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Examining the Student Care Industry in Singapore: The state's policies and support for the family's care-giving responsibilities for children aged 7 to 12

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the state in supporting the family's care-giving responsibilities for children aged 7 to 12 years. To this end, a case study was done on middle-income working parents who utilised student care services, or paid day-care services, to care for their school-going children. Through this case study, information was gathered in three areas: (i) how working parents managed their childcare arrangements, (ii) the role of student care services in supporting working parents on their childcare arrangements, and (iii) the influence of the state's policies for the student care industry on the care-giving arrangements of these parents. Ochiai's (2009: 69) Care Diamond Framework is employed to interpret and analyse the findings of this study. Through its findings, this study argues that government policies on the student care industry bear implications on the challenges faced by working parents in balancing both their family and workplace commitments.

Key Words: After-school care, Family policies, Childcare, Latchkey children, Student care

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Objective of study

The objective of this study is to examine the role of the state in supporting the family's care-giving responsibilities for children aged 7 to 12 years. To this end, a case study was done on middle-income working parents who utilised student care services, or paid day-care services, to care for their school-going children aged 7 to 12 years. In this study, information was gathered in three areas:

a. How working parents manage their care-giving roles (through the arrangements, challenges and sites of support relating to the care of their children)
b. The role of student care services in supporting middle-income working parents on their care arrangements for school-going children
c. The influence of the state's policies for the student care industry on the care-giving arrangements of middle-income families

To examine these areas, ten separate interviews were conducted with ten married couples who utilised paid care services at student care centres to care for their children. Through its findings, this study argues that the state's lack of oversight and support for private student care services have significantly shaped how middle-income families arranged their childcare responsibilities. The study further argues that state policies on the student care industry bear significant implications on the challenges faced by middle-income working parents in fulfilling their caring duties towards their school-going children.

1.2. Premise and Rationale of Study

Since the 1970s, the Singapore government had sought to raise the labour force participation of females to address the manpower demands of a developing economy. Specifically, to target married women's participation in the workforce (Ueno 2008: 144), the dual-income family model was endorsed by the state as the dominant family form in Singapore (Quah 2003: 12; Hong 2001: 4) to encourage both parents in a household to seek full-time employment (Standing 2001: 17). Consequently, family policies by the state focused on supporting the dual-income family in their childrearing responsibilities by subsidising paid childcare services and the employment of foreign domestic workers (Quah 1994: 142).

The state's initiatives to promote the dual-income family model and encourage female labour force participation have faced mixed success. While the female labour-force participation in Singapore has been high across all age groups since the 1970s, there is a steady decrease after women enter their thirties (Ochiai et al. 2008: 41). Existing studies have found that while married women work during their child bearing and early childrearing years (Ochiai 2008: 164), many begin to leave the workforce when their children begin elementary school education (Khong 2004: 10).

This study traces this trend to two factors. The first factor stems from parents' perception that existing sources of care support are inadequate to fulfil the needs for their children (Ochiai et al. 2008: 42). Consequently, working mothers leave employment to be directly involved in nurturing and educating their school-going children (Khong 2004: 7). The second reason is that working parents, particularly those who do not belong to low-income families, face a reduction in state subsidies and options for childcare services once their children develop beyond their early childhood years (Quah 1994: 138).

In light of these challenges facing dual-income families, this study examines the student care industry in Singapore. Student care services refer to paid day-care services that provide custodial care for children aged between 7 to 12 years (Goh 1998: 25). Existing state policies for the student care industry focuses on tailoring state support to benefit low-income families (Hong 2001: 24). The state's focus on low-income families remains unchanged despite growing demands for student care services by middle-income families, as well as an increasing presence of unregulated and private student care services. Consequently, it is these middle-income families, who utilise student care services but fall out of the purview of state policies, that represents the main focus of inquiry in this study.

