

Immigrant Parents' Articulation and Imaginings of the Singaporean Education System

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Abstract

Drawing on a study into immigrant parents' influences on children's education in Singapore, this paper presents preliminary and partial findings on immigrant parents' discourses surrounding various forms of schooling or education systems, specifically the local mainstream schools, international schools, education in their countries of origin, and shadow education in Singapore. The paper demonstrates how such discourses inform and are intertwined with the immigrant parents' articulations of their parenting ideologies and educational philosophies. It is found that immigrant parents generally hold positive views on mainstream schools in Singapore, sometimes comparing these favourably with the perceived education and culture in international schools, as well as that of their countries of origin. At the same time, immigrant parents also pointed out the drawbacks of the Singapore education system in terms of its stressful nature, which has given rise to a pervasive shadow education sector. Through talking about and reflecting on these different forms of schooling/education, immigrant parents construct their notions of a good education. However, the paper cautions that

the various characteristics attributed to different types of schools/education should be understood as immigrant parents' subjective and imaginary constructs, reflecting not so much 'objective reality' as their ideologies and expectations pertaining to their children's education.

Introduction

As one of the most cosmopolitan global cities in the world, Southeast Asian city-state Singapore hosts a significant number of im/migrants. As of mid-2024, Singapore's total population stood at 6.04 million, of which *non-residents* (namely, those without citizenship or permanent residency/PR status) accounted for more than 30 per centⁱ. Furthermore, among resident populations, a significant portion had migrant background. The presence of such large numbers of immigrants adds to the immense diversity of Singapore's social and cultural fabric.

This paper is concerned with immigrants' experiences as parents of children who attend local *mainstream* schools in Singapore (i.e. not international schools, religious or special education schools). In Singapore, mainstream schools

run by the state prioritize the enrolment of local residents, making it challenging for children of immigrant status to secure school places. Sending children to the more costly international schools is an option for immigrant parents, but those who have obtained local status (citizenship or PR) typically enrol their children in local mainstreams schools.

Set against this backdrop, this paper examines how Singapore-based immigrant parents perceive and talk about different types of schools, and how their imaginaries and perceptions of these different education forms are intertwined with their parenting discourses and educational philosophy. Specifically, we look at how parents perceive or imagine the education offered in international schools as well as schooling in their countries of origin, and how such discourses juxtapose with their evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the local school education in Singapore.

Methodology and data

This paper draws on data collected in a study—led by the third author—that explores the influence of immigrant parents on the education of their 1.5- and second-generation immigrant children in Singapore (OER 09/20 YPD). In the broader study, eligible participants must be foreign-born and had migrated to Singapore as adults.

Migrants of Malaysian background were excluded due to their cultural proximity to Singapore, as were parents married to local-born Singaporeans. In addition, only immigrant parents with at least one child enrolled in mainstream Singapore schools, either at the primary or secondary level, were eligible.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and advertisements on public noticeboards. An online survey was used to collect descriptive demographic data on the participants before proceeding to interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted one-on-one, usually over the course of two sessions, in the participants’ preferred language: either Mandarin or English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages. Mandarin transcripts were further translated into English for analysis. All names used in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants’ confidentiality. At the time of data analysis, the broader study had interviewed a total of 64 participants (Mainland China = 31; India= 14; the Philippines= 12; Indonesia= 4; other nationalities= 3).

This paper has a relatively modest scope, focusing on the narratives of just eight participants from the larger dataset (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Profile of selected participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Residential status	Years in Singapore	Children’s age
Aanya	Female	38	India	Employment Pass	14	6
Melanie	Female	40	Philippines	Singaporean	9	8 and 6
Siara	Female	49	India	Singaporean	20	19
Caitlyn	Female	40	Germany	Permanent Resident	14	9
Winnie	Female	48	China	Long Term	3	17

				Visit Pass		
Linda	Female	44	China	Permanent Resident	8	13 and 17
Richard	Male	48	Philippines	Singaporean	16	13
Debora	Female	36	Philippines	S Pass	11	7

Imagining Non-Local vs Local Schools

This section focuses on how immigrant parents in our study articulate their educational philosophies and expectations for their children through discursively constructing ideas and images of *non-local* schools, particularly international schools and schools in their countries of origin.

Findings reveal that such discursive conjuring of non-local schools can serve to highlight both what is perceived as *desirable/positive* of local schools and what is regarded as *undesirable/negative* about them. It should be noted that since research participants in the study have enrolled their children in local schools, their views about international schools are not always based on first-hand experience, although when they invoke education in their countries of origin, they tend to be drawing on personal experiences.

