



Article

Education as care labor: Expanding our lens on the work-life balance problem

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Abstract

Scholars have documented the challenges of combining wage work and care responsibilities in various societal contexts. National variations reveal that public policy and care infrastructure have major effects in shaping gendered patterns, class inequalities, as well as overall wellbeing of parents. Childcare centers and schools can enable people with children to pursue jobs and careers. Yet, as I show in this article, education systems' demands can become a major component of parental care labor. Drawing on interviews with 92 parents in Singapore, I illustrate the ways in which education care labor impedes work-life reconciliation as well as deepens the significance of gender and class.

Keywords

Asia, care labor, care regimes, class, education, gender, public policy, Singapore

That's why when you talk about work-life balance, I personally feel that unless I take those very simple job, or part-time, or maybe don't need to bring back home one, that kind, half day, and another half day with the kids, then it is possible. For work-life balance. If I really want to strive for my career, at the same time my children is doing well, I feel that it is not possible.

-Seow Ling, recently resigned from a job in
Human Resources, mother of two

A vast body of research considers how, in contemporary capitalist societies, parents manage, reconcile, or 'balance' needs for wage work and care responsibilities. Scholars highlight the challenges parents face as both needs for wage income and expectations of

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parenting intensify. On one hand, many face economic precarity and experience difficulty controlling their work schedules (Hepburn, 2018; Lyonette, 2015; Munsch, 2016; Oishi et al., 2015; Schneider and Harknett, 2019; Warren, 2015). Simultaneously, expectations regarding parental labor and responsibilities – especially of mothers' obligations to cultivate children's 'success' – have also intensified (Bianchi, 2011; Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019; Hays, 1996; Ishizuka, 2019; O'Brien, 2005; Prickett and Augustine, 2021). Consequently, working parents find themselves caught up in significant struggles – where time feels perpetually scarce, balance elusive, and stress endemic (Clawson and Gerstel, 2014; Folbre and Bittman, 2004; Hobson, 2014; Le Bihan et al., 2014; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2020).

Amid this big picture, important variations nonetheless exist. Gender and class render 'work-life balance/conflict' a different experience for women versus men, and for parents across class lines. Indeed, gender and class often intersect to shape the nature of wage work, the capacity to displace care labor to paid caregivers, and the concrete tone and texture of parental and household labor (Clawson and Gerstel, 2014; Collins, 2019; Folbre, 2009; Gracia, 2014; Keck and Saraceno, 2013; Lyonette, 2015; Warren, 2015).

Scholars account for these variations through comparative scholarship on care *regimes*. A vast body of research analyzes how leave provisions, childcare services, labor market characteristics, and cultural norms shape the options people have for reconciling wage work with care responsibilities (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; Daly, 2010, 2020; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Ellingsaeter, 1999; Gornick et al., 2009; Javornik and Kurowska, 2017; Keck and Saraceno, 2013; Le Bihan et al., 2014; Michel and Peng, 2012; Pascall and Lewis, 2004; Peng, 2018; Plantenga, 2021; Pocock, 2005; Saraceno, 2011). While not the focus of this article, significant research also examines regime characteristics' implications on elder care arrangements (Frericks et al., 2014; Halinski et al., 2018). Informed by both detailed country studies as well as regional or international comparative analyses, we thus have rich empirical evidence pointing to the significance of public policy in shaping individuals' and families' capacities and experiences. Variations observed across regime types – often ideal-typically categorized as 'liberal', 'familialist', or 'social democratic' (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Peng, 2011) – indicate that affordable and high-quality care infrastructure; paid time-off from work for men and women; employment protections, including job guarantees and rights to control work hours; tax reliefs and family allowances, are key conditions that facilitate fulfilling work and care needs. While gender and class inequalities have not completely disappeared in any empirical case, comparative research suggests that these *can* be mitigated by policies designed to enable fathers' participation as caregivers and mothers' participation as wage-workers, and to ensure high accessibility to good-quality care services.

In recent years, some of these lessons have been taken up by Singapore policy-makers. While the care regime in Singapore is still best characterized as 'liberal private market' and 'familialist' (Peng, 2018) – insofar as the responsibility of resolving care needs falls heavily to individual families and the quantity and quality of care depends on private resources – significant state attention has been directed at expanding childcare infrastructure. In 2003–2004, when I interviewed people about childcare arrangements, many expressed concerns about placing children in childcare centers and preference for home-based care by mothers or grandmothers, sometimes in combination with domestic workers. Almost two decades later, in recent interviews, reservations about childcare centers

have all but disappeared. Parents spoke of readily enrolling young children, and framed them as better and ‘more professional’ care. Between 2009 and 2018, the number of childcare centers increased from 777 to 1486 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2019b).¹ Their capacity correspondingly expanded from 65,006 to 165,919 spaces. In a context of persistently below-replacement fertility, the number of children enrolled in childcare centers doubled from 59,911 to 123,660. After-school Student Care services catering to children ages 7–12 also increased – from 13,333 spaces in 2006 to 42,907 in 2019 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2019a), so that more primary school children also have full-day care.

