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Home school relations in Singaporean primary schools: teachers', parents' and children's views

Abstract

By providing descriptive evidence from an ethnographic study at three Singaporean primary schools, this paper reveals how participants in children's education perceive and account for the relations they shape between home and school. Through analyses of interview data from teachers, parents, and children, the article demonstrates the potential effects of the actions of parents and teachers on the structure of the childhoods of a particular group of nine-year-olds. Findings are that children's lives are mostly centred on their schools, which provide academic and values education. Parents, too, ascribe importance to holistic education; this, their aspirations for the future, and their attention to the individual needs of their children motivated them to agentively support their children's education at home by teaching and organising educational, sporting, and cultural activities. Therefore, home/school relations structured rather curricularized childhoods for most children in the study.

Key words: parental involvement; home/school partnership; Singapore; children; primary school; holistic education; individual needs.

Introduction

Since independence in 1965, Singapore's drive to build a cohesive nation which can survive economically has been strong and clearly articulated. Educational policies reflect these goals of cohesion and survival and have been fundamental in achieving them. English is a lingua franca and the medium of instruction in schools to allow access to global information and technology (Zulkifli, 2009; Shanmutgaratnam, 2002). In order to attract business and investment, the resource-scarce country offers a skilled, well-educated, English-speaking workforce. Thus, investment in human capital is perceived as crucial for national survival and education prepares citizens to work in a knowledge economy (Lee, 2009; Ng, 2008).

The ideology of ability and meritocracy coupled with hard work is foundational to ability-driven education system (Tong and Pakir 1996), which is centrally planned at all levels (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2006). Children are taught in classes of 40, on average, except at primary one and two where classes typically hold 30 pupils, although there are also much smaller classes in schools for particular groups of pupils, for example, the learning support programmes for English and mathematics at primary one and two (Liang, 2012). In order to assess and reward merit, there are national examinations at

various stages of an individual's education, for example, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and the 'O' Level Examination.

The results of the PSLE are significant in determining the secondary schools a child may apply to enter and the educational track available, that is, the Express or Normal (Academic or Technical) with their associated subject choices for the 'N' Level and 'O' Level examinations at the end of secondary schooling (moe.gov.sg). Cheah (1998) describes the system as having an examination culture and there has been much discussion in the media with both schools and parents being blamed for creating stressed childhoods (e.g. Davie, 2001). An additional media focus has been the perceived educational advantage children from well-resourced homes may experience (e.g. Nirmala, 2013).

However, after a period of consideration and debate, in efforts to reduce the import of examinations, especially at the primary level, the MOE has directed that there be less fanfare over high achievers in examinations and more discretionary places offered by all types of secondary schools. The PSLE marking system is to change from 2021 (<https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/psle/>) with the use of achievement levels rather than scores and criterion-referenced instead of norm-referenced marking, which is likely to reduce competition.

In conjunction, the MOE aims to educate children beyond academic knowledge through a student-centric and values-driven holistic education (MOE, n.d.a). Student-centric approaches are translated into pedagogic practice through subject-based banding instead of streaming (MOE n.d.b., p.7) and differentiated learning, for example, the learning support and gifted education programmes (MOE n.d.b., p.6) as well as school initiatives to provide enrichment or remedial lessons to broaden, deepen, and support the curriculum.

Then Acting Minister for Education (Schools), Mr Ng Chee Meng, defined holistic education: 'every child should be provided with the opportunities to discover and develop his or her strengths and interests, in multiple domains' to become 'a well-rounded individual' (2016, para.8). This is to be achieved by helping children 'learn the right values and attitudes, broader attributes and competencies to navigate the demands of life and work' (para. 7). The then Acting Minister argues that it is necessary to 'free up time and space' for children to achieve this (para. 13) through, for example, co-curricular activities, school camps, and outdoor activities. However, he notes that, 'an emphasis on

academics is deeply ingrained in our culture, translated into expectations of our children, parents, and teachers' (para. 12). He argues for a partnership with parents for a 'collective paradigm shift' (para. 9) in education.

This study took place in the climate of discussion leading up to such a 'collective paradigm shift' (Ng, 2016, para. 16). It centres on descriptions of experiences of childhood by 76 nine-year-old children and some of their teachers and parents. Drawing on literature from childhood studies and parental involvement in education, the paper provides descriptions of the complexity and variety of the relations between home and school and their likely contributory effect on the structuring of the childhoods of this particular group of nine-year-olds.

Literature review

Childhood

Studies in the sociology of childhood demonstrate how individual children's life experiences in particular social, cultural, educational, economic, and political circumstances shape their childhoods. Research in the discipline by, for example, Qvortrup (2001), Hendrick (1997) and James and Prout (1997) demonstrate that modern childhood is scholarized with children spending a great deal of time actually in school (Montadon, 2001; Qvortrup, 2001). Additionally, schoolchildren also have to complete homework out of school; as a result, a mother's role in relation to her children's education has become almost a professional one (Zeicher, 2001) with the expectation that she monitor and manage her child in view of school requirements.

