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Middle-class cultivation out of tune?

Challenges to intensive parenting in Singapore

This article explores how conceptions of responsible parenting are re-negotiated in present-day Singapore. It discusses how policy changes in the pre-school area have affected parental practices and notions of morally worthy parenting. Pre-school reform promoting children’s holistic development and less intensive parenting is part of a wider process of education reform, which has been on-going for the last 20 years. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, we examine how parents and pre-school teachers negotiate these changes in the context of making pre-school children ready for formal schooling. Our main finding is that the changes associated with reform have created a situation, in which well-educated middle-class parents are increasingly insecure when it comes to education. Rather, they are caught off-balance and are struggling hard to figure out which modes of parenting will be counted as responsible and will turn out to be rewarding in terms of their children’s educational success and wholesome development.

Keywords: concerted cultivation, natural growth, middle-class, Singapore, education reform

On the way to our local mall in Singapore in 2013 and 2017, we used to pass by a pre-school with a big banner saying *Childhood is a journey not a race*. On our recent fieldtrip to Singapore in 2019-20, the pre-school was still there, but the banner was gone. Conceptions of good childhoods and responsible parenting are currently being re-negotiated in many parts of the world. This is also the case in Singapore. In spite of Singapore’s economic success and outstanding performance in educational benchmarking exercises like PISA, many policy makers and parents worry about Singapore’s future in an increasingly unpredictable and competitive global environment. This raises new concerns regarding how to make children ready for the future. Over the last 20 years, the Singapore government has addressed these questions by initiating a series of education reforms, ranging from pre-school to higher education. These reforms participate in the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg 2006) in the sense that they seek to adapt Singapore’s education system to the conditions of a competitive and globalized ‘knowledge economy’. They differ, however, in the sense that they are not focused on rigorous standards, testing and basic academic skills. Instead, they seek to shift educational practices in Singapore away from an excessive focus on testing, high-stakes examinations and academic proficiency towards a focus on holistic education dedicated to nurturing motivated, socially adept and creative individuals destined for success in a globalized knowledge economy.

In this article, we explore the interplay between education reform and shifting parental strategies for enhancing children’s futures. For this purpose, we focus specifically on the pre-school field,
which has been the object of reform efforts since the early 2000s. Until then, preschools in Singapore were modeled over the school. Teacher-centered education with widespread use of worksheets and textbooks characterized preschools as well as schools. Since the turn of the millennium, however, the government has tried to reform this educational culture. In the article, we discuss how policy changes in the pre-school area have affected parenting practices and notions of morally worthy parenting. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, we examine how middle-class parents negotiate conflicting notions of childhood and future aspirations in the context of making kindergarten children ready for formal schooling.

In our analysis, we draw on the concept of ‘intensive parenting’ (Faircloth 2014) as well as on Lareau’s concepts of ‘concerted cultivation’ and ‘natural growth’ (2003). We argue that education reform discourages long-standing forms of intensive parenting focused on exam performance and academic success. We therefore argue that an established form of ‘concerted cultivation’ between educational institutions and parents has been dislocated. Consequently, we argue that the changes associated with reform have created a situation, in which well-educated middle-class parents are caught off-balance and struggle to figure out which modes of parenting will be recognised socially and will turn out to be rewarding in terms of their children’s futures. Before elaborating this argument, we further outline the theoretical and methodological framework of the analysis.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Our study is situated within the field of studies of education reform and parenting cultures. The former has highlighted the messy and contradictory nature of education reform processes. They have shown that education reform rarely plays out in a linear fashion, as a straightforward implementation of a policy master plan (Ball 1993; Levinson et al., 2009; Shore & Wright, 2011). Policies are seldom passively adopted, but tend to give rise to active forms of appropriation. As Levinson and his research team (2009) emphasize, ‘unauthorized actors’, such as parents and teachers, negotiate the meaning of official policies. With regard to the recent global pre-school reforms for instance, we often see differences concerning how preschool teachers and parents view the purpose and pedagogy of early education (Kjær et al: 2020).