Yet, despite what appears to be significant improvement in care infrastructure, parents in Singapore *still* experience work-life balance as elusive. Something I was beginning to notice in the early 2000s now appears as full-blown impediment: children’s education. In particular, parents spoke about primary school with trepidation and anxiety – reporting responsibilities, labor, and expenditure that render work-life reconciliation especially challenging.

Care regimes scholarship indicates care institutions – childcare facilities and schools – as major ‘solutions’ to care needs. Yet, as scholars of family document, expectations of parenting have intensified and extended well beyond physical care, and educational or schooling demands manifest as challenges *belonging* to parents (Bianchi, 2011; Calarco, 2018; Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019; Göransson, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Hays, 1996; Ishizuka, 2019; Nelson, 2010; O’Brien, 2005; Prickett and Augustine, 2021). The way we think of ‘care’ and its intersection with public policy and institutions requires further interrogation. The Singapore case is a suitable site to look more closely at how work-life conflict can be exacerbated by institutions that offer care ‘solutions’. Schools generate new needs that intensify care labor and obligations. In particular, the high demands of primary school shape the choices parents confront as they weigh wage work and parental duties; and affect their decisions and practices around employment, household division of labor, family expenditure, and parenting styles and strategies. At the same time that schools *replace* parents’ care labor in some ways and for some hours of the day, they also *generate* care labor and responsibility for parents, compelling them to rethink and reorganize their paid work.

The Singapore case illuminates a dynamic now common in many wealthy countries and especially cities. The individualization of life, the intensified stakes in credentials, and widening income and wealth inequalities have turned education into a competitive game (Baker, 2020; Bray, 2017; Calarco, 2018; Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019; Lareau, 2011 [2003]; Park et al., 2016; Sandel, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Education systems or policies are not often explicitly considered, by policy-makers or scholars, as a source of work-life conflict. This article, in presenting parents’ articulations of these connections, suggests the urgency of doing so.

Methodology

In order to understand how parents reconcile work and family in contemporary Singapore, I designed a qualitative study to investigate their everyday experiences, conflicts, and negotiations. Between 2018 and 2020, I conducted 92 in-depth interviews with parents. Figure 1 summarizes their demographic backgrounds.

Total number of respondents			92		
Gender	Men	23 (25%)	Ethnicity	Chinese	57 (62%)
	Women	69 (75%)		Malay	19 (21%)
Age	20s	10 (11%)		Indian	8 (9%)
	30s	47 (51%)		Eurasian	1 (1%)
	40s	29 (31%)		Mixed Race	2 (2%)
	50s	6 (7%)		Non-Singaporeans (Malaysian, PRC, Indian)	5 (5%)
				1	43 (47%)
Marital Status	Married	82 (89%)		2	27 (29%)
	Unmarried	4 (4%)		3	15 (16%)
	Divorced	6 (7%)		4	5 (6%)
Housing Type Public housing (HDB)	1- and 2-Room HDB Rental	5 (6%)		5	Chart Area
	3-Room	10 (11%)		6	1 (1%)
	4-Room	28 (31%)		Full-time	78 (85%)
	5-Room	23 (25%)		Part-time	6 (7%)
	Executive Maisonette	1 (1%)		Freelance	4 (4%)
	Executive Apartment	3 (3%)		Unemployed	4 (4%)
	Executive Condo	3 (3%)		Below Secondary	1 (1%)
Private Housing	Condominium	14 (15%)	Secondary	3 (4%)	
	Terrace, Semi-detached and Bungalow	5 (5%)	Post-Secondary (Non-tertiary)	11 (12%)	
	Own	74 (80%)	Diploma or Professional Qualification	24 (26%)	
Home ownership	Owns a property but lives in parents' home	2 (2%)	Degree	47 (51%)	
	Don't own; live with parents	8 (9%)	Post-graduate Diploma / Certificate	3 (3%)	
	Rent	8 (9%)	Masters and Doctorate or Equivalent	3 (3%)	
			Low	21 (23%)	
Household income from work/capita	1st -10th	14 (15%)	Middle	50 (54%)	
	11th-20th	14 (15%)	High	21 (23%)	
	21st-30th	15 (16%)	* Respondents are categorised in "High" if they fit at least 3 of these 4 criteria: university degree; household income per capita in the top 20% of all households; owners and residents of 5R HDB and above; employed in high-level positions, professions, or business owners.		
	31st-40th	11 (12%)	Respondents are categorised in "Middle" if they fit at least 3 of these 4 criteria: household income per capita between the 40th-60th percentile of all households; 'O' level, 'A' levels, and/or diploma; owners and residents of 3-room or 4-room HDB; employed in mid-level positions or owners of small businesses.		
	41st-50th	4 (5%)	Respondents are categorised in "Low" if they fit at least three of these four criteria: household income per capita in the lowest 20% of all households; residents of 2-room and smaller HDB flats (may not be owners); did not complete secondary school; employed in low-level positions.		
	51st-60th	14 (15%)			
	61st-70th	7 (8%)			
	71st-80th	4 (4%)			
	81st-90th	9 (10%)			