Children's individual personal growth achieved through national education might both enable the social mobility of families and create the possibility of national economic success (Boyden, 1997). Further, Qvortrup (2001) claims that, in fact, children's schoolwork has come to be an economic necessity in contemporary knowledge economies. He views children's education as adding to the formation of familial and societal human capital through the enhancement of knowledge, even though the effect is deferred until they are adults. Levey (2005) argues of beauty pageants and private maths classes that 'the children are engaging in work and their parents encourage them to engage in that work as an investment in their futures' (p.196). Another reason for investment in private, out-of-school classes, according to Oldman (1994), is that middle-class families, in particular, are becoming smaller and often both parents work long

hours. However, Ennew (1994) suggests that home time is becoming increasingly curricularized, timetabled, and school-like, as a result.

Nevertheless, although a schooled childhood is the dominant and more thoroughly researched perspective, other studies of childhood show variations. Punch (2003) demonstrates different, more integrated practices to do with work, play, and education among children in a part of rural, agrarian Bolivia. Switching between the roles and tasks of home and school throughout the day, the children in her study integrated tasks and activities within constraints of time, space, and finance in their families and in the national economic context. Furthermore, Alanen's (2001) research shows how nine- to ten-year-old Finnish children experienced their daily lives in the domains of family, school, personal interest, and friendship. In her study, being a child meant different things in these different domains, and this allowed differential access to resources. Researching in the UK with ten- to 13-year-old children, Mayall (2001) found that Muslim children expressed different ideas of participation and personal development to other children in her study, suggesting a variation on childhood associated with culture. This sociological research shows how experiences of childhood are dependent on varying social, economic, educational, political, and cultural conditions.

In research in Singapore about children's experiences of transition from kindergarten to primary school, Yeo and Clarke (2005) found that, although the children said that they enjoyed school and were happy, their view of the world was work- and school-centric. The children made a clear distinction between work and play, relating school to work and reporting an increase in the difficulty and amount of work in primary school; for instance, they reported having homework from between three times a week to daily. In addition, young children in a study by Sharpe (2002) described scheduled lives without much time for leisure, noting days allocated for tuition and homework. Despite their expressed need for quiet time for relaxation, children said they did not experience much of it. Sharpe (2002) notes that, consequently, pupils' social experience was confined to school and school activities; her data shows children talking about school friends and teachers rather than other activities, leading her to speculate:

'That may be because the emphasis placed on their performance in school leaves them little time or opportunity for a wide range of social experiences.'
(p.14).

Home/school relations

Parental involvement in their children's education is thought to be related to successful outcomes (e.g. Edwards and Warin, 1999). Although parent and teacher relations are described as partnerships, teachers are often positioned as more knowledgeable (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Edwards and Warin, 1999). Causal relationships between parental involvement and their children's academic success have been found by See and Gorard (2015) in a narrative synthesis of research showing that parents reading to their children, specific types of parent/child interaction, and parents' interest in their children's education are all associated with positive outcomes at school. In another narrative synthesis of research, Wilder (2014) demonstrates a relationship between parental involvement and children's academic success. The strongest relationship was when parental involvement was defined as expectations and the weakest when parental involvement was taken to mean assistance with homework.

Research has also focused on categorizing the processes involved in parents' engagement in their children's learning. The continuum designed by Goodall and Montgomery (2014), foregrounds parental agency, which they define as 'the capacity of parents to act (in a beneficial manner) in relation to their children's learning' (p.400). The researchers posit three points on a continuum from 'parental involvement with school' to 'parental involvement with schooling' to 'parental engagement in children's learning' (Fig 1, p.403). Parental agency increases along this continuum. The writers argue that acknowledging the agency of parents is foundational to creating equitable and trusting relations between home and school.

However, Laureau (2011) finds that the agency of working-class parents can be constrained by their perceptions of their identities and capacities to act in relation to institutions. Lareau (2011) identifies two styles of parenting to be 'concerted cultivation' and 'natural growth' (p.246) of middle-class and working-class parents respectively in the USA. As the terms suggest, the two categories rest on the degree of parents' active involvement in their children's education. However, Mayo and Siraj's (2015) use of Lareau's categories demonstrate that both types of parenting were evident among working class families in the UK. Moreover, Mayo and Siraj (2015) found that children who were achieving better than expected academically came from 'a family environment that actively and effectively supports children's well-being and academic achievement'

(2015, p.49) through routines for homework and literacy development, for example. These were homes where parents considered education important for social mobility and where parents encouraged their children and communicated with them about school. Mayo and Siraj's (2015) term 'active cultivation' (p. 49) combines elements of both of Lareau's (2011) categories. Thus, home socialisation can provide children with 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll and Armanti, 2005, p.25) useful for school. Hughes and Greenhough (2006) apply this same notion of 'funds of knowledge' to the intimate understandings parents develop of their children, including, for example, their needs and interests.