Desirable/positive

For parents in our study, different school types represent different values and cultures, and they believe their children will be socialised differently depending on the school they attend. Aanya (female, age 38) says:

So it's like, many of the Western families I see the children don't even respect parents because they have the freedom of speech right, they can say whatever they want. And anyways, once they turn 16 or 18, they are off on their own, there's no concept of living with parents, taking care of parents, etc..

So for us, we are more rooted to those kind of values: respect, discipline, etc.. So for me, I just felt that the Asian system will be better.

Aanya's comments reflect not a direct critique of the international school system but an imagined understanding of it. She perceives international schools as places where values like respect, filial piety, and discipline may not be taught, which she considers essential for her child. The type of school becomes a lens through which parents imagine the kind of socialisation their children will experience, leading to their decision to avoid international schools due to perceived misalignment with their parenting values. Here, Aanya clearly articulates that her parenting philosophy is rooted in traditional values, and she associates international schools with Western ideals that contradict those values. She reinforced this point when she brought up the issue of sexuality:

For example, in some international schools, I've heard they have LGBT clubs, and I'm like (chuckles), you know, that's not me for sure? So, I don't want her to be exposed to all that, because at a young age, it would just unnecessarily put thoughts in their head. They will eventually figure it out in time. But what I don't want is the school, in an effort to or with the intention of giving wider exposure, influencing her.

Many immigrant parents imagine that international schools instil liberal values that conflict with their own ideals for their children. Winnie (female, age 40) contrasts her perceptions of local and international

schools to justify her decision to choose a local school:

The feeling I got from the kids there [international schools] is that they are very free-thinking, very free-spirited, and they have no discipline. Of course, you will think they have no rules, they don't stand properly, sit properly, but they may live very reckless, right? They don't care about others, what do you think of me? Right? But most of the children who came out from the Singapore education system, what I see is that the boys and girls are very well behaved and disciplined. They always follow the rules. You can see that when you look at them, you will know which one is from the international school, which one is from the local school.

Although neither Winnie nor her child has experienced the international school system, her perception of it is negative. Words like 'free-thinking' and 'free-spirited', while not inherently negative, are used with an implied criticism, suggesting a lack of discipline. This perception informs her value judgement and reinforces her preference for local schools, which she associates with producing disciplined, rule-abiding students. Conversely, by articulating why local schools are preferred, both Aanya and Winnie can be seen as asserting their parenting ideologies and expectations for their children's growth.

Undesirable/negative

While non-local schools can be used as a foil to highlight the merit of local schools, the converse is also true. At times, immigrant parents in our study used international schools and schooling experiences from their countries of origin as reference points for offering critical evaluations of the education their children receive in local schools in Singapore.

Linda (female, 44), for example, contrasts the schooling experience in her hometown of Shanghai, where students can pursue multiple sports, performing arts, classical music, and even traditional Chinese medicine:

The courses offered by Shanghai schools were actually richer than those in Singapore, such as courses on Chinese herbal medicine and handicrafts. Primary schools in Singapore just focus on academics, with no time for entertainment.

Immigrant parents who send their children to local schools thus often compensate for the lack of such holistic activities in the school curriculum by engaging private tutors for lessons in sports, art, music, and more. There is a common assumption among immigrant parents that international schools offer more holistic activities, whereas local schools focus heavily on written national exams. For example, Richard (male, 48) critiques the academic rigour of local education, stating:

So, there's a lot of emphases on written exams, on term examinations. And, you know, the problem is, before, I think in primary there are about four major exams, split into 3 or 4 exams, like 15%-15%-15% and then the bulk would be the last examination. Now in secondary school, I think it's less, about 3 exams, with the majority on the written examinations at the end.

Carina (female, 40) compares local schools with international schools, using the latter's project-based approach to highlight what could have been a better learning environment for her child:

I've also seen what great projects international schools do, yeah, when some of my friends share it, it's like

wow! This is like... a whole project where you get the parents involved if they have time. So, it's all about experiencing and playing, which deepens social skills, natural skills, and discovery through play.

Immigrant parents feel that Singapore's exam-centric mode of assessment is not as effective as having a variety of assessments, such as projects and presentations. For some parents, streaming at the age of 12 (through PSLEⁱⁱ) is particularly problematic because their children may not be mature enough to fully grasp the importance of the exam, yet once they are streamed in secondary school based on the exam results, their educational path is perceived as set in stone. Siara contrasts Singapore's streaming system with India's, where students only face their first major exam in Secondary 4.