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

As shown, most respondents were parents in full-time employment, although some were working part-time, freelancing, or not currently working. In general, it was more difficult to recruit men, as they seem less likely than women to see work-life balance as their issue; there are therefore more women than men in my sample. Mirroring marriage-parenting patterns in Singapore, most respondents were married but a few were never-married or divorced; most had between one and three children. Respondents ranged in age from their 20s to 50s and therefore had experiences parenting across the entire range of childhood and youth – from infants to young adults in their early 20s. Most Singaporeans are officially categorized by the state as ‘Chinese’ (74.3%), ‘Malay’ (13.5%), and ‘Indian’ (9%); my sample included respondents from all three groups and Chinese were slightly underrepresented and Malays slightly overrepresented relative to their proportion in the population. Using housing type, education, household per capita income from work, and occupation as proxies, I included respondents in ‘low’, ‘middle’, and ‘high’ socioeconomic positions. The varied sample allows me to capture a representative range of experiences and challenges faced by parents in contemporary Singapore.

Research assistants recruited respondents through social media and word of mouth. They also transcribed recordings. I conducted all interviews, coding, and analyses. Research protocol was approved by my university’s Institutional Review Board.² Informed consent was sought from participants prior to interviewing and recording; no

personal data (e.g. national identity card numbers) were collected. I use pseudonyms to refer to interviewees and care has been taken to minimize risk of re-identification.

Interviews typically took place at locations and times of interviewees' choosing. Often this was at cafes or eateries in shopping malls near their workplaces during lunch, or near respondents' homes in the evenings or weekends. Occasionally, I was invited to people's homes or met them at the 'void decks' – public open areas on the ground floor – of flats. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I interviewed some respondents through video calls.

Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours, covering a range of topics including work histories and current employment; everyday routines of all members of households; housework, errands, and care arrangements; children and their activities; aspirations and hopes for kids; and money matters. Interviewees were forthcoming about sharing their lives, and especially animated when it came to discussing their children. I coded interview data along a number of broad themes (e.g. daily lives, education, employer and employment, money) and narrower parameters within each (e.g. leisure, time pressure, housework), in order to systematically analyze patterns and trends.

Findings

In conversations about work-life balance, parents talk about education taking center stage in daily lives. Primary school and the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), in particular, are salient. Women bear especially heavy burdens in both the routine labor as well as the responsibility for children's education. While there is wide consensus and convergence around parental aspirations, class variations lead to uneven options, particularly when it comes to the hiring of tutors, an increasingly important ingredient in surviving Singapore's education system. In this section, I describe each of these in order to illustrate how education or schooling – an institution that fulfills certain care needs, and certainly well-resourced and widely accessible in Singapore – pose challenges for reconciling work and care.

Everyday routines and time pressures: The salience of primary school education

I asked interviewees to describe in detail their routines on typical weekdays and weekends. Most people had mapped-out schedules they know well and try to operate within. For households where there are working parents and young kids, the rhythm of everyday life is relentless. There is often a feeling of rushing from point to point and task to task, with a few breaks between.

Parents spoke regularly about feeling rushed and stressed. In some instances, where this was possible given a family's financial circumstances, hectic schedules were the main impetus pushing women to reduce wage work. In other instances, it was experienced as hardship to be endured while children are young. Time pressures seeped often into weekends, as various needs of the family that cannot be met during weekdays – errands, housework, tuition, and enrichment activities, socializing with extended family or friends – are crammed into the two weekend days.

Significantly, time spent at home often revolved around homework. Hours spent with school-going children centered on helping with or checking on homework.³ From the ages of 7–12, as most children become more independent and capable of taking care of their own physical needs, many become *more* dependent on parents where schooling is concerned.

Notably, parents with children younger than primary school age talked about *anticipating* life becoming more challenging when their children enter primary school; and parents with children older than primary school age look back on the time as a period when they had ‘no life’. Parents with children in primary school at the time of the interview spoke like they are living in the eye of the storm. In talking to parents with kids at different ages, I found consensus that the primary school years are when their lives revolve around children’s education. There was a strong sense that this is a major component of parental duty.

For example, Pei Lee, a manager in her 50s, with three children near adulthood when we met, recalled having ‘no life’ when her children were in primary school:

Basically, no life. 8 to 5 working, get back home, with the maid it is definitely more helpful but I think work stress and kids’ studies stress, I really ask myself ‘what is life?’ Like when the kids are mischievous, I really ask myself what is life, just feel like giving up on everything. . . . I think P4 onwards was most stressful cause we were worried about streaming. I would say P4 to P5 was when I was most stressed for all three kids. I was afraid that they would go to NT (‘Normal Technical’ stream). The first two ok, but the third one. . . . I was trying very hard but his results was still very bad. . . . No life, meaning, okay, by the time you reach home, you put down your bag, go for dinner, have to check on the three kids did their homework, check on the maid, whether she did all the house chores, this and that. Then plan the groceries, everything at home is my duty. So, means, I can’t even have time to meet friends, have a sip of coffee. By the time you are done with everything already 10.30 or 11pm. And Saturday is marketing day, groceries. And the next day Sunday you get to catch a nap, the next day working day. So is like I think I felt very exhausted, very lazy to move about.

