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## article

# Guiding the young child: trajectories of parents' educational work in Singapore

Kristina Göransson, [kristina.goransson@soch.lu.se](mailto:kristina.goransson@soch.lu.se)  
Lund University, Sweden

Singapore has established a reputation as a top performer in international student assessment tests and rankings, which is usually understood to be the result of a competitive education system and a distinct Asian parenting culture. Drawing on ethnographic data, the aim of the article is to explore the emotional and moral dimensions of Singaporean parents' educational work, and how they cope with complex and sometimes contradictory demands in raising their young children. The article is based on interviews and observations with parents of pre- and primary school-aged children. The reasons for focusing specifically on this category of parents was that previous research indicates that parental involvement in children's education in Singapore is most intense during this period, and that parents everywhere are faced with increasing expectations to attend to their young children's learning and cognitive development. The findings contest simplistic interpretations of intensive parenting in East Asia, especially when considering the role of social class, gender and generational change.

**Key words** parenting • educational work • childhood • ethnography • parental involvement • Singapore

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## Introduction

Singapore<sup>1</sup> has established a reputation as a top performer in international student assessment tests and rankings, which is usually understood to be the result of a competitive education system and a distinct Asian parenting culture, which prioritises school results above all. Such simplistic notions of Asian parenting styles, however, leave no room for a context-sensitive and nuanced understanding of parents' motivations and arrangements concerning their children's education. Drawing on ethnographic data, the aim of this article is to explore the emotional and moral dimensions of

Singaporean parents' educational work, and how they cope with complex and sometimes contradictory demands in raising their young children.

During my ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore parents across a range of class backgrounds expressed deep concern for their children's schooling. Their concern was not just about results and grades, but also their children's resilience and emotional wellbeing. Parents worried that their children would fall behind if 'learning gaps' in early childhood were not corrected in time, and that failure to get good grades in school could have a lifelong negative impact on a child's self-confidence. This can be theorised as a tension between the ambition to secure conventional career paths and success (for example, high grades, social status) versus nurturing of the child's own needs and interests and being attentive to his or her emotional wellbeing. [Bach and Christensen \(2017\)](#), among others, have used Gregory Bateson's concept of 'double bind' to theorise such conflicting ideas about 'proper' forms of parenthood and childhood among middle-class parents in Singapore (see also [Bregnbæk, 2016](#)). [Bach and Christensen \(2017: 136\)](#) argue that these conflicting or contradictory demands give rise to a 'meta-communicational deadlock', whereby parents feel powerless and uncertain 'about which course of action to follow'. In this article, however, I argue that Singaporean parents are by no means paralysed by these conflicting demands. On the contrary, this study reveals a multitude of strategies employed by parents across class backgrounds to manage the above mentioned double bind.

While balancing seemingly contradictory demands and aspirations likely contributes to the intensification of parenting, ethnographic research on parents' moral and emotional investments in their children's education and development in East Asia remains scarce (but see [Kang, 2016a; 2016b; Lan, 2018](#)). Questions regarding parental involvement, not only in Singapore but also in a global context, are significant, given the ever-growing education market, international student assessment tools, and parents' intensified role and engagement in their children's education everywhere. This article contributes to the body of research on contemporary parenting by showing how intensive parenting may vary in its manifestations based on social class, gender and cultural context.

## **Parents' educational aspirations in contemporary Singapore**

This study focuses on parents of pre- and primary school-aged children. There are two reasons for focusing specifically on this category of parents. First, previous research indicates that parental involvement in children's education in Singapore is most intense during this period, as compared to parents with older children ([Lai and Huang, 2004; Göransson, 2015; 2016](#)). Second, parents everywhere are faced with increasing expectations to attend to their young children's learning and cognitive development. The pressure on parents in this regard has been further reinforced by the growing influence of neuroscience, in particular the widespread claim that early childhood is the most critical period of cognitive development (see [Macvarish, 2016; Smyth and Craig, 2017](#)).

Anxieties about preparing one's children for the future, entangled with widely shared expectations as to what constitutes responsible parenting, drive Singaporean parents to devote substantial resources, time and energy in their children's upbringing ([Göransson, 2015; 2016; Bach and Christensen, 2017](#)). Supplementary training outside the school is a reflection of this trend. The number of private tuition and

learning centres in Singapore grows steadily; currently there are over 1,300 registered tuition and enrichment centres, compared with 700 in 2012 (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2020). According to the latest Household Expenditure Survey (2017/18), Singaporean families spend 1.4 billion Singapore dollars per year on tuition, more than twice as much as 15 years ago (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019a). Singapore is by no means unique in this regard. An abundance of international research shows that contemporary parenting increasingly centres on supporting children in their educational and extracurricular activities (Hays 1996; Lai and Huang, 2004; O'Brien, 2007; Gottzén, 2009; Abelman and Kang, 2013; Faircloth et al, 2013; Faircloth, 2014; Kang, 2016a; 2016b; Lan, 2018).