In order to understand the childrearing strategies of Singaporean parents and educators we draw on a basic figure within education theory, namely the notion that children grow naturally, versus the notion that children must be cultivated (Halldén 1992). Lareau (2003) draws on the nature/culture-figure when describing the difference between American working-class and middle-class parents. She characterizes working-class parents by a ‘natural growth’-strategy in which children’s growth is left to nature and the children themselves. Conversely, middle-class parents consider their children’s
development too important to leave to nature or the children themselves. Instead, these parents actively cultivate their children's potential through elaborate communication in the family, intensive involvement in the school and a range of organized activities. Generally, middle-class parenting is characterized by a fast-paced family life centering on children's enriching leisure activities. Lareau calls this child-rearing strategy 'concerted cultivation' (2003:2). It is concerted in the double sense of being intensive and joint. First, it is intensive as it structures children's lives in a comprehensive, planned and development-oriented manner. Second, it is joint – in concert – with the norms of dominant institutions and therefore meets societal recognition. 'Natural growth' on the other hand meets no recognition though it seems more joyful for the children who have more time to play freely with their peers.

As noted in previous research (Matsuoka 2016; Zhang 2020), Lareau’s concept of ‘concerted cultivation’ cannot be transferred wholesale to the East Asian education context. In her research on Japan, Matsuoka points out that ‘concerted cultivation’ takes different forms in highly ‘standardized education systems’ where performance in high-stakes examinations are perceived as all-important for children’s educational and social futures. In Shanghai, Zhang found that the most common strategy among middle-class parents for enhancing their children’s futures is the intensive use of private tutoring rather than leisure activities. To a significant extent, this is also the established childrearing strategy of middle-class parents in Singapore (Lan 2004).

In this article, we therefore adapt Lareau’s concepts to the Singapore context. As mentioned, there is currently a policy of discouraging the established childrearing strategy of the middle-class in Singapore. We ask therefore, what happens once middle-class parental strategies no longer seem in tune with official policy? If middle-class cultivation is intensive but no longer joint, then how can we conceptualize it?

Our distinction between ‘concerted cultivation’ and ‘natural growth’ also differ from Lareau who uses this distinction according to a middle/working-class binary (Vincent and Maxwell 2016). Here, however, we argue that education reform normatively promotes elements of natural growth, which middle-class parents must therefore take into consideration. We ask to which extent such elements of ‘natural growth’, clash with those practices of hothousing that have for long been pivotal to intensive parenting in Singapore? We examine these questions by analyzing what parents and preschools emphasize in the transition to primary school. While we do not question the educational advantage of middle-class parents, we seek to highlight the disorientation created by policy changes to the traditional educational culture of middle-class parents.

In order to further advance our understanding of changes to early education in Singapore, we also refer to Aarseth (2014) who describes different forms of intensive parenting within the middle-class
in Norway. She distinguishes between an inner-directed, joy-oriented ‘learning culture’ characteristic of the cultural elite and an outer-directed, goal-oriented ‘learning culture’ characteristic of the economic elite – naming them, respectively, ‘passion for learning’ and ‘fit for fight’ (2014). For the purpose of this article, we prefer the broader term ‘educational cultures’ to ‘learning cultures’. We examine if and how joy- and goal-orientation interact with ‘natural growth’ and ‘concerted cultivation’.

Methodologically, our study is qualitative and seeks to create detailed insight and understanding rather than representativeness. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore in 2013 and 2017. The empirical material derives from interviews and conversations with educators and government representatives as well as participation in activities such as courses for pre- and primary schoolteachers. The main data however is from 2017 and consist of interviews with twenty middle-class parents. Most of the respondents work with engineering, IT, business and finance and are degree-holders with at least a BA-degree. Thus, they can be classified as belonging to the economic middle class – although Aarseth’s Bourdieu-inspired distinction between economic and cultural middle class fraction makes little sense in Singapore where there is no cultural elite to speak of. In Singapore to be considered middle-class also depends on factors such as ethnicity, housing and - relevant in this context – choice of pre-school. The parents in this study are of either Chinese or Indian ethnicity, many of them live in condominiums and they send their children to private or semi-private preschools.

Education reform

In 1992, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong dedicated part of his National Day Rally Speech to a celebration of the competitive ethos of Singapore society and education system: Our school system has always been competitive. Pupils get tested regularly and ranked in class … As a result everybody studies hard … (Goh 1992: 32). Only five years after, in 1997, Goh gave a totally different speech in which he took stock of the challenges facing Singapore’s education system. He outlined a future characterized by intensifying global competition, innovation and constant social and technological change. (Goh 1997). He made clear that, for Singapore to remain successful in this volatile environment, the education system would have to change. More specifically, he singled out the prevalence of narrowly academic and exam-oriented attitudes to learning as the most important obstacle to preparing young Singaporeans for the future:

What is critical however is that we fire in our students a passion for learning, instead of studying for the sake of getting good grades in their examinations. I must say this passion is generally lacking among our students, including many among our most able. Their knowledge will be fragile, no matter how many ‘A’s
they get, unless they have the desire and aptitude to continue discovering new knowledge well after they leave school (Goh 1997).