A few noteworthy points here. First, many of the parents I spoke with, like Pei Lee, had other caregivers to rely on – domestic workers and/or grandparents; most of the parents I spoke with were also in two-parent households. But even people like her, with a care network, regularly reflected that the labor of supervising homework cannot be given over to other caregivers. It was *their* role.

Second, mothers were far more involved in this labor and responsibility compared to fathers. Since mothers also tended to be far more involved in housework and coordinating households than fathers, the primary school years are an especially intense stage for women.

Third, my interviewees, regularly referenced streaming (i.e. tracking) and examinations as a key orientation of their worries and a major reason for having no choice but to pay close attention to their kids’ schoolwork at specific times. The primary school years loom large in parents’ minds because of the high stakes involved as children are tracked into various secondary schools and educational tracks after PSLE. Parents threw out words like ‘Express’, ‘Normal’, ‘NT’, ‘Normal Acad’, ‘Normal Tech’, ‘good schools’, ‘neighborhood schools’, with no explanation at all to me because these words form a

regular part of Singaporeans' shared vocabulary; everyone knows and *is expected to understand* the connotations of each about one's location in a social hierarchy, and therefore the stakes involved.

Unsurprisingly, as one can see from Pei Lee's account, parents and especially mothers talked of feeling stretched, fatigued, and stressed at having to do this labor. Amid ambivalence about the value of these labels and sometimes explicit critique of tracking, parents understood that their duty lies partially in steering their kids toward some tracks (e.g. 'Express') and avoiding others (e.g. 'Normal').

Duty and sacrifice: Gender matters

I often left conversations feeling quite moved by parents' strong sense of duty and personal sacrifice. Ensuring that their children keep up with primary school was framed in their narratives as duty around which they expect to make personal sacrifices. Mothers especially took this on as a central part of their decision making, daily habits, as well as identities as mothers.

What does it mean to say primary school is parental duty? What does it look like in practice? Three dimensions are noteworthy: duty and sacrifice are embedded in the rhythms of everyday habits; duty and sacrifice are infused in decisions about familial economy; and most importantly, duty and sacrifice are experienced and enacted in gendered ways.

In everyday habits, parents regularly spend their evenings making sure kids have done their homework and, where possible, helping them with it. This form of care is neither pleasant nor pretty. Interviewees readily admitted that much of what they do on a daily basis is to nag and scold. They felt impatient and frustrated about losing their tempers and having to 'shout' or 'scream'. Particularly for those in full-time employment, having kids in primary school translates to forgoing leisure and rest. That this is a big part of their daily experience comes through in the way some invoked the phrase 'me time' – for many, personal leisure is so rare that work hours or time spent running errands or on their commute to and from work is what constitutes 'me time'. Duty and sacrifice, then, are partly about putting as secondary their needs for leisure, rest, or social lives, to attend first to their children's educational needs.

The strong sense of duty and sacrifice leads to the harnessing of resources and deployment of strategies. Parents try, for example, to figure out what is expected of their children by participating in parent chat groups on WhatsApp, Telegram, or Facebook. Adults exchange information about homework assignments and due dates, and sometimes trade tips on how to complete especially difficult assignments (usually Mathematics). Many parents regularly purchase assessment books and/or download worksheets in order to assign extra work to their children; these are seen as necessary because doing well in examinations requires practice and familiarity with the style of tests. Some parents attend workshops organized by schools to learn how to help their children with the school curriculum (again, most often in Math). I heard about efforts to find suitable tutors or tuition centers, coordinate after-school and weekend tuition schedules, and bring children to and from these classes. Education as care labor involves parents keeping up and staying in

close touch with developments in curriculum. Aisha, a mother of four who has a diploma in Engineering, told me,

I attended a Marshall Cavendish science class before. . . and some short Maths classes. . . because have to pick up with the present, you know, because Maths they actually have a lot of things they added, like heuristics, the new concepts. So I rather, I learn myself and then I pass the knowledge to my children.

Of course, not all parents are able to teach their children. ‘Tuition’ has a major starring role in familial economies. Parents regularly spoke of weighing various costs and benefits – the costs of paid services, the benefits and pitfalls of services at different price points, and how much they can afford on their incomes. They used words like ‘outsourcing’ and ‘return on investment’. Some spoke of ‘outsourcing’ as a way to avoid parent–child conflicts that come with coaching one’s own child and a way to improve the quality of the time they spend with them. Li Yun, in her mid-30s and working in business development at an investment firm, for example, told me,

I like the idea of outsource. To me it's a luxury for me to compensate the need to work, because I work, I feel that okay, I have to . . . this is like to comfort myself, this is the luxury I can accept, so we have to spend money and then let other people teach my girl so that I spend some quality time with her. I can't really sit down, I'm not very patient, the minute I sit down I start to scold her, so it's not really quality time, so as much as possible, academic I want to outsource it.