What makes Singapore stand out, however, is the way educational aspirations are entangled with 'an enduring narrative about a nation that nearly did not make it' (Koh and Chong, 2014: 625). This narrative, in which Singapore is construed as a small country with no resources other than its population, reaffirms a conviction that the only chance for national survival is to embrace globalisation and enhance the country's 'population quality' (Barr and Skrbis, 2008; Koh and Chong, 2014). In this context, education is seen as key to fostering a competitive and competent population that can ensure economic growth, social stability and national progress. The notion of children as investments, then, must be understood in relation to the impact of the Singaporean state on the lives of families and how it reaffirms ideas concerning the (future) value of children.

While the parents I met did not talk about their educational work as a patriotic duty, it is important to understand how the deeply ingrained the narrative of an exposed nation informs the pressure that Singaporean parents experience as they try to ensure their children will cope and succeed in school. Their fears of not doing enough or making the wrong decisions are tangible in the ethnographic material analysed in this article. To engage in their child's learning is viewed as a reflection of good parenting, and conversely, the failure to do so reflects bad and irresponsible parenting.

### **Intensive parenting and children as 'becomings'**

Parents' increased involvement in their children's academic achievement is usually understood as a manifestation of the cultural norm known as intensive parenting, according to which parents are expected to invest substantial time as well as emotional and financial resources in their children's upbringing (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003; O'Brien, 2007; Gottzén, 2009; Faircloth, 2014). Intensive parenting styles imply a future-oriented understanding of children's lives by their emphasis on the development of competitive individuals, as well as parents' responsibility to ensure that development (Katz, 2008; Lister, 2008). In this context, parents are expected to raise their children to be agile and flexible individuals who can thrive in the rapidly changing global market (Katz, 2008; Anagnost, 2013; Kang, 2016a). Children's lives are thus understood in light of what is referred to in childhood studies as 'becomings' rather than 'beings' (Qvortrup, 2005), and their academic achievement is now a central focus of parental caregiving. Several studies have linked intensive parenting to the reproduction and increase of socioeconomic stratification (Lareau 2003) as well as gender inequality, since the increased burden of care included in the norm of intensive parenting to a great extent falls on mothers (see Reay, 1998; 2000). These studies do not, however,

make clear how parents actively define and negotiate ideologies and norms of care in everyday life, and how the ‘doing’ of educational work may vary in its expressions.

In the East Asian context, the future-oriented understanding of children’s lives can be usefully explored in relation to what Yan (2016) has termed ‘descending familism’. This refers to a transformation of traditional norms of filial piety,<sup>2</sup> where the authority of the senior generation has weakened in tandem with an expanded flow of material and emotional resources to young children (hence descending). The focus on children is further heightened by a dramatic fertility decline and increasingly competitive education system, in Singapore as well as many other East Asian societies, where parents spend increasing resources on raising fewer children. Descending familism is based on intimacy rather than submission and hierarchy. However, as we will see, this does not mean that intergenerational relationships are conflict-free; on the contrary, the redefinitions of familial roles and relationships create new kinds of friction. It should also be noted that while there is a marked expansion of the resources flowing from parents to children, this has not led to the anticipated disruption of adult children’s responsibilities to elderly parents in many parts of East Asia (Croll, 2006; Göransson, 2009). In Singapore the practical centrality of the family is continuously reaffirmed in family policies and legislation, the most obvious example being the passage of the 1995 Maintenance of Parents Act, whereby adult children’s obligation to support old family members who cannot support themselves is prescribed by law.

## Method and data

This article is based on ethnographic data generated during three periods of fieldwork in Singapore from 2018 to 2019.<sup>3</sup> The empirical material includes in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers of pre- and primary school-aged children, fieldnotes from observations of extracurricular activities, such as homework support and home-schooling sessions, interviews with professionals, and numerous informal conversations. Different types of documents, such as leaflets and brochures from private learning centres as well as selected material from the mainstream media were also collected during fieldwork. Such ‘naturally occurring data’ (Silverman, 2006) have been useful in illustrating how both professionals and parents articulate their priorities, concerns and strategies.