Finally, this study's focus on the state stems from its role as a key agent in shaping the care arrangements of the family (Knijn and Kremer 1999: 349). Therefore, this study focuses on how the state's policies for the student care industry have influenced the childcare arrangements for middle-income families.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The Student Care Industry in Singapore*

Given this study's focus on the student care industry in Singapore, an examination into the characteristics of the industry is provided. Student care refers to the provision of paid day-care services for children aged between 7 to 12 (Abu Bakar 1990). In Singapore where children attend compulsory schooling during the age range, student care services refer to professional custodial care for children "through specifically organised services and activities" that occurs beyond their formal education hours (Goh 1998: 4). Since its inception in Singapore in 1989 (NCSS 1993:2), student care services have been designated by the state to benefit a specific population segment – "latchkey children" (Mulchand 2004), referring to children from low-income and/or single-parent families who lack parental or custodial care at home when they return from school (NCSS 1993: 1).

Consistent with its focus on latchkey children, the state's policies focus on tailoring its support for them in two key areas. The first area pertains to the state subsidies, through the Student Care Financial Assistance (SCFA) programme administered by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS 2006). The SCFA represents a subsidy to offset the monthly student care services fees, to encourage low-income families to send their children to Student Care Centres (SCCs) operated by non-profit Volunteer Welfare Organisations (VWO) (Nair et al. 1997: 292). The second area pertains to the role of the state in providing financial support and infrastructure for non-profit VWOs to develop SCCs that specifically cater to latchkey children (NCSS 1993: 37). To this end, the state provides capital grant to defray the building and operating costs of SCCs for VWO operators (Goh 1998: 19). In the recent years, the state has also focused on developing infrastructures for VWO-operated SCCs within government schools (Othman 2009) and rental apartments where low-income families predominantly reside (Cai 2010). In summary, the state's initiatives represent a two-pronged strategy to tailor both the demand and supply for the student care industry towards benefitting low-income families. Consequently, only low-income families with latchkey children qualify for subsidised student care services (MCYS 2006), and these subsidies will only be applicable if such families send their children specifically to the VWO-operated SCCs endorsed by the state (Teo 1989: 11).

Consistent with the focus of state support for VWO-operated SCCs, the state's oversight of the student care industry is primarily limited to these operators, through the licensing of these operators as a prerequisite for the qualification of state subsidies and

support (MCYS 2006). Through licensing, the state mandates compliance by VWO-operated SCCs with a set of regulations pertaining to infrastructure requirements, operating hours and the specific programmes to be offered (Goh 1998: 20).

Notwithstanding the state's emphasis on VWO-operated SCCs, the student care industry can be categorized into two types: Non-profit VWO-operated SCCs, as well as for-profit, private student care services (Hong 2001: 3). This study seeks to focus on private student care services for two reasons: the lack of government oversight for these services, and unexamined developments on the growing supply and demand of such services.

Private student care operators, referring to for-profit, private business entities that specialise in providing paid day-care services for children aged 7 to 12, can be distinguished from VWO operators in two areas. Firstly, families who utilise care services from these private operators do not qualify for state subsidies (NCSS 1993: 14) and consequently, the financial cost of services by private operators is significantly higher than that by VWO operators (Teo 2012). Secondly, private operators are not licensed by the government (NCSS 1993: 14) and are not subjected to the compliance with state regulations.

In addition, two developments within the private student care services sector are of significance to this study. Firstly, while the government continues to emphasize on the presence of VWO-operated SCCs, private SCCs currently form the majority of centres within the student care industry. Currently, only 154 out of 370 SCCs are operated by VWOs (MCYS 2010), with the remaining 60% of the centres in the industry comprising of private SCCs. This means that the majority of SCCs within the industry fall beyond state regulation.

The second development pertains to indications of growing demands for private student care services by middle-income families. Existing literature suggests a significant demand for these services by families beyond the low-income segment of the population. Firstly, Teo (1989: 7) found that the demand for non-familial care arrangement for children aged 6 to 12 had risen dramatically across all income groups. In addition, Hong (2001: 3)'s study on a private-operated student care centre indicated that 65.5% of the children at the centre belong to middle-income households, while a local national-wide study indicated that only 25.6% of the families using student care services belong to the low-income group (NCSS 1993: 42). These findings are further supported by the oversubscription of services (Tan 2008) reported at private SCCs that cater to the demand of middle-class families.

