Navigating conflicting desires: parenting practices and the meaning of educational work in urban East Asia

Kristina Göransson a, Yoonhee Kang b and Yeonjin Kim a

aSchool of Social Work, Lund University, Lund, Sweden; bDepartment of Anthropology, Seoul National University, Gwanak-gu, Korea

ABSTRACT
Today parents are faced with increasing expectations to attend to their young children’s learning and cognitive development. South Korea and Singapore are well-known for their competitive education systems and for consistently topping international student assessment tests. They also share an inflated private tuition industry, fuelled by the assumption that parents are compelled to invest substantial resources and time to support their children’s development and education. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul and Singapore, the article explores how middle-class parents of pre- and primary school children negotiate seemingly conflicting aspirations of academic achievement versus emotional well-being and resilience. The findings unveil how parents strive to cultivate positive attitudes towards learning through management of time and space in everyday life. In particular, it draws attention to the moral imperative to raise children who enjoy learning, as a way to reconcile parents’ twofold aspiration to upskill their children and cultivate their emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS
Intensive parenting; educational work; childhood; ethnography; Singapore; South Korea

Introduction
Singapore and South Korea (hereafter Korea) are well-known for their competitive education systems and for consistently topping international student assessment tests. Both countries aspire to establish themselves as regional education hubs with a skilled population (Dobson 2013; Knight 2014; Koh and Chong 2014). They both also have an inflated private tuition industry, driven by parents’ anxiety over their children’s academic achievements and future (e.g. Lai and Huang 2004; Park and Abellman 2004; Yeoh and Huang 2010; Abellman and Kang 2013; Göransson 2009, 2015, 2021). Increased parental involvement in children’s education around the developed world has been theorised in terms of an ideology of intensive parenting, according to which parents are expected to invest substantial time, emotion and material resources in their children’s upbringing (Faircloth 2014; Forsberg 2007; Gottzén 2009; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003;
O’Brien 2007; Lan 2018). Previous research on parental involvement highlights that particularly middle-class parents are inclined to cultivate their children’s talents and skills through adult-organised activities (e.g. Cooper 2014; Hays 1996; Katz 2008; Lareau 2003). Marianne Cooper (2014) suggests that middle-class parents’ investment of time, emotion and material resources in children’s education can be understood from the perspective of a ‘security project’, or a class-specific way of coping with sentiments of uncertainty and risk.

When conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul and Singapore, we found that middle-class parents were indeed deeply concerned about their children’s education and future. But their concern was not just about grades; it was also about their child’s emotional well-being. In previous studies, these two desires are usually framed as conflicting, as in the notions of ‘concerted cultivation’ versus ‘natural growth’ (Lareau 2003), ‘tiger parenting’ versus ‘European-style parenting’ (Fu and Markus 2014), ‘ambitious parents’ versus ‘relaxed parents’ (Bach 2016), and ‘independence’ versus ‘surveillance’ (Nelson 2010). Bach and Christensen (2017), among others, have used Gregory Bateson’s concept of ‘double bind’ to theorise such conflicting ideas about appropriate forms of parenthood and childrearing (see also Bristow 2014; Bregnbæk 2016). Bach and Christensen (2017, 136) propose that these contradictory demands give rise to a ‘meta-communicational deadlock’, whereby parents feel powerless and uncertain about which course of action to follow.

This article, however, demonstrates that Korean and Singaporean parents are far from paralysed. On the contrary, the parents in our study understand the seemingly conflicting aspirations of academic achievement versus emotional well-being and resilience as intimately intertwined and mutually dependent. They are negotiated and even reconciled in what can be conceptualised as a feedback loop, mediated by specific cultural notions of learning and ‘good parenting’ in Korea and Singapore. The overall aim of this study, then, is to explore how Singaporean and Korean middle-class parents navigate and negotiate these demands and desires as they raise their young children. The following questions will be addressed: What desires do middle-class parents have for their children’s education and future? How do they attempt to balance and reconcile children’s self-motivation versus parental control and self-discipline versus emotional well-being? By raising these issues, this study discovers how parents strive to cultivate positive attitudes towards learning through their micromanagement of everyday life. In particular, it draws attention to the moral imperative to raise children who want to learn and enjoy learning, as a way to reconcile parents’ twofold aspiration to upskill their children and cultivate their emotional well-being.

This article focuses specifically on parents of pre- and primary school-aged children. An important reason for studying this cohort is that parents in Korea and Singapore, as well as globally, are increasingly expected to attend to their young children’s cognitive development and learning. This pressure is reinforced by the growing influence of neuroscience and the widespread claim that early childhood is the most critical period of cognitive development (Macvarish 2016; Smyth and Craig 2017). Early childhood is also considered to be crucial in the formation of affective bonds with parents, believed to become an important foundation for children’s future learning and education (e.g. Valiente, Swanson, and Eisenberg 2012). Existing research on parenting and early childhood are predominantly based on quantitative studies in psychology or cognitive science,
but by drawing on ethnographic data, this article presents a more nuanced and fine-grained analysis of parenting practices around young children’s education, while attending to culturally specific notions of parenthood and learning. As such, it will contribute to context-sensitive analyses of (middle-class) parents’ moral and emotional work around their children’s education and learning.