The interviews with parents focused on their experiences of supporting children in their studies and the strategies they employ for doing so. How do parents describe the task of engaging in children’s education? How do they talk about their responsibilities as parents in educating their children versus the responsibilities of formal educational institutions? Personal accounts of this type highlight not only individual perceptions and experiences, but also reflect collective beliefs about, in this case, the meaning of education, parenthood and raising children.

Since I was interested in the diversity of parental involvement, participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy. By including parents of different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, the fieldwork generated data on the ways parenting activities and strategies are both stratified and stratifying (for example, unequal access to information and unequal ability to pay for private tuition and after-school activities). The sample consists of 22 interviews with, in total, 23 mothers and five fathers. Most of the interviews were individual, but some included both mothers and fathers and in one case a group of three mothers. The parents interviewed were

of low-, middle-, and upper middle-income backgrounds. Five of the interviews were with low-income parents, 15 were with middle-income parents and two were with upper middle-income parents. The parents from a low-income background had limited education; most had finished elementary school, but one mother had not attended school at all. All the low-income mothers were homemakers. Meanwhile, all the middle- and upper middle-class parents had some form of tertiary education (university or polytechnic). Most of these parents were employed or self-employed, but I also interviewed two middle-class mums who home schooled their children. All parents were in their thirties or forties, with children in pre- or primary school.

Access to family and parenting space requires approval and trust. In this case, access to potential informants was facilitated by my previous experiences conducting ethnographic fieldwork on family and parenting in Singapore. Most participants were recruited through personal social networks. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees. The transcriptions have been slightly edited for readability. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and guaranteed anonymity. All names used in the article are fictitious.

Ethnographic analysis is an iterative and abductive process, where '[t]he development of analytical themes and ideas is an emergent property of our engagement with the field, and of our systematic reflections on the data' (Atkinson, 2015: 11). In this manner I began reviewing my fieldnotes and interviews already during and in between fieldwork. The themes emerging from the continuous review of the data guided both the remaining fieldwork and the analysis. On completion of fieldwork I organised and reviewed all transcripts and fieldnotes again to identify recurring patterns and put these in conversation with theoretical perspectives and notions relating to parenting, agency and social class. Unlike transcripts and fieldnotes, documents and photos have not been consistently analysed; primarily they have been used as a complement. Ethnographic data is by default rich and complex, and cannot be quantified. As is common in ethnographic studies, I use examples of a smaller number of individual participants to illustrate the analysis. These have been selected to make visible general findings from the fieldwork. In the following sections, the findings are presented and discussed.

### **'Doing' parenthood through educational work**

During my fieldwork I visited a homework support session run by a voluntary welfare organisation. Alif, the social worker in charge of the sessions, met me outside the main building and escorted me to the classroom. This homework support programme catered to low-income families in the community. In the room, about ten children aged 7–14 sat around square tables occupied with their homework. The volunteer tutors were students from a local junior college. Textbooks, papers, pencils, erasers and pencil cases were spread out over the tables. Alif told me that the kids who attend homework support are the ones whose parents are very committed to their children's education, but they lack resources to send them to private learning centres or to coach the children themselves. Some neighbourhood parents are afraid to send their children to the youth centre because they worry they will meet bad company there. Afterwards, Alif held a briefing session with the tutors. He asked them how they thought the work was going. "Any progress? Any issues?" One of the tutors said he found it hard to motivate one of his students. Alif then asked if the tutors noticed

anything different about Izara, one of the younger children. “Yes,” one replied, “she’s wearing glasses.” “Correct,” Alif said. He then related that the social workers just recently realised Izara suffered from very bad eye sight. No one had paid attention to that until now, not even her teachers at school. Izara seemed a quite different kid after she got her glasses. More interactive. “So hopefully there will be a positive impact on her school performance too,” Alif concluded.

This fieldnote anecdote stands in stark contrast to the kinds of educational work pursued by middle-class families, which usually involves enrolling children in well-reputed and expensive private learning centres. While engagement in children’s education is not exclusive to the middle- and upper middle-classes, the means to do so remain sharply stratified. The imperative that parents play a supporting role in their children’s educational development is intimately linked to middle-class and affluent class status, precisely because it requires a certain economic, academic and social capital. The importance of an education was certainly emphasised by low-income parents, in many cases even more so than by the middle- and upper middle-class parents I interviewed. But their concerns differed in a number of ways. First, low-income parents lacked the resources to enrol their children in private tuition centres, and they lacked the self-confidence and know-how to coach their children through homework and in preparation for exams. Second, low-income parents expressed more confidence in and reliance on the teachers than did middle- and upper middle-class parents. Third, low-income parents’ expectations of their children’s performance were significantly lower. Even so, as we will see below, given their very limited resources, the educational work performed by low-income parents was equally emotionally absorbing and time-consuming.