Singaporean parents' responses to a questionnaire by Quah, Sharpe, Lim and Heng (1995) about parenting children aged seven and eight show that most parents were concerned to make the most of school opportunities for their children, but they said they would rather teachers took responsibility for teaching (p.26). However, these parents showed their willingness to monitor or teach their children by asking for guidance about how to help them with school subjects at home. According to the researchers, parents of educationally high-achieving children wanted to be involved in guiding their children and providing tuition in academic subjects, as well as other types of classes called 'recreational pursuits' (p.26). In this article, I define these classes as sporting and cultural activities.

Using the concept of family capital theorised to consist of financial, human and social capital (Coleman 1998), Ren and Hu (2011) investigated how social capital was deployed in the literacy practices of pre-school children in four families in Singapore. The families were middle-class (with financial capital) and the parents were well educated (with human capital). The four were two Chinese Singaporean and two Chinese immigrant families. Of interest for this paper is the finding that the various forms of capital could be used in compensatory ways, for example, parents with a low volume of social capital could activate their human capital and devote more time to their children. Another relevant finding is that parents' beliefs motivated the activation of parents' social capital. A contrast in the opinions of the two Singaporean mothers exemplifies the effect of beliefs on practice. One parent, reflecting that her actions were motivated by kiasuism¹, felt that she should reinforce what was taught at school at home and provide tuition for

¹ The word kiasuism (kiasu) originates from Hokkien and means afraid to lose out.

her child. By contrast, the other believed her child's school time was very full and that young pre-school children should not have the narrow educational focus that tuition might provide.

This paper studies the relations between homes and schools and how they are associated with structuring the childhoods of a specific group of children in the context of Singapore. The study cannot generalize or categorize; instead, it explores and particularizes. Through a detailed analysis of interview data, it reveals participants', perceptions, actions, and agency as they endeavour to accomplish schooling.

Method

An ethnographic approach was employed to explore the lives of 76 nine-year-old children through observations of school lessons and interviews with the children, eight of their parents, and six of their teachers, including their schools' Heads of English Departments (HODs). Table 1 shows the schools and the anonymized names of the parents and teachers associated with each one².

Insert Table 1 here.

Two schools elected to participate in response to emailed invitations and one joined the study through a recommendation. There were no criteria for selection beyond one that the schools should be state primary schools. However, once participation was finalised, a difference in the perceived socio-economic status among families sending their children to the three schools was noted, as reported by the teachers at interview. However, these are generalised categories and do not apply to all families of a particular school. A more detailed understanding was provided by the parents at interview as they talked about their employment and their perceptions of their own financial status relative to other parents of children at their child's school.³

All participants were given information sheets and signed consent forms. The parents signed on behalf of their children and the children were also asked for assent. I

² All names are anonymized. The initial letter of the adult participants' names corresponds to the initial letter of the schools they teach in or send their children to.

³ These details were gathered but are not reported in the article to protect participants' identities.

gave small presentations in each class about the study. It was then that children requested to be interviewed in friendship groups. I observed four classes in each of three primary schools for six months and then interviewed teachers, parents, and children. Three classes were the top of the cohort and one was the third⁴. Thus, the children were recognised as academic achievers. While observations contextualize the study, this article draws only on the interviews. Questions were topic-focused (Hymes, 1982) but interviews were semi-structured to allow space for discussion (Denscome, 1998, Seidman, 2013). The topics covered were on reading choices, learning to read, reading in school, reading at home, time at school, and home life. Questions were phrased differently for adults and children. For example:

Question put to children: *Tell me what you do at home?*

Question put to parents: *Can you tell me what your child's life is like at home?*

Question put to teachers: *What do you think life is like for children in this school?*

The interviews with adults took, on average, one to one-and-a-half hours. Children were interviewed singly, in pairs, or in friendship groups, as they requested. This choice was a means of alleviating the effect of the adult/child status differential. Additionally, the fact that I had been observing in classrooms for about five months before the interviews started meant I was a familiar face to children and they were at ease in my company. Children's interviews ranged from the longest group interviews of about 45 minutes to the shortest individual interviews of about 15 minutes. Each child was given an opportunity to answer every question and I also conducted supplementary interviews with all children to explore unanticipated topics which emerged during the first interview and to clarify some of their earlier responses.