The following section provides a survey of the ethnographic field sites and previous relevant research, followed by an outline of method and data. The analysis explores how parents try to reconcile conflicting demands and desires for their children’s education by cultivating a growth and learning mentality. The techniques of spatialisation and temporalisation are given as examples of how parents strive to cultivate self-disciplined and motivated children who enjoy learning.

**Outline of the field: parenting and children’s education in Seoul and Singapore**

This section highlights previous research on parenting and children’s education in an East Asian context. Ethnographic study of the topic in Seoul and Singapore is interesting and relevant because these settings present different contexts but share similar features. As pointed out, both Singapore and Korea are recognised for their competitive education systems. They have a flourishing private tuition industry and are frequently among the top-performing countries in international student assessment tests. They also share certain demographic and cultural characteristics. The Confucian tradition, with its strong emphasis on academic achievement and training (Wee 1995), feeds the conviction among both parents and professionals that supplementary training is fundamental to securing top grades in school. Moreover, both countries have been experiencing declining fertility rates: In 2019 Singapore and Korea had a total fertility rate of 1.14 and 0.92, respectively, far below the replacement rate of 2.1 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2020; Statistics Korea 2020). Falling fertility correlates to changing family dynamics and allows parents to spend increased resources raising fewer children.

The unprecedented flow of resources from parents to their young children is certainly not unique to East Asia. Worldwide, children’s lives are increasingly understood in a future-oriented sense, and parents are expected to raise capable individuals who can thrive and fit into a rapidly changing world (cf. Butler 2015; Lister 2008; Katz 2008; Lan 2018). However, it is not well understood how all this intersects with family cultures and intergenerational expectations. In the East Asian context, the future-oriented understanding of children’s lives can be conceptualised as ‘descending familism’ (Yan 2016) or ‘child-centered relatedness’ (Kipnis 2011). This refers to the transformation of traditional norms of filial piety, by which the authority of the senior generation has weakened in tandem with an expanded flow of material and emotional resources to young children (hence ‘descending’ rather than ‘ascending’). Descending familism is based on intimacy and communication rather than submission and hierarchy. Children are viewed as vulnerable, and parental involvement and protection as reflections of ‘good’ parenting (Yan 2016).

The increasing concern for children’s emotional and psychological well-being is by no means driven single-handedly by parents. The importance of child emotional and psychological health is emphasised at multiple levels, including by ministries of
education, experts, and the media. With the number of reports on anxiety and stress among students on the rise, there has been a shift of attention in education policy in both Korea and Singapore. Measures are now taken to reduce the emphasis on exams and grades, while promoting a more holistic notion of learning. In an effort to promote ‘Happy Education for All Students’, the Korean Ministry of Education (2021) revised the national curriculum in 2015 to ‘nurture a creative and integrative learner’. Under this motto, public schools in Korea are expected to ‘enhance the happiness and well-being of students by giving them opportunities to explore dreams and aptitudes through participatory instructions, diverse learning experiences, and flexible curricula’ (2021). In the same vein, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (2021) has identified a list of ‘21st Century Competencies’ essential to preparing children for the future, including ‘self-awareness’, ‘self-management’, ‘responsible decision-making’, ‘social awareness’ and ‘relationship management’. The core values underpinning these competencies are ‘respect’, ‘responsibility’, ‘resilience’, ‘integrity’, ‘care’ and ‘harmony’. While these core values and competencies appear to be more holistic than a narrow exam-oriented framework, they remain a means to an end. They are promoted as crucial to ‘helping […] students embody the desired outcomes of education so that they are able to capitalize on the rich opportunities of the digital age’ (2021).

In this context, parents’ involvement in children’s education is increasingly taken for granted and considered an essential form of parental care labour (cf. Teo 2022). At the same time, parents’, and especially mothers’, expected roles and responsibilities have moved from directly assisting their children with their homework and other academic activities, to providing an appropriate environment where children can develop greater self-responsibility (Jezierski and Wall 2019). Parents are expected not only to manage, monitor, and motivate their children’s learning, but also to cultivate their positive attitudes towards learning and education. All this requires affective investment in addition to the more task-oriented educational work (Hoffman 2010). Through this effort, parents enable children to internalise desirable values and attitudes, or ‘psychological capital’ (Ortner 2002), such as self-responsibility, flexibility, and creativity. This involvement guides children to regulate and discipline their behaviour seemingly voluntarily, but paradoxically it requires even more intensive parenting, including a vast amount of emotional work.

**Method**

This study is based on extended periods of fieldwork in Seoul and Singapore between 2018 and 2020. Taking an ethnographic approach enables us to reach a contextualised understanding of parenting strategies around children’s education through rich accounts of the thinking and practices of individuals in everyday life (cf. Atkinson 2015). Extending case studies across geographical areas also allow us to obtain theoretically sound understandings of social processes beyond the local field sites (cf. Burawoy 1991, 2000). The fieldwork is multi-sited in the sense that it has been conducted in more than one geographical location, but also, and more importantly, a multi-sited ethnographic approach stresses global interconnectedness and seeks to ‘understand something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as much as it does its local subjects’ (Marcus 1998, 95). In this case, attempting to understand and compare how shifting
norms of parenting are entangled with an ever-growing education market, notions of children’s future and increasing expectations on parents to support their young children’s learning.

