

Prepping for arts school



Some parents are enrolling their children in preparatory classes to gain admission to the School of the Arts



Venessa Lee

When Kimaya Bhuta was about eight years old, she told her parents she wanted to apply to the School of the Arts (Sota), Singapore's only national pre-tertiary specialised arts school, which she had heard about from her friends.

Recalling how she had enjoyed school concerts in kindergarten,

where she danced, as well as hosted and sang in Hindi and English, her parents started looking for enrichment classes in the performing arts. Last year, when she was in Primary 4 at Tanjong Katong Primary School, Kimaya, 10, enrolled in the Direct School Admission (DSA) preparatory course at Kids Performing Academy Of The Arts, where she engages in activities such as improvisation and dialogues in weekly group lessons.

Her father, Mr Devang Bhuta, 41, who works in banking, says: "Initially, the idea was to give her exposure to theatre. We didn't realise that the children would have to build a portfolio."

To apply for admission to Sota, all candidates must go through a selec-

tion process that includes a portfolio review, an audition and an interview.

Preparatory courses such as the one Kimaya is taking, offered by some enrichment centres, help children prepare for application to Sota, which offers a six-year integrated arts and academic curriculum based on the International Baccalaureate, and also to other secondary schools that emphasise the arts.

Fees for Kids Performing's direct admission programme, for upper primary pupils, range from \$160 to \$240 a session, which lasts up to three hours. A year's fees range from \$6,400 to \$9,600.

Some say such enrichment classes are another example of how the children of parents who are able to afford the fees have an advantage over those in poorer households when entering top schools. Sota's enrolment is capped at 200 places a year. Every year, for each spot available, there are usually four to five applicants vying for entry, according to figures provided by the school.

Dr Paulin Straughan, a sociologist at Singapore Management University, says: "Parents may not have enough confidence that the selection criterion is robust enough to see through the frills, that (the school) is able to tease out raw talent from the packaged product."

She says the application should be one that a 12-year-old child is able to put together.

There are no easy answers to concerns about meritocracy, she adds. While an enrichment system that disadvantages those with less resources is not desirable, "neither do we want to disadvantage kids whose parents are able to nurture their talent", she says.

Moreover, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, a sociologist at National University of Singapore, says prep classes can help a child improve his portfolio, but the lack of genuine talent cannot be papered over by taking preparatory classes.

"For those with neither the potential and talent, nor the passion, I doubt preparatory work would be helpful. A sharp assessor would be able to detect the lack of creativity in the works submitted."

Rukshana Driver, 16, took a preparatory class for Sota, which she says "widened her skill set". While she is now a Year 5 student at Sota, she says her interest in visual arts was always driven by herself.

"I started at five and really liked it. At the age of 11, I found out about Sota and wanted to apply," she says.

Mrs Shalini Kapoor, director of Little Artists Art Studio, noticed that Rukshana had "highly aesthetic colour combinations" when she was a pre-schooler attending an art class at Mrs Kapoor's studio. She also taught Rukshana tech-

niques such as how to apply quick-drying plaster of Paris for sculpting during the girl's preparatory class at the age of about 11.

At the studio, preparatory classes for upper primary pupils start at about \$200 a month.

Some parents and children say preparatory enrichment classes for youngsters aiming to apply to Sota in Primary 6 offer benefits, such as the child becoming more confident, as well as a targeted approach in the highly competitive process of applying to Sota.

Performing arts academies such as Kids Performing are also places casting agents go to when they are looking for child actors.

Ms Linette Lim, 44, whose daughter, Annette Yeong, 10, is a student at the centre, is taking a broader view on having the younger of her two daughters take the preparatory course.

Having witnessed many potential undergraduates fumble at interviews, the admissions director at Singapore Management University feels that the programme helps in "personal branding" by training Annette to become more articulate. While acting is Annette's main interest, she also does visual arts and musical theatre, as well as ballet and jazz dance, and she plans to attend an acting masterclass in New York at the end of the year.

"I like acting the most because I don't only have to be Annette, I can be someone else," says the Primary 5 pupil at Methodist Girls' School.

Sota principal Lim Geok Cheng says: "We do know that some of our students attend preparatory lessons. Sota is trying to level the playing field by conducting workshops in portfolio compilation and submission through the primary schools."

Moreover, the school has a range of exercises to identify talent and taking preparatory classes can be counter-productive, she says.

"Students have been admitted based on their exposure to the arts through aesthetics lessons or CCAs in their primary schools. We have even seen some talented students who made it through the auditions based on their personal learning from watching YouTube videos."

Jan Ong, 17, a Year 5 student at Sota, is among those who did not attend prep classes for admission. He had heard about Sota from one of his teachers at Edgefield Primary School and put together a portfolio a month before the application date, unlike others who may have spent two years preparing one.

He says: "It's possible to get in on your own merit and with your own passion and skill if you show that you're interested and have the potential to grow."

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Rukshana Driver, 16, with her mother Daisy, 45, posing with an artwork the teenager did around the age of 12. ST PHOTO VENESSA LEE



Ten-year-olds Kimaya Bhuta and Annette Yeong with a trainer at Kids Performing Academy Of The Arts. PHOTO ADRISSON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES