

THF Working Paper

Working Papers Series No.1 /2020

State-School-Family Relations in Singapore: Perspectives of Low-Income Families

Charleen Chiong

University of Cambridge, PhD



The
HEAD
Foundation

State-School-Family Relations in Singapore: Perspectives of Low-Income Families

Charleen Chiong

Editorial Note and Acknowledgments:

This Working Paper offers a summary of the key findings from my doctoral research, completed at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge: 'Families and the State: Relations of dependency, responsibility and educational inequality in Singapore'. The contents of this Paper were presented at The Australian Sociological Association Conference (Sydney), the Meeting of Minds Forum (Hong Kong) and the Department of Education and Training Victoria (Melbourne).

I am indebted to the 12 families I interviewed, over the course of my doctoral research. I also wish to express my thanks to the 15 academic and policy experts, who provided rich contextual insight into the policy landscape in Singapore within which families' lives are situated. Finally, I have benefited from the feedback of participants in the conferences listed above, as well as the generous support of my mentors over the past four years. My sincere thanks are due to: Dr. Arathi Sriprakash (University of Cambridge), Professor Clive Dimmock (University of Glasgow), Professor Saravanan Gopinathan and Associate Professor Leonel Lim (National Institute of Education, Singapore).

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Cambridge.

“I respect the Singapore government, the father of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. He was here, he already do for us everything already. Everything already he do, then he say “bye bye” then go. For Singapore government, for Singaporean, they never give us suffer. What you need, everything here.” (Srinivas, father, F3¹)

“The great city today is a site...for a contingent citizenship based on meritocracy. It compels ordinary citizens to increase their brainpower as a condition of more secure attachment to the metropolitan motherland.” (Ong, 2007:92)

Introduction

In much policy research, the micro and the macro, structure and agency, the political and personal, are often not integrated within a single optic for analysis (Shore and Wright 2005). Socio-political context is often missing from micro-level analyses of families’ lives, and micro-level analyses of everyday lives are often missing from macro-level understandings of politics and policy (Eklund and Göransson 2016; Mylan and Southerton 2018).

Yet, integrating the two, which seem like ‘universes’ apart (Shore and Wright, 2005), is often complex. Read together, the opening quotes – the first from an interview I conducted with one low-income father, and the second from an anthropologist’s analysis of Asian mega-cities – sketch out the seemingly paradoxical co-existence of families’ dependency on the state’s provision, alongside the responsabilisation of individuals for ‘success’. How low-income families navigate Singapore’s education system – including their relations of responsibility and dependency with the state and state institutions such as schools, as they do so – forms the central problematic of my doctoral research, and this paper.

¹ This is a quote from a father interviewed in this study. I generally accompany interview quotes with the pseudonym of the person speaking, and their role in the family (i.e. father, mother, son, daughter), except where these details are already obvious due to repetition. Additionally, I include a reference code for each family (F1, F2, etc.), to help readers locate the individual or family in Appendix A, which provides background information for each family.

Method

This research draws on 72 in-depth interviews with 12 low-income, ethnic minority (six Indian, six Malay) families, conducted in Singapore between January and July 2017. Access to the families was facilitated by community organisations in Singapore. The families were selected based on the following criteria drawn from Ern-Ser Tan's (2004) work on social class in Singapore, Lareau's (2003) work on social class in the U.S. and the Singapore Department of Statistics (2016) data:

1. Household income (bottom 20% household income/capita)
2. Parental education (typically at most, secondary school qualification)
3. Parental job (typically blue-collar or low-level white-collar work)

I interviewed Secondary Four-aged (16-17-year-olds) young people, and their parents (or whoever identified as the child's primary caregivers²). From each ethnic group, I interviewed two Express, two Normal-Academic and two Normal-Technical stream students. Following Seidman's (2006) set-of-three approach, three rounds of interview were conducted with each family: two individual semi-structured interviews with each participant, and one focus group interview, held at least one month later, with each family. For the focus group interview, I interviewed not only the Secondary Four young person and their primary caregiver(s), but also, if the opportunity arose, extended the invitation to other household members (usually siblings) to join the interview. This provided additional insight into family life and the construction of relationships within families. With the families' voluntary, informed

² The general term of 'parent' is used to represent 'primary caregiver' to maintain intellectual lineage with the sociology of parenting literature. The term 'parent' in this project, however, encompasses one grandparent (see F1 in Appendix A) who fulfils a 'parental' role in the eyes of both the grandparent and grandchild in question.

consent, interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

I interviewed only Indian and Malay families, initially hoping to understand the intersecting disadvantages related to both race and class (Vincent 2017). However, as the study progressed, I decided to focus on the role of 'class' in structuring families' lives, rather than 'race' – for two reasons: 1) families seemed less interested in discussing matters of 'race' than 'class', in shaping their financial and educational futures; 2) in Singapore, academic research has suggested that 'class' divisions have a more salient structuring force compared to 'race' divisions; a low-income Malay family likely has more in common with a low-income Chinese or Indian family, than with a middle-income Malay family (Chua 2017; Teo 2018). Furthermore, I found significant homogeneity in the views of Indian and Malay families concerning education, so I did not distinguish analytically between their responses; their responses were also not separated by racial categorisation, to avoid perpetuating racist stereotypes (Teo 2018).