Consequently, this study reasons that there is a significant demand for student care services by families beyond the low-income segment of the population.

There continues to be a lack of recognition of these two developments by the state as the latest local media reports continue to focus on the state's efforts in developing VWO-operated student care services for low-income families (Tan 2012). It is on this premise that this study argues that by looking at these unexamined developments, fresh perspectives on the impact of state policies on the dual-income family's care arrangements can be derived. Consequently, it is the middle and dual-income families, who utilise private student care services but fall out of the purview of state policies, that are the focus of inquiry.

2.2. Role of the State in Care Arrangements of the Family

This study's rationale for examining the impact of state involvement can be traced to the literature that identifies the Singapore government as the ideal actor to shape the family's care arrangements. In examining the state's influence on care-giving arrangements within the family, Teo (2010: 338) explores the intimate relationship between the family and the state by situating the family an "anchor in the state's development narrative" to illustrate the importance of the family as a core site of state intervention. Specifically, state policies determine the resources and constraints that families have to work with when deciding on family practices, including the care arrangements for children (Hofferth et al. 2004: 490). Teo (2010: 346) observes that the context and constraints framed by the state's policies can lead to normative practices of childcare among families. Towards this study's focus on paid care services, Bittman et al. (2004: 133) further asserts that the cost, quality and supply of non-parental care services are directly influenced by public policies. In this regard, the state can be regarded as the primary institution "which has the political, financial and legal instruments" to ensure the conditions necessary for quality care services (Knijn and Kremer 1997: 349).

In this regard, the lack of state support for the family's care giving roles can result in implications for the family. Of relevance to this study is literature that suggests implications on the family's care-giving arrangements due to the lack of state regulation of market-based care services.

Uttal (2006: 222) notes that when public policy does not acknowledge the childcare roles that employed parents have, a "haphazard and diverse system" of market-based childcare options emerge. This situation often leads to variations in the quality of such

services, resulting in reduced confidence by parents over the viability of such services in providing quality care for children. Hofferth et al. (2004: 493) further observes that parental decisions on the selection of after-school care occur in the context of "a highly fragmented set of options". Therefore, working parents tend to makes decisions based on the compatibility of these options to their income maximization objectives at the workplace (Owen 2003: 158), rather than its suitability to their children's care needs. In essence, the lack of government regulation on market-based care services results in uncertainty over the compatibility of such services with the family's ideas and needs of child-rearing (Glenn 2004; Uttal 2006: 222).

Therefore, existing literature establishes the premise for studying the influence of the state. Specifically, the lack of government oversight on private operators in the student care industry can potentially result in implications on the care-giving arrangements of families.

2.3. The "Care Diamond" Theoretical Framework

This study bases its analysis of care arrangements in the family on Ochiai's (2009) works on the social networks for childcare in Singapore. Specifically, this study examines how the care for children in Singapore is balanced between agents from four key institutions (the state, market, family, and community) in society (Ochiai et al. 2008: 2). To this end, the study examines the "Care Diamond" framework (Ochiai 2009).

To understand the relevance of the Care Diamond Framework, the theoretical underpinnings of this framework is examined. This framework seeks to synthesize the micro-level analyses of social networks for care provision in the field of family sociology and the macro-level theory of "welfare mix" in the area of welfare sociology (Ochiai 2009: 62).

The idea of Social Network Analysis was developed by Elizabeth Bott to conceptualise the family as a fluid social institution that interacts with various actors within its social network (Treas 2011). In the context of social networks for childcare, the family, through its relationships with three key institutions (Ochiai et al. 2008: 56) in society: the community, the market and family (referring to kinship ties), leverage on actors within these institutions to manage their childcare arrangements.

