

■ HOT NEWS

Glee, Warren Buffett, and much more

Enrichment centres keep up with parents' increasingly sophisticated demands, groom world-savvy kids

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SINGAPORE — For 10-year-old Claire Lim, learning does not stop after school. The CHIJ (Kellock) Primary School student attends up to six hours of enrichment and tuition lessons each week.

According to her mother Frances Yong, Claire would even remind her parents to send her to these external classes should they forget.

"She enjoys her dance classes very much ... not so much for piano lessons as it requires a bit of practising but she would still be very aware of her schedule and keeps to them," said Mdm Yong.

The booming enrichment programme and tuition industry — at last count, there are 700 centres offering such classes islandwide — is also undergoing a facelift to meet increasingly sophisticated demands.

No longer are centres offering only the usual fare of speech and drama or ballet lessons. Now, even subjects such as the sub-prime mortgage crisis, architecture and emotional quotient (EQ) — topics that even some adults would have difficulty grasping — are on the menu for parents shopping for classes for their seven- to 12-year-olds.

Other activity-based enrichment lessons for primary school-going children include fencing, animation, baking and sushi-making.

Six enrichment and tuition centres interviewed by TODAY are seeing an average increase of 20 to 30 per cent in demand for places annually.

A poll by TODAY of 50 parents found only nine who do not send their children to any enrichment or tuition class.

The children of the remaining 41 respondents spend an average of 4.67 hours a week at these classes.

One respondent, whose daughters attend tuition and violin classes up to eight hours every week, said he spends almost S\$2,000 a month for their enrichment and tuition lessons — an outlay that has been increasing over the years, he added.

But he believes these extra lessons will put his children in a "competitive position".

"Everyone is doing it nowadays so of course there is the societal pressure to send my girls to these classes... it is hard to measure the end result but I hope it helps them some ways," said the respondent, who wished to be known only as Mr Leong.

'IT'S BETTER TO START YOUNG'

According to the Ministry of Education's (MOE) latest figures, there are 700 tuition centres and enrichment centres registered with the ministry.

Under the Education Act, centres offering tuition or enrichment programmes with 10 or more students must be registered with the MOE.



PHOTO COURTESY NURTURE KIDS

According to the ministry, registered centres have to comply with building and fire safety requirements, conduct their activities at appropriate facilities and have a school management committee.

They must also register their teachers with the MOE and provide evidence that the teachers possess the appropriate educational qualifications required to teach their proposed courses or subjects.

The Learning Lab teaches children about Hungarian-American financier George Soros, as well as topics such as the United States Presidential Elections, the Singapore Formula One Grand Prix and the sub-prime mortgage crisis, as part of its English curriculum for Primary 2 to Primary 6 pupils.

Ms Ling Cheah, manager of The Learning Lab, said: "Warren Buffett, Lionel Messi, 911, China's and India's rise, the Glee phenomenon and the entire gamut of new social media — these are must-know issues if our kids are to thrive in their complex new worlds."

She added: "Kids love this special exposure as they find it fun to keep on top of global affairs ... and become world-ready."

Apart from being world-savvy, children are also trained to improve their EQ. Nurture Kids, which started EQ lessons last October for children between three and nine years old, believes that EQ should be taught at a young age before "negative coping behaviour patterns set in".

Nurture Kids director Denise Ang said: "EQ plays a large part in determining success later on in life, and often children underperform in school because they are experiencing social or emotional issues."

According to the centres, they try to anticipate demand when it comes to coming up with new courses.

Mr Eugene Tay, who runs creative writing workshops for children and youth between four and 18 years old, said that when he started his company, Monsters Under The Bed, about five years ago, such enrichment programmes were unheard of. His company charges between S\$450 and S\$580 for a term of 10 lessons.

"It was just tuition, tuition and tuition, and I decided to set up this company to go the other direction — cater to young parents who may want something different," he said.

NOT ALL ARE BORN EQUAL

While the proliferation of enrichment and tuition lessons could lead to concerns that parents who are well-off can give their children a head start in life, sociologist Paulin Straughan argued that social inequality is inevitable.

The associate lecturer at the National University of Singapore said: "The larger question here is ... without the benefit of earlier intervention, would the kid still succeed in the education system?"

She added that it is pertinent to ensure that children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds do not suffer. Said the former Nominated Member of Parliament: "MOE cannot assume that all children have the benefit of enrichment, and start formal education from the base that most of the kids are at, which is, no enrichment."

Zhangde Primary School principal Jaswant Sroya reiterated that "all children are given an equal opportunity to succeed"

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if they pay attention during classes and attend the additional classes offered by the school.

While noting that the enrichment and tuition classes could cause more stress on children, Ms Sroya added that those who are academically weak could benefit from personalised attention if tuition and enrichment classes offer that.

Not all parents think that enrichment and tuition lessons are the way to go.

Homemaker Jenny Lim, 45, does not see the need to send her daughter, who is in Primary 5, to any of these classes.

Mrs Lim pointed out that children already face pressure from school examinations. They also have to stay back in school occasionally for co-curricular activities, thus reducing the time they have to themselves, she said.

"There's no need to add on to the stress that they are already facing."