This is not to say that race is not important. Social class *is* racialised in Singapore, with, on average, Malay families usually occupying lower economic and educational positions compared to their Chinese counterparts, and Indian families broadly in-between (Barr and Skrbis 2008; Moore 2000). However, within the space constraints of this paper, I focus on the (classed) construction of state-school-family relations. The production of these relations can be more richly understood within the socio-political context of Singapore – the focus of the next section.

Socio-Political Context of Singapore

Singapore is a small, post-colonial, multiracial city-state in Southeast Asia with a majority of ethnic Chinese (75%), and Malay (13%) and Indian (8%) minority groups. The People's Action Party (PAP), the only governing political party that has been in power in Singapore since its independence in 1959, is popularly credited for rapidly transforming Singapore over three decades – from a 'backwater' fishing village with few natural resources and a high unemployment rate, to a 'global city' with a top-performing education system according to international benchmarking tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Deng and Gopinathan 2016).

In this section, I outline aspects of Singapore's socio-political context that likely structure families' educational lives. On the one hand, Singapore is often described in academic literature as a 'strong' state – as 'soft authoritarian' and paternalistic (that is, parent-like), especially regarding education (Lim 2016; Lim and Apple 2016). For instance, a majority of schools are under the ideological leadership and financing of Singapore's Ministry of Education; around 80% of Singaporean students attend a government school in Singapore. Historically, Singaporean politicians have been particularly interested in education, emphasising that as a state with little natural resources, developing human capital is vital to Singapore's survival. For this historical reason, and due to Confucian cultural influences that place great importance on education, the value of education is clear both amongst Singaporean politicians and the wider population. Generally, Singapore has an 'anti-welfarist' ideology (Teo 2013), but education is perceived as an exception to the rule. Apart from fourteen 'independent' schools (high-performing government schools that are provided relatively more autonomy in setting school curricula and

programmes) that charge higher school fees,³ almost all schools in Singapore are heavily subsidised,⁴ and of reasonably high quality.

While this seems to invite *dependence* on the state, there are simultaneously *self-responsibilising* neoliberal logics that structure Singapore's education system. The term 'neoliberalism' is "oft-invoked but ill-defined" (Mudge, 2008:703). Neoliberalism may be conceptualised as the prioritisation of capital accumulation, skills and profits, competition and efficiency, over other social goals (Flew, 2014). It tends to promote an ethic of individualism and responsibility (Shamir 2008). It is also a 'mobile technology' that, beyond the abovementioned conceptual parameters, can manifest differently in different political and cultural contexts (Ong 2007). As such, 'neoliberalism' is not necessarily antithetical to (soft) authoritarian politics; in fact, neoliberal efficiency can be used to bolster the legitimacy of the 'strong' state (ibid). In Singaporean education, the emphasis on individual effort and performance is reinforced through high levels of streaming and tracking, rigorous high-stakes examinations and likely regressive government spending in education (Ng 2014).

Singaporean meritocracy, I posit, embodies both 'neoliberal' and 'strong' state logics. Singaporean meritocracy presumes that any individual, regardless of background, with talent and hard work, can achieve education and life success (Adzahar 2012). While this seems to presume an individualistic focus, Singaporean meritocracy more accurately seems to operate as follows: *In light of high-quality state provision (that is, the dependability of state), individuals (and families) should bear responsibility for educational and life success.* The metaphor of 'leveling the

³ There are, however, fee subsidies that cover up to the full cost of attending these schools, provided on a means-tested basis (Ang 2018).

⁴ Almost all government primary school fees are free, with government secondary school fees at SGD \$5/month.

playing field' is pervasive in Singaporean political discourse. That is, the state will provide high-quality, virtually free schooling. Beyond this, and indeed, *because of this*, the individual and family need to be responsible and help themselves (Teo 2011, 2013). Dependency and responsibility are key animating logics – not only in Singaporean meritocracy, but, as I will demonstrate, in low-income families' lives, too.