This speech became the kick-off for a series of education reforms that continue to this day. These reforms address what is perceived as an excessive focus on academic ability and measurable performance in Singapore’s education system. The education reforms include fewer tests and examination, less ability-based streaming of students, reduced curricula as well as more student-centered pedagogies. Borrowing Aarseth’s terms (2014), education should no longer simply make students ‘fit for fight’ in a competitive society. Or more precisely: it should do so by also developing that ‘passion for learning’, which will sustain them in a social environment, which requires citizens to be independent, resilient and life-long learners.

In the early 2000s, the pre-school field became a new focus of the reform movement (Bach & Christensen 2017). This was prompted in part by a growing global awareness among researchers on human capital that investing in young children provides a far greater return than investing later in life (Heckman 2008). This ‘infantile determinism’ (Furedi 2002) has drawn attention to the importance of preschool for children's life-long learning and the necessity of having a well-functioning collaboration between parents and preschool teachers.

In 2003, the Singaporean government therefore issued a national pre-school curriculum framework, *Nurturing Early Learners*. At the time, all pre-schools were formally private sector institutions and the curriculum framework was therefore not legally binding. However, given the highly centralized, ‘quasi-authoritarian’ political culture in Singapore (Christensen 2016), and the close association between the government and some of the largest pre-school chains in Singapore, the curriculum framework came to exercise a crucial influence on the entire pre-school sector.

Dovetailing with the new policy emphasis on joyful learning, the curriculum framework emphasized that pre-school should not just prepare for school, but should above all inculcate life-skills. It also encouraged *learning through play* (MOE 2003), arguing that this is a more efficient and age-appropriate mode of learning for pre-school children, compared to the school-like didactics used at the time in most Singapore pre-schools.

In 2012, the Ministry of education issued an updated version of the curriculum framework. Here, the idea of learning through play was specified as *purposeful play* – thus reassuring parents that pre-schools were not supposed to let go and have children play on their own, but to use play as a didactical method for learning and developmental purposes. In this sense, the updated curriculum framework explicitly seeks to integrate a ‘goal-oriented’ and a ‘passion-oriented’ approach to education (Aarseth 2014).
In the 2012 curriculum framework, pre-schools are encouraged to work on six themes. These are 1) language and literacy, 2) numeracy, 3) exploration of the world, 4) development of motor skills, 5) social and emotional development, and 6) aesthetic and creative expression. The first three themes are categorized as *academic*, the last three as *non-academic*. The even distribution of curriculum themes between the academic and the non-academic is hardly fortuitous. It signals a policy ambition to move from an overwhelmingly academic educational culture towards *holistic education* - a balanced educational culture, which values non-academic competencies as much as academic ones.

**Problematizing parents**

Turning to our analytical concepts, we may argue that elements of both ‘natural growth’ and ‘passion for learning’ are components of the reform ideal of *holistic education*. This implies that learning in pre-school should take place *through play* and be fun, that it should develop children’s natural potential in all its diversity and, finally, that this development should be in tune with the natural growth of children. It also implies that parents should step back – refrain from *pressuring* in order to let children grow at their natural pace. However, there was widespread agreement among the parents and educators we talked to that the ideal of *holistic education* had not yet materialized. Educational practices remain focused on academic performance. Parents and educators were also in quasi-universal agreement that this was due to a lack of concordance between the education system and parents, but they explained this lack of concordance in different ways. According to policymakers, the main reason for this is the inertia of parenting norms and practices. *We need to change the mindset of parents*, as several government officials told us.

In order to do so, the government has sought to educate parents through a number of initiatives. In a video addressed to first-time school parents, the Ministry of Education for instance advises parents to set *realistic goals* and refrain from pushing their children. Nevertheless, policymakers still view parents as stuck in a mode of parenting, which sacrifices children’s happiness and *holistic development* by subjecting them to draining tutoring classes so as to make them ‘fit for fight’ in test and examinations. The problem is viewed as so serious that, in his 2012 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong felt it necessary to admonish parents of pre-school children:

*Please let your children have their childhoods!* ... *Education experts, child development specialists, they warn against over teaching preschool children. You do harm, you turn the kid off, you make his life miserable ... It is good for young children to play and to learn through play. So please... I read of parents who send their kindergarten age children to tuition, please do not do that* (Lee 2012).
This view of parents was echoed by many pre-school teachers who distinguished between the academic and the holistic as a way of contrasting the attitudes of parents with their own. Parents only care about the academics, not the social, in the transition to primary school, one pre-school teacher told us. We believe in play, another pre-school teacher said. According to the preschool teachers, this contrasted with parents who force fed their children with flashcards, wanted worksheets in the kindergarten and were above all concerned whether their child would be able to read and do some arithmetic when starting school. One pre-school principal made a similar point, stating that her holistic pre-school was not the right place for academically goal-oriented parents. She elaborated that by academic she and her teachers meant drilling, worksheets and rote learning while holistic implied an experiential and joy-oriented approach to learning.