### *Imagining the future and navigating the present*

During a field visit to Singapore in 2019 I met Fatimah, the mother of three young children, ages seven, four and two. Fatimah and her family, including her elderly father-in-law, live in a subsidised rental flat in one of Singapore’s public housing estates. Flats under the Public Rental Scheme cater to citizens like Fatimah, who have no other housing options or family support (for example, adult children who can house you) and a gross household income of less than 1,500 Singapore dollars. Besides Fatimah, I met three other families living in this type of subsidised rental flat. The most striking impression when I entered their homes was the cramped conditions; Fatimah’s family of six shared a one-bedroom flat, as did three other low-income families I met. Fatimah’s 80-year-old father-in-law slept in the living room while Fatimah, her husband and three kids shared the single bedroom.

Fatimah was not employed, but she was fully occupied taking care of the household, children and her father-in-law. Her husband worked as a delivery man. During our interview Fatimah said she initially intended to work outside the home, but with three kids and a father-in-law to take care of, it was impossible. “I cannot go out and work. [...] I have to cook. I have to do all the laundry. I have to do all the housework, send the kids to school. No energy.” In addition to basic household chores, Fatimah puts much time and energy into helping her seven-year-old, Nor, with her homework. Nor is now in primary one, but she was diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of five. Nor is enrolled in a school in the neighbourhood. Fatimah expressed much trust in the teachers. “Luckily, the teachers are very patient and she [Nor] gets extra sessions

also.” The trust in teachers is also noted in [Chiong’s \(2020\)](#) study on Singaporean low-income parents and home-school relations. In addition to support provided by the school, Nor attends reading classes organised by a nearby volunteer organisation twice per week, and twice per week she attends a special programme for children with dyslexia. The dyslexia centre is located quite a distance from their home, and since they are dependent on public transport it takes over an hour to get there. Fatimah is not only the children’s main caregiver, she also does most, if not all, of the educational support work. Fatimah, who herself completed secondary school, pointed out that she has a stronger educational background than her husband, who only had six years of schooling, but more importantly she is patient, something she feels is necessary to support Nor in her school work. They cannot afford private tutoring (the dyslexia programme is government funded), but the amount of time, energy and emotional investment Fatimah puts into training Nor was striking. Weekends provided no break. Fatimah shared that although they visit grandparents and take the kids to the playground on the weekends, she makes sure Nor practises her spelling. Fatimah maintains a structured schedule, according to which Nor is supposed to practise five words an hour, then another five words the next hour, and so forth. Fatimah makes sure that Nor always takes her notebook when they go out, so whenever there is an opportunity, she can review her spelling.

‘Even when we are going to the dyslexia centre. We have to take the MRT [train], right? I bring her notebook and a pencil [...] So this is the way I teach her. Whenever we go [somewhere], her notebook and her pen are always on her hand and lap. So, in the MRT, when people see that she is holding [a notebook], they will give her a seat.’ (Fatimah)

While the middle- and upper middle-class parents I interviewed perceived tertiary education as a given, the low-income parents I met never spoke about this as a given. They did stress the importance of education, but more in the sense of getting by and pulling through. Fatimah, for example, said that while she encourages her daughter to cultivate her passion to dance, it will always come second to school.

“‘If [dancing] is your passion, go for it,” I said [to my daughter]. “Just do whatever you want. But I have to send you to school because education is the main thing in Singapore. You need an education,” I said. “Because [education] is more important than anything else. Dancing is a passion. You can go and dance anything, but education comes first. If you don’t have an education, you can’t go to work.”’ (Fatimah)

A similar reasoning surfaced in an interview with Nadia, a low-income mother of five. Just like Fatimah, Nadia and her family live in a rental flat. When talking about education, Nadia said, “I don’t want to have high hopes of my children [...] Whatever you want, as long as you study, you go to the next level, it is fine with me.” Nadia and Fatimah’s emphasis on formal conventional education stands in contrast to many of the middle- and upper middle-class parents I met. Andy and Michelle, for instance, are an upper middle-class couple with three sons, one aged eight, one three and an infant. Andy and Michelle hold university degrees from well-known universities in the US and the UK. Both have had successful professional careers. When discussing

their thoughts on children's education, Andy maintained that social skills and a flexible mindset is more important than a formal education.