However, the meritocratic chain of reasoning has been increasingly problematised in recent years. There has been growing discontent in Singapore over the 'unfairness' of meritocracy. Research suggests persistent, worsening socio-economic and educational inequalities in Singapore. Singapore has been ranked as the second most unequal developed Asian economy, after Hong Kong (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] 2017). Its Gini coefficient increased from the 1980s, rising from 0.412 (1997) to 0.458 (2016). Its range of 0.410-0.482 throughout the last two decades suggests an inequality level above the UN-Habitat's international alert line for income inequality of 0.4 (Chew 2017).⁵ Teo (2018) notes that if one were to set the poverty line at less than half the median household income (a level widely-accepted in academic scholarship), one fifth of Singapore's resident population might be defined as poor. Considerable empirical literature suggests growing class-based inequalities in Singaporean education, such as Chang and Cai's (2011) research that estimates that the proportion of students in Singapore's elite schools with fathers as university graduates exceeds 50%, while in mainstream schools, the proportion is a mere 10%.

⁵ Figures higher than 0.4 signify inequality at a 'dangerously high' range – a level that may potentially lead to loss of investment and social unrest, without remedial intervention.

As such, meritocracy is critiqued as “[favouring] those who already have the capital” (Koh 2014:200). Politicians recognise this, too; current Minister for Education, Ong Ye Kung, stated that meritocracy is at the risk of becoming a “dirty word”, appealing for Singaporeans to not “lose faith” in meritocracy (Teng 2018). Yet, public critique of meritocracy and its resulting inequality continues. Upper and middle-class families are extensively strategising, doing everything in their power, to ensure the best outcomes for their children – such as through enrolling children in private tuition and enrichment classes, a largely unregulated industry (Gee 2012). Private tuition on its own is an SGD \$1.1 billion industry; 40% of preschoolers are enrolled in private tuition (Wise, 2016).

Thus, in light of the complex socio-political context of Singapore – that is, a ‘strong’ state that invites dependence in some ways, yet also promotes neoliberal, self-responsibilising logics – *how do low-income families navigate Singapore’s education policy landscape? And, how do they relate to the state and state institutions as they do so?*

While there is growing research on the Singaporean middle-class (Bach and Christensen 2017; Göransson 2015), there is little Singapore-based research that engages the perspectives of families (parents and young people) on the sharp end of inequality, to listen to their representations of their experiences, anxieties and aspirations, and to understand the nature of their relations with formal institutions such as the state and school. In the rest of this paper, I trace the ways families subjectively experience education in Singapore. Dependency and responsibility were, in my judgment, key animating logics not only in the meritocratic discourse of the neoliberal ‘strong’ state, but in the educational lives of low-income families in

Singapore. I discuss my findings in four sections: 1) responsibility dynamics, 2) dependency dynamics, 3) how dependency-on-state makes the acceptance of responsibility plausible, 4) an illustration of how insufficient state support can weaken one's capacity and willingness to take up responsibility.

Responsibilisation of Families and Young People

Much research literature (especially research conducted in U.K., European and American contexts) portrays relationships between low-income and ethnic minority families and schools as fraught and uneasy. These relations are often described as characterised by feelings of alienation, distance and distrust (e.g. Lareau 2003; Ule, Živoder, and du Bois-Reymond 2015). Some research suggests that working-class families trust the professional judgment of teachers more than middle-class families do; Crozier (1998:128) found that working-class families “were much more reliant on teachers’ judgements and often spoke about them ‘knowing best’ ”. Yet, theoretical and empirical research tend to represent middle-class families as experiencing a greater degree of ‘interconnectedness’ with schools, sharing similar educational expectations of students, similar understandings of the education system, speaking similar languages and practising similar rituals, compared to poor families (Lareau 1987).

In Singapore, however, home-school relations generally seem to be warm, close and friendly. Families, especially parents, seem to deeply appreciate the schools – and the state, by proxy, because schools (particularly mainstream government schools) are often seen as the benefaction of the ‘strong’ state in Singapore. The perception of state and school as intertwined is evidenced in Namrita’s (F1, grandmother) comment: “Even sick also, [schools] will call us, ‘Come

and fetch your children go home, don't let them alone', they will call us. So children okay you know. They happy now. So must thanks to the [...] government.”⁶

In fact, parents and young people seemed to internalise and accept responsibility (and blame) for educational and life success. Young people recognised their responsibility, although they tended to add that schools and parents had important roles to play, too, to support and motivate them.

[T]he child can make themselves [...] be successful in life. (Nurul, daughter, F8)

[T]he child must be 100% responsibility lah. Your parents can only give you what they can give. So whichever you want, work hard enough in what you want to achieve. So if you want [...] comfort in your life, don't just go and have fun. Have an ambition in your life [...] The parents are just the support, the moral support. Your teachers and parents can only push you, but it's your own [responsibility] to push yourself more. They are just the helping hand. (Sanjay, son, F3)

Parents tended to view young people as ultimately responsible for success in even stronger terms, devolving responsibility to them and individualising the pathway to 'success', sometimes portraying the rewards and punishments of responsibility and irresponsibility respectively, in hyperbolic ways:

Yeah, so I always tell [my children]: “You just choose lah. You want 10,000 [dollars] or you want 2,000? 10,000 it means if you study hard, you will achieve monthly salary is 10,000. If you want 2,000, or less than 2,000, you keep doing what you are doing now.” [...] “So if you don't want to listen my advice now, you'll be regret.” (Radzi, father, F11)

This did not mean that parents saw themselves as having no role to play. They expressed anxiety and fear, particularly when young people were “playful” and struggled to pass examinations. They described closely monitoring their children's academic, social and moral development. On a rhetorical level, parents and young

⁶ Not all government provision is viewed as positively as schooling was. Families were at times more critical of a bureaucratic welfare system that was inadequate for their needs, and administered by social service officers who they felt were at times unempathetic.

people unanimously saw ‘young people’ as ultimately responsible for success. However, it also seemed that on a practical level, the burden of ‘individual’ responsibility spilled over into parents’ lives; they exerted considerable effort around long (often shift job) working hours and at times debilitating illness,⁷ to ensure their children at least progressed from one grade to the next.

To understand *why* families and young people accepted responsibility, I drew out from my data a ‘plausibility structure’ – reasons that ‘made plausible’ the internalisation of responsibility. This ‘plausibility structure’ provides insight into why families had warm relations with state and school. There are two aspects of this ‘plausibility structure’: perceived competence, and perceived care of state and school, which the next section elaborates on.

Dependency Context: Making Responsibility Plausible

Reason (1): Competence

Materially, families felt that the state had provided schools and tuition programmes that are of high-quality and well-funded. Families felt their beliefs in the competence of the state and schools were validated by what they heard in the news about Singapore’s rankings on international benchmarking tests, as ‘Number One’ in the world in Science and Mathematics. They found Singaporean education to compare favourably with neighbouring countries, especially countries where they had kinship networks, such as India and Malaysia:⁸

⁷ Examples of this include Ayu’s ongoing fight with cancer, Naadia’s chronic back pain and Kumar being wheelchair-bound and his struggles with clinical depression. These conditions not only constrained the time they could give to caregiving and helping their children with schoolwork, it also severely limited their ability to work and created additional sources of stress, financially and emotionally, at home.

⁸ Of the twelve families interviewed, five parents (all mothers) had migrated from Indonesia, India or Malaysia to Singapore, shortly or around the time of marriage.

Yeah, the education is good, Singapore the education is very good. Even from India also they come here and study you know. 'Cause they say the education is very good. So we also very proud, [that] from our side, people come here and study [*laughs*]. (Namrita, grandmother, F1)

If I compare to Malaysia – [education in Singapore] is still good, high standard, and also, our professionalism, and also, it's recognised by worldwide. So, that's why I like the education. (Hannah, mother, F7)

Like, recently, we went [on field trip] to Malaysia, then we just learned about their culture, whatever they do. And you will like, compare that to Singapore, how good we are than them. [...] Their education system is so different, very different. (Hakeem, son, F7)

Families' recognition of the competence of the state and school is an unsurprising finding – a Varkey Foundation study found that 73% of Singaporean families felt that government-funded schools were 'good', significantly higher than global average of 45%. This proportion was behind only Finland and Estonia, out of 29 countries surveyed (Varkey Foundation 2018).

In contrast to this perceived 'competence' of the state and school, low-income parents viewed themselves as uneducated and less capable at child-rearing – and thus felt grateful for the work of the state and schools in supporting their children's education and futures. While seeing herself as uneducated, Lakshmi (mother, F4) explained, "educated" teachers were seen as capable of teaching young people "everything".

Reason (2): Care

The second aspect of this plausibility structure is the notion of the care of the state and school. Teachers in Singapore were seen as very caring, doing all in their power to help children navigate what they described as a highly challenging education system. As such, there was a level of trust, and relatively free flow of information between home and school. Children consulted teachers on their education and life

decisions; parents consulted teachers on how to help their children academically or in their emotional development to help them become 'responsible', emotionally stable young adults.

Mothers such as Dania (mother, F12) trusted that teachers cared enough about her family to bring her concerns, including "family problems" to them. She told her children's teachers about issues such as her imminent divorce, which she felt might affect her children's behaviour. Dania rationalised that this free flow of information between parent and teacher would enable teachers to be "well-prepared to face the child". Parents frequently cited the importance of keeping teachers informed about what the child was doing at home, and expected teachers to keep them well-informed about what the child was doing at school.

While *both* parents and young people talked about the care of teachers, young people in particular used the imagery of 'friendship' – as in the case of Devi (F4), Irfan (F10) and Sanjay (F3) – and in some cases, even 'family', to discuss their relationship with teachers. For instance, when asked what her classroom was like, one young person, Deepta (daughter, F2) immediately replied: "You'll feel at home. It's a very lively environment because you'll feel that teachers are 'legit'⁹ our parents." Deepta continued, describing her teachers: "They don't judge actually...They don't point out failures, they actually focus more on the positive side." She had, a few years ago, confided in one of her teachers when their family went through a brief season of domestic abuse. The perceived care of teachers formed a protective buffer that was important for many families – particularly given that low-income families experience disproportionately high rates of negative

⁹ Informal slang – similar in meaning to 'truly'.

childhood experiences (e.g. being bullied, having a family member in prison, or with mental illness) (Tai 2019) that can be complexly related to the severe financial stress that many low-income families face.

Making Responsibility Plausible

The chain of reasoning families described seems to be as follows: families *depend* on and trust the state's competence and on the care of teachers; this dependence enables, or makes plausible for families, the acceptance and devolution of responsibility, to families and particularly to young people. This might be interpreted as the internalisation, and reproduction, of the key logics of Singaporean meritocracy: the state has provided a sufficient 'dependency' context – therefore, you should take responsibility.

This chain of reasoning (from dependency to responsibility) might be traced across many interviews that I conducted. For instance, in one father, Srinivas' (F3) response, when asked what he liked about Singapore's education system, he replied:

Singapore education-wise, what I like. First thing, for education-wise, we go to our Singapore government, our MPs [Members of Parliament] – first place they will help you. They never say “no” – no such thing. For education, you go to our Singapore government, they will ask you “what”. [If it's] regarding education, “Come come come come come, sit down, what you want”. They'll give a first place to that [...]

That's why I tell you, other thing the MP will say: “OK I will write a letter, wait for the reply to come” but education-wise no such thing. “No money? You don't have uniform to buy for your children? No pocket-money? No shoe? No problem.” They write a letter, this letter you go give to your school, you can collect [these items] from the school. [...] That's like, very interesting, Singapore government. You no need to bring out any single cent. [...]

[So] If [the children] don't want listen to us, you know everything but you don't want to have a good life...that is up to you! *You cannot blame the school, you cannot blame the parents. Everything they already give you, is yours, your life. You want to do, that is up to you.* (Emphasis added)

‘Dependency’, as a term, is often seen as antithetical to ‘responsibility’; it is often assumed you cannot be both dependent and responsible at the same time. In fact, ‘dependency’ is often pathologised within a liberal-individualist culture. However, my findings suggest that they work synergistically together for families I interviewed. In fact, a context of dependency seemed to make plausible the acceptance of responsibility; feeling adequately supported by the state and school is crucial, the very lifeblood, to the acceptance and uptake of responsibility.

When Responsibility is Implausible

However, while families broadly accepted this chain of reasoning, there are also ways in which this configuration of relations can be experienced very differently by different families, depending on their circumstances. This became clear when I visited Ayu’s family. Ayu’s family was probably the most disadvantaged family I interviewed. The family faced multiple intersecting disadvantages: Ayu had cancer, there were seven children to financially support, the family lived in a one-bedroom rented flat, her husband had to drop out of work to care for children. As such, they were, for a time, effectively earning \$0/month, and heavily reliant on welfare.

Taking up responsibility became impossible for Qawi, Ayu’s eldest son, who dropped out of school to work as a cleaner and restaurant worker, to financially support the family. It is unsurprising that this family was less warm and trusting in their relations with school and state. What became clear to me was that if families do not find the state/school to be dependable – if the ‘dependency context’ is not sufficiently robust – it can adversely affect the families’ willingness and capacity to take responsibility and ownership for their lives.

Concluding Reflections and Implications

My analysis suggests that relations of trust, responsibility and dependency differ in how they play out in the Singapore context, compared to research conducted in many other contexts. This is partly because of the role the state (and schools) play, in developing relations of trust, and even, with some teachers, friendship and family-like relations with families.

At different presentations of this research at academic and other events, particularly in the global 'North', I have met with questions concerning this 'positivity' of families towards the state – were they 'brainwashed', is this positivity an effect of state manipulation? This perception is unsurprising, given that social theory generated in the global North tends to see the state as almost singularly devoted to capital accumulation and its own legitimacy (Cheng 2018). However, as I studied the content of these interviews, I have found that to hold such a view would be overly critical and pessimistic. I believe this would be to unfairly position the families as dupes – as though low-income families were unable to critically mediate state discourse. These families' perspectives point to several commendable aspects of the management of education in Singapore that facilitate genuine trust and collaboration between state, school and family.

At the same time, I do think there is a need for policy-makers and policy researchers to more closely consider how relations of dependency and responsibility play out differently, and have different effects on families' lives, depending on their circumstances. A crucial question is: do these relations empower, motivate and create opportunities for collaboration and progress along families' desired pathways, or do they exact too heavy and oppressive a burden on families? As alluded to in the

penultimate section of this paper: under what circumstances might dependency-responsibility relations have different effects?

While the ‘responsible self’ and the ‘responsible family’ is a dominant, recurring political trope in Singapore and across many advanced capitalist states (Teo 2013), my research highlights the need to pay more careful attention to concepts such as the ‘plausibility of responsibility’ and the ‘importance of dependency’ (as the context for responsibility). These concepts seem to be particularly important in our age that tends towards hyper-competitiveness and individualism (McLeod 2017).

Finally, I close with preliminary reflections on what these conceptual moves might mean for policy and service design. Crucially, speaking to families has helped me to reframe the oft-implied ‘policy problem’ concerning low-income families. How we frame policy problems is important, because this impacts our policy-making and service design. The dominant policy problem regarding low-income families in many advanced capitalist states seems to be: “How do we make families responsible?”. In particular, how do we make the ‘irresponsible poor family’ responsible? This can lead to anti-welfarist policies that are focused on competition, and individual and family self-reliance.

However, one might valuably re-frame the policy problem to: “How do we make responsibility plausible for families?”. From interviews with families, three implications of this mindset shift might be identified:

- 1) It entails the need to build a professional school workforce, perceived as technically competent and caring,

- 2) It entails policy design that takes seriously the complex, interconnected (financial, health, socio-emotional, socio-cultural) barriers low-income families face,
- 3) Having accounted for these barriers, it entails making support for low-income families more nuanced, contextualised, and sufficient to make plausible and reasonable, the uptake of responsibility in families' lives.

Policy cannot be carelessly lifted out of a context and implemented in another. However, it is my contention that for many advanced capitalist states including Singapore, recognising the importance of 'making responsibility plausible' is timely and important. While the specific configuration and level of support might look different across different cultural, economic, political and historical contexts, the perspectives of the poor remind us that our policies should reflect the importance of 'dependency' in making 'responsibility' plausible – and, crucially, the necessary interconnectedness of both terms, as part of the human condition.

References

- Adzahar, Fadzli bin Baharom. 2012. "Taking the Gravel Road': Educational Aspirations of Working Class Malay Youths." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40: 153–73.
- Ang, Jolene. 2018. "Lower Fees for Students from Lower- and Middle-Income Families in Independent Schools." <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/more-financial-help-for-students-from-lower-and-middle-income-families-in>.
- Bach, Dil, and Søren Christensen. 2017. "Battling the Tiger Mother: Pre-School Reform and Conflicting Norms of Parenthood in Singapore." *Children and Society* 31(2): 134–43.
- Barr, M., and Z. Skrbis. 2008. *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]. 2017. "The World Factbook: Distribution of Family Income - Gini Index." <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2172rank.html> (June 22, 2019).
- Chang, R, and H. Cai. 2011. "Graduate Dads, Brighter Kids?" *The Straits Times*.
- Cheng, Xiuying. 2018. "The Contested State vs . Contentious Workers : The Symbolic Labor Politics in Transitional China." *Qualitative Sociology*: 521–43.
- Chew, Agnes Yunqian. 2017. "The Hidden Costs of a Successful Developmental State: Prosperity and Paucity in Singapore." London School of Economics.
- Chua, Beng Huat. 2017. *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Crozier, Gill. 1998. "Parents and Schools: Partnership or Surveillance?" *Journal of Education Policy* 13(1): 125–36.
- Deng, Zongyi, and Saravanan Gopinathan. 2016. "PISA and High-Performing Education Systems: Explaining Singapore's Education Success." *Comparative Education* 52(4): 449–72.
- Eklund, Lisa, and Kristina Göransson. 2016. "Resituating Parenthood: Emergent

- Subjects and Shifting Power Relations in Urban East Asian Families.”
Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific (39).
- Gee, Christopher. 2012. *The Educational “Arms Race”: All for One, Loss for All*.
Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies.
- Göransson, Kristina. 2015. “Raising Successful Children: Children as Accumulation
Strategy and the Renegotiation of Parenting Arrangements in Singapore.” *Asia
Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16(3): 211–26.
- Koh, Aaron. 2014. “Doing Class Analysis in Singapore’s Elite Education: Unravelling
the Smokescreen of ‘Meritocratic Talk.’” *Globalisation, Societies and Education*
12(2): 196–210.
- Lareau, Annette. 1987. “Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships : The
Importance of Cultural Capital.” *Sociology of Education* 60(2): 73–85.
- . 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Berkeley: University
of California Press.
- Lim, Leonel. 2016. “Globalization, the Strong State and Education Policy: The Politics
of Policy in Asia.” *Journal of Education Policy* 31(6): 711–26.
- Lim, Leonel, and Michael W. Apple. 2016. “Introducing the Strong State and
Curriculum Reform in Asia.” In *The Strong State and Curriculum Reform:
Assessing the Politics and Possibilities of Educational Change in Asia*, eds. Leonel
Lim and Michael Apple. Abingdon: Routledge, 1–20.
- Mallett, Shelley. 2018. “Building Education Success for Young People Experiencing
Disadvantage.”
- McLeod, Julie. 2017. “Reframing Responsibility in an Era of Responsibilisation:
Education, Feminist Ethics.” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of
Education* 38(1): 43–56.
- Moore, R. Quinn. 2000. “Multiracialism and Meritocracy: Singapore’s Approach to
Race and Inequality.” *Review of Social Economy* 58(3): 339–60.
- Mylan, Josephine, and Dale Southerton. 2018. “The Social Ordering of an Everyday
Practice: The Case of Laundry.” *Sociology*.
- Ng, Irene Y.H. 2014. “Education and Intergenerational Mobility in Singapore.”
Educational Review 66(3): 362–76.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131911.2013.780008>.