In most cases, the opposition between the holistic and the academic was also used to express a contrast between the future and the past. While the educational culture of the past was perceived as academic, the future would be holistic. Thus, from this perspective, parents who insisted on the academics were steeped in the past. But how do parents themselves perceive the situation? We will address this question in the next section.

Concerted cultivation of the socio-emotional

Our interview material does not support the opposition between forward-looking education policies and backward-looking parents, single-mindedly focused on academic results. The parents we talked to did not only focus on academics. They were very concerned with social and other non-academic topics. Discussing the transition to primary school, several parents even stated that they were more concerned with the social than with the academic aspect. One mother, Joanna, said: I don’t worry so much about the academics for him ... My worry is the social side. Similarly, Pam told us about her daughter: She shouldn’t have a problem academically, but I do worry about socializing with her. Pam went on to sum up her view of childhood in these terms: All parents just want them to be happy. We want them to have a childhood that’s filled with some nice memories. Not all about school and work and pressure. [We] want them to grow up and be well-balanced.

Rather than simply wanting their children to become ‘fit for [academic] fight’ several parents worried that their child might become too nerdy. Thus, Joanna, was not unambiguously excited about her son’s interest in chess: It’s so nerdy. So, that is what we have to balance out with the football. In this sense, parents’ views of proper parenting revolved around the idea of a well-balanced childhood, which is not all about school and work and pressure.
This idea of a well-balanced childhood is central to the policy notion of holistic education—and thus in tune with the new ideals. In this sense, there was a significant degree of ‘concerted cultivation’ between parents and pre-schools. Parents were attentive to the preschool teachers’ advice and happy to receive guidance on how best to prepare their children socio-emotionally for school.

Advised by the pre-school teachers, Alice had therefore decided to send her son for anger management therapy as well as for a drawing class. When he started primary school, she asked him every day to cite the name of a classmate – thus encouraging him to pay attention to others than himself. Similarly, at the pre-school teacher’s request, Joanna sent her boy, Elliot, to football when he entered Kindergarten 1:

We were all trying to challenge him and they gave regular updates. In Kindergarten 1, he still wasn’t physically on par with his mates. He would just rather sit in a corner and passively play with bricks by himself. So, that was worrying. Solitary activity and physically inept. So, we found him a class, it was football, he really enjoys football. Then once that started, he was more keen to play with other kids, because a ball game is something that involves other people. He used to cycle by himself in circles, like in a corner. So, that was something the teachers gave feedback on.

Nirmala also stressed the socio-emotional. She sent her daughter for chess to make her more confident and able to speak up more amongst unknown people. In addition, she sent her to music, art and swimming. Like many other parents, Nirmala felt it was important to cultivate the extra-curricular, while there was still time for it:

I think academics is okay, it is not so important. What is more important is a wholesome development, a holistic child. Let school do school’s job of educating in academics. I am focusing more on character building and on personality development and on extra-curricular, on chess, music, art, swimming ... Let them do all other things, which is possible at this time, because later, time may get lesser.

Here, Nirmala implicitly specifies ‘concerted cultivation’ as division of labor, in which the home cultivates social and personal competencies while pre-school and primary school provides academic cultivation. At the same time, elements of an orientation towards ‘natural growth’ can also be discerned. Nirmala believes that children must develop from within. This belief, however, is predicated on an expectation that academics is cultivated by educational institutions. We asked her how important academic school preparation was for her.
I think she will learn in school ... I believe Primary 1 will do that. I mean, they get self-develop, rather than us pushing them to do something. I don’t believe in pushing a child. It should be coming from within. So, let them do it as a part of growing.

The efforts at ‘concerted cultivation’ of the socio-emotional were not simply driven by philosophical agreement about child-rearing, but also by a deep-seated anxiety about the demands of primary school. This was especially evident in Brana’s mother who would do anything to make Brana ready for Primary 1, because he had already stayed an extra year in preschool. On Saturdays, he went to Speech and Drama and Morals, which were extra classes offered by the kindergarten. She also sent him to various forms of interventions and therapies. At the same time, she made a point of letting him play with other children in the playground. Overall, she cultivated his social skills, his language development, his understanding of mathematics, and his learning skills in general. As she said: I just want him to be ready.