There is in Li Yun’s narrative a sense that not all parental duties can be outsourced but some aspects of academic guidance can be. We also see that part of the calculation of costs and benefits involves not just academic results, but also relationships – tutors and tuition can improve ‘quality time’ with one’s child. Sam, an insurance agent and father of three children in their teens and early 20s, articulated the costs to parent–child relationships that are incurred around academic pressures and therefore the calculations he makes around spending on tuition:

For my kids, I send them for tuition, because I tried teaching them and I almost strangle them. So I told my wife, I cannot *tahan* [tolerate] . . . I tried teaching, but after that I bang table. So I concluded that it becomes very tense in the family relationship, like imagine you keep scolding your children to study, how to become friend friend, you know? Go fishing, holiday. So I concluded no, since I'm working, my wife's working. I'm a person who believe in using money to buy time and buy peace. So I bring him for tuition.

Calculations of resources, costs, and benefits relating to children’s educational needs often become an important part of couples’ relationships. Interviewees described conversations they have with spouses regarding how to get the most utility out of limited resources, and how to manage demands on their time and attention as well as needs for wage income.

Unsurprisingly, there are variations in what parents in different class circumstances can afford. That there are class variations in parental practices around schooling is well established (Calarco, 2018; Göransson, 2021; Lareau, 2011 [2003]; Zhang, 2020). The two quotes above allude to respondents’ own awareness that ‘outsourcing’ is a privilege, even

'luxury' – made possible by money. Nonetheless, there is striking convergence around the prominent role children's primary school education plays in shaping parents' practices, decisions, and strategies about type of wage work, schedules, and budgets. Parents may not have equal monetary resources for 'outsourcing' nor equal access to favorable employment conditions, but regardless of class circumstances, their sense of duty toward garnering resources for children's education was strong. Within the limitations of their class circumstances, all parents sought ways to locate educational support for their children, in the process sacrificing time, energy, money, and sometimes mental wellbeing.

Finally, duty and sacrifice draw on gendered scripts and deepen gendered patterns. Mothers' careers are characterized by breaks, punctuated by the disruptions brought on first by childbearing and maternity leave, and then later by the demands of meeting educational needs of children. Mothers spoke frequently about caring less about careers after becoming mothers and/or having no choice but to 'change priorities' and put their children first. In contrast, fathers rarely spoke of significant pivoting in wage work or mental adjustments in ambition and aspiration; they were more likely instead to express their sense of duty toward, and stresses around, earning enough to support families. Even for men whose wives earn, fatherhood was deeply connected to breadwinning. Although both fathers and mothers expressed concern about the PSLE, it was generally framed as mothers' duty. Jessie, in a clerical job she finds boring, has put off dreams of pursuing a different profession because she first wants to 'be decent mother, go through PSLE' – in six words, she encapsulates perfectly the centrality of the PSLE to Singaporean motherhood.

The patterns are not merely about individual gendered beliefs or habits. Collectively, they draw our attention to work structures and cultures that demand long and/or inflexible hours; to the judgment of bosses or co-workers; and to truncated opportunities for recognition and advancement due to their altered priorities both real or perceived. As other scholars have also found (Benard and Correll, 2010; Schilt, 2006), social conditions are gender-inflected. Women refer regularly to themselves as 'working mothers', and to their co-workers' and bosses' gender, marital, and parental status, because these matter in shaping their workplace encounters. Their needs for time-off or flexibility; their requests for understanding and support; perceptions of and enabling or disabling of their ambitions, capacities, and potentials are all filtered through theirs and others' gendered expectations. On the school side of things, mothers are driven to respond, worry, step up, by the feedback they regularly receive – through homework, marking rubrics and test scores, calls for 'parent engagement/partnership', and sometimes advice from teachers that their children could benefit from extra tutoring.

For women who have made significant changes in wage work, there was a cost. Interviewees talked about the satisfaction they get from having wage work, and the sense of esteem they feel from doing things well and from being connected to people outside the family. Wai Leng, who was a housewife for several years and now works as an assistant at a clinic, expressed a typical set of emotions in a cogent way:

I feel fulfilled because I get some income. It makes me feel happy and satisfied, and I can buy what I like and do what I want. . . . Even though my husband gives me allowance but I feel more free spending my own money. For example, when the Buddhist association needs charitable contribution, I will want to use my own money to give others. And secondly, I also feel like my life is not just about my family. I am not just stuck at home and in my own circle. I have the

ability to go outside and interact with the world. I think this is better for me. Because when I am working I get to interact and talk to my colleagues also. And I also get to learn another type of skill. Last time I used to think that I cannot be in the service industry, I kept thinking I am only suitable for office jobs, but hey that is not true.