- Ong, Aihwa. 2007. "Boundary Crossings: Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology." *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 32: 3–8.
- Seidman, Irving. 2006. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. 3rd ed. New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Shamir, Ronen. 2008. "The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality." *Economy and Society* 37(1): 1–19.
- Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright. 2005. "Policy: A New Field of Anthropology." In *Anthropology of Policy: Critical Perspectives on Governance and Power*, eds. Cris Shore and Susan Wright. London & New York: Routledge, 3–34.
- Singapore Department of Statistics. 2016. "General Household Survey 2015." <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/ghs/ghs2015> (June 20, 2019).
- Tai, Janice. 2019. "Kids from Needy Families Face Risk of Poorer Outcomes: Study." *The Straits Times*.
- Tan, Ern Ser. 2004. *Does Class Matter: Social Stratification and Orientations in Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Teng, Amelia. 2018. "Parliament: Do Not Lose Faith in Meritocracy, Says Education Minister Ong Ye Kung." *The Straits Times*.
- Teo, Youyenn. 2011. *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How Family Policies Make State and Society*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- . 2013. "Support for Deserving Families: Inventing the Anti-Welfare Familialist State in Singapore." *Social Politics* 20(3): 387–406.
- . 2018. *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*. Singapore: Ethos Books.
- Ule, Mirjana, Andreja Živoder, and Manuela du Bois-Reymond. 2015. "'Simply the Best for My Children': Patterns of Parental Involvement in Education." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(3): 329–48.
- Varkey Foundation. 2018. "Global Parents' Survey: Singapore Findings." https://www.varkeyfoundation.org/media/3745/17-091869-01-varkey-foundation-gps_singapore-pack_270218_iuo.pdf (December 31, 2018).
- Vincent, Carol. 2017. "'The Children Have Only Got One Education and You Have to Make Sure It's a Good One': Parenting and Parent–School Relations in a Neoliberal Age." *Gender and Education* 29(5): 541–57.

Appendix A: Families' Demographic Background Information

No.	Household ¹⁰ Family Members' Pseudonyms (interviewed members asterisked [*]) ¹¹	Ethnic group ¹²	Young Person's Academic Stream	Monthly Household Income / Capita (SGD) ¹³	Government education-related financial support	Household Breadwinner Occupation	Household Adults' Highest Completed Education Level ¹⁴	Housing (Rented/Bought)
1	Grandfather (Fardeen) Grandmother (Namrita)* Uncle (Ritesh) Mother (Juliana) Son (Yudhav) Daughter 1 (Shreya)* Daughter 2 (Jasmit)	Indian	Express	468	SINDA tuition/support	Occasional taxi driver (grandfather) Factory worker (uncle) Private nurse (mother)	Secondary (grandfather) Primary (grandmother) Secondary + ITE Certificate (uncle) Secondary (mother)	3-bedroom HDB (bought by grandparents 30-odd years ago)
2	Father (Chandra)* Mother (Saanvi) Daughter (Deepta)*	Indian	Express	1425	SINDA tuition/support	Bus driver (father) Production operator in food packaging factory (mother)	Secondary + VITB Certificate ¹⁵ (father) Primary school in Indonesia (mother)	5-bedroom HDB (bought)
3	Father (Srinivas)* Mother (Anjushri)* Son 1 (Sanjay)* Son 2 (Anil)* Daughter 1 (Gayatri)	Indian	NA	380	FAS SINDA tuition/support Childcare subsidy	Bus driver (father)	Primary (father) Secondary 2 (mother)	1-bedroom HDB (rented)

¹⁰ 'Household' refers to people living under the same roof.

¹¹ Household members who were only interviewed in focus groups (not individually interviewed) are indicated by double-asterisk [**]

¹² Based on state classification. However, I also indicate mixed parentage homes where families noted this. In the end, four families self-identified as Indian, three as mixed-parentage and five Malay.