The data includes in-depth interviews and numerous informal conversations with mothers and fathers of pre- and primary school children and fieldnotes from observations in settings relating to children’s learning, such as homework support sessions, homeschooling cooperatives, and extracurricular activities (e.g. a childparent workshop to learn and practice traditional Korean dance, a meeting with an author of a book on the subject of homeschooling, etcetera) for parents and children.

In Seoul, we conducted fifteen interviews with a total of seventeen middle-class families (fourteen mothers and eight fathers). Some parents were interviewed together. Two group interviews were done with one group of three mothers and one other group of two mothers. In Singapore, we conducted eighteen interviews with a total of twenty middle-class families (nineteen mothers and five fathers). While some interviews included both parents, most were individual. One group interview was conducted with three mothers. The variation in interviews settings (environment), as well as set-ups (parents interviewed together or separately), is characteristic of the elastic and serendipitous nature of ethnographic fieldwork. The type of setting and set-up depended on the participants’ personal preferences. Some asked us to conduct the interview at their homes, others preferred a public place, such as café. Some couples preferred to be interviewed together, and in other cases, the spouses were not interested or willing to be interviewed. Since an ethnographic study is not concerned with replicability, and since data is understood as produced in interaction rather than ‘collected’, the variation in interview settings and set-ups is viewed as a methodological tool.

The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours and focused on the parents’ experiences of engaging in children’s education and learning and their motivations. We also included two cases of photo diaries, where the Korean mother-participants took photos of their children’s daily activities for about a week to capture what they think to be important moments in their children’s learning and development.

The recruitment of participants was facilitated by our previous experiences of conducting ethnographic work in Singapore and Korea and our extensive knowledge of the field sites. Participants were primarily recruited through personal networks and referral. Existing contacts in the field helped us get in touch with parents who were willing to participate in the study, who then were asked to recommend other potential participants. In ethnography, it is common to negotiate access by using existing networks and referral. While this strategy usually eases the establishment of trust and rapport, it may ‘close off certain avenues of inquiry’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 59). Field relations are also shaped by the researcher’s positionality, including social characteristics such as age, gender and marital status (Okely and Callaway 1992). The fact that we are mothers facilitated access and building of rapport as we could relate to many of the experiences and concerns raised by the parents participating in the study. Moreover, the negotiation of access is informed by the potential participants’ interest in the particular topic. Probably as a result of the emphasis put on education in contemporary societies, not least in Singapore and Korea, we found that parents were both willing and interested in discussing their views and involvement in children’s learning and education.
Most of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. We strove to keep the transcriptions verbatim, but excerpts presented in this article have been slightly edited for readability. The interview excerpts of Korean parents were translated from Korean to English by one of the authors. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and ensured confidentiality. All names used here are pseudonyms, and personal data that could jeopardise the participants’ anonymity, such as residential areas or workplaces, have been excluded.

The analysis of ethnographic data is an iterative process, where “[t]he development of analytical themes and ideas is an emergent property of our engagement with the field, and of our systematic reflections on the data” (Atkinson 2015, 11). In this manner, we have reviewed fieldnotes and interviews during and between periods of fieldwork. On the completion of fieldwork we reviewed transcripts and fieldnotes again to identify patterns and paradoxes, and put these in conversation with previous research and theoretical perspectives related to parenting, learning, and childhood.2 The analysis has been guided by Emerson’s (2004) notion of ‘key incidents’, that is, ‘in-the-field events or observations that stimulate or implicate original lines of inquiry and conceptualization’ (427). Such key incidents are not necessarily significant or spectacular for those involved (i.e. members of the field), rather they are incidents or situations that intrigue the particular field researcher. They direct the analytic work and help the researcher to try out different lines of theorising (Emerson 2004, 439). Ethnographic data is by default empirically rich and complex, and cannot be quantified. In our analysis here, we use examples from a smaller number of individual participants and key incidents to illustrate and discuss the general findings, which are presented in the following sections.

**Feedback loops and the reconciling of conflicting desires**

As noted in the introduction, parents’ aspirations for their children were characterised by a tension between, on one hand, academic achievement and, on the other hand, the child’s emotional well-being. This tension has been theorised as a double bind, a situation in which a person is faced with two irreconcilable desires, resulting in a deadlock or an unresolvable dilemma (e.g. Bach and Christensen 2017). However, the findings of this study show an array of strategies parents employ to negotiate and even reconcile seemingly contradictory demands and desires. This was particularly evident with parental efforts to raise resilient, self-motivated and self-disciplined children. In this process, parents aimed to cultivate a ‘learning and growth mentality’ in their children, as opposed to resorting to the conventional cramming. A learning and growth mentality is framed as a specific psychological disposition that help children enjoy learning, thereby reconciling the tension between academic achievement and emotional well-being.