Similarly, when asked, if there was anything about the transition she worried about, Uma answered, that the school was so big, that the children should spend so many hours there with lots of bigger kids. Like many other parents she worried how her child would settle in socio-emotionally (Levan Lim, personal communication, March, 2017).

**Cultivating the academics**

Not surprisingly, the anxiety about the transition to primary school extended also to the academic aspect. While some parents stated that they were most concerned about socio-emotional development, the anticipated academic demands of primary school also loomed large for most of them. They therefore worked equally closely with pre-schools to identify potential areas of academic weakness that would have to be addressed in order for their children to level up to the demands of primary school. In addition to attending workshops organized by the pre-schools, some parents would regularly consult with the pre-school teachers to get a sense of their child’s individual academic learning needs. Uma is a case in point:

*We attended those workshops, and I did talk a lot to the [pre]school. Each kid is different, so we had to find out, ‘What do you think? Where do you think this kid needs attention?’ Like my son, his reading is not as good as my two girls. They are faster than him. So, we needed to put in more time for reading for him ... And I think, there is also a difference in terms of their maturity level between girls and boys. So, girls tend to be a little more mature than boys. He is still his playful self.*
This kind of concerted effort at cultivating children academically could go into considerable detail. Thus, the pre-school had not only advised Uma to read with her son, but had also provided her with a specific ‘curriculum’:

_They advise parents to read with the kids, that the kids should read three books a day. One book is their favorite book that can be the same book every day. And another book is chosen by us. And one book is a new book that is chosen by them. So, we read three books every day with them ... And also they give us some side words that we have to make into cards ..._

Interviewer: Like flashcards?

Uma: Flashcards, yeah.

However, even as parents consulted with pre-school teachers and sought to comply with their advice, they did not confine themselves to this. Many parents also prepared their children in ways that were not agreed with, and even discouraged by most pre-schools. They did so by sending their children for supplementary tuition and enrichment classes.

As we have mentioned above, this practice is strongly discouraged by the government – especially for pre-school children. Nevertheless, it is highly common especially among middle-class parents. According to a 2015 survey, 40% of Singaporean pre-school children receive supplementary classes. Among primary school children, the numbers are around 80% (Straits Times, July 4, 2015). The most important reason for this is the continued existence of a high-stakes exam at age 12 – the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) – which allocates students to secondary schools according to their performance. This allocation is generally considered decisive for children’s educational and social futures and it therefore has significant ‘backwash effects’, even at the pre-school level.

This ‘backwash effect’ was also palpable among the parents we talked to. Thus, like several other Chinese parents, Joanna told us that she had decided to send her son, Elliot, for Chinese enrichment. The reason for this was that, like many other middle-class Chinese families, they spoke English rather than Chinese at home which would put Elliot at a disadvantage since Chinese is officially considered his mother tongue and is therefore one of the subjects in which he will be tested in the PSLE:

_Because we are a totally non-Chinese speaking family. He started going to the same type his sister did, in Nursery 1. It is a group class. They call it enrichment. It’s a very standard kind of thing where you get together and every week they come back with some kind of crafted thing. And there’ll be homework and there’ll be practice. It is very structured. So once a week, two hours and 15 minutes. And then last year in November, a friend suggested we tried this [new] place. So, I switched both of them over. They both like the_
Most parents were no less critical than the government about the pervasiveness of private tutoring in Singapore. However, like Joanna, they all referred to individual circumstances, which justified this deviation from their critical stance towards private tutoring. They also implicitly defended themselves by stressing that classes were joyful. In the above quotation, Joanna also characterizes her son’s Chinese class as an enrichment class. She refers here to an established distinction in Singapore between tuition (which focuses on academic results) and enrichment (which focuses more on personal development and generic intellectual capacities). Thus, even as she engaged in the very kind of parenting practice, which the government discourages, she justified this in terms which were aligned with the policy ideal of holistic education.

This attempt to reconcile ‘fit for [academic] fight’ and ‘passion for learning’ was equally evident in the case of Uma who referred to play as well as fun when describing her children’s extra math classes:

"We did math enrichment since Kindergarten 2. So, they were introduced to some concepts already, so that it makes it easier for Primary 1. And the school did it too, but we thought that if they did something extra, that would be helpful for them, ‘cause I think math these days, it's not just like, 1 + 1 is 2. So, this enrichment class that they went to, they had other concepts that they introduced to them and they gave tools that they use to play with and figure out how to do some sums together and all. So, I think it was kind of fun as well."