'Like, you don't even know, right, by the time when our kids are old enough, is a university degree even relevant? I don't know. I am not sure whether worrying about all this now is going to pay out in the future. I would much rather have the children enjoy school and have friends. Being able to make friends is a very important skill.' (Andy)

Andy continued his reflection on what types of skills might be valuable in a future economy.

'I think what is important is really for them [the children] to be able to explore and try many things, to be able to be very nimble, so that in future when they go for their further studies, the key to it is that they can graduate. They can spot opportunities; they can seize the right opportunities when they are out there working. And not just become a doctor or a lawyer.' (Andy)

While Andy emphasised the importance of being nimble and able to spot opportunities, rather than going for a conventional career, both he and Michelle were quite aware that their privileged position allowed them to take a more relaxed stance toward formal education.

'I suppose, like Andy said, because we have access to more resources ourselves, so even if we do meet up with challenges in the future with our kids, I guess we will at least know where to seek help. And we are hands-on enough to know that we will spot it early, and we will probably get it sorted. Get them the support that they need early on. And we just deal with it as it comes. There is no point worrying ahead of time.' (Michelle)

Andy and Michelle's confidence about making the right decisions for their children is characteristic of the middle- and upper middle-class parents in this study. Joan, another middle-class mum I interviewed, expressed a similar approach. She explained that her primary concern in choosing a primary school for her children was the school's ability to inculcate "good values", not the school's academic reputation. (That said, Joan's children are enrolled in an academically prestigious school.)

'The reason we don't want our kids to go to a so-called neighbourhood school is not so much about academics. If the school cannot make it academically, we are more than capable to coach the kids ourselves at home. It is more about the other kind of kids that they begin to find, [in neighborhood schools]; you generally find more people who come from dysfunctional families. That is something we try to avoid.' (Joan)

This kind of self-assurance about coaching children, as well as access to information and social networks, stands in stark contrast to the interviews with low-income parents like Fatimah. There is no doubt that conceptions and practices regarding children's education are stratified and linked to different forms of power relations.



Annette Lareau's (2003) classic study *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* on social class and parenting in families in the US distinguished two essentially different approaches to childrearing. The approach Lareau terms 'concerted cultivation' is associated with middle-class parents' ambitions to meticulously organise and structure their children's activities, while working-class parents appeared to favour the accomplishment of natural growth, an approach characterised by the absence of adult-organised activities and a clear boundary between adults and children. However, similar to Kang and Kim's (2019) findings in urban South Korea, the ethnographic data in the present study suggests that parenting styles are complexly related rather than essentially different. In Kang and Kim's ethnographic study on notions of class and learning among Korean parents, middle- and upper middle-class parents often emphasised creativity and natural exposure in learning activities. While such activities were usually framed as relatively unstructured and radically different from cramming, they are in fact carefully planned and regulated, and often with hidden educational intentions to increase the child's versatility and learning potential (see also Lan, 2018). Lower-income parents, by contrast, were much less concerned with creativity and natural exposure, and as pointed out earlier, expressed less self-confidence regarding their children's educational needs and learning processes.

### *Ambiguous aspirations*

In addition to an emphasis on agility and creativity, middle- and upper middle-class parents in particular often expressed aspirations about their children's resilience and self-motivation. In one interview with Joan, this was particularly manifest. While the idea that children should be self-motivated eventually would seem to require less parental involvement, the work and effort that go into teaching them how to manage their own time and how to complete their tasks independently was in fact considerable. Joan's two children, aged 9 and 11, have a packed schedule; they have several organised activities every week, most of which are non-academic: swimming, piano, rock climbing, Chinese tutoring, scouts, gymnastics and artistic diving. Joan explained to me that her primary focus is not to coach the children about the content of their homework, but rather to train them to be "self-sufficient and self-disciplined in managing their schoolwork". Joan pointed to a tray placed on a table in the kitchen and continued:

'So, this tray there we call homework corner. Every day when they [the children] come home from school, they are supposed to put all their homework there. So, I tried to get the system going, like every day, put [your homework] there, check your homework, do your homework. At the end of the day, pack your school bag.' (Joan)

While Joan's ambition was that her children should take responsibility for their homework, she felt compelled to do spot checks after receiving notes from the teacher about her oldest not handing in his work. And because Joan's children, unlike most other middle-class children, do not get private tutoring apart from Mandarin, every now and then she gives them her own assessment sheets, to check "that they know what they are supposed to know". The perceived need to test and check children's knowledge outside school is widespread. Private learning and tutoring centres of

course provide tests, but parents themselves also initiate their own methods of tracking. Most parents I interviewed or met during fieldwork purchased supplementary assessment books and educational materials, which are readily available in local bookstores. In Joan's opinion, you cannot take for granted that your child's knowledge is adequate just because he or she completes schoolwork without mistakes, since that may be a result of the teacher guiding them step by step and teaching them how to do it. By doing her own spot checks, Joan feels she can get a more accurate sense of her children's level of mastery. Apart from purchasing supplementary educational materials from the bookstore, parents have formed an informal market where they circulate past years' exam papers among themselves. Past years' papers are used just before exams, to drill the child.