We suggest that this process can be understood in terms of a feedback loop, which, contrary to the deadlock of the double bind, reconciles conflicting demands. Bateson ([1972] 1987) used the concept of ‘feedback loops’ to refer to a circuit of causal relations that creates adaptive change in a system. A positive or negative feedback loop in this case encourages or discourages certain behaviours through a process of trial and error and comparison (278). In this study, however, the feedback loop between parental ambitions
or desires does not directly link them in a cause-and-effect relationship. We want to explore how parents make sense of their ambitions for children’s academic achievements and their emotional well-being as being mutually supportive and complementary. We are specifically concerned with the various strategies and techniques parents employ to make such feedback loops work.

To understand how parents formulate and facilitate the feedback loop between their children’s academic achievements and emotional well-being, we are focusing on two techniques of educational work that we are calling ‘temporalisation’ and ‘spatialisation’. We discuss how Singaporean and Korean parents manage time and space to achieve their ambition of nurturing self-motivated and self-disciplined children. Through these techniques, parents aspire to raise their children to want to learn or enjoy learning so they do not feel distressed in their pursuit of academic success. We argue that these techniques, in turn, form a subset of feedback loops in children’s learning processes by which children can ‘learn to learn’ (Bateson [1972] 1987, 279) and become ready to pursue both academic achievement and emotional well-being. By focusing on how the parents make sense of and justify these parenting techniques, we highlight the significance of the affective dimension of strategies that are believed to foster children’s psychological capital, or ‘the production of the kind of social self a person emerges with from childhood’ (Ortner 2002, 13).

Techniques of temporalisation

Monitoring and tracking

While self-motivated and self-disciplined children would presumably require less parental involvement, the parents we interviewed, mothers in particular, devoted substantial time, effort, and emotion to training children how to manage their own time and complete their tasks independently. Joan, a Singaporean mother of two, aged 9 and 11, emphasised in an interview that her primary goal was to teach her children to be ‘self-disciplined in managing their schoolwork’. Her children have a packed schedule with organised activities nearly every day, most of which are non-academic, including piano, rock climbing, scouts, gymnastics, swimming, artistic diving, and Chinese. In addition to all the organised activities, the children have to keep up with homework. To help her children manage their time, Joan created detailed spreadsheets to organise and track their activities and routines.

So at the beginning of the year, I always do up a daily schedule for them which, you know, factoring in all the daily activities they have and which are the days that they can possibly have a bit more time to work on revisions, which is so little, it probably ends up like you touch each subject once every fortnight.

One set of spreadsheets provided an overview of the month, including exams, classes and special events. Another set of spreadsheets provided a very detailed schedule over the children’s daily programme from Monday to Sunday, organised in 15-minute time slots. The programme includes time to get ready for school in the mornings (6:15–6:45), travel to/from school (6:45–7:15), school hours (7:15–13:30), travel (13:30–14:00), lunch (14:00–14:30), relaxation time (14:30–15:00), piano/study time (15:00–16:30), travel to extra-curricular activities (16:30–17:00), and so forth, ending with
bedtime at 21:00. Joan hoped that the spreadsheets would help the children manage their time and take responsibility for their own activities. Joan positioned herself in opposition to those who ‘over-parent’. Still, she felt compelled to monitor and motivate her children to a considerable degree, despite her efforts at creating pedagogical spreadsheets.

I kind of have to do it [monitor and motivate the children], but I feel that I shouldn’t have to do it because it is not me. And at your age [referring to her children’s age], you should [take responsibility]. So I am quite conflicted. I don’t know. Quite conflicted because I feel you should take responsibility yourself. But I kind of also understand that you are a boy and you are 11 years old and you probably can’t really see the relevance of this. So usually it gets a bit ugly around this time and we all scream at each other. ‘Cause I feel like we already have a schedule and an exam schedule. ‘I already did up a beautiful schedule for you! All you have to do is to follow it, and you still don’t!’ (Joan laughed)

Joan’s account illustrates how the cultivation of children’s self-discipline can be both labour-intensive and emotionally exhausting. Not only does it require time and energy to plan, set up, and monitor the children’s schedules; those efforts are also a source of frustration when the intended outcome fails and the children don’t follow the schedules.

While Joan shouldered most of the burden of planning and monitoring the children’s days, her husband was delegated more specific tasks. Joan likened herself to ‘the default administrator and executor of everything’.

It is really mainly planned by me. Because personality-wise my husband and I are very different. So I have been managing projects, you know, for many years. I am very organised and I plan. Like right now I already have to think about next year and schedules and classes and all that, right. So generally I am the default administrator and executor of everything. And then I will allocate certain things to him.

The above account is by no means unique. There is an abundance of international research showing how the intensification of parenting is highly gendered, with mothers more involved in their children’s education and development than fathers (e.g. Forsberg 2007; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003; Reay 1998, 2000; Yeoh and Huang 2010). This observation was true also for the Korean and Singaporean families we encountered during fieldwork; mothers spent time researching school rankings, planned educational activities, oversaw homework, monitored their children’s learning process, networked with other parents, compiled spreadsheets, volunteered at school, and much more. At first sight, these efforts may appear purely instrumental, but they should be understood as a form of identity work, with emotional and moral dimensions, where parents actively define and negotiate ideologies and norms of care in everyday life (cf. Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013).