All interviews were fully transcribed. Content analyses of the interview data were carried out by a process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 1998). This allowed themes to emerge, showing where participants took similar standpoints and where they differed. A further step in the analysis of the children's interview data was to create tables for each child and note their individual responses. This enabled further analysis, for example, the tabulation of the number and types of tuition classes and

⁴ At the time of the study, the schools allocated children to classes based on internal assessment of academic subjects. Now, schools have moved to subject-based banding (MOE n.d.b., p.7).

sporting and cultural activities children attended per week, converted to simple percentages.

Findings

A holistic and differentiated education

All the teachers in this study commented on the busy, school-centric lives of the children. A factor in the dominance of school in the lives of children was the length of the school day, which could be due to differentiated teaching. Saga School provided remedial lessons after school while the HOD at Tembusu explained how the aim of providing after-school enrichment lessons beyond the curriculum was derailed when curriculum time became short. She pointed out that these lessons often became extensions of morning school, producing a 'very long school day'.

Okay, the reason why we have supplementary classes, we started off with wanting to give the children enrichment. Then we hoped that in the afternoon, what they do are a lot of things that are what we do not cover in the usual syllabus. That means we do enrichment in the afternoon outside the curriculum. But sometimes that's not possible because the school hours just don't permit for the syllabus to be completed

According to the philosophy of holistic education, Tembusu and Saga schools offered pupils a choice of co-curricular activities with the aim of character development. Saga School also organised holiday camps, which, as Ms Stella explained, had the educational goals of team-building and class-bonding as well as developing independence and ruggedness.

Parents, too, conceptualized education as holistic, providing art, music, and sports activities for their children. Some teachers saw this as one of the causes of children's busy lives. For example, the HOD of Saga School said:

But it's more of how much the parents have packed their lives for them. Because in school, everybody goes through the same few hours.

Information from the children shows that 64.28% at Acacia, 53.33% at Saga, and 56.25% at Tembusu attended one or more of these kinds of cultural and sporting activities weekly. Mrs Steed and Mrs Sage, whose children were at Saga School provided their children with such activities, for example, violin and piano lessons for Stephen and piano, art, and roller-blading lessons for Sadie. Thea, at Tembusu School, did netball, Brownies, piano, swimming, dance, and ice-skating as well as her Chinese tuition. Families had specific policies governing their arrangement of activities. Mrs Steed's policy was to limit each of her children to one artistic and one sporting activity. The Soo family policy was to enroll the children in sports or arts classes to develop confidence and to complement and broaden school education. Mr Sails saw these kinds of activities as crucial for his son's development, saying, 'we try to give him a holistic childhood', different to the ones he and his wife had experienced. He said that his wife was at home with his son to 'encourage and be attentive' but not to teach. He saw it as a parental duty to give Scott a well-rounded childhood including socializing, appreciation of nature and art, as well as exercise.

Parents viewed all their educational efforts as an investment in the future of their children. For example, Mr Sails, said:

You want your child in the end reap all the investment they have in absorbing and come out somebody who is not only successful but also somebody who is happy, who can contribute, who can be an all-rounder, and who won't have any problems with life, and who can help others.

Parents spoke about buying books as an investment. Alan's mother and Thea's mother, who were careful with their family budget, discussed spending on books that their children would reread rather than on toys. Stephen's mother who taught her children at home said, 'I'm investing my life into theirs'. Likewise, Mrs Thor said she poured all her time, energy, and money into teaching her children at home, seeing it as a long-term investment for the family as well as the children.

Although children at Acacia School reported more cultural and sporting activities than children at the other two schools, they had fewer additional academic classes: 57.14% of Acacia schoolchildren reported attending one or more academic classes outside school while the figures are 70.0% at Saga School and 75% at Tembusu School. Comments from this group of children at Acacia indicated that they had the time to go out and play on their own. They described a range of interests and pastimes that they engaged

in after school such as reading, playing with toys or on the computer, watching television, and playing outside. According to the HOD of Acacia, the situation of many of the families at the school was that both parents worked out of necessity, which allowed their children time and space to play. Even Mrs Amber who did not work outside the home, encouraged her son to go outside to play with friends independently once his homework was complete. The situation at Tembusu School, according to the HOD, was that children whose mothers did not work or who had relatives or helpers at home were more likely to have scheduled out-of-school activities than some of the others. Thus, holistic education was achieved in a variety of ways both at home and at school.

Homework partners

Children devoted time at home to completing work from school. The HOD of Saga School observed that the amount of homework was a necessity, arguing that, in fact, parents demanded it due to their concern about examination preparation.

So, there's a fair amount of homework because if we don't give it, parents may be wondering why we don't and it has been the culture. We have always been giving homework, so homework is a must.

In addition, the HOD of Acacia School commented that she thought that it was impossible for children to 'clear exams' without doing homework especially since the curriculum had become full with attention to the explicit teaching of values.