Those who had quit either permanently or temporarily to become housewives were especially clear in pointing to the monotony and boredom brought on by doing housework and caregiving day after day, and the feeling of being somewhat out of step with society. Importantly, women who had seen reduction in wage incomes spoke of the loss they experience when they make less money; this was consistent across class lines, that is, no matter how much or little they were earning from work. Not having one's own money, they lamented, makes them feel less independent and often less 'useful'. It intensified an uneasy feeling of dependence on husbands, as well as diminished control, autonomy, and power in decisions about household expenditure.

Out of duty to children's primary school needs, many women sacrifice their financial independence and alter their sense of self and accomplishment in both the short and long terms. Correspondingly, men almost never mentioned making major changes to their work schedules or career plans after the birth of children, although many considered themselves quite involved as fathers. They readily acknowledged that their wives are the ones who watch over kids' schooling. Indeed, a number told me that they are 'more relaxed' in their attitudes about homework and exams, and saw their wives as overly anxious. In several instances, women and men spoke about disagreements between them and their spouses about the importance of tuition or enrichment classes. Women who cannot convince their husbands that extra classes matter elect to resolve disagreements by being – if they can afford to do so – the ones to pay for tutors and classes. Both the women who pay for tuition or enrichment with their 'own money' in order to avoid further arguments, as well as the men who stop arguing because their wives are paying for tuition and enrichment, seem to accept that the ability and willingness to pay gives a person the right to have the final word on contentious matters. In the family as more generally, then, money is power.

Duty and sacrifice in service of education therefore has differential consequences for women and men. In both the short and long terms, practices triggered in service of children's school needs have profound effects on how gender is experienced and enacted in the family. The consequences involve labor and relational matters – where women's care labor on education are generally more intense than men's even in households where tutors are hired – and financial ones insofar as women's wages both earned or foregone are more deeply implicated in children's educational needs.

Class and the outsourcing of educational care labor

I spend a lot of money. . . I only know quarterly, I didn't go and calculate, because I'm scared leh, if I calculate I'm afraid it won't be enough. . . . 'Berries' it's paid once every four months, about \$560 per person. So this has to be multiplied by two [kids]. For the Phonics reading, it's \$570 every three months. This is for my boy. Then for my girl, it's not Phonics anymore, it's P2, I let her attend another place, it's called I-level, it's \$150 per month. It's also tuition for

English. Originally she has Maths, but we stopped the Maths. And they also have Taekwondo. Because I'm scared of school bullies, so I feel they should learn some self-defense. This is also \$150 per month, per person. They have a grading every three months. Grading is \$60 per person. Grading test. That is per quarter. I don't even dare to add it all up. . . if my husband sees it. . . . (Sharley, an accountant with two kids)

Singapore is often mentioned with other East Asian countries as having, somewhat paradoxically, highly regarded, and well-resourced 'world-class' education systems and *also* large private 'shadow education' industries (Bray, 2017; Byun et al., 2018; Entrich, 2020, Zwier et al., 2020). Parents' widespread beliefs about the importance of school results and their duties as parents in supporting children's education, together with high-academic demands that cannot be met solely in school nor by parents, have paved the way for a massive private tutoring industry (Jason, 2009; Tan, 2017). Parents regularly told me that the relatively large class sizes in schools (average of 33) means it is difficult for teachers to give their children close attention in the way tutors can. Tuition is a billion-dollar business, with parents spending significant proportions of household income on it (Wise, 2016).

Spending varies along class lines. In 2017/2018, monthly expenditure on private tuition and other educational courses varied widely by household income: households in the 1st to 20th percentiles spent S\$45.30 per month. Relative to this, those in the 21st to 40th percentile spent 1.7 times the amount (S\$75.80); those in the 41st to 60th percentiles 2.7 times (S\$121.20); those in the 61st to 80th percentiles 3.4 times (S\$152.60); and those in the 81st to 100th percentiles 3.7 times (S\$167; Department of Statistics, 2018).⁴

There is a tiered market to serve customers with different budgets – branded chains as well as bespoke services; smaller and cheaper centers located in so-called heartland neighborhoods as well as fancier chain stores located in major shopping malls. Many university students work part-time as tutors, but the industry is also heavily staffed by ex-school teachers. These teachers – and especially those who have worked in well-known 'good schools' – command the highest prices, indicating they are valued for being able to teach the official curriculum. Tuition centers unabashedly advertise their capacity to teach students test-taking skills that translate into improved grades at major exams. So intense is the need for tuition that this has also become a major role played by the social service sector – volunteer-run and/or charity-based tuition services are in high demand, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.

Among my respondents, I saw class-inflected strategies and practices that map onto this social context. While the salience of primary school education as parental duty was high across class lines, parents took on strategies and practices that reflect and align with the resources they have. Parents with more resources can hire tutors throughout the school years. Even if children are maintaining average or above grades, higher income parents are able to use tutors to help with the supervision of homework and test-teaching skills on a continual basis. For children from higher income households, tuition can be paid for throughout the year and children's school lives. In contrast, parents with more limited resources tend to pay for tuition for subjects their children are 'weaker' in and near exam times and in crucial examination years.