As in Singapore, most of the Korean parents we interviewed managed their children’s activities by setting up daily/weekly/monthly schedules. Such schedules helped the parents monitor the children’s work progress. This technique of temporalisation was sometimes combined with various types of rewards, including monetary compensation. The parents of 10-year-old Aram and 8-year-old Boram set a schedule for the boys’ reading and counted the number of books they read during the winter holidays. Mother Sun-Young said that her husband, Tae-Sik, had made a chart for tracking the
number of books the boys finished, in order to set ‘a goal’ and motivate them to read more.

Figure 1 shows a chart titled ‘The Master Plan for Reading Books during the Winter Vacation.’ The second line reads, ‘Prizes: PS4 Lego® Ninjago™ and Lego® Marvel Super Heroes™.’ The small table on the top shows the targets; Aram has a target of ten easy books and eight difficult books, and Boram has eight easy books and five difficult books. The first coloured row (in light red) marks the days from Sunday to Saturday. In each of the three tables below, the first row refers to dates, the second marks the
boys’ reading progress, divided into ‘easy books’ (blue box) and ‘difficult books’ (yellow box), and finally, the third row is the so-called ‘Father’s Check.’ Father Tae-Sik told us the boys would get money according to the number of books they read. They would also get a PlayStation as a prize. When we visited their home for an interview, we observed the box with the PlayStation displayed on a bookshelf in the living room. The father added that just looking at the prize motivated the boys to read and compete with each other.

This practice of temporalisation, however, was gendered in a different way from most other families included in this study. While Aram and Boram’s mother, Sun-Young, was responsible for planning the children’s daily programmes, such as extracurricular activities and study time, the father turned out to be the one who monitored and tracked their task completion by giving rewards accordingly. Sun-Young said:

I don’t manage it [the tracking]. I just put their reading schedule on the wall at their eye-level [so that they can easily see it], but my husband usually checks the progress. If the kids do not finish their books, they cannot come out from their rooms when father comes back home, because they have to finish their tasks first.

When asked if the children complied with these rules, Tae-Sik explained, ’Yes, because I use a reward, like playing games and watching TV. […] I usually say, “finish your homework first, then we can watch TV together.”’ Since the boys enjoyed watching the same TV shows as Tae-Sik, watching TV together was a time for bonding. Tae-Sik also frequently played video games together with the boys as a reward. Thus, father Tae-Sik set a goal – in this case, a reward – to motivate the children, and was also deeply engaged in monitoring their work progress. This parenting practice partly corresponds to the stereotypical image of the macroscopic father, who usually pays close attention to a more general orientation or goal for children in order to motivate them (Kang 2012). At the same time, the reward was not just for the boys’ own entertainment; it was also an activity Tae-Sik enjoyed ‘together’ with them. This emphasis on closeness and intimacy resonates with a contemporary notion of fatherhood, where the emotional father–child relationship is central (Dermott 2008; Kang 2012). Through temporalisation and a rewarding system, the parents of Aram and Boram appeared to balance the seemingly contradictory desires of pushing their children to do more work and, at the same time, forging a stronger emotional connection with them.

**Age and timing: notions of ‘age-appropriate’ learning**

Another technique of temporalisation parents used was prioritising certain learning activities and tasks based on the child’s age. In Korea, as well as in Singapore, it is quite a common practice to arrange age-appropriate after-school programmes and study subjects. For example, Korean children usually learn to play musical instruments (most commonly the piano) before and in the lower primary school grades. Parents do this because children will not have much time when they reach higher grades since they need to concentrate on their studies. Sun-Young, the mother of Aram and Boram, elaborated on her long-term plan to educate her children, a plan that seemed to be a common path for Korean children around the time of the fieldwork.

Sun-Young: The reason my kids started learning to play the piano at an early age is because they’ll have too many other things to do once they start school. It’s better to study music
early, in the lower grades or in primary school, because they need to study only math when they are in middle school.

Researcher: Why do they have to study only math?

Sun-Young: I heard from other moms that children do not have time to study other subjects [once they start middle school]. They said, even English is a subject that kids are considered to have completed when they are primary schoolers, never mind music!

Korean parents usually share the belief that children’s early years are the best time to explore various things and find out what they like and what they do well, especially in the arts and physical education. This ordering of children’s extracurricular activities is not exactly part of their early education, but it does make more time available when they are required to focus on academic subjects. Parents often justified such time management by explaining they intended to ease the child’s burden in the future. By spreading out learning activities according to a child’s age, parents believe the child will feel less pressure when they have a lot more work to keep up with in secondary school.

