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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increasingly large amount of policies implemented by the Singapore government in order to give children of low socio-economic status (SES) a better start in life. This study looks at measuring the impact of KidSTART, one of the initiatives implemented by the government in 2016 to support parents and children of the lower-income bracket. KidSTART consists of three initiatives: Home Visitation, where medical professionals and trained volunteers visit parents of children between 1 and 3 years old to educate them about nutrition and early childhood development, Playgroups, where sessions are held in volunteer centres by trained and qualified volunteers to teach parents vital skills and promote parent-child bonding through play, and Childcare Support, where ambassadors are sent to selected pre-schools to help children meet key developmental milestones and serve as advisors to parents and pre-schools to help these children flourish.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

KidSTART was an initiative put into place by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and jointly managed by the Ministries of Education and Social and Family Development in 2016. To be eligible for KidSTART, one must have a child under 6 years of age,

have a gross monthly household income under \$1900 or a gross monthly per capita income under \$650, and reside in one of the regions served by KidSTART, being Kreta Ayer, Bukit Merah, Taman Jurong, Boon Lay and Geylang Serai. KidSTART has since benefitted over 1,000 children and plans to expand it to more areas and cover a broader income group were announced in 2019.

KidSTART uses a three-pronged approach: the first being Home Visitations, where ECDA partners with KK Women and Children's Hospital to deliver regular home visitations to parents. These visitations are conducted from the antenatal period until the child is three years old, and are conducted by professionals with qualifications and/or relevant experience in health, early childhood development, or social services. Parents would receive support in skills and practical knowledge of parenting practices and developmental milestones across areas of child growth, health, and nutrition. In addition, regular group-based visits would be conducted in order to reinforce the lessons learnt during the home visitations, and the child would also be given help in enrolling into an appropriate pre-school programme.

The second programme is KidSTART Playgroups. These are weekly community-based playgroups for children aged between 1 and 3 years old and their caregivers, conducted at the facilities of partnered organisations such as WeLL centre, with the objectives of allowing parents and caregivers to build up skills in child development and foster parent-child bonding. Parents will afterward be given resources such that they can reinforce the lessons at home. These sessions will be conducted by ECDA-trained facilitators who have been recruited and have experience in dealing with young children.

The third programme is KidSTART preschools, to support selected Anchor pre-schools operated by PAP Community Foundation and NTUC First Campus are provided with additional resources and Child Enabling Executive personnel to improve engagement with parents and to improve the child's overall school readiness. This may include addressing barriers to preschool attendance or referrals to other support programmes to ensure their developmental needs are met.

1.2 Rationale

Though a large amount of research has been conducted into the importance of the early childhood period in determining how an individual later succeeds in life, not as many studies have investigated this phenomenon in Singapore, and many such studies were conducted before KidSTART was implemented. Thus the analysis of its success is superficial at best, with studies mentioning how many people KidSTART has benefitted without detailing their experiences. Therefore, this paper would attempt to study KidSTART and its impact using a qualitative approach.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How has KidSTART impacted its beneficiaries?
 - a. Developing parenting skills
 - b. Developing parent-child bond
 - c. Helping children achieve key developmental milestones
2. How might KidSTART be improved further?
 - a. Clarity of communication

- b. Convenience of access

1.4 Thesis Statement

KidSTART has been successful at supporting parents with child development, and should be expanded by making communication clearer and access more convenient for parents of low SES.

1.5 Scope of Research/Delimitations

Limited to current or former beneficiaries and executors of the KidSTART initiative, including but not limited to parents, volunteers, medical professionals involved in home visitation, organisers, and staff at ECDA that are involved in the KidSTART programme. Specifically focused as much as possible on the KidSTART Playgroups initiative and its community partners and organisers, as well as its impacts and potential challenges facing the programme.