When I went through my education in India, my major exam was only in Sec 4, which is similar to O' Level, and then the next major exam was in JC2, similar to A' Level. So, it was very difficult for me to think of children sitting for such a major exam at the P6 level.

In a similar vein, Melanie (female, 40) reflects on her education in the Philippines, where she recalls 'having fun' and 'enjoying life'. She contrasts this with Singapore's competitive atmosphere, noting how the former offered a sense of balance she now wishes for her children:

In the Philippines, we were not that competitive with regard to grades. We still knew how to have fun. I mean, we still enjoyed life, hanging out with friends... It's more about wanting a balanced, well-rounded experience for my children.

Taken together, the above findings

illustrate that certain notions about *non-local* schools, be they international schools or schools in immigrants' sending countries, can serve to construct images of the local school by highlighting both the desirable and positive as well as the undesirable or negative.

The next section focuses on what research participants say about local schools in Singapore based on their actual experiences.

Local Schools in Singapore

Immigrant parents' discourses about education in local mainstream schools also contain both *positive* and *negative* appraisals.

Praise: bilingualism

On the positive front, Singapore's bilingual education policy—which mandates the learning of a mother-tongue language (MTL) (see the paper by Ong, Chow and Yang, this issue)—is commonly viewed as an advantage because parents believe it provides their children with a competitive edge; to them, having bilingual children will enable greater success in the future labour market.

Caitlyn considers bilingual education in Singapore the main attraction for immigrant parents, which is especially relevant as her child's mother tongue is German.

One of the advantages of Singapore education that attracts me is the dual-language programme. Although we had an opportunity in UK or other English-speaking countries at that time, my child will lose the advantage of dual language because it is quite difficult to learn Chinese in those countries.

Singapore's mandatory bilingualism

simplifies the process for second-generation immigrants to learn Mandarin, as parents do not have to go out of their way to incorporate the language into their children's education. Having it embedded within the school system alleviates the pressure on parents who want their children to acquire Mandarin. This positive outlook not only highlights immigrant parents' goals for their children, such as bilingualism, but also the specific type of bilingualism they desire—English and Mandarin.

Further analysis shows that English-Mandarin bilingualism is highly valued by both Chinese and non-Chinese immigrant parents. Aanya, for instance, explains how this trend is common among non-Chinese parents:

I mean I know a lot of Indians or non-Chinese people also take Chinese, as the Mother Tongue language in school. I think the main reasons why they do it is because, one, it's a very important language to pick up; I mean, if you can speak English and Chinese, you can communicate with most of the world, right? So, it's definitely a language that's highly useful, especially if you're going to settle down somewhere in Asia, whether it's China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia to some extent, etc.

Likewise, Richard, whose child's mother tongue is Tagalog, chose English-Mandarin bilingualism, seeing it as a form of social and cultural capital.

I never had second thought on having him learn Chinese, because I know that he needs to be conversant in the language and understand it really well when he grows up, because that's his environment, and a lot of his friends are Chinese, and it will definitely be useful probably in a business context or in a

corporate context that he knows it.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Winnie, a Chinese immigrant parent, who highlights how Singapore's bilingual education system is perceived as a way to raise global citizens and enhance their competitiveness in the labour market. Although bilingualism is a requirement, it is seen and spoken of as an asset.

So, in this case, the various conditions, including the bilingual education, make it rather advantageous for Chinese children to come here. No matter what the case is, my son's mother tongue is Chinese, in addition to English [which he is learning], we hope he can become an international talent in the future.

It is clear that parents use different aspects of the school curriculum as tools to shape and express their goals for their children. For Winnie, the goal is for her child to become an 'international talent', and she views bilingual education as a stepping stone towards achieving that aim. To immigrant parents, bilingualism is not just an element of Singapore's education system; it is seen as a crucial resource to be fully utilised to achieve the desired outcomes for their children.

Moreover, bilingualism is also credited with facilitating integration and is considered a form of cultural capital, particularly by Chinese immigrant parents whose children's native language is Mandarin. Winnie (female, 48) states that being Chinese nationals enabled her child to integrate more easily into Singaporean society:

But in Singapore, our identity is Chinese, including our appearance and some preferences, it is still very easy to integrate into this society. In fact, if the ultimate purpose of studying abroad and

staying here, he (my son) needs to integrate himself into this society.