Singaporean middle-class parents, too, planned children’s activities according to what was believed to be age appropriate. Will, a father of three children aged 8, 6, and 4, elaborated on the importance of choosing those activities. In his view, it was not only a matter of spreading out activities and thereby easing the burden; it was also a matter of nurturing self-motivation. ‘At whatever the age [the children] are, they have to realise their capabilities so they will feel proud and [become] self-motivated.’ His two daughters took dance classes. Will thought that dance was particularly suitable for their ages, because moving and dance is ‘first-hand learning’, unlike learning to read music notes or speech and drama, which are also very popular with parents. In Will’s view, learning, for example, speech and drama at their age is not helpful: ‘They do not know [yet] when to speak, when not to speak, and what to say. We have seen it with our friend’s children, they are able to speak but they say the wrong things or say them the wrong way.’ Will’s wife Carolyn added, ‘They are mentally not ready, but they have the capacity.’

The increasingly popular notion of play-based learning is another example of the emphasis on timing learning activities around age. Play-based learning, which is thriving in both Singapore and Korea, emphasises hands-on activities. Natural exposure is assumed to be particularly suitable to young children, yet these activities are in fact carefully planned and managed by adults. Sports is another activity assumed to be appropriate for young children, to foster self-motivation and discipline. An example was Singaporean Pei Ling’s 7-year-old daughter, who was enrolled in gymnastics. Pei Ling explained that an additional benefit of gymnastics was that it ‘stimulates both the right and the left sides of the brain’. While deemed age-appropriate, the emphasis on play is in a sense instrumental; play is also seen as a way of enhancing creativity, maintaining self-motivation and interest in learning activities, and developing social skills.

Hence, time was understood as essential in several respects: Parental scheduling helped children to establish routines around their everyday activities and, in a more long-term perspective, parents’ actively chose age-appropriate activities to spread out the learning process over time and nurture the children’s predisposition toward learning of all sorts.
Techniques of spatialisation

Making space for learning

Alongside the techniques of temporalisation, the parents in this study managed space to create an optimal environment for children’s study habits. By planning and organising their home spaces in certain ways, parents attempted to establish routines and encourage their children’s self-discipline. Joan, quoted above, showed us a ‘homework corner’, a desk tray placed on a side table in the kitchen.

This tray here [Joan points to the tray], is what we call a homework corner. So every day when they come back from school, they are supposed to put all their homework there. […] Since Primary 1, I think my focus, rather than coaching them on the content of the subjects, was training them to be self-sufficient, and self-disciplined in managing their school work. So, I tried to get the system going. Like every day, put it [the homework] there, check your homework, do your homework. At the end of the day, pack your school bag.

In Korea, parents sometimes arrange the home environment in specific ways to create an ideal space for learning. For example, since the 2000s there has been a popular trend to convert the living room into a study room to provide a proper atmosphere for the children to study, especially among middle-class families. The living room is called keo-sil (living room) or eungjeop-sil (reception room) in Korean, and it usually functions as a place where family members can relax together or where guests are entertained when they visit. The use of the living room for entertaining and socialising has been common among middle-class families since the 1970s, with Korea’s rapid modernisation and economic development (Lee, Chong, and Kang 2016; Su and Jeon 2009). Parents and children usually spend the daytime hours in different places, but they get together in the living room after they return home. Interestingly, fathers used to claim the centre of this family space – the image of the Korean father laying on the couch watching TV after a long day at work was once quite common.

But as middle-class Korean families have started to change the living room from an entertainment space to a study room, instead of a TV, there are bookshelves; instead of a sofa and coffee table, there is a study table and chairs. This change indicates that the centre of the family activities has shifted to the children’s reading and other learning activities. One mother told us, ‘Because a table is at the very centre of the living room, it is much easier [for children] to access it and read.’ By changing the living room’s function, most Korean parents believe that they provide a more natural setting for their children to develop better reading and study habits, even with their parents and siblings around. Siting the study table in the centre of the living room also reflects the Korean parents’ perception of study as a family activity in which the parents, and fathers in particular, are also expected to join.

Optimising location

The ways in which Korean and Singaporean parents managed space as part of their educational work sometimes included changing their location to optimise access to preferred schools and enrichment activities. In Singapore, geographical location can help with admission into primary school. Primary school admission depends on several criteria,
such as sibling priority and the parents’ alumni affiliation. However, if the chosen primary school has fewer vacancies than applicants, which is common in the most popular schools, priority will be based on the child’s home-to-school distance. While not all parents move for the sake of optimising school admission, school is no doubt an important factor when deciding if, when, and where to move. Shi Yun, whose son was still in preschool, had recently moved to another part of Singapore. She said that although they did not house hunt solely for the sake of access to a good primary school, it ‘was definitely an attractive factor’. In another example, Nicole and her husband wanted a primary school with a strong profile in Chinese language for her two boys. In addition, they relied on Nicole’s parents to take care of the boys after school, so the school could not be located too far away. They found a ‘branded’ school of good reputation reasonably close to the grandparents’ home, and so, to increase the chance of their sons getting admitted they moved close to that school.