1.6 Significance of Research/Usefulness

This study hopes to:

1. Provide information about the impacts of KidSTART
2. Determine how KidSTART might be improved

1.7 Limitations of Research

Restricted sampling pool and time limitations means that evidence collected may not be sufficient

Social desirability bias may cause respondents to not reply honestly about the problems with KidSTART or the challenges they face

COVID-19 has severely restricted the functionality of KidSTART meaning certain sampling methods are unavailable and the data collected may not fully reflect the KidSTART initiative as functioning right now

Political nature of this paper means that respondents may choose not to mention the problems or challenges facing KidSTART (Note: Many interviewees said during the interview process that they wished to clear their responses with their bosses/ECDA first, due to the sensitive nature of this programme)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

International Studies on Parenting

Studies have long demonstrated the beneficial effects of parenting quality on children's language development, cognition, and school readiness (Bornstein, 2002). Tamis-LeMonda and Lugo-Gil (2008) define three key metrics of parenting that may impact this: *Parenting Sensitivity* refers to "parent's attunement to their children's cues, emotions, interests, and capabilities in ways that balance children's needs for support and children's needs for autonomy". *Cognitive Stimulation* refers to "parents' didactic efforts to enrich their children's cognitive and language development by engaging children in activities that promote learning and by offering language-rich environments to their children". *Parents' warmth* refers to "parents' expressions of affection and

respect toward their children and is thought to support skills for learning such as mastery, security, autonomy, and self-efficacy”. This study goes on to find that parenting quality, as defined by these three factors, is directly linked to child development in a majority of the cases and that a high quantity of all three factors led to the highest chance of a good outcome for the child, with an increase in cognitive ability, self-discipline, and learning capacity. Therefore, it can be concluded that any initiative like KidSTART would need to target these three specific areas to substantially increase the chances of a good outcome for the child.

Studies on the Impact of fewer resources on parenting

Childhood poverty has long been linked to negative outcomes in adulthood. Low familial income in early childhood has been linked to reduced chances of getting a degree and lower levels of income in adulthood (Duncan et al., 2012 & Duncan and Maguson, 2013). Furthermore, familial income per capita has been linked to child outcomes at ages as late as 36 (Lugo-Gil and Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Further, it has been found that exposure to adverse conditions below the age of 5 have a far greater impact on a child’s emotional and cognitive development than said exposure in late adolescence or adulthood (Duncan et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that fewer resources can negatively impact the quality of parenting, and intervention at ages below 5 has the greatest effect on a child’s cognitive and emotional development, as well as their success later in life (Duncan et al., 2012).

Furthermore, families of low socio-economic status often have lower amounts of social capital. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is based on several factors, including obligations, expectations, norms, and trustworthiness. In the context of parenting, social capital is divided

into two categories, with home-based (or parent-child) social capital, which is often based on parent-child communication and interaction, and makes children more likely to have good relationships with their parents. The other kind of social capital is external social capital, or the relationships formed between parents and other parents, parents and teachers, or parents and other adults. This kind of social capital is built on parent participation in schools and parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and often affects how much social capital a child has early on in their life (Capriano & Kimbro, 2012). A low amount of social capital has been linked to poor performance in schools due to the reduced amount of help available to a child, and due to a feeling of social isolation in certain cases (Capriano & Kimbro, 2012).

Application of studies in the Singapore context

Some research has been conducted into these trends in the Singapore context. In a study based on 40 interviews conducted in Singapore, Ebbeck and Gokhale (2004) found that there was a significant disparity in expectations between the parents of young children of low SES and the childcare centres these children were being sent to. Teachers at childcare centres expected children of a certain age to meet certain developmental milestones, such as fluent speech and being able to independently use the toilet, but parents of low SES did not have such expectations. Moreover, only 14% of parents surveyed reported to believe in reasoning with their children as a disciplinary tool, compared to all teachers surveyed. Ebbert and Gokhale suggest that this could be because parents of low SES need to work additional hours to feed the families, and they may also not be equipped with the skills or knowledge about developmental milestones.

Chong (2017) found that among a survey of 48 mothers in Singapore of low economic status, only five were actively involved in their child's life as much as a median parent of higher economic status would be, with the most prominent reason being the long work hours required to feed their family, especially since most of those surveyed were poorly educated and a few were even single parents. Further, several testified that they had not enough time to care for their kid, as they worked very late "just to feed the family" (Chong, 2017). 8 of the mothers surveyed had latchkey children (defined as children who are left at home alone for some regular period of time during the day), and thus would need after-school care to help their children develop, but none were able to afford it (Chong, 2017). Another key factor cited was that parents were not equipped to teach the child. Among the 48 mothers, 15 identified that their main issue with parenting was that they did not feel equipped to teach their child (Chong, 2017). Therefore, it was found that these parents often lacked the confidence to effectively discipline their children.