Joan and other middle-class parents emphasised self-motivation, resilience and natural exposure, while the children depended on their parents, mothers in particular, to set up and run an elaborate programme of assessment books, independent research, contact with other parents, and systems of organising their homework so they can learn independence. Even so, fear that the child will fall behind academically is still very present, as reflected in the perceived need to regularly evaluate the child's learning. Parents' attempts at balancing their paradoxical aspirations must be understood in relation to both the modern expertise-based approach to parenting and a shifting perception of children, in which they are seen as vulnerable to all sorts of risk (Faircloth, 2014), but they also need to be understood in relation to the Singaporean context. My findings indicate that Singaporean parents' involvement in their children's education and upbringing is effectively reaffirmed by the deeply rooted narrative of national survival and progress, according to which Singapore is wholly dependent on securing a competent population. In the ethnographic data this narrative was frequently reflected in parents' concerns about their children's ability to survive in the 'system', or as narrated by one middle-class mother:

'I think I've survived pretty well in the system because we've been trained to do so. *I think I've survived pretty well in the system because we've been trained to do so.* But of course then I start realising, I have lost parts of what my childhood could have been, which then [leads to] the question on how then do we provide the kind of holistic education that can allow our son to survive, but at the same time he still, given the environment where he is, is free to explore, free to play, free to experiment and form his own understanding of how he want to live or how his road is going to be.' (Beth)

The tension between parents' conflicting aspirations for their children plays out in a distinct way among parents who have chosen to home school their children. While home schooling remains an unusual option in Singapore, it is becoming increasingly popular.<sup>4</sup> During fieldwork I met Tanya, the mother of three children. Tanya has home schooled all three. The two oldest are now in university and junior college, respectively, while the youngest who is primary school age is still being home schooled. Certainly, the option to home school children is dependent on the family's financial capacity; Tanya's husband earns an income high enough to support the family but compromises have been made. Living on a single income means they cannot afford a car or a spacious apartment. The family live in a modest public housing flat in a suburb.

When I first visited their home on a weekday afternoon, Tanya and her youngest daughter had just finished an iodine test to find out what types of food contain starch.

Tanya had decided to home school her children even before she got married. Her husband had given her a book for Christmas while they were still courting. It was about a songwriter who home schooled his five children. “That was the first time I ever heard of home schooling and I said if I ever get married and if I ever have children, I will want to home school them, because they made it sound so fun and interesting.” Tanya continued, “I felt that in Singapore, the children are so stressed, they spend so much time studying and they sort of lose their childhood. They don’t have time to play.” The importance of a ‘good childhood’ surfaced several times during my conversations with Tanya.

At the same time as Tanya stressed the importance of play and free time, in her children’s daily routine these are meticulously regulated, though in a different way from children attending mainstream education. Tanya talked about the importance of regular mealtimes and getting enough sleep. The youngest girl was allowed to watch ballet videos on YouTube 45 minutes twice per week, but other than that there were no TVs, smartphones or tablets since Tanya strongly feels they are addictive. Practising piano and violin was a ‘must’ and non-negotiable. In this sense, home schoolers, too, reflect an expertise-based approach to parenting, where parents are ‘deterministic in an individual child’s development and future’ (Faircloth, 2014: 26). While most parents perceive falling behind or failing in school as the biggest risk to their child’s future, Tanya and the other mums in her home school community felt that mainstream education itself poses the greatest risk, with its notorious assessment culture and supposedly negative effects on children’s curiosity and contextual knowledge. Tanya’s way of eliminating that risk was to take charge of the schooling herself.

The image of the involved parent as a rational consumer in education masks not only the moral and emotional aspects of educational work; it also masks that this work is highly gendered and primarily carried out by mothers. In line with previous studies (Hays, 1996; Reay, 1998; 2000; O’Brien, 2007; Göransson, 2016), this study indicates that Singaporean mothers tend to be much more involved in their children’s education than the fathers. Mothers, more so than fathers, function as their children’s ‘key educational agent’ (Yeoh and Huang, 2010: 32), from overseeing homework, spending time researching school rankings and private learning centres to networking with other parents and volunteering to get ahead in the primary school admission process. At the same time, the ways in which mothers engage with their children’s education, whether by home schooling or investing in private tutors, is a form of ‘identity work’ (see Faircloth et al, 2013), where they actively shape, reaffirm, and present a distinct idea of what constitutes not only appropriate parenting, but also appropriate childhood.

