

# NIE23065- Immigrant Parents' Perceptions of the Education System and Culture in Singapore

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## Introduction & Background

This research aims to explore how a parent's immigrant background affects the way they perceive Singapore's local and international education system, in which their children are enrolled. Further analysis seeks to unpack how these perceptions are informed and influenced by their personal education experiences in their home countries.

While highly impressed by the high quality of education characteristic of Singapore's public schools, immigrant parents are also critical of the rigorous curriculum and competitive culture. They agree that international schools are less exam-oriented, and instead focus on holistic activities. Immigrant parents also draw links to their own educational experiences, using it as a point of comparison and a guide for parenting.

Analysis found that immigrant parents are likely to consciously set themselves apart from local parents. While there is no mindset or parenting approach that is inherently superior, the way immigrant parents have chosen to align with or subvert their local counterparts is extremely interesting in analysis of both their status as first-generation immigrants and parents.



## Research Question

How does a parent's immigrant background affect the way they negotiate Singapore's local and international education cultures, as well as the comparisons they draw to the education they received in their home countries?

## Methodology

The immigrant parent participants here were sampled based on the criteria of both parents being foreign-born, regardless of their residential statuses; Malaysian-background participants were excluded due to their cultural proximity to Singapore. The study had interviewed a total of 61 participants (Chinese=31, Filipino=11, Indian=14, Indonesian=3, Others=4).

An online survey was used to collect descriptive demographics on the participants before being interviewed. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then carried out one-on-one, mostly over the course of two sessions, in the participants' language of preference: either in Mandarin or English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages, with Mandarin transcripts being further translated into English.

## Key Findings

	Positive Sentiments	Negative Sentiments
Local Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Values education and enforced discipline</li> <li>High standards of education</li> <li>Bilingual education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overwhelming competition and pressure</li> <li>Shadow education and tuition culture</li> <li>Streaming</li> </ul>
International Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on holistic curriculum</li> <li>No streaming system</li> <li>Less stressful and competitive than local schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Liberal values</li> <li>Poor discipline and ill behaviour</li> <li>Lack of bilingual curriculum</li> </ul>
Education in Home Country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on holistic curriculum</li> <li>Variety in assessments of students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacks Singapore's positionality, high standards of education, and bilingual curriculum</li> </ul>

## Discussion

### Immigrant Parents' Perception of Local Schools

Parents, local and immigrant, do not view tuition as an advantage for their children, but rather, perceive it as a *means of survival*.

Immigrant parents attribute this competitiveness to Singapore's streaming system. Anjali (female, 38) talks about how this instils fear into younger children:

*"Sorry to say but it almost sounds like a caste system"*

When it comes to academic performance, it is not about performing well, but rather, *performing better than others*. Bilingualism is heavily emphasised because immigrant parents view it as social capital to be transformed into better economic opportunities in the future.

### Immigrant Parents' Perception of International Schools

Jia Min (female, 40) justifies the merits of choosing a local school over an international school through the values inculcated in students:

*The feeling I got from the kids there is that they are very free thinking, very free-spirited, and they have no discipline...they don't stand properly, sit properly, but they may live very [recklessly].*

Parents acknowledge that the International School curriculum is less pressuring and demanding. Ultimately, academic rigour is a subjective and simultaneous boon or bane that guides the parent's decision.

### Immigrant Parents' Comparisons to Education in their Home Country

Parents believe that the way examinations are conducted in Singapore are an inferior mode of assessment because it creates the pressure to do well on the exam, rather than learn. Nathan (male, 48) compares this to her experience back home in the Philippines:

*It's not just purely written examinations, there's a lot of emphasis on reading, on how you participate in class during recitations, a lot of emphasis on group projects, you present a project, how you defend it and so on*

The issue is not with the streaming system *per se*, but rather, the high stakes it creates, and the resulting stress it puts on young students. The parents' own experiences snowballs into the expectations they themselves have for their children, and the school path they choose.

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