Interviews of parents found that the prevailing view among them was that apart from the differently abled, children from families of lower SES were considerably disadvantaged in their learning (Lien Foundation, 2018). Professionals interviewed acknowledged that these parents faced significant challenges as many of them were poorly educated and had to work odd shifts to feed their children, taking away time for parent and child interaction (Lien Foundation, 2018). Moreover, these parents faced a dearth of knowledge about parenting and developmental milestones, and lacked the skills and/or confidence to parent effectively (Chong, 2017 and Lien Foundation, 2018). Although there has been a push for further help to be rendered to these parents recently by both the government and NGOs, the push is ill-coordinated and may have

resulted in further confusion (Lien Foundation, 2018). Therefore, parents may need social workers to show them what initiatives they may be eligible for and how to apply (Chong, 2017).

KidSTART is one of the most prominent programmes implemented in Singapore, and is intended to address some of these concerns by adopting a multi-disciplinary approach (ECDA, 2016).

KidSTART was intended to be a holistic programme to help develop these children, through the component programmes of Home Visitations and Playgroups, while also addressing structural challenges faced by these parents of low SES, such as getting their child enrolled in preschool (ECDA, 2016). As such, KidSTART is important to analyse, not just to determine its impact on a child's most important phase of development but also how it could be improved to further benefit families of low SES and give their children a "good start in life".

KidSTART

KidSTART consists of three initiatives, as mentioned earlier, with the overall stated goal being to "enable children from low-income families to have a good start in life", by "building an ecosystem of support around the child" (ECDA, 2016). As of current, the government is providing some support toward the KidSTART initiative. Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Social and Family Development, Associate Professor Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, mentioned in Parliament on the 5th of March 2020 that they have received mostly positive feedback from KidSTART (Parliament, 2020). Further, he mentioned that the Ministry of Social and Family Development, in conjunction with ECDA, plans to raise the KidSTART eligibility criteria from a gross monthly household income of \$1900 to \$2500 and plans to expand to the Woodlands and Bedok constituencies, allowing for the initiative to benefit 5000

more children. This expansion is still currently underway and thus this paper does not make substantial comment on the feasibility or success of such an expansion.

Furthermore, MSF has since launched the Growing Together with KidSTART initiative, aiming at engaging members of the public to provide regular contributions or volunteering for the KidSTART initiative. In the period since last September, Growing Together with KidSTART has received \$800,000 in donations, with the large majority of \$600,000 being from a single party, the Real Estate Developers Association of Singapore. (Parliament, 2020) This amount of money must however be put into context. KidSTART is estimated to cost an average of \$20,000 per child (Straits Times, 2016). Therefore, this amount of money raised can only account for 40 children. However, Growing Together with KidSTART does not only receive monetary donations, with over 250 volunteers signing up specifically with the recruitment programme by Growing Together with KidSTART, acting in supporting roles and working in tandem with official ECDA facilitators.

Methodology

Due to the broad scope of KidSTART as an initiative, this study will be specifically focused on the KidSTART Playgroups initiative, which may involve parents, children, volunteers, community partners or charity organisations, and organisers of the KidSTART initiative.

Due to the small sample size, this study would adopt a qualitative approach to the investigation of whether or not KidSTART Playgroups has been successful. These interviews would mostly be with parents of low SES who benefit from the initiative, volunteers or organisers affiliated with

community partners of KidSTART, and organisers of KidSTART affiliated with the Ministry of Social and Family Development or the Early Childhood Development Agency.

These interviews would be structured to find out details on how KidSTART conducts its day-to-day operations, the participant's impressions of the impact of KidSTART, and potential challenges and areas for improvement of the KidSTART initiative. These questions are divided into two kinds, for participants and for volunteers of the programme, and each questionnaire is again broadly divided into four categories: Knowledge, Communication, Convenience, and Impact.

Questions in the Knowledge category seek to find out what challenges parents of low SES face, what exactly KidSTART aims to do for its participants, detailed information about the day-to-day workings of KidSTART, and their general impressions of the programme. Questions in the Communication category seek to find out how KidSTART seeks to impact key parenting knowledge or skill sets, and whether parents may misunderstand or purposefully ignore such advice. Questions in the Convenience category seek to find out what KidSTART demands of its participants, whether participants are able to fulfil these demands (i.e attend KidSTART activities), whether there are any attendance problems with the programme, and the enthusiasm of the participants. Questions in the Impact category focus on the effect KidSTART has on parents of low SES, the effectiveness of certain programmes, and potential shortfalls in the way KidSTART chooses to address certain problems.