To study the Singapore context, these institutions can be contextualised as follows. The institution of family refers to the nuclear family household of the father, mother, as well as the extended family of relatives, whereby the child-caring responsibilities are likely to be

shared among a couple's extended family or relatives (Quah 1994: 128; Lewis 2001: 297). The institution of market refers to individuals or entities that offer commercial care services, such as foreign domestic workers (Ueno 2008: 145) and paid childcare services in Singapore (Ochiai et al. 2008: 42). The community refers to groups that operate at the grassroots level to support the childcare needs of the family, such as VWOs (Khong 2004: 11; Mulchand 2004) that establish family services centres to support the childcare needs of low-income families (Quah 1994: 136).

The final institution within the Care Diamond framework is the state. Ochiai (2009:71) contends that the state determines the agents and resources that families have access to in their social network of childcare. The state, through its policies, bears the capability to determine the resources and constraints through which families determine their arrangements of childcare (Teo 2010: 346; Hofferth 2004: 492). It is on this premise that Ochiai sought to combine the social network emphasis in her framework with the idea of "welfare mix" or welfare pluralism, to reflect the idea that while the state is a key provider of welfare, it functions with various institutions of welfare in society (Powell and Barrientos 2004). Through its interactions with these institutions, the state influences the role of each institution as a care provider in the social network of the family (Ochiai 2009: 63).

From her findings, Ochiai conceptualizes the Care Diamond characteristic of the social network of childcare in Singapore as follows:
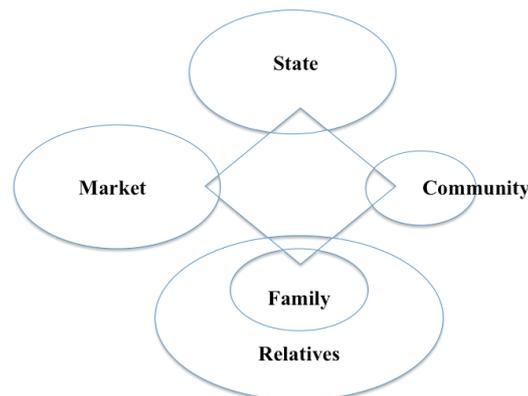

Figure A: Care Diamond Framework for Childcare in Singapore (Ochiai, 2009: 69)

An elaboration of the characteristics and relationships represented in the framework is provided to understand Ochiai's findings on the nature of childcare in Singapore. Firstly, in

depicting the State and Market as separate large ovals, she accentuates the role of both institutions as key agents in providing the care required for children within a dual-income family model in Singapore (Nair et. al. 1997: 294). Secondly, in representing the "Community" oval as the smallest, it reflects the limited role of the community as VWOs typically specialise on the needs of low-income families (NCSS 1993: 4). Finally, in depicting a small "Family" oval that is encircled by a larger circle of "Relatives", it corresponds to Ochiai et al. (2008: 58)'s findings that despite the prevalence of the dual-income family model, the family is a major agent of care due to a strong relationship of mutual dependence between relatives. (Uttal 2006: 21; Lewis 2001: 297).

Linkages drawn between the various institutions within the framework reflect the direct collaborative relationships that these institutions share towards providing care. For example, the linkage drawn between the "Family" and "Market" is reflective of how Grandparents (Family) collaborate with Foreign Domestic Workers (Market) to jointly care for children within a household (Teo 2010: 38). In establishing linkages from the "State" to the "Market" and "Community" but not the "Family', the framework also reflects the state's preference for an indirect approach to influence the family, usually through state policies that support the role of the market and community as direct care providers to the family. Indeed, Quah (1994:142) notes the state's indirect role as a care provider through its collaborations with VWOs (Community) to help low-income families, and the use of states subsidies to encourage the use of paid childcare services (Market) among working parents. Finally, in joining the linkages to form a diamond, the framework further reflects that these four institutions in society are interrelated either directly or indirectly, and jointly address the caring needs for children in Singapore (Ochiai 2009: 60).