Parents' comments from Saga and Tembusu schools demonstrated that homework increased in relation to children's age, which advanced their proximity to the PSLE. For example, Mrs Tent observed that Thea was very busy and said that she was given extra homework because she was in one of the 'better classes' at Tembusu School. Tracy's mother, Mrs Taff, spoke of her daughter's daily routine of one or two hours' homework. Mrs Steed had moved her son's bedtime later so he could manage homework.

However, acknowledging the children's busy lives, the HOD Acacia pointed out that the school implemented a policy of a 'no homework day'. Additionally, Ms Tara, the teacher at Tembusu, said that she rarely gave her classes English homework. Her reason was that she was quite sure that parents would give their children academic work to

complete at home. Emphasising that the children were just as busy at home as in school, she described her coping strategies:

That is why I try to limit my homework because they won't have time. I will get frustrated because I cannot collect all the homework, so I will just make sure that it can be done in class. And if it has to be completed at home, it will be minimal or I have to give an extended period of time.

Another type of homework set was group projects. Ms Anita regarded science projects as valuable in cultivating children's independence. She said children enjoyed the projects because 'they get to explore on their own and they get to meet up with their friends.' However, this teacher also recognized and valued the practical and academic assistance of parents. In one case, she remarked on a child's use of referencing, 'I think the parent must have taught this child that you have to acknowledge where you got the information from, which is fantastic.'

Some form of partnership with parents for children's academic work was expected by the schools although the HOD of Tembusu School stressed that parents should merely monitor homework, not teach. Their involvement seemed to be accepted by parents too since, of the 76 children, only three reported having no parental guidance or tuition classes at all. Ms Stella said:

The school really believes the teacher's hard work and the child working hard is really not enough. If you want the child to really improve academically, you need to get the parents to help you too.

Ms Stella suggested that parents wanted the best for their children in terms of a 'good life' and 'independence' and that, in Singapore, this meant a focus on studies. Her view was that monitoring and control could be lightly done, however, and that children could be left to do their work alone at their own pace; parents should 'glance through' homework so that the children knew that 'someone is watching out for them'. Ms Anita thought all parents, except for a 'few busy ones' checked their children's homework.

In sum, the interviews suggest that teachers and parents at Acacia and Saga schools saw homework as a necessity; teachers required parents to monitor its completion, appreciating their assistance with non-routine tasks. By contrast, parents of pupils at Tembusu School could be relied upon to supply homework if there was not much

forthcoming from teachers. Thus, in all eventualities, children would have to work on the school curriculum at home.

Home teaching

All the eight parents were active in supporting their children's schooling. Two children at Saga School and two at Tembusu said that their mothers taught them everything. Mrs Thor was one such stay-at-home mother. Her parenting included her own professional pedagogic expertise and provision of the sporting and cultural activities similar to the other families. She described how she taught her children all the school subjects at home, creating a parallel educational system, which included homework or her teaching after school until five o'clock, followed by outdoor play with friends and appreciation of nature. Her children's teachers reported that her children were doing very well in school, so Mrs Thor felt there was no need to attend parent/teacher meetings. Her motivation was to teach her two children according to their needs as individuals, as the quotation illustrates.

- MRS THOR Really. I know because I know my boys. You know I follow them every day. So, I know their weak points. I know what to do. I don't have to ask the teachers.
- INT Right.
- MRS THOR I can do better than them. That's what I think.

Indeed, Mrs Thor said that she hoped that the school could teach Thomas more. She argued that at school, children did not learn much in relation to what was expected in examinations. Furthermore, she argued that it was not enough, '[i]f you want to go to a good school'. Although she said that the education system was meritocratic, she thought the role of the family immensely significant, saying 'you need the family involvement' and 'you need the family to push' because the school 'won't reach that level'.

Mrs Amber, who also stayed at home with her children, arranged the daily schedule to accommodate homework, reading, independent outdoor play, educational television, and trips down to town to bookshops, as well as nature trips at weekends and school holidays. Her reason, similarly expressed by all the parents was because she wanted to give her child the individual attention which, she believed, was lacking in school.

I understand the teachers have to take care of so many children in one class. So, it is so difficult for the teacher to really just be, you know, taking care of individual needs.

Although she read to Alan, she said she could not afford tuition in specialized phonics techniques. Mrs Amber therefore researched phonics and taught Alan herself, as she recounts.

So, from there, then I just slowly teach him because I was not exposed to phonics when I was in primary school. So, when it comes to phonics, it's something new to me but I just did some reading. Then I just helped my child and moved along.

However, it was not always the case that parents could confidently draw on or supplement their own knowledge to teach their children. Mrs Sams explained the difficulties involved in consideration of the complexity of the current curriculum against the one she had experienced herself.