Even if they described enrichment classes as enjoyable, most parents were a bit hesitant, if not rueful when discussing their use of extra classes for their pre-schoolers with us. Some parents did not mention it until explicitly asked by us and all were careful to justify their decision – describing classes as joyful or referring to problems encountered by elder siblings who had not had extra classes.

A mother whose daughter had just been praised at a parent-teacher conference for her academic skills expressed this uneasiness about the use of extra classes most clearly. This mother confessed to us that she would never tell the teachers that she had cultivated these skills, in part, through enrichment classes. Thus, even as she sought to act in accordance with the advice of pre-school teachers, she simultaneously practiced a mode of parenting, which she knew to be ‘out of tune’ with the norm of holistic education and which she therefore tried to hide from the pre-school teachers. This aspect of ‘un-concerted’ or ‘dis-jointed’ cultivation will be explored further in the next section.
**Accelerated growth**

While this quasi-clandestine reliance on private tutoring points to an ‘out-of-jointness’ between the ideals of education reform and parental practice, this does not mean that parents do not share these ideals. On the contrary, most of the middle-class parents interviewed for this study identified very much with the idea of *holistic education*. Many of them, however, pointed to the extraordinary difficulty of observing these ideals in the Singapore context.

Some pointed specifically to the almost insuperable obstacle, which the speed of education in Singapore posed to the practice of *holistic* parenting. Alexis, a mother who was also herself a pre-school teacher, was especially vocal in this respect:

> We live our whole life in Singapore like preparing for the next thing. It is like, why don't you live now? Why can't you leave for the Primary 1’s to do Primary 1 things, for the 7-year-olds to do 7-year-olds things? Why are we preparing to be 8? Why can't we just be 7? I think it is crazy. And so the kids don't have a life.

In contrast to the policy of *holistic education*, Alexis here describes the educational culture in Singapore as highly imbalanced, effectively ruining children’s childhoods. Rather than promoting ‘natural growth’, education in Singapore fosters a form of growth that constantly pushes children to learn and develop beyond their ‘natural’ age. We suggest calling this practice ‘accelerated growth’. Alexis confessed to participate in this herself as she also sent both of her younger children for extra classes.

Going into more detail, she pointed out two sources for this dis-junction between educational ideals and parental practice. One was the curriculum and teaching practices of schools which, according to Alexis, was predicated on what we call ‘accelerated growth’. Advising her worried friends about their children’s transition to primary school, she would explain this discrepancy between natural development and the demands of schooling in the following way:

> Well technically, you shouldn’t be worried, because developmentally he is still at the right level. But you have to be worried because if he is going into primary school and he can’t read and he is not established in his reading, then that is gonna be where your problem lies. Because once you get into Primary 1, there is no stopping; there is no time to catch up. So, like my oldest, she is always six months behind.

Referring to her own experience as a pre-school teacher, she further explained how the relentless speed of schooling would also hamper the work of pre-school educators, creating a similar imbalance in pre-schools:

> Even for being [a] preschool teacher is very stressful because at Kindergarten 2 it is like: ‘Oh my God, this kid doesn’t know his numbers. Oh my God, this kid can’t write, he can’t read. How are we going to tell his
parents, that he is not ready for Primary 1?’ Because at the end of the day, it is your responsibility to make sure that these kids are ready. Even if you don’t believe it is developmentally appropriate, it is still your responsibility to make sure … and it is really stressful. So, the whole Kindergarten 2 becomes like, ‘Oh my God, hurry up! hurry up! Learn your numbers!’ It is really, really stressful. I had a couple of kids in my class where it is like, this kid just can’t learn the numbers and he is going to Primary 1 in six months. What do you do?

Even if all the preschools we visited discursively emphasized their holistic approach, we also experienced this kind of academic haste. In one pre-school, after being shown a number of joyful activities, we witnessed a teacher wrapping up the day by reviewing a series of flashcards with the children at an increasingly faster pace. Several pre-schools also had play corners, but time rarely allowed the children to use them.