In Singapore, primary and secondary schools are unofficially known as ‘neighbourhood’ schools or ‘elite’ schools and even though the Ministry of Education makes no such designations, every parent knows whether a particular school is ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘elite’. Nicole wanted her boys to enrol in an elite school because she believed this ‘would help the children to go further’. At the same time, she was torn between helping her sons achieve good grades and respecting their interests and safeguarding their mental well-being. This dilemma became acute shortly after one of her sons was admitted into the Gifted Education Program at age 10. According to Nicole, he did not thrive and his grades were falling. After a parent-teacher meeting, she realised that he had trouble adapting to the intense and competitive environment of the programme. ‘I didn’t know they are marked on so many things. […] The [students] are marked on even filing, they are graded on everything!’ Nicole said. ‘He was not coping and that was a difficult time.’ Eventually, Nicole took her son to see a therapist to help him manage his anxiety. ‘Because of all these things, I started to be a lot more involved [as a parent]’, Nicole said. She consulted other parents and took a more active role in overseeing his homework. Nicole’s impression was that slowly her son adapted and coped better with the expectations at school. The fact that Nicole took her son to a therapist and got more involved in his schoolwork is here understood as an attempt to balance and negotiate the two opposite desires of well-being and achievement.

In Seoul, too, it is attractive for middle-class families to seek housing in highly regarded school districts to increase the chances of their children getting into a preferred school and to provide a better learning environment. In addition to optimising location, there was another emerging pattern in Korean parents’ narratives about house hunting, namely their desire to find a place where their children will feel happy and comfortable. Chan-Ho, an 11-year-old boy who was homeschooled by his parents, had lived in a hanok, a single-story traditional Korean house with a small yard, from around the age of 6. His parents explained that the main reason for moving from an apartment to a traditional house was that Chan-Ho liked the place very much. Chan-Ho’s father, Joong-Sik, said:

Chan-Ho came along with us when we first visited our hanok place. We suddenly realised that he had disappeared as we were chatting with the real estate agent. He disappeared, and we found him in its loft [laughing]. He had climbed and crawled into that space, and he said
he loved the place! Although it was quite old and small, we decided to buy that traditional house because Chan-Ho liked it so much [...] And in fact, a house, not an apartment, was the type of housing we were hoping for. Because when we lived in an apartment, my wife always told him [Chan-Ho] not to run. She was very concerned that the noise [Chan-Ho made] would annoy our neighbours downstairs. So she kept nagging, ‘Don’t run! Walk on tiptoe!’ But I didn’t agree. It is too unnatural and total nonsense that we tell a child to walk on tiptoe.

At the time of moving, they did consider the reputation of the school district. Eventually, however, they realised that Chan-Ho was not happy at his new school. They decided to pull him out and homeschool him instead. They pointed out that it would be very difficult to do homeschooling if they still lived in an apartment. Chan-Ho’s mother, Myung-Hee, worried that neighbours might question their decision to homeschool their child. In an apartment complex, she added, it is impossible to ‘avoid the gaze (siseon) of others’. Since homeschooling is very rare in Korea, probably the neighbours would have kept asking Chan-Ho why he does not go to school whenever he bumped into them in the lift or on the street. Myung-Hee said, ‘An apartment complex is such a packed community and the neighbours would always notice and be curious about why we do not send him to school. But since we now live in a house, we feel much more freedom.’

Another benefit of living in a house was easy access to ‘people’. By ‘people’, Chan-Ho’s parents did not mean nosy neighbours but potential friends. Mother Myung-Hee was concerned about Chan-Ho’s sociability since he did not attend formal school and thus had few chances to make new friends. She worried that Chan-Ho would feel lonely and that the lack of interaction might harm his social competence, a significant component of a child’s social capital as well as emotional well-being. To enhance Chan-Ho’s ‘civilising process’ (cf. Bach 2014), his parents decided to run an Airbnb, renting a room in their house to guests. Since they lived in a hanok located in an area popular among foreign tourists, running the Airbnb seemed like a good strategy for making foreign acquaintances. Whenever they had foreign guests, Chan-Ho’s parents encouraged him to interact with them, by doing tasks like serving them meals and drinks. Myung-Hee was happy that Chan-Ho, who had been a shy and timid boy, got the opportunity to practice both his English and his social skills when interacting with the foreign ‘uncles and aunts’ who stayed at their home.

In this case, the parents tried to ease the child’s stress by finding a better housing and even ‘opting out’ of formal school. At the same time, they were committed to help Chan-Ho ‘nurture his interests.’ At the time of the interview, Chan-Ho was engrossed with making robots, an interest arising from his hobby of making paper crafts. Myung-Hee said that Chan-Ho developed his interest in Robotics not because she planned to lead him that way, but because she gave him ‘enough time’ to ‘play’ with whatever he liked, which evolved from crafting small paper animals to paper robot suits, and eventually real robots. Giving Chan-Ho ‘enough time’, however, required a great deal of patience and waiting. Myung-Hee explained how she let Chan-Ho make paper crafts all day long without interrupting, to provide him with the ‘experience of doing things wholeheartedly’, an experience that she hoped would help him finding out what he likes to do in the future. At the same time, Myung-Hee said, it was hard for her not to interrupt, because what Chan-Ho did sometimes seemed so meaningless that it made her feel upset.
Myung-Hee's account is a good illustration of the emotional work involved in parents’ activities around education and learning. Patience and refraining from intervening were in fact emotionally demanding. Chan-Ho’s case is also an illustration of parents attempting to balance and reconcile conflicting desires and aspirations. When we interviewed Chan-Ho’s parents, they were contemplating on whether they should continue homeschooling. At the time, Chan-Ho had gotten to know about a particular kind of gifted high schools that appeared suited for his emerging interest in Robotics. Myung-Hee and Joong-Sik were concerned, as homeschooling would not adequately prepare him for the admission test. They began to think about exploring adequate middle schools and qualified private learning services to help Chan-Ho prepare for a gifted high school. ‘We can try [to find a good middle school’], Myung-Hee said. ‘Because he is motivated and wants to prepare for high school.’ Chan-Ho’s case stands out in that his parents opted out from the mainstream path of academic achievement, but it should not be read as a case where parents dismiss academic achievement altogether to prioritise well-being. Rather, it illustrates how parents aspire to cultivate a ‘learning and growth mentality’ to help the child enjoy learning and nurture his interests. While the notion of academic achievement appears more fluid, or even subverted, in Chan-Ho’s case it still reflects the future-oriented understanding of children’s lives typical of contemporary intensive parenting styles.