She further explains that her second-generation immigrant son does not need to worry about Mandarin, as he already has a strong foundation in the language. Therefore, bilingual education does not pose a challenge for him in the same way it might have done if he were learning Mandarin without a Chinese background. Additionally, she believes that his proficiency in Mandarin will enhance his employability:

And he is a Chinese, and his Chinese is definitely much better than Singaporean, then the government must have the demand for this kind of talents in this field.

Criticism: high-stakes examination and streaming

While local education in mainstream Singapore schools is praised for its cultivation of bilingual abilities, it is also commonly criticized for its heavy academic emphasis, the high-stakes examination system and culture, and the streaming mechanism.ⁱⁱⁱ Prior to the recent reform, students in Singapore are channelled—based on PSLE results—into the Normal (Technical), Normal (Academic). Express stream students are regarded as more academically inclined, and consequently admitted to “better” schools with more resources and opportunities which are less available to students in other streams. Immigrant parents in our study were highly critical of this system for the academic stress it places on students.

Aanya (female, 38) explains how the streaming processes following the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) instil fear in children:

I find it very strict in the sense that, to some extent they seem to be driving a bit of fear in the children, you know? [...] So for me, sorry to say but it almost sounds like a caste system. Because if you start segmenting kids so early right, that's how they will grow up, right? So that's one thing that I don't want, agree with, so that's one thing that probably doesn't match in my philosophy. Whereas in the US, right, I feel it's much more simpler. [...] Like there, once you go, you pay tax, everyone gets into a neighbourhood school, you go through the same experience. There's no such streamlining or grading or anything right, you just go through the system, and that's it. So I think we can maybe put less pressure and focus on the children at that age, that's the only thing I would say, my ideology is different from the ideology here. Not saying streaming isn't important, it is important, not when they're eight or nine years old. We should do it when they're 16 years old, that's the only point.

Rather than simply separating students, Aanya's comparison to the Indian caste system illustrates how certain streams are more coveted than others. The perception that certain streams confer greater prestige adds to the pressure parents feel, as they strive to ensure their children fall into the desired academic category.

Siara (female, 49) shares a similar critique of Singapore's education system:

This is quite a big difference that I saw in Singapore. In the Indian system we don't have anything like that at the P6 level. Then another thing I noticed in the primary school was that even at P3 there was this test for a gifted education programme^{iv}, you know?

In sum, in the discourse of immigrant parents in our study, the local Singapore school education appears to be attributed both praise-worthy and critique-worthy qualities. Voicing their approval and disapprovals respectively, we argue, can be interpreted as immigrant parents' ways of articulating their conceptions of a desirable education for their children.

Shadow Education

Singapore's rigorous and highly competitive education system has spawned a huge shadow education industry that is widely utilised by Singaporean families.^v This last section presents immigrant parents' discourse about shadow education, which serve to further illuminate their parenting and educational ideals.

Research participants in our study almost unanimously expressed critique and regret regarding the pervasive tuition culture in Singapore, which often may be interpreted as an extension of their critique of the Singapore education system *per se*.

For example, Aanya (female, 38) shared:

...what I definitely see is, like, some of the Singaporean parents that I've observed or the local parents, how to say, they put a lot of pressure on the child I feel. Like I know a lot of my friends whose, you know, children are sent for tuition, you know, they start sending them for like coding classes, robotic classes, and then I have also heard, for example, there's the gifted education programme, right? So they send them for tuition so that they you know, can get into the sort of GEP programme.

Despite such common practices, Aanya subverts this norm by choosing not to send her child for shadow education at the

Primary One level:

No, no, no tuition, no tuition, not until P5 (laughs). At least that's my hope, right? So, she goes for music, Indian classical music, karate, swimming, and she learns the piano. We've just recently enrolled her also in tennis, although I'm now wondering if that's too much, because she already has four classes. Yeah. Four to five.

Aanya explains that her decision is grounded in her belief that parents should provide their children with a relatively stress-free childhood that encourages happiness and freedom, rather than an obsession with academic performance:

Because you know, the childhood is for them to enjoy, to learn and to explore, rather than be worried about grades and being streamlined and being in the right school or the right class.

The contrast between spending large sums of money on tuition versus holistic education, such as music or sports, is significant. The issue goes beyond the financial expenditure itself, but the type of classes parents choose, which reflects their parenting philosophies. The phenomenon of sending children for tuition as early as Primary One is alarming to immigrant parents because it is associated with stress and the pressure to excel. By choosing to enrol her daughter in music and sports instead, Aanya communicates her values and goals as a parent.