For this study, a total of 5 people were able to be interviewed. 2 are associated with the Early Childhood Development Association, and serve in organisational roles where they act as liaisons between ECDA and the volunteer centres. The remaining interviewees are volunteer leaders or

coordinators associated with independent partners of KidSTART, belonging to Tasek Jurong, WeLL Centre Henderson, and Beyond Social Services, which are all non-profit non-governmental organisations which host KidSTART programmes, specifically KidSTART Playgroups. Due to the politically sensitive nature of this study, all but one of the interviewees have requested that their names and exact positions in their organisations be kept anonymous, and thus for the sake of convenience all information pertaining to their identities has been removed.

Discussion and Analysis

Interviewees noted that those of low socioeconomic status often face many challenges. A majority of these challenges are related to their financial situation, with an extremely common issue being unemployment. This can often be caused or lead to incarceration, observed multiple interviewees, and they cited low credentials and domestic issues as other problems facing parents of the lower income group. For parenting specifically, parents of low socioeconomic status often face difficulties in parenting, having to devote a large amount of time to their jobs and are unable to interact with their children in meaningful ways, facing nutritional challenges due to low income, and lack of confidence and skills in the field of parenting. Furthermore, some parents may lack knowledge of key developmental milestones and thus neglect their children, a fact that is consistent with the findings of Ebbeck and Gokhale (2004) as mentioned in the above literature review. Interviewees noted that these issues are all interrelated and interconnected, and the root cause of this is poverty, and KidSTART can only help the parents with knowledge about parenting and advice in this field, but not solve the problem of poverty at its root.

KidSTART was seen by interviewees as a platform for parents to learn. an interviewee noted that KidSTART served as a platform for parents to build connections with each other, with facilitators, and with the partner organisations. It was further mentioned that through the medium of KidSTART, parents would feel more comfortable approaching the charity centres and sometimes would act of their own accord to approach volunteers affiliated with the partner organisation to seek help on issues unrelated to KidSTART or parenting, which is rare. Teo (2018) noted that people of low socioeconomic status are reluctant to seek help from charity organisations because they are wary of becoming “beggars” or labelled as “leeches”, and that often it feels extremely debasing and undignified to seek out such help in a society like Singapore where meritocracy is constantly emphasised. KidSTART provides a platform for these parents to form connections with charity organisations and the volunteers and organisers there, and thus feel more comfortable approaching them in a discreet manner. The interviewee stressed that his organisation has seen plenty of parents approach them through the platform of KidSTART and that his organisation tries its best to resolve these issues or refer them to an appropriate agency to obtain further assistance.

Interestingly, an interviewee noted that initially, many parents of the lower income group are uninterested in participating in KidSTART when first introduced to the programme. an interviewee attributed this to the innate resistance of parents of lower socioeconomic status to so-called “enrichment” programmes. The prevalent perception amongst parents of lower income, he explains, is that enrichment programmes are not necessary for a child’s development, nor are they worth it, and KidSTART is often associated with these sorts of enrichment programmes, despite charging no fee and requiring nothing of its participants. As such, many parents tend to

see KidSTART as unimportant. However, the interviewee notes, when parents begin attending KidSTART sessions and see other children who have been attending for a longer period of time, they begin to realise that their child is behind others in terms of development and milestones, and start to question why there is a delay between this. Often, he reasons, this delay is caused by non optimal parenting strategies, and these parents of lower socioeconomic status who attend a few sessions begin to see the value of KidSTART in helping their children meet milestones and helping themselves increase their knowledge of parenting. He cites one incident, where he witnessed a mother harshly scolding her young children when they began crying. After two months of attending KidSTART Playgroups sessions, however, this mother began to ask questions to her children and attempt to console them instead of simply scolding them. He credits this development in parenting skills to KidSTART.

Attendance is also an important challenge faced by the organisers and facilitators of KidSTART. An interviewee noted that on a good week, the attendance rate hovers around 50-60%. He further noted that this is already considered excellent for a programme targeted at those of lower socioeconomic status, especially since parents of lower socioeconomic status often have to work weekends, take care of elderly family members, and counselling or doctor's appointments, and have very little time to spare for such sessions. He notes that on most other programmes targeting a similar income group hosted by his centre, attendance rate is normally around 30-40% on any given session. However, other interviewees indicate differently, with one citing that parents are often extremely enthusiastic about the programme, and that because his centre is located relatively close to the flats where the parents are staying, it is not inconvenient for them to attend, with parents only missing sessions whenever they had important prior commitments

like family, sick children, or doctor's appointments. He did not, however, provide information about precise attendance rates.