Middle- and high-income parents are also more likely to place children in enrichment courses, such as phonics classes, prior to primary school. They are conscious that children are expected to read and write by the time they begin Primary One, and are more likely to be anxious about ensuring school-readiness. Parents who have middle income are most sensitive about the importance of educational credentials for securing jobs and financial independence.⁵ Compared to higher income parents, they expressed more anxiety about children falling behind; compared to lower income parents, who expressed more generalized beliefs about wanting their children to ‘study hard’, middle-income parents were more specific and consistent in articulating the importance of formal credentials, the streams and tracks available to children, and therefore the sense that much is at stake in examinations. They spoke more of the fear of falling into lower tracks. Private tuition is, unsurprisingly, least accessible to low-income parents. While they too feel the struggle to keep up with school and expressed worries about this, they typically relied on schools or voluntary welfare associations for after-school remedial sessions or free- or low-cost tutoring.

Across class, these intricate needs shape everyday routines, household political economies, parental stress and wellbeing, parent–child relationships, and decisions about and negotiations around wage work. In answering my questions about work-life ‘balance’, parents made clear that children’s education is core to their priorities, and the challenges of these often make ‘balance’ an elusive experience.

Kiasu, helicopter, tiger parents?

You can see the kids are going on weekends and all. It becomes a norm, which you realise that, it used to be people who are well-to-do, then they send their kids for all these. But it seems like everyone is doing it. If you’re not doing it, are you shortchanging your kid? If you have the means, are you doing something that you will regret? . . . But so far, we feel that, just let him play, when it’s time, then he will just pick up the things and learn from school. But the school itself do have other enrichment programmes within the school itself – optional but, of course, additional cost. So those we actually sign him up for it. Just that my wife is worried whether that’s a norm [to have additional enrichment activities]. But so far we have not done anything. . . . I think the child is too young. It should be a time when they have more fun. We were just discussing, is it going to be on weekend, or weekdays? Weekdays, what kind of timing, would it be tiring for him? If it’s weekend, wouldn’t it eat into our family time, which is so scarce? So we have to weigh the pros and cons. (Jack, bank employee and father of a 4-year-old)

Singaporean parents are regularly accused of being *kiasu* – competitive, anxious, afraid of losing out. In public discourse, parents are often framed as the problem in Singaporeans’ shared angst around education. Even if schools change and the education system shifts away from examinations and streaming, people ask, will parents really behave differently? This popular discourse is important in two ways: first, given these beliefs, parents interpret and measure their own decisions and practices against these stereotypes. Second, it brings to the surface a serious question regarding how to think about the responsibilities of ‘the system’ versus parents in the perpetuation of a high-competition, high-stress education regime.

Parents I spoke with were conscious of the stereotypes of Singapore parents and often referred to them. A small handful of parents acknowledged or claimed themselves to be *kiasu*, and were relatively unambivalent about wanting their children to have maximum resources and do well against the competition. Most respondents, however, expressed ambivalence. The emotions at the forefront of our conversations around education were angst, frustration, and helplessness. Some explicitly repudiated this kind of parenting – insisting that they are not or *do not want to be* ‘helicopter’ or ‘tiger’ parents. They questioned if it is right to pay so much attention to exam results. Many express tension between what they practiced and what they believed; although they spent time and energy on their kids’ education, they talked about pitying children these days for not having time to play; about their worries of stress and even youth suicide, which they attributed to a stressful education system; and of how ‘book smarts’ are not enough to survive in this world. Some explicitly expressed that the rising need for tuition advantages children whose parents have more money and disadvantages those with less. Apart from the fact that education as parental duty exerts significant costs on their daily lives and finances, then, we must register the fact that it exerts costs in parents’ feelings toward parenthood and self.

In fulfilling what they saw as their duties, parents invoked multiple moral orientations that appear at odds and which pull them in opposite directions. On one hand, they spoke of their desire for children to enjoy learning, to have happy childhoods that include play, and to acquire good values and become good people. Their definition of ‘good’ persons often revealed a social dimension – to be able to take care of others, to not hurt people, to get along in society. On the other hand, parents are conscious of the importance of educational credentials and therefore drawn to the everyday focus on homework, examinations, competing, and not losing out to others. These emotions of unease, and the emotional labor of managing contradictory parental desires, were present across class and gender lines. They signal, then, a broader paradoxical social phenomenon: a world-class education system in which people are not exactly satisfied.

