2014). Perhaps this is not unusual in a privatised market: Xiao (2010) observed that in the United States, only 20 % of childcare centres had applied for voluntary NAEYC accreditation a decade after the accreditation framework was established; and only 7.5 % actually obtained accreditation status.

One would need to examine how such voluntary quality rating and accreditation mechanisms are actually making a difference in a privatised ECCE landscape, and for whom such processes ultimately benefit. Competitiveness in a tight labour market has created teacher movement, from lower-paying centres to higher-paying ones (Tay 2013). With a growing middle-and upper-class, this commercialisation phenomenon will continue to create social stratification as these centres continue to attract better-resourced families who perceive them to be offering higher quality care and education than lower-priced centres catering to the masses. More educated families have more power now as consumers; they have higher expectations of teachers’ language abilities and want their children to be interacting with those from similar socio-economic backgrounds (Lim 2015).

An entirely different set of issues face economically disadvantaged children. Government support exists in the form of generous subsidies for low income families to enrol their children in pre-school or child care. If the children’s attendance is regular, they would certainly receive support for holistic development. But it has been reported that children in this particular population may not attend child care or pre-school regularly (Ng 2015) and monetary incentives alone are not sufficient to mitigate the effects of poverty and multiple stresses often faced by such families (Ng 2013). What remains to be done is for the sector to create

more comprehensive and holistic services that see to the needs of economically disadvantaged adults and children; that is, to provide maternal health care, social services, employment and re-training advice and opportunities, child health and nutrition, and child care and education support services.

While the government can provide salary subsidies and insist that anchor operators cap their fees, it must realise that the nature of “quality” in the care and education of young human beings is ultimately a shifting construct, dynamically shaped by families’ perceptions, and one that is difficult to measure (Dahlberg et al. 2007). At best, the Anchor Operator Scheme (i.e., selected not-for-profit centres subsidised by government and required to cap fees accordingly) could try to persuade families that they offer “value-for-money” quality ECCE. Even so, anchor operators will not solve the fundamental issue of social stratification because economically advantaged families still have the freedom to decide on placement of children according to how much they are willing or able to pay for ECCE that matches their own knowledge, values, income, aspirations, and needs.

2.4.3 Influence on Teacher Education and Professional Status

The privatisation and commercialisation of ECCE has resulted in commercialisation and commodification of both early childhood teacher education and higher education in Singapore. This has influenced the development of teacher education and the image of the profession. Unlike primary school teacher preparation, which is only available at a government-funded local institution of higher education (the National Institute of Education), for about two decades, ECCE teachers have been trained mainly in commercial training agencies. At its peak, the industry had 27 training agencies in 2006 (Lim *in press*). Many of these private training agencies were also partnering with foreign universities to offer part-time early childhood degree programmes with significantly reduced study durations.

It has only been in recent years that the government has made explicit its support for capacity development at three local polytechnic institutions and the Institute of Technical Education to offer both full-time and part-time early childhood diploma and certificate level programmes (Teng 2015). This move may have indirectly reduced the number of for-profit training agencies with accredited ECCE teaching diplomas to nine (Early Childhood Development Agency 2015c), demonstrating the importance of government intervention in shaping public perception and rigour of ECCE teacher education within a privatised and commercial industry.

A major limitation of having a largely commercial and private ECCE teacher education landscape is this: having existed for two decades, the sector has not encouraged much growth of scholarship and criticality, especially with ECCE teacher education pegged at a certificate level (without complete secondary

education) or diploma level for secondary school leavers. These entry requirements are lower than those aspiring to be primary school teachers. Run by private businesses, ECCE teacher preparation, while regulated by government requirements for minimal standards, has not supported the sector's knowledge generation or leadership growth. Without ECCE teacher preparation housed in a university, and without more systematic teaching and learning research, there can be little critical reflection and evaluation of local practices, issues and trends.

ECCE around the world is largely female, given the stereotypical view that women should work with young children (Cannella and Viruru 2004; Hochschild 2005; Penn 2007). In Singapore, the sector is also overwhelmingly female, a challenge to be surmounted if the work of caring for and educating young children is to be seen as a gender-neutral task. Figures show that across the 498 private kindergartens in Singapore more than 99 % of the teachers are female; in primary schools, 81 % are women, whereas in junior colleges, 59 % are female (MOE 2014). In the compulsory years, in terms of gender distribution in the mainstream education system, there is a significantly higher proportion of female teachers in primary schools than in junior colleges (MOE 2014). From a systemic perspective, preschool teachers form the least-educated ranks of the nation's community of educators because they typically have diploma and/or certificate qualifications, and have been traditionally separated from the community of primary and secondary school teachers. The gender divide is created by a traditional separation of children's "care" and "education" needs, where caring work is seen as being more feminine (Cannella and Viruru 2004; Hochschild 2005; Penn 2007).

The ECCE workforce in Singapore has traditionally come from the bottom one-third of the academic cohort, but with the government's raised requirement in minimum academic standards, preschool teachers are now recruited from the middle one-third of the academic cohort (MOE 2010). ECCE has been viewed by the public as women's work or low-skilled caring work that should be done for family members without remuneration (Folbre 2003), and Singaporeans generally think that preschool education is an uncomplicated task of teaching children to rote learn words and numbers (Loke 2015). Comparable to reports from the US and the UK, ECCE as caring work has created low wages that have been endemic in the sector (Ackerman 2006; Folbre 2003; Penn 2011; Whitebook et al. 2014). In Singapore, early childhood graduates earn at least 20 % less than graduates in other disciplines (Davie 2013).

In Singapore, the professional status of ECCE practitioners has remained lower than that of primary school teachers, even though the government acknowledges the importance of child care services that allow women to remain in the workforce (Chan 2014). Early years care and education is not often a career of choice for many, mainly because of the tradition of lower salaries compared to other kinds of employment available to either diploma or degree-graduates (Davie 2013). Because of the sector's lower pay, it has attracted less educationally qualified staff. But with the recent government call for swift expansion of child care services (Chan 2014), the sector now faces stiff competition among the 600 or so brand names for certified teachers and principals to fill the many newly established

centres (Davie 2013). There are anecdotal and newspaper reports of a significant shortage of teachers in the Singapore ECCE market and disillusioned young graduates who prefer not to join the sector after their diploma studies (Craig 2013; Tay 2013). Independent reports and investigations of teacher shortage or movement do not exist yet although this has been identified as an issue in the international literature; in contrast, job turnover and occupational turnover of the early years workforce has been studied in the USA, Australia, and the UK (Rolfe 2005; Sumsion 2006; Whitebook and Sakai 2003). And we know that young children thrive in environments where there is staffing consistency and quality interactions (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Whitebook et al. 2014).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how the ECCE market in Singapore has a strong influence over public conceptions of popularity-as-quality, and has a tendency to separate children's attendance at preschool according to family access to financial resources. Extensive government policy development has occurred since the turn of the 21st century. However, curriculum frameworks and quality accreditation systems remain voluntary, which has resulted in corporations and specific brands not completing accreditation and certification processes. In a neoliberal market, these policies continue to pose issues of concern related to equity, including feasibility of access to early childhood settings and services for vulnerable children and families. It remains to be seen if a private and commercial ECCE market, with an appropriate degree of governmental control, can indeed improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of ECCE in Singapore. Much is yet to be learned about the strengths and limitations of the ECCE market landscape in Singapore. It will take time before the field is able to generate more systematic data and research activity to better understand interconnected realities facing teachers, families, and children. Intended policy outcomes have yet to be seen, but given a few more years, Singapore may eventually be able to achieve public goals with private means for a fair and just ECCE system.

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