However, according to Alexis, there was also a second source of ‘accelerated growth’, which was the prevalence of over-ambitious parents. She thereby invoked the notion of kiasuparents – a widespread stereotypical representation of ‘typical’ Singaporean middle-class parents. Kiasuparenting is the local equivalent of the East Asian mode of intensive parenting, which is often referred to, in the Chinese context, as ‘tiger-parenting’ (Chua 2011; Zhang 2020). The Chinese dialect word kiasu means ‘fear of losing out’. The notion of kiasuparents therefor refers to parents who will go to any length to obtain academic goals and secure positional advantages for their children in the education race – regardless of the costs for their children as well as for others.

As an example of this, Alexis pointed to the wealthy parents in her own neighborhood who would have their children take up private tutoring even if the children were perfectly able of keeping up with school. Instead, these parents used it with the mindset of always being a step ahead. Pam made a similar point. She complained how parents of already high-achieving children would nevertheless send them for private tutoring, thus in effect forcing other parents to do the same.

However, according to Alexis, the most serious problem was the way the unreasonable expectations of schools and the unreasonable ambitions of kiasuparents reinforced each other, creating a vicious circle of ever-increasing academic expectations and still more fast-paced teaching. When parents took up private tutoring to cope with the fast-paced speed of teaching, schools would then respond by accelerating teaching even more. What do the teachers teach?, Alexis asked rhetorically and replied herself: They teach ahead and then if you are not one of those parents that buy into the whole enrichment [thing], you are kind of left behind. In this sense, the school system had become secretly dependent on tuition/enrichment. In Alexis’ view, this vicious circle included even the government itself:
Sometimes I wonder does MOE [Ministry of Education] look at that. It seems more like they are thinking, "but the kids are coping, so we can up the level again" ... They don’t look at the fact that 80% of these kids go to extra classes.

**Two strands of natural growth**

If parents find it difficult to follow the government’s exhortations to parent more in accordance with ‘natural growth’, this is also because the notion of ‘natural growth’ – in the Singaporean context - itself contains two, partially contradictory, strands.

On the one hand, there is a notion of ‘natural growth’ that is intimately related to the policy ideal of holistic education. Here it refers to a passion-oriented, child-centered and psychologically informed mode of education, which aims to develop children in an organic way adapted to the natural maturation process of children themselves. This is the understanding of ‘natural growth’, which Prime Minister Lee invokes when he admonishes parents to let children play and refrain from over teaching them by sending pre-school children to tuition classes. Generally, it is this conception of ‘natural growth’, which is highlighted under the aegis of education reform.

There is, however, also a different conception of ‘natural growth’, which is much older, but still shapes Singapore’s education system in many ways. This a naturalistic and eugenicist version, which is especially associated with Singapore’s ‘founding father’ Lee Kuan Yew (Wee 1995; Barr 2000; Christensen 2007). Lee believed that talent is largely innate. Furthermore, he believed that talent is disproportionately located in a small minority of the population – an elite stratum of natural leaders. According to Lee Kuan Yew, it was therefore this elite on which a new nation like Singapore should target its limited resources:

> In any society there is that 5% who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally ... It is on this group that we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide that yeast, that ferment, that catalyst which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain its pre-eminent place in the societies that exist in South and Southeast Asia ... (Lee 1967: 6f.).

While no Singaporean politician today would utter such words, much of Lee Kuan Yews thinking still permeates Singapore’s education system. The most obvious example is the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) which, by means of a series of IQ-like tests, selects 1% of Primary 3 students for a special programme designed to nurture them for future leadership. However, it also remains a crucial component of mainstream education itself. Thus, the Primary School Leave Examination (PSLE) itself can be understood as a mechanism for singling out this natural elite at an early age. A high-ranking official from the Ministry of Education made this point to us quite explicitly:
Parents have misunderstood the PSLE and it has turned into a nightmare. It was just to sort the kids. Not for all children to suddenly have 100 out of 100. Parents should realize that less is good enough and communicate that to the children.

This statement is illustrative of the second version of ‘natural growth’. From this perspective, the notorious killer questions in the PSLE, and the impossible standards of the education system more generally are not requirements that all children should live up to. They are devices that make it easier to differentiate and therefore to sort the children in order to make it possible to cultivate them according to their nature.

In this light, the appeal for parents to relax, be realistic and mind their expectations, takes on a different significance. Here it means that parents should learn to accept the natural hierarchy of talent and ability. Kiasuparents do harm and make their children miserable, as Prime Minister Lee put it, by hothousing them to go beyond their natural capacities – thus pushing them into a league for which they may not be naturally fit. From this point of view (shared by some parents) it would be more rational and create less misery if parents could step back and relax and let the education system itself do the work of allocating students to the appropriate educational paths.