Therefore, the contribution of the framework to this study is that it allows the conceptualization and graphic representation of the relationships, institutions and forms of care provision that are available to children in a society.

Notwithstanding the analytic contributions of this framework, this paper disputes the validity of this framework in two areas. Firstly, given the limited nature of state involvement within the student care industry, this study has already identified significant differences in the nature of paid-care services (Market) and the level of state support (State) between a child's early childhood years and their elementary education years. Secondly, while Ochiai maintains that kinship ties (Family) and Foreign Domestic Workers (Market) are major sources of care for children, working mothers in Singapore increasingly withdraw from the workforce to care

for their children (Ochiai et al. 2008: 42) because they perceive these sources of care as inadequate once children enter elementary school (Khong 2004: 7; NCSS 1993: 42). Therefore, this paper argues that by treating the nature of care arrangements for children as consistent across a child's childhood, Ochiai's characterisation of the care network in Singapore does not sufficiently consider the variations in the patterns of care as children progress beyond their early childhood years.

Therefore, the analytical function of the framework for this study is as follows. Firstly, the framework will be applied to categorize and interpret the data collected from the respondents, so as to understand the nature of their care-giving arrangements for their children. Secondly, it allows the study to assess the validity of Ochiai's characterization of childcare in Singapore. Thirdly, if this study reveals findings that deviate from Ochiai's analysis, the framework can be reconceptualised to represent these findings.

2.4. Definition for "Care" in this Study

Given that this study focuses on the care arrangements for children, there is a need to establish a working definition of "care". Existing literature on care of children in Singapore have failed to define the specific aspects of care in their respective studies. However, inferences can be made, by examining what "care" is referred to in such studies. To this end, three pertinent aspects of care (for children) that are relevant to the Singapore family are identified. The first aspect of care pertains to the education of children (Khong 2004; Goh 1998; Hong 2001). The second aspect of care pertains to the supervision of the physical wellbeing and security of children (Quah 1994). The third aspect of care pertains to supporting the emotional wellbeing of children (Goh 1998). Consistent with the identified aspects of care, the state also identifies childcare as activities pertaining to the physical health, education, and emotional wellbeing of children (MCYS 2012).

Therefore, in this study, "care" is defined as the provision of arrangements and activities that contribute to the education, physical and emotional wellbeing of children's needs. The rationale of establishing this broad definition of "care" is as follows. Firstly, this definition will facilitate its wide compatibility in analysing the various reviewed literature. Secondly, this definition will take into account the diverse and subjective meanings of care that may be present among respondents of this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Objectives and Selection of Respondents

Consistent with the study's research objective, ten (separate) interviews were conducted with ten married couples respectively, with the objective to gather information in three areas. Firstly, the interviews aim to capture information on the arrangements, challenges and sites of support that respondents experience in the care for their children. Secondly, interviews aim to explore the respondents' experiences with student care services and the role of such services in their childcare arrangements. Thirdly, the interviews aim to explore the respondents' understanding of government policies in the student care industry and examine the perceived impact of such policies on their childcare arrangements.

In defining the respondent profile, this study has chosen to focus on middle-income, ethnic Chinese, married and working parents who utilise private student care services for their children. In addition, respondents hold occupations that fall into the category of PMETs (Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians) in Singapore, or occupations belonging predominantly to the middle class (Lee 2009). The rationale for this definition rests on two reasons. Firstly, this study has already established the research significance of studying middle-income families who utilise private student care services but fall out of the purview of state policies. Secondly, this study seeks to establish a common basis for analysing the validity of Ochiai (2008)'s findings by aligning it with the respondent profile used in her study. In this regard, this study's respondent profile is similar to Ochiai's study on ethnic Chinese, middle-class families with working parents that hold professional, technical or non-manual service jobs (Ochiai 2008: 22). In addition, the rationale for interviewing parents (instead of the children who utilise these care services) is that parents are often the key decision makers tasked with assessing the available care options and deciding on the after-school care option for their children (Hofferth et al. 2004: 492).