And how are we going to teach them because my secondary school education is now what they are doing in primary? I'm lost. I'm totally lost. I can't really help them in anything. Zero.'

By contrast, Sadie's parents did not supervise her daily work but Mrs Sage said, 'I must admit, for example, before her major exams, my husband and I would actually revise work with her.' Their aim was, naturally, to have Sadie do well in the immediate examinations, but they also wanted to cultivate academic habits and teach her to be self-sufficient. However, Mrs Sage confessed that she was not sure if they were doing the 'right thing'.

I think for us, we just want to be sure. So, I think it's a typical kiasu⁵ syndrome that we just want to make sure that she knows and I think it's also trying to cultivate in her the idea that you do need to revise work before exams. I hope that maybe one year later if I will ever meet you, I can tell you she is revising for exams herself.

⁵ The word kiasu originates from Hokkien meaning afraid to lose out.

Mrs Sage also felt strongly the investment in her daughter's education was not for the 'As or the stars' but for doing 'well enough to get to a good enough school', showing, like Mrs Thor, an orientation to a future beyond the PSLE.

Some parents provided their children with tuition. Of the 76 nine-year-old children interviewed for this study, 68% said they attended tuition classes. Mrs Tent observed that tuition was provided because parents 'are afraid that their kids would be left behind.' Mrs Taff identified her child's language needs and weaknesses against the English syllabus, weighing up the merits of current tuition against what she, as parent, was able to teach. She therefore drew on all options available to her, saying:

In fact, she [Tracy] is now at [a well-known centre], but I'm thinking of stopping it and thinking of whether to look for some other centre because they cover the full sweep of vocab, grammar, oral and all that. Whereas I'm more interested in looking for a centre that can really focus more on comprehension and creative writing because I find that that's the part that she is weaker in you see. Because vocab, grammar, I can teach her myself.

However, she also expressed some doubts when describing a switch in guiding Tracy's reading from wide reading and enjoyment of stories to making a conscious effort to note vocabulary and use it in writing. She questioned, 'I am not sure is that the right approach or not.' Sometimes teachers gave explicit advice about tuition to enable children to keep up in school. It was at the suggestion of the schoolteacher at a parent/teacher meeting that Mrs Tent provided, albeit reluctantly, tuition for her daughter in the Chinese language to help her cope with the school curriculum.

However, the HOD of Tembusu School identified a problem with tuition when the teaching was ahead of the school curriculum, resulting in children being bored in school classes and misbehaving. She said of teachers, 'we will still do the teaching'. Mrs Tent described her own visit to a 'famous' centre which used this approach of teaching ahead. According to her, the centre's rationale was because 'the parents wanted it that way'. Moreover, Mrs Sage reported difficulty in evaluating the efficacy of her daughter's regular tuition, saying that she was unsure whether the slight improvement in her English marks was due to tuition or the school enrichment lessons. In the interviews, therefore, parents were rather thoughtful and realistic about the effects of tutoring; they observed that tuition was not a panacea or a quick route to PSLE success. Furthermore, Mrs Amber

questioned how parents might feel if their child did not do well in school despite their investment in tutoring.

Nevertheless, according to their perceptions of education, their family policies, and their understandings of their children's individual needs, most parents agentively negotiated family and private educational provision for home teaching.

Using assessment books

A strategy used by parents to support their children's academic studies was their employment of assessment books. These books constitute a local genre of revision guides and collections of practice examination papers for school subjects to match the Singapore school syllabi. Parents and teachers said that many parents bought assessment books and collections of practice papers for their children to prepare for examinations. Teachers expressed contrasting views about this custom. On the one hand, Ms Anita would rather parents not buy assessment books for their children because, in her view, this could only lead to examination 'smartness' and not genuine learning. Ms Stella, on the other hand, thought that parents' provision of one or two assessment books for their children to complete was necessary but, nonetheless, agreed that too many would 'kill their interest'. She said:

I feel that a few is essential for them to have that extra because when you are doing assessment books, you are exposed to questions, especially for science. Because many a time, the science questions are very different, so I feel that the children need that exposure to tackle different kinds of questions.

However, for most families in this study the use of assessment books was routine. At Acacia School, 78.57%, at Saga, 86.66% and at Tembusu, 68.75% of children interviewed said they read and used assessment books. This represents an overall average of 77.99%.

The availability of assessment books enabled the parents' home teaching although the books were used differently in homes due to the mothers' lifestyles. It seemed that mothers who worked outside the home, such as Tracy's, bought assessment books with answers in the back so that their children could complete them independently. They then taught according to their children's needs, as described by Henry below:

INT Okay and what about you, Henry?
 HENRY At home I do my homework or sometimes I do the exam papers because my mother buys the exam papers or sometimes assessment books. And then in the exam paper, if I don't know a question, then I will circle it.
 INT Yes.
 HENRY Then after that I will go and mark my paper. And then if I still don't know, then my father or mother will explain to me.