Conclusion

Ethnographic methods allow for a dense and contextual understanding of the complexities and ambivalences of contemporary parenting practices and educational work. Contrary to popular stereotypes of Asian parenting, with their emphasis on discipline and academic achievement, this article casts light on how Korean and Singaporean parents negotiate seemingly conflicting aspirations of academic achievement versus emotional well-being and resilience. In particular, it draws attention to the moral imperative to raise children who enjoy learning, as a way to reconcile parents’ twofold aspiration to upskill their children and cultivate their emotional well-being. Parents’ concerns and efforts to balance this two-fold aspiration can be understood as another prominent facet of ‘doing security’ (cf. Cooper 2014). In both settings, middle-class parents emphasised the importance of managing their children’s well-being and resilience as part of their responsibilities. Rather than conceptualising children’s academic achievement and their well-being as incompatible desires, this article argues that, in fact, they are understood by parents as intimately intertwined and even reconciled at a meta-cognitive level. We have conceptualised this process as a feedback loop (cf. Bateson [1972] 1987), as opposed to the deadlock of a double bind. Of particular importance in this feedback loop is the idea of nurturing children who enjoy learning rather than conventional cramming. Positive attitudes toward learning and self-motivation were framed as essential by the parents in our study to foster this kind of psychological capital (cf. Ortner 2002). Teaching children to be complete their tasks independently was often and paradoxically a labour-intensive and emotionally absorbing task. Mothers in particular invested considerable time, energy, and emotion in planning and monitoring their children’s learning. Here we have highlighted how parents manage time and space in specific ways to
foster routines and create an environment that will facilitate and stimulate the child’s learning without causing emotional distress.

As pointed out, the concern for children’s emotional and psychological well-being is emphasised not only by parents, but also by ministries of education, experts, and the media. However, measures to reduce the emphasis on grades and exams are not only expected to enhance emotional intelligence and psychological well-being. They are also becoming ‘capitalized’ as desirable traits in an uncertain and rapidly changing world. While parents, too, appear to construct children’s well-being and resilience as essential to educational achievement, the parents we interviewed were genuinely concerned about their children’s well-being and devoted not only material resources and time, but also emotional work into their children’s learning and well-being. Likewise, it is simplistic to assume that parents’ sentiments of uncertainty in relation to children’s education and future cause a deadlock (cf. Bach and Christensen 2017). On the contrary, this ethnographic study shows how parents actively navigate, negotiate and even reconcile the complex and sometimes contradictory demands in raising young children.

While this article focuses on parenting, the field is constructed by various actors and perspectives other than the parents themselves. An important direction for future studies is how children themselves negotiate parents’ demands and desires for academic achievement and emotional and psychological well-being. Such ethnographic research would contribute to the understanding of how parenting and childhood cultures intersect in a time of increasing pressure on both parents and children to cope with uncertainty and secure upward social mobility.

Notes

1. The Confucian notion of filial piety originally meant specific ritual observances between parent and child, but the term in present-day Singapore and Korea primarily refers to children’s moral responsibility to care for their elderly parents.
2. In addition to interview transcripts and fieldnotes, we also collected documents and photos. While those have not been consistently analysed, they have been used as complementary information and as illustrations.
3. ‘Is a remocon (remote control) power? Why do fathers sleep on a sofa in the living room?’ 2013. 12. 12. Joongang Daily News. https://news.joins.com/article/13374918 (Accessed January 28, 2021). In this article, the author accounts for the typical image of Korean fathers by analyzing big data.
4. Korean parents sometimes choose private schools for their children since private schools do not admit students based on home–school distance.
5. Homeschooling is rare in Korea. During fieldwork we met only two Korean families who homeschooled their children.
6. The most common type of housing in Seoul as well as Singapore is apartments.
7. In Korea, it is very common for children to call adults by fictive kinship terms, such as sam-chon (uncle) and imo (aunt).

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ORCID

Kristina Göransson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4908-7851
Yoonhee Kang http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4706-5736
Yeonjin Kim http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5374-5474

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