Interviewees noted that KidSTART Playgroups is normally conducted in the centre, with weekly 2 hour long sessions. Sometimes, however, excursions to the zoo or other educational destinations are planned, and an interviewee remarked that he has observed that such trips often bring up the attendance rate of new participants and are totally novel experiences for their children. He cites that most families of lower socioeconomic status are either unable to afford such trips or cannot take time out of their schedules to go on such excursions, and therefore their kids have never been to the zoo or aquarium, and KidSTART provides an opportunity for these kids to gain new experiences and interact with other kids of their age group. Furthermore, an interviewee notes that most kids involved in the KidSTART programme grew up in a troubled environment, with such family issues as domestic conflict, bad role models, and financial worries, and therefore do not have many positive childhood experiences, and the creation of such experiences through the medium of excursions organised by KidSTART can aid greatly toward the social and emotional development of a child. This is consistent with the findings of Skodol et al. (2009) and Bethell, Jones and Gombojav (2019), who found that positive experiences in early childhood carry a strong correlation to socioemotional development in young children and can carry on later into life, increasing resilience against personality disorders and adult mental welfare.

Further, KidSTART also allowed both children and parents of lower socioeconomic status to improve. Interviewees cited that children who attended KidSTART regularly became more outgoing and less individualistic, developing social intelligence and emotional maturity, and

beginning to take an interest in reading, while parents would become more disciplined after understanding the importance of good role models, setting a schedule for themselves and for their children, and making a strong effort to interact more with their children. This leads to children who were previously behind their peers to begin meeting developmental milestones, and stronger parent-child bonds. However, one interviewee warned that a sizable portion of the enrolled participants do not attend or attend only sporadically, and in such cases he observes that their children see little to no improvement, and says that his centre cannot do anything about it, nor does he have any reasonable solution for increasing attendance further.

Interviewees further stressed that KidSTART was not perfect. Several interviewees explained that every family that comes to them for help is unique and a programme like KidSTART, though a good programme and mostly successful in its implementation, does not and cannot address all the problems that a family of lower socioeconomic status may face. Furthermore, one interviewee (the same one who provided the data on attendance rates earlier) noted that despite the attendance rate of around 60% that his centre normally sees, they still find themselves shorthanded. Interestingly, he explained that many other volunteers who are not trained by ECDA or certified in early childhood development participate in some way in the KidSTART programme, whether it is through watching older children while parents and younger children attend the KidSTART programme or acting in supporting roles in tandem with official ECDA certified and trained facilitators. He stated that his centre needs more of these volunteers and more facilitators as well. However, other interviewees indicate differently, with one mentioning that the ratio of volunteers and facilitators to participant families is around 1 to 2 or 1 to 3, enabling the facilitators to build stronger bonds of trust with the families, be intimately familiar

with the challenges facing each child, and engage in 1 on 1 interactions with the parents and children of KidSTART. As such, it can be concluded that only certain centres are short in manpower, but this is still a problem that needs to be addressed by KidSTART.

In general, despite the manpower problems cited by some interviewees, interviewees generally supported the government's move toward increasing funding for KidSTART and expanding it as announced in the National Day Rally 2019. They cited that there are still many more families who are living in areas not covered by KidSTART, and would benefit tremendously from this initiative.

Conclusion

It is therefore evident that those involved in KidSTART hold positive opinions toward it and are optimistic of its success. In the discussion of KidSTART's success, it has been reported that KidSTART has been successful in influencing parents and children, through meeting the social and emotional needs of young children of low SES that would not have been otherwise met, educating parents of low SES about developmental milestones and enabling their children to meet these milestones, imparting vital information about parenting and relevant skill sets to parents, and building an environment of support around the growing child. However, KidSTART is not perfect. KidSTART cannot fully address all of the problems that parents of low SES may face, parents may not be enthusiastic about KidSTART and may not make full use of the resources available to them, and certain partners of KidSTART, crucial to the initiative's success in the areas where the partners are responsible, may not have sufficient manpower to conduct KidSTART properly.

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