Assessment books are therefore a commercial support for teaching at home, and a large variety is readily available in local bookshops. Children observed that as a general practice, once they had completed their school homework they would 'do assessments' or their 'mothers' homework'. For example, Mrs Taff explained that Tracy's daily routine after school was to spend one or two hours on school homework and then complete tasks in assessment books, which Mrs Taff rotated by subject. The use of these books appears to increase with proximity to examinations either as children move up the school grade levels or as examinations approach at the middle and end of each semester. Mrs Steed's words exemplify this when she explained how she used assessment books with Stephen.

Yes, I bought him - I didn't do it for primary one and two because everybody says primary one and two is really simple. So primary three I bought him the whole set of past year questions. So, I just give to him like okay you do this now. And then when he finishes, I will mark it. And I will go through with him what he got wrong and explain to him why.

However, Mrs Sams expressed the parents' dilemma when it came to choosing and buying appropriate books from the titles on offer. She urged the teachers to give parents advice on which books were the most suitable for educational and economic reasons

The children had different perspectives on having to work through assessment books. While, for example, Shi Ying acknowledged that completing assessment tasks was a helpful practice and many felt it was quite natural, others reported feeling the strain; for example, Dolly commented that her mother bought 'stacks' of assessment books, and Rajit, May and Edward used verbs such as 'force', 'stuff' or 'squeeze' respectively, indicating the pressure they could be feeling. For example, Edward said:

INT So can I also ask you Edward, do you do assessment books?
 EDWARD Yes, lots.
 INT Lots.

EDWARD Even after exams, my mother is still squeezing me with so much.

Scheduling home time

Jessica's description of her routinized home experience explains how she was able to cope with the academic demands of school, home, and tuition centre.

INT Can you tell me what you do at home?
JESSICA I .. when I come back from school, I always put my bag aside and then I .. I take a bath first. Then after I take a bath, I will eat my lunch. After that, I will .. I will do my homework. After that, before I do my mother's homework, I will always go down for a swim for one hour.
INT Oh.
JESSICA Then I will do my mother's homework.
INT Yes.
JESSICA After that, after I finish everything, if I got extra homework like tuition homework, I will do it. But if I don't have any of the tuition homework, my mother say I can relax already. So I will relax.
INT Okay. What do you do when you relax?
JESSICA I read my storybooks and sometimes watch TV.

Children's descriptions of their lifestyles ranged from merely following a working mother's instructions, for example, Dorothy said, 'I will call my mum to know what to do in the afternoons' to the explicit scheduling described by Jessica.

The timetabling of home lives was particularly evident during the examination period; for instance, Mrs Tent described how she had had to make revision schedules for her children and cut down their time on the computer. After simply providing them with assessment books, which they did not complete voluntarily, she 'took over and took charge' and the children 'just had to follow the schedule'. Of the eight parents, only Scott's father said that home life was not scheduled.

Discussion

The particular detail of the interviews demonstrates how the efforts of parents and teachers provided the children with busy, structured, schooled lives similar to that demonstrated by research in Europe (Montadon, 2001; Qvortrup, 2001; Hendrick, 1997; James and Prout, 1997). Of the 76 children interviewed, the majority said they

experienced some curricularisation (Ennew, 1994) of their home time possibly caused by long school days, homework, home teaching and/or the organization of tuition and sporting and cultural activities. Thus, this study aligns with other survey and interview research on children's lifestyles in Singapore (Yeo & Clarke, 2005; Sharpe, 2002; Quah et al., 1995). The parents' confidence in their own knowledge and abilities determined how far and in what ways they were directly involved with their children's school and homework, showing how the parenting role is becoming almost a professional one in its awareness and understanding of the school curriculum (Zeihner, 2001). However, there was variation in how parental involvement was viewed by teachers. Ms Anita valued parental expertise while other teachers thought parents should monitor while they took full responsibility for teaching.

Nevertheless, parental professional knowledge enabled agency in the construction of home school relations, according to Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) framework. Seven parents were 'engaged' in their children's 'learning' (p. 405), that is, their actions were motivated by their attitudes and perceptions of their parental roles, not only by information provided by the school. In fact, these parents operated almost independently of the school, offering support to their children in the form of encouragement (e.g. Scott's family) and home teaching (e.g. Thomas's and Alan's families). However, although Mrs Sams was actively involved in taking her children to the library and monitoring their homework, her view of her own knowledge led her to feel isolated and incompetent. This parent was 'involved' with her children's 'schooling' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014, p. 404) and considered herself less able to be agentive than other parents. She attributed this to a lack of financial resources and information from her son's school. Mrs Amber, however, was able to compensate for less financial capital by educating herself in phonics and then teaching her son, thus drawing on human capital (Ren and Hu, 2011)