The expressions of these conflicting orientations and desires reveal important patterns about our situation. Is the regime we have the fault of an overly competitive education system or the responsibility of *kiasu* parents? It is of course overly simplistic to pose the question in this way since systems are reproduced through the interactions that daily occur between individual agents and rules and processes. What my findings reveal nonetheless is that parents have limited room to maneuver; they are cognizant, and indeed correct in their assessment, of the high stakes involved – education attainment and wages are highly correlated in Singapore. The average monthly income of households with a university graduate as main income earner (S\$18,255) is almost three times that of households with a secondary school graduate as main income earner (S\$6580; Department of Statistics, 2018). Parents have limited room in which to decide not to ‘play the game’. Education as care labor is a form of labor that parents have limited ‘choice’ to reject. The ambivalence and unease they experience, and the work they do to try to manage conflicting parental desires has indeed itself become part of that labor.

Education care labor

The rich scholarship on care regimes identifies gender inequalities and imbalances as a major problem. Some of the solutions to mitigating gender inequalities proposed by scholars have to do with addressing care needs through public institutional mechanisms – enhancing childcare centers on one hand and on the other hand, improving the rights of both fathers and mothers to take paid time-off from wage work.

What I found in the Singapore context illustrates how gender inequality is reproduced. Education as care labor solidifies the distinct roles ascribed to men and women as parents, and indeed creates forms of care work and responsibilities that become deeply entrenched as mothers' duty. The gendered norms and patterns that accompany families' practices around children's education have long-term consequences for exacerbating men and women's differential financial status and therefore social power. Conceptualizing education as care work, we see that gender norms solidify through layers of everyday practices and are deepened precisely as modes of care go beyond the physical care of babies and toddlers, to a sense of duty directed toward ensuring children can keep up in a tough and competitive environment. The narratives and scripts around mothers' duty and sacrifice, enacted as they are through many years and various social channels, take on solid contours both cultural and institutionalized. While paternity and parental leave and childhood care infrastructure can be important modes for disrupting gendered inequalities, they cannot reach these particular practices I have found in contemporary Singapore.

Existing research highlights that class differences can create variations in families' experiences of family and work-life. Here, the Singapore case too indicates the importance of class and the ways in which care institutions and public policy do not adequately mitigate inequality, and indeed create conditions that make class imbalances more significant.

Finally, the comparative scholarship on care regimes identifies how, in different national contexts, there are variations in the degree to which care is taken up as a public problem requiring public solutions. In general, scholars have emphasized the importance of public investments and institutional infrastructure in replacing parental labor. The Singapore case points to the importance of also looking at how public institutions may not just generate care solutions but also produce new needs for care labor, rendering even more challenging work-life reconciliation.

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Notes

1. Most childcare centers provide services for children from 18 months to 6 years old. A subset of these also caters to infants between 2 and 18 months old.
2. The research was reviewed and approved by Nanyang Technological University's Institutional Review Board (IRB-2016-12-014-02).

3. This intensified when schools shifted to online home-based learning and parents shifted to working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, school closures in Singapore have been limited to two short periods: a month in April to May 2020, and 2 weeks in May 2021.
4. In a separate project, my collaborators and I found that parents in Singapore consider tuition a 'basic need' (Ng et al., 2021).
5. We also found that parents consider university degrees to be 'basic' as well, because not having a degree results in a far smaller range of job opportunities in Singapore today.

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Author biography

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Résumé

Des travaux de recherche antérieurs font état des difficultés pour concilier travail rémunéré et responsabilités de soins dans divers contextes sociétaux. Les variations nationales indiquent que les politiques publiques et les infrastructures de soins ont des répercussions importantes sur les modèles genrés et les inégalités sociales, ainsi que sur le bien-être général des parents. Les services de garde d'enfants et les écoles peuvent permettre aux personnes ayant des enfants de mener à bien leur travail et leur carrière professionnelle. Pourtant, comme je le montre dans cet article, les exigences des systèmes éducatifs peuvent devenir une composante majeure de la charge parentale. À partir d'entretiens menés auprès de 92 parents à Singapour, je montre la manière dont les responsabilités éducatives entravent la conciliation entre vie professionnelle et vie privée et renforcent le poids du genre et de la classe sociale.

Mots-clés

Asie, classe sociale, éducation, genre, politiques publiques, régimes de soins, responsabilités de soins, Singapour

Resumen

Las investigaciones previas han documentado los desafíos de combinar el trabajo asalariado y las responsabilidades de cuidado en varios contextos sociales. Las variaciones nacionales revelan que las políticas públicas y las infraestructuras de cuidados tienen efectos importantes en la configuración de los patrones de género, las desigualdades de clase y el bienestar general de los progenitores. Las guarderías infantiles y las escuelas pueden permitir a las personas con niños desarrollar sus trabajos y carreras profesionales. Sin embargo, como se muestra en este artículo, las demandas de los sistemas educativos pueden convertirse en una parte importante de la carga de cuidado de los padres. A partir de entrevistas con 92 padres en Singapur, se ilustran las formas en que las tareas educativas del trabajo de cuidado dificultan la conciliación entre el trabajo y la vida personal y amplifican la importancia del género y la clase.

Palabras clave

Asia, clase social, educación, género, políticas públicas, regímenes de cuidado, responsabilidades de cuidado, Singapur