



Being older than my classmates was difficult at first. Some of them would ask questions like, 'Why are you so old?' and I would just say, 'I don't know.'

— Miss Chew Khee Gek, 20, on starting Primary 1 at 11

BY THE NUMBERS

60

The number of non-registration cases the Singapore Children's Society saw in the past 10 years. On average, these children missed out on four to five months of school. About half missed school for three months or less, while a handful missed school for between one and two years.

Twenty-year-old starts primary school at 11, does her PSLE at 15, but gets 10 points in O levels last year

Late, but not behind

Reports by TAN TAM MEI
tantam@sph.com.sg

Like most children, Miss Chew Khee Gek, now 20, was excited to start her first day of Primary 1 back in 2005.

But she was almost four years older than her classmates.

And, at 11, she was not even the oldest in the family to start Primary 1 that year. That distinction went to her 12-year-old brother. Joining them in Primary 1 was their nine-year-old sister. All three siblings went to the same school, but were in different classes.

But Miss Chew is now the pride of her family after managing to score 10 points in five subjects in her O levels last year. She hopes to take up a biomedical course at a local polytechnic.

Now that her four-year wait to get an education has paid off, she can reflect on her unusual childhood. Unlike in some other countries, hardly any children here miss out on starting Primary 1 at the right age. (See report on facing page.)

In Miss Chew's case, it was because her mother was suffering from depression and her father was working long hours in construction. Education was not the main focus for the family, so she and her siblings were not sent to school even after reaching school-going age.

Miss Chew was able to register and start her first year at Blangah Rise Primary School only at the age of 11, with the help of Ms Indranee Rajah, the MP for Tanjong Pagar Group Representative Constituency and now Senior Minister of State for Education and Law.

Miss Chew, the second of four children, said: "Being older than my classmates was difficult at first. Some would ask questions like, 'Why are you so old?' and I would just say, 'I don't know'."

"But eventually, they started to treat me like an older sister and I treated them like my younger siblings."

Before attending school, Miss Chew and her siblings would usually spend their days at the play-

ground below their flat in Redhill.

When asked whether she had found it strange that other children went to play much later in the day, Miss Chew said: "They didn't talk about school and I just assumed that they were of school-going age and I was not."

'SUPER EXCITED'

She said when their chance came to start their education, she and her siblings were "super excited because we had never attended school or lessons before".

"But after entering the school, we were a bit scared because everyone spoke in English. And coming from a Mandarin-speaking family, the language was very foreign to us," she said.

Initially, she was ashamed of her poor English language skills, but with the encouragement of her teachers and their efforts to translate lessons taught in English into Mandarin for the siblings, she began to speak up more often. Within six months, she was comfortable conversing in English.

Volunteers at the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) centre at Redhill helped the siblings by mentoring and tutoring them in various subjects and checking on their well-being at home and in school.

The CDAC got to know Miss Chew and her family when her elder brother accidentally walked into



EDUCATION TO BUILD IDENTITY AND SOCIAL COHESION

"The CE (Compulsory Education) Act was... introduced to ensure that all Singaporean children attend mainstream primary schools — to give them a sound educational foundation that prepares them for life and work, as well as further education and training, and to provide a common educational experience that allows our children to collectively build national identity and social cohesion."

— A Ministry of Education spokesman

their centre, thinking it was a "free library". When volunteers there asked to see his student pass, they realised he did not have one as he was not schooling.

Eventually, Miss Chew and her elder brother did so well in their first year that they were allowed to skip a year and go to Primary 3.

After taking her Primary School Leaving Examination at the age of 15, Miss Chew entered Outram Secondary School, where she did her O levels last year.

Her elder brother dropped out of school when he was in Secondary 3 and is working part-time to help support the family before enlisting into national service. Her younger sister and brother are in Secondary 3 and Primary 2 respectively.

Miss Chew said: "When I was younger, I didn't understand what my dad gave up (for this family). But I peeked into his wallet one day, and saw that all he took to work every day was just \$2. He gave all the rest of his earnings to us."

"I think my mum and dad are most excited that we are receiving an education. They told me that I must be grateful to all the people who gave us the chance to go to school."

Her father, construction site supervisor Chew Van Yin, 53, said in Mandarin: "I did feel like I had let my children down in the beginning. But I tried my best and now if they can study, I am contented."

DOING WELL: Miss Chew Khee Gek (above, left), 20, and the case worker in charge of her family, Ms Diong Siew Kuan, from the Chinese Development Assistance Council.

TNP PHOTO: GARY GOH

ON CHILDREN WHO START SCHOOL LATE

"Many of them have difficulties catching up academically, especially if they had little or no pre-school education beforehand. Additionally, if they start Primary 1 too late into the year, they may not receive the full extent of academic support available in school.

"For the most part, as long as the child is not significantly bigger-sized or taller than his/her classmates, they would not have much difficulty fitting in. However, this can become an issue when the child grows older. There is quite a difference between a nine-year-old fitting in with a class of seven-year-olds in Primary 1, and a 14-year-old fitting in with a class of 12-year-olds in Primary 6."