The descriptions of the parenting style evident in this study can be categorized by Mayo and Siraj's (2015, p. 49) 'active cultivation', as parents were motivated by the value they placed on education and their aspirations for their children. However, parents did also feel insecure in exercising agency in relation to schooling. Mrs Sage and Mrs Taff expressed doubts as to the 'right' practice while Mrs Sams felt 'lost'. As Laureau (2011) shows, dialogue between home and school may be difficult for a parent who is not well versed in the ways of institutions. Mrs Sams thought of herself as less financially secure

compared to other parents and stated that she would have liked more specific direction from teachers about how to guide her child, similar to the parents in Quah et al., (1995). By contrast, Mrs Tent did receive very clear information from her daughter's school about the particular need for Chinese tuition.

Most parents were, therefore, not just the assistants or agents of teachers (Brown, 1993; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), but motivated by their own concerns: they arranged their teaching and tuition in relation to the value they ascribed to education, the schools' provision, their understandings of the curriculum, and exam preparation. Sometimes, the teachers recommended seeking help for particular needs, such as language, and the parents followed advice. Otherwise, parents learnt skills themselves and taught their children using assessment books. Although children's workloads from both home and school increased with proximity to examinations, parents discussed their aims beyond the tests as cultivating good routines and habits in their children to enable them for futures in 'good' secondary schools. The interviews show them thoughtfully questioning the appropriateness and efficacy of tuition against their own beliefs and capabilities. From their standpoint though, teachers noted problems in their classrooms stemming from tuition; some children were bored in lessons and less independent in thinking owing to their reliance on tutors. Thus, the effects of parental agency usually thought beneficial in constructing home school relations (Goodall and Montgomery, 2015) are questioned by the teachers in this research.

As Ren and Hu (2011) have demonstrated, beliefs are important influences on parenting. In this research, beliefs and perceptions were often articulated as philosophies and policies. First, home and school were motivated by the philosophy of holistic education. Schools differentiated their curricula and provided values education and character-building co-curricular activities. However, paradoxically, the differentiation provided by schools lengthened the school day, which in turn ensured children spent more time on school activities at home. In their turn, parents followed their imperative to invest in their children's education on behalf of the family (Levey, 2005; Qvortrup, 2001; Boyden, 1997), taking responsibility for providing cultural and sporting activities to provide a balanced education. Families explained their policies about such activities, and the way they viewed their responsibilities as parents in providing them. However, findings suggest that some children from homes where both parents worked full-time out of financial necessity were engaging freely in some of the very activities that were

arranged by parents for others. As a result, such children might acquire the independence and values that schools and other parents tried to teach directly through specific cultural and sporting activities as part of holistic education.

Second, one of the strongest parental perceptions was that their involvement in their children's learning was necessary because schools could not cater to the individual needs of children in large classes. On the other hand, the teachers argued that individual needs were attended to in school through differentiated pedagogic activities, as well as remedial and enrichment classes. The study therefore shows a disjuncture between the perceptions of parents and teachers in this area. While not at all definitive, research into the pedagogic effects of class size (e.g. Blatchford, Basset & Brown, 2011) shows that a smaller class may, in fact, allow teachers to use more individualized pedagogies and spend more time with each child in their classes resulting in greater engagement in learning. Parents had intimate, expert knowledge of their children, such that Mrs Thor never felt the need to meet her children's teachers. Parents drew on these deep 'funds of knowledge' (Hughes & Greenhough, 2006; Gonzalez et al, 2005) to guide and teach their children, arrange their educational classes and other cultural and sporting activities, and monitor their school homework, going beyond the school curriculum, in some cases, and supplementing it in others. Children spoke of completing their schoolwork at home followed by their mothers' work as if two separate, parallel yet complementary educational curricula were in operation at home and school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, at a time of paradigmatic change in educational philosophy and policy, this particular group of children experienced childhoods dominated by schooling. The study concludes with the thought that, in effect, many children experienced two curricula operating in parallel, both apparently equally scheduled: a school curriculum and a home curriculum. The implementation of school pedagogies of differentiation and holistic education within an academic curriculum became lived through lengthened school days, co-curricular activities and homework. Additionally, most parents were highly agentive. They were motivated to provide home teaching, tuition, and recreational and cultural activities by their perceptions of their own pedagogic competence, including knowledge of the curriculum, as well as philosophies and policies about education, and ultimately by their concern for the present and future needs of their individual children.

The study has not sought to typify or categorize because of the small number of participants. It is limited by the fact that the eight parents who agreed to participate in the study were likely to be those who were very interested in their children's education. Future research with more diverse participants and with children experiencing different degrees of success in education is necessary.

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