Insightfully, Melanie (female, 40) observes that in Singapore shadow education is no longer a means to help children outperform their peers, but rather functions as a leveller:

[My boss] was telling me that 'my salaries goes to maths, classes, science',

so ya, they said they are not competitive actually, they want to help [their children] to survive [in school], their goal is not really to have a high grade actually. They just want their kids to survive.

This highlights a paradox: shadow education, once intended to give students an edge, has become so widespread that it no longer delivers the competitive advantage it was designed to provide. Instead, it has been reduced to a tool for keeping up, rather than getting ahead. The intense competition in Singapore makes it difficult for individuals to excel, repositioning shadow education as a necessity for survival.

Siara (female, 49) reflects on the emotional toll experienced by parents who choose not to engage with shadow education. For these parents, opting out of the tuition culture often leads to self-doubt about whether this unconventional choice might harm their children's academic performance:

When I saw all his classmates going for tuitions and all that, that was a source of worry for me you know? That, "Am I doing the right thing by not putting him in tuitions?"

Immigrant parents acknowledge that, even if they do not pressure their children directly, the competitive culture does. This creates an ongoing tension: while the normalisation of shadow education makes parents who initially avoid or resist it question their decisions, they also aim to minimise the stress their children face. For some, a success would be their child graduating from primary school without having attended tuition at all. While no single parenting philosophy is inherently superior in this context, it is notable how immigrant parents navigate their own priorities alongside the demands of the

education system they have chosen.

Conclusion

This paper has explored immigrant parents' ideals and priorities with respect to their children's education in Singapore by examining their discourses surrounding different types of schooling and/or forms of education. Specifically, immigrant parents' discursive constructions of the 'international school', schooling in their countries of origin, the local Singaporean mainstream school, and the shadow education sector were explored. We found that, by commenting on these different schooling/education forms and making comparisons between them where appropriate, immigrant parents articulate their preferences, values, and ideals about the kind of education they would like their children to receive in Singapore.

One notable finding was the often positive way in which immigrant parents spoke about how children socialised in local schools tend to be disciplined, respectful, and obedient. They contrasted this with their perception that international schools are more liberal and flexible, which they assume yields the opposite results. One possible explanation for this preference could be that immigrant parents in Singapore mostly originate from other Asian countries, which arguably have cultures and value systems more aligned with those promoted in Singapore.

While affirming the desirability of local schools in terms of value inculcation and the usefulness of the bilingual education policy, parents in our study also expressed concerns about the highly competitive and stressful nature of local schooling system and culture, focusing their critique particularly on the streaming system, high-stakes examinations at relatively early age, and the widespread use of shadow

education services.

Overall, immigrant parents in Singapore navigate a plural landscape of various schooling options and limitations. Balancing their educational philosophies and priorities with the realities of local schooling, immigrant parents' decisions regarding children's education are shaped by perceptions of discipline, socialisation, academic rigor, as well as concerns with their children's holistic development. While critiques of both local and international schools are common, parents often accept trade-offs in order to meet their

broader educational goals for their children.

One inherent limitation of the findings presented here stems from the fact that the broader study from which this paper is derived only involved immigrant parents with children enrolled in local mainstream Singapore schools. As such, the findings and tentative conclusions drawn here should not be extrapolated to immigrant parents more broadly defined, especially those whose children study in private and/or international schools. This latter group constitute one possible direction for future research.

ⁱPopulation.gov.sg (2024) *Population in Brief 2024*. Retrieved from:

https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf

ⁱⁱ Primary School Leaving Examination.

ⁱⁱⁱ While the streaming system has been recently refined to reduce stratification based on academic performance, students are still segregated by their results, albeit to a lesser extent.

^{iv} The Gifted Education Programme (GEP) is an official scheme in the Singapore school system that selects intellectually "gifted" students through a 2-stage screening process to join a more academically demanding curriculum from Primary 4. Selected students may be transferred to schools offering GEP academic programmes. In 2024, significant reforms to the GEP programme were announced, which will likely change the meaning of the programme for parents and students. These changes lie beyond the scope of this paper.

^v Wise (2016) *Behind Singapore's PISA rankings success – and why other countries may not want to join the race*. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/behind-singapores-pisa-rankings-success-and-why-other-countries-may-not-want-to-join-the-race-70057>