¹³ This figure excludes government financial support. Generally, this figure is after CPF has been deducted. However, in some cases, the parent interviewed only preferred to give an approximate figure, or were not sure what the exact figure was, pre- and post-CPF.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, education qualification was completed in Singapore.

¹⁵ VITB stands for Vocational and Industrial Training Board, which is the former name for the present-day Institute for Technical Education.

No.	Household Family Members' Pseudonyms (interviewed members asterisked [*])	Ethnic group	Young Person's Academic Stream	Monthly Household Income / Capita (SGD)	Government education-related financial support	Household Breadwinner Occupation	Household Adults' Highest Completed Education Level	Housing (Rented/Bought)
4	Father (Kumar)* Mother (Lakshmi)* Son 1 (Raj) Daughter 1 (Devi)* Son 2 (Vaasu)	Indian	NA	734	SINDA tuition/support FAS (occasionally)	Administrative (data entry) assistant (father) Airport screening officer (mother)	Secondary + Diploma of Accounting (father) Bachelor's Degree in India (mother) ¹⁶	1-bedroom HDB (bought)
5	Father (Dimal)* Mother (Salimah) Daughter 1 (Farah)* Daughter 2 (Dhia) Daughter 3 (Aishah) Daughter 4 (Sophia) Daughter 5 (Munah) Daughter 6 (Suriani)	Indian-Malay	NT	664	SINDA tuition/support Family Service Centre tuition PAP childcare FAS	Hotel concierge (father)	Secondary (both parents)	1-bedroom HDB (rented)
6	Father (Omar)* Mother (Nasifah)* Son 1 (Adam) Son 2 (Iyaan) Son 3 (Shafiq)* Daughter 1 (Tasmia)	Indian-Malay	NT	0	SINDA tuition/support FAS	Imam (religious leader) + occasional research projects (father)	Bachelor's degree from the American University (USA) (father) ¹⁷ Primary (mother)	3-bedroom HDB (bought by grandparents who passed away before interviews)
7	Father (Abdul) Mother (Hannah)* Son 1 (Hakeem)* Son 2 (Wasfi) Son 3 (Sannan) Son 4 (Nijat)	Malay-Indian	Express	750	SINDA tuition/support	Secondary school teacher (mother) Building maintenance manager (father)	Secondary + ITE Diploma (father) Bachelor's degree from Malaysia (mother)	5-bedroom HDB (bought)

¹⁶ Both parents described this qualification as equivalent only to secondary school level, in Singapore's education system.

¹⁷ This degree was earned before the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which effectively destroyed Omar's parents' jewellery business.

No.	Household Family Members' Pseudonyms (interviewed members asterisked [*])	Ethnic group	Young Person's Academic Stream	Monthly Household Income / Capita (SGD)	Government education-related financial support	Household Breadwinner Occupation	Household Adults' Highest Completed Education Level	Housing (Rented/Bought)
8	Father (Rahman)* Mother (Izzati)* Son 1 (Amir) Son 2 (Rashid) Daughter (Nurul)*	Malay	Express	667	MENDAKI tuition/support FAS (occasionally)	Electrical technician (father) Part-time cashier (mother)	Primary (father) Secondary + Diploma in Accountancy from Malaysia (mother)	4-bedroom HDB (bought)
9	Father (Zainul) Mother (Juriffah)* Son 1 (Mahmoud)* Son 2 (Hafiz)** Son 3 (Rizwan)**	Malay	NA	207	MENDAKI tuition/support FAS	Pest control worker (father) Part-time hawker food centre worker (mother)	Primary (father) Secondary in Indonesia ¹⁸ (mother)	3-bedroom HDB (bought)
10	Father (Khairul)** Mother (Naadia)* Son 1 (Irfan)* Son 2 (Yusof)**	Malay	NA	0	MENDAKI tuition/support FAS	-	Primary (father) Secondary 3 (mother)	3-bedroom HDB (rent)
11	Father (Radzi)* Mother (Ayu)* Son 1 (Qawi) Daughter 1 (Masuda) Son 2 (Aiman)* Son 3 (Ibrahim) Son 4 (Aqil) Daughter 2 (Wadida)	Malay	NT	0	MENDAKI tuition/support FAS	Cleaner (additionally on weekends, restaurant worker) (son 1)	Secondary + Diploma from ITE (father) Secondary (mother)	1-bedroom HDB (rent)
12	Father (Johari) Mother (Dania)* Son 1 (Mikhail) Son 2 (Feisal) Son 3 (Mohamed) Daughter 1 (Sabrena)* Son 4 (Zikri)	Malay	NT	500	MENDAKI FAS Childcare subsidy	Cleaner (both parents)	Secondary 2 (father) Primary (mother)	2-bedroom flat (bought)

¹⁸ This was equated by participants to the equivalent of less than primary school level, in Singapore's education system.