— Mr Benedict Kuah, assistant director of Singapore Children's Society's Research and Outreach Centre

HOW MISSING CHILDREN ARE TRACED

At the end of each annual Primary 1 registration exercise, the MOE will refer to the list of unregistered children and send reminders to their parents. It also offers assistance to place the child in a mainstream primary school.

If there is no response to the letters, MOE's liaison officers will visit the parents to find out the reasons for non-registration and to offer support, the MOE spokesman said.

She added that family service centres, self-help groups and grassroots organisation often help identify such children to MOE for follow-up support, including helping to place the child in a school and providing financial aid.

MOE has a longstanding arrangement with the Singapore Children's Society (SCS) to provide counselling and support to these parents, she said.

Mr Benedict Kuah, assistant director of SCS' research and outreach centre, said they work with the families to place the child into a school as soon as possible and also assist them with other issues.

MOST UNREGISTERED PRI 1 CHILDREN LIVE OVERSEAS

About 1,500 children are not registered for Primary 1 by the end of the annual Primary 1 registration exercise every year, a Ministry of Education (MOE) spokesman said.

The majority of them are typically residing overseas.

Others, such as children with special needs and homeschoolers, have or will eventually get MOE's permission to pursue other forms of education.

In each cohort, about 50 children are homeschooled and about 300 are enrolled in the madrasahs.

But every year, five or six parents are unaware of their obligations under the Compulsory Education (CE) Act, or are not familiar with Primary 1 registration procedures, or might be having pressing familial issues, said the spokesman.

Under the Act, a parent who does not register a child for primary school can be fined up to \$5,000 or jailed for up to a year, or both.

The spokesman said that MOE has to date chosen not to pursue legal action as "such an odd case would involve complex familial issues that the parent(s) grapple with".

— Rennie Whang

Late, but keen to learn

Boy, eight, starts primary school late because mum was worried about fees

PAGE 4



OFFICIAL HELP:
The Singapore Children's Society and the Ministry of Education intervened to help Amir (right) start school this year.
TNP PHOTO: CHOO CHWEE HUA



Boy, 8, starts primary school a year late because mum was worried about fees

Late, but keen to learn

Report by **RENNIE WHANG**
wrennie@sph.com.sg

When classes started at New Town Primary School earlier this month, one Primary 1 pupil was especially glad to be there.

Amir is eight and had missed out on Primary 1 the year before because he had not been registered.

If not for the intervention of the Singapore Children's Society and the Ministry of Education (MOE), he might have missed going this year as well.

"I felt bored not going to school," said Amir.

He added that he had envied other children in school because they were surrounded by friends.

Amir's case is rare, but not unique. Every year, the MOE sees five or six cases of children who were not registered for primary school. (See report on previous page.)

When TNP met Amir and his mother, who wanted to be known only as Madam Sofia, at a playground in the Commonwealth area recently, he was running around with his seven-year-old sister, also in Primary 1 this year, and six-year-old brother.

His sister entered kindergarten at the same time as him, as such they are currently in the same year.

"That was what he was doing when he didn't attend school – stay at home and play with his siblings," said Madam Sofia, 29.

The part-time dishwasher also has a four-year-old son. A three-year-old daughter has been adopted by relatives.

Madam Sofia said she didn't register Amir for school because she was worried about the fees.

She was also concerned that they do not have a home of their own and moved often. If they did so again, she feared they would end up living too far from the school.

The family has bunked in the homes of friends, but they have been quite stable for the last three years, sharing a two-room flat with a friend.

Madam Sofia, who makes \$400 working on weekends, said: "Sometimes the kids would ask, 'Whose home is this?'"

"I would tell them, 'Mama cannot say anything.' I just wanted to make sure they have a roof over their heads."

Amir would sometimes tell her about wanting to go to school, said Madam Sofia, who has an O-level certification. Her husband studied until Primary 2 and earns about \$1,000 a month as a full-time dishwasher.

"But I didn't know what to say, so I kept quiet. I felt guilty. But I don't want to tell the kids my (financial) problems. They are too young."

Before this year, Amir's only schooling was half a year of K2 in 2011.

Madam Sofia said her husband's friend had stayed over one night and asked: "How come you never put your son in school? You better put him in".

He told her to approach the nearby PAP Community Foundation kindergarten. She did, and Amir and his sister were enrolled.

But when Amir's classmates went on to Primary 1, he was left behind.

Madam Sofia remembers placing him on a waiting list at New Town Primary School, but left it at that when he didn't get a spot.

WILLING BUT UNINFORMED

The MOE referred his case to the Singapore Children's Society last year and a social worker, Ms Lee Poh Ling, went to their old address and left a letter. Madam Sofia later called her.

Ms Lee recalled: "She was very willing to place her child in primary school, but just did not know how to go about doing it at the time."

Amir repeated half a year of K2 last year to prepare himself for Primary 1 this year.

He and his younger sister are on MOE's Financial Assistance Scheme, which pays for their books, uniforms and some canteen meals.

On top of that, Madam Sofia sends them to school with bread and some pocket money sometimes.

"(Amir) is very understanding. His sister can use up \$3 in one day, but he will use it over two to three days," she said.

Amir, who wants to be a policeman when he grows up, said he likes school and has many friends.

One certainty is that he will not be playing truant.

"If I don't go to school, I will be scolded by teacher," he said.