This view on improper parenting comes out especially clearly in the case of tuition. The use of tuition (especially for preschoolers) is strongly discouraged by the government and the educational community as well as by some parents. It is viewed as the epitome of kiasuism – of parental ambitions having lost connection to the needs of children themselves. It is also condemned as a kind of artificial fertilizer to produce growth that may not reflect, or even obscure,c children’s natural abilities. Alexis, the mother who was otherwise most critical of Singapore’s testing culture, provides an example of this. As part of her criticism of private tutoring, she complained that her older daughter had not been selected for her school’s tennis team. Speaking of the children who had been selected, Alexis said: These kids go to classes every week. They have been learning. Here ‘learning’ appears almost as a form of cheating conferring an unfair advantage in a competition that should be decided entirely by natural talent.

While some parents would agree with Alexis, it is nevertheless possible – analytically, at least – to interpret the widespread use of tuition as a parental protest against the idea of a stable and natural hierarchy of talent. Intensive parenting, or kiasuism, can be viewed as a refusal to accept that children’s educational opportunities have specific limits given by nature. If parents are unable to practice ‘natural growth’, it is not simply because they are inherently pushy and over-ambitious. It is also because they fear that relaxed and de-intensified parenting would not result in age-appropriate growth, but rather in letting the ruthless natural selection machinery of the education system reign supreme. On a general basis,
middle-class Singaporean parents will not risk their children to be sorted out as ‘inferior’ (Wee 1995: 209). They therefore do anything to prepare their children for formal schooling.

Conclusion

Since the onset of education reform in Singapore, education policy has promoted holistic education containing elements of ‘natural growth’ and ‘passion for learning’. The new policy admonishes parents to relax, let [pre-school] children play and grow at their natural pace and manage their expectations with regards to the academics. These changes, however, have not materialized in a new ‘holistic’ educational culture. Rather, they have flooded the education field and middle-class parenting with ambiguities and new anxieties. While most middle-class parents are aligned with the ideal of holistic education, in practice many still adhere to the traditional precepts of intensive parenting. In this sense, many Singaporean middle-class parents remain kiasuparents, anxiously focused on academic results - but they are simultaneously self-critical about it and now also worry about their children’s socio-emotional development.

However, if parents feel dis-oriented by policy exhortations to relax and leave pre-school children’s development to more ‘natural growth’, it is not just because relaxing goes against the traditional academically goal-oriented educational culture. It is also because many educational contexts remain in which relaxing would be a risky strategy. This applies, especially, to the academic demands of schooling, which remain exceedingly high – and continue to rise, according to both parents and pre-school teachers.

As we have shown in our discussion of preparing pre-school children for formal schooling, this means that for middle-class parents the problem of ‘concerted cultivation’ poses itself in different ways in the contexts of socio-emotional and academic competencies. Parents and pre-schools agree on the importance of socio-emotional competencies and engage in sustained ‘concerted cultivation’ of these qualities in pre-school children.

Prior to the onset of education reform, this also applied to academic cultivation, which was based on a common understanding of the goal-oriented educational culture in Singapore. This consensus has been gradually eroded by education reform. Instead, a split has emerged between a policy ideal of holistic education and the educational practices not only of parents but also of the educational institutions (schools as well as preschools). Even as education policy promotes an ideal with elements of ‘natural growth’ and ‘passion for learning’, parents experience schools as making excessive academic demands, which can only be met through what we have called ‘accelerated growth’. This can also be viewed as a refusal to accept the naturalistic and eugenic version of ‘natural growth’ that still exist in Singapore today.

At the level of academic cultivation, parents do therefore not only engage in ‘concerted cultivation’ with pre-schools. They eagerly seek the advice of pre-schools on how best to address the
academic weaknesses of their children. However, in addition to this they also engage in supplementary forms of academic cultivation, which are discouraged by pre-schools and policy-makers and which therefore take place behind the scenes – thereby exacerbating the split between the ideal of more ‘natural growth’ and the prevailing practices of ‘accelerated growth’. Paradoxically, preschools likewise seem to engage in accelerated academic growth, which they are neither proud of displaying. However, both parents and preschools try to manage this paradox by insisting that academics is fun – thus apparently combining a goal-oriented and a passion-oriented educational culture. In this sense, passion has been appropriated for educational purposes as in other neoliberal societies (Kjær et al 2020). As such, emphasis on enjoyment does not necessarily represent a shift away from an academic agenda. Rather it indicates that passion has been colonized by a goal-oriented agenda, where childhood supposedly can be a joyful race.

**References**