## Shifting notions of return

The priorities regarding children’s education not only intersect with social class and gender, but also with generation. These days the knowledge and experience of the older generation is increasingly seen as obsolete. Frictions surface both with regard to basic child-minding practices – parents being unhappy with the grandparents’ habit of letting the child eat in front of the TV or giving the child too many sweets – as well as education and learning. Few parents would delegate educational duties, such

as overseeing homework, to grandparents. The home schooler Tanya, for instance, was concerned that the grandparents' attitude to learning would hamper her children's creativity. Conflicting generational expectations goes both ways. Tanya pointed out that neither her parents nor her in-laws had been very supportive of their decision to home school. I encountered similar accounts from other home-schooling mums during fieldwork. According to these accounts, grandparents tend to question the decision to opt out of formal schooling, primarily because they see it as a high-risk enterprise that in worst case will jeopardise the grandchild's chances of higher education and a future professional career. One mum pointed out that this increases the pressure on home-schooling parents to succeed in their educational efforts; if their children fail, not only will they bear the burden of that failure, they will also risk being ruthlessly criticised by grandparents and extended family.

The idea that grandparents' knowledge and values are outdated was by no means limited to parents who home school their children; it surfaced frequently in interviews, but more so among the middle- and upper middle-class parents than the low-income parents. Will, a middle-class father of three, said that although they are close-knit and have a harmonious relationship with the grandparents, he and his wife avoid involving them in raising their children because there is a "big value gap". Yvonne, a middle-class mother who has a four-year old son, also worried about the negative influence of grandparents:

'My mum always gives my son the phone and [lets him watch] YouTube whenever he asks. [...] Sometimes I have no choice, I still ask them to watch him because I have no choice, I have to do this thing on the weekend. So, Saturdays and Sundays, I sometimes ask my mother to help me. I get very troubled by it because I know that my son will be watching hours of YouTube. [...] I prefer for him to be with me, it is just that I work, so [I have] no choice.' (Yvonne)

Yvonne rarely asks her parents or in-laws for advice on raising her son. She said, "When I do face problems, like managing his behaviour, I either ask my friends, I have a mums' chat group, like a few close friends, and I will Google." Only once she asked her mother-in-law how to potty train a child but later on her sister-in-law gave her completely opposite advice, "So we kind of gave up".

Yan's (2016) notion of descending familism describes a transformation of traditional intergenerational expectations and obligations. This transformation does not imply the dissolution of intergenerational expectations per se, but rather a shift in direction of resource flows, including symbolic returns, where the primary goal is 'raising a perfect child who will carry the hopes of the entire family' (Yan, 2016: 245). Several studies confirm that intergenerational relations remain strong in Singapore, as is the expectation that children should reciprocate their parents' efforts in the future (Graham et al, 2002; Göransson, 2009). What has changed, however, alongside the emergence of a child-centered notions of relatedness (Kipnis, 2011), is the notion of return. Traditionally, adult children are expected to provide financial support to their parents when they get old. While the absolute majority of the parents in this study more-or-less regularly contributed financially to their parents, they are quick to point out that they do not hold the same expectation for their own children. Instead, the expectations for their own children involve a more symbolic return, such

as accomplishment in academic, professional and personal life. Whether reciprocal acts are manifested in material or symbolic terms, they are seen as recognition of the parents' efforts in raising the child. The idea of a reciprocal relationship is also manifested in the way parents talk about their fear of guilt, that it would be their fault if the child were deprived of certain opportunities. In one of my many conversations with Pei Ling, a mother of three, this surfaced. At the time Pei Ling's oldest son David struggled with his Chinese studies and his teacher advised that he had to work harder. Pei Ling, a middle-class stay-at-home mother, contemplated whether she should hire a private tutor for David, but he resisted.

'So, I told him [David]: "At the end of the day, it is your grade, so you have to work hard." And I said, "I also have to work hard, as your mummy. I have to do what I think I need to do to push you; if not, I will feel that I didn't do my job as a mummy." I told him honestly. "So, I am going to be harsher on you. But that is because I don't want to regret, I don't want to regret as a mother I didn't do what I am supposed to do. And that is why I am doing this.'" (Pei Ling)

As mentioned earlier, the fear of not doing enough or making the wrong decision is a recurring theme in the ethnographic material, in particular among middle-class parents. Many pointed out that their worst nightmare would be to realise that their lack of commitment deprived their children of opportunities. Recognising the emotional and moral dimensions of parental involvement in education is thus crucial. While Singapore's education system is extremely competitive, parents' educational work is by no means purely instrumental. On the contrary, parents are highly ambivalent about the burden placed on young children today, but the fear of falling behind already at an early age compels them to devote energy, time and resources to their children's grooming for school and life.

## Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to provide a nuanced and contextual analysis of Singaporean parents' aspirations and practices in relation to their young children's education. By shedding light on the emotional and moral dimensions of parents' educational work, the findings challenge simplistic interpretations of the intensification of parenting in Singapore and beyond. Rather than understanding parents' educational work as calculating and instrumental, this study shows how parents across social classes cope with complex and sometimes contradictory demands and desires in raising their young children. While existing theories of intensive parenthood are relevant to describe the current child-centred and labour-intensive approach to parenting, an important finding is that the norm of intensive parenthood is not exclusive to the middle class. On the contrary, parents across class backgrounds invested substantial energy and emotions into securing their children's educational performance as well as their wellbeing, although in different ways and often with different outcomes. As we have seen, despite limited resources, the educational work performed by low-income parents appears equally emotionally absorbing and time-consuming, despite the fact that they lack resources to enrol their children in private tuition centres, and often lack the know-how to coach their children through homework and in preparation

for exams. Also, while low-income parents had lower expectations on their children's academic performance, they all emphasised the importance of an education, and in many cases even more so than the middle- and upper middle-class parents, who tended to emphasise the importance of raising agile and creative children who can manoeuvre in a global and rapidly changing world.

At the same time, parents' educational work is complicated by a growing tension between the ambition to achieve conventional success (such as good school results) and the ambition to nurture the child's emotional wellbeing and personal preferences and talents. This tension was particularly palpable among the middle- and upper middle-class parents I interviewed. While these contradictory demands may give rise to sentiments of uncertainty among parents (Bach and Christensen, 2017), this article shows that parents are far from paralysed. One of the objectives here has been to cast light on the complexity of practices which parents employ to handle conflicting ideas of proper parenthood and childhood. While parents' involvement in education is both stratified and stratifying, the ideas that children are vulnerable to risks and that responsible parenthood is tied to the task of reducing those risks appears to be widely shared regardless of social class background.

In this article I have proposed 'descending familism' (Yan, 2016) as an analytical prism to explore Singaporean parents' sentiments of uncertainty and guilt in relation to their children's future. In doing so, I suggest that the lingering notion of a reciprocal relationship between generations may add pressure on parents to invest substantial energy, emotions and resources in their children's education. Lastly, Singaporean parents' involvement in their children's education and upbringing is further complicated by the persistent narrative of national survival and progress, according to which Singapore as a nation is wholly dependent on establishing itself as a global city and a competent population. Singapore's education system is highly competitive and ability-based streaming begins at a young age. In such a competitive system, the need for 'concerted cultivation' on the part of the parents is likely heightened.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The island city-state of Singapore is located just south of Peninsular Malaysia. Singapore was a British colony from 1819 to 1963. Following a brief union with Malaysia (1963–65), Singapore became independent in 1965. Today it is one of the most trade-intensive economies in the world and the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia.

<sup>2</sup> The Confucian notion of filial piety originally referred to a set of ritual observances between parent and child, but the way the term is used in present-day Singapore is much broader and mostly applies to children's moral responsibility to care for their elderly parents.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of centuries of regional immigration, Singapore has a multi-ethnic population that is primarily made up of the Chinese (74.4 per cent), Malay (13.4 per cent), Indian (9 per cent) communities. There are also a number of smaller ethnic groups, including Eurasians, Arabs and Europeans (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019b). Ethnic background was not considered when recruiting participants, but I should point out that most were of Chinese ethnicity, though some were Malay and Eurasian.

<sup>4</sup> There are no official statistics on the number of children being taught at home. The Singaporean parents I met who home school their children do so for many different reasons: some wish to provide a religious education, others prefer the flexibility of home schooling, and still others feel that their children's needs cannot be met by institutional

schooling. Parents who wish to home school their child must apply for an exemption from the Ministry of Education. To be granted approval, parents need to provide a learning plan for the four subjects assessed at the Primary School Leaving Examination (English, mother tongue, mathematics and science) and for citizenship education, as well as details about their own qualifications to home school the child. Home schooled children must sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at age 12 and are required to meet a certain benchmark to pass.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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