3.2. Sampling Process

Given the lack of statistics on the demand distribution of student care services, this study uses snowball sampling to identify and approach respondents that are specific to its objectives.

I contacted 5 private Student Care Centres (SCCs) that were located within either housing estates or community centres. Introduction to this study was given to the managers of

these SCCs and permission was sought for me to be present near the premises during the evenings, so as to approach parents who came to pick up their children from the SCCs.

Through my interactions with the managers and teachers at the SCCs, I was referred to parents who were regarded as more "friendly" and "outgoing" (i.e. parents who would stay briefly to engage in small talk among parents or teachers when they picked up their children) and thus more likely to agree to be interviewed. In addition, invited respondents helped to refer me to friends or colleagues whom they knew utilised private student care services. Ten married couples (total of twenty respondents) that fit the criteria of the study were selected. Details of the respondents' profile are found in Appendix A.

3.3. Interview Methods

Ten face-to-face interviews were conducted between January and February 2012. Each interview was conducted with a married couple (two respondents) that fulfilled the study's respondent criteria, and lasted between 60 to 80 minutes. Interviews were conducted in either a café or community centre near the residences of respondents. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were semi-structured and supplemented with an interview schedule to allow for the conversations to proceed along broad objectives. Interviews began with general questions before elaborations were sought by probing respondents for specific details and information. Given the limited literature on student care, this strategy was effective as it refrained from fixating on a frame of reference for the respondents and surfaced perspectives that had not been considered during the formulation of the interview schedule.

Three main themes were covered in each interview. Firstly, respondents were asked to share their experiences of how they managed their care arrangement for their children, with focus on the role of student care services in their care arrangements. From this, I was able to locate the sites of support that working parents utilised in the care of their children. Secondly, respondents were queried on their perceptions and experiences with the student care services. Finally, the final section ascertained the understandings of respondents on government policies pertaining to the student care industry, and sought to seek their opinions on how these policies may have influenced their care arrangements.

3.4. Ethics Considerations

Prior to the interviews, all respondents were duly informed about the following aspects of the study. A document brief was prepared and emailed to all respondents, detailing their personalized interview timings and venue, general objectives of this study and the roles of the respondents within the study. The official contact number and email of the Sociology division office, as well as the name of this study's supervisor, were included within the document to allow respondents to verify and raise any concerns over the study.

Informed consent of all respondents was sought twice, through verbal consent and email replies confirming their participation and acknowledgement of information within the document brief. In addition, respondents were informed that they reserved the right to withdraw both their participation and their responses at any point of the study. Respondents had also been assured that their personal identities would not be revealed, and that their names would be replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. In addition, two earlier drafts of this report had been circulated to all respondents for their reference.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Care Arrangements for Children: Sites of Support, Circumstances and Challenges

In examining how parents manage their care arrangements for their children, this section elucidates four findings. Firstly, respondents regarded themselves and student care services as the central source of care for their children. Secondly, respondents shared that the centrality of student care services to their care arrangement was often due to the lack of alternative sites of support for their care duties. Thirdly, respondents perceived such services as insufficient to their children's care needs and indicated their desire to increase direct involvement in caring for their children. Finally, respondents revealed the desire to reassess their care arrangements, especially when existing arrangements malfunction. These findings are elaborated as follows.

4.1.1. Centrality of Parents and Student Care Services to Care Arrangements

The study found that all respondents identified themselves as the main provider of care in their children's life. Respondents regarded themselves as the coordinator of their children's care needs and development. For instance, Lawrence shared that:

> *"Of course we are their main care-givers. We make sure they have someone to look after them…We monitor their work and help them…We support them along the way."*

Next to themselves, most respondents felt that student care services were the most significant source of care for their children. Respondents reasoned that student care gave them assurance that their children were well cared for during after-school hours. For instance, Nigel said that:

> *"Student care is good because it is safe. I know my child will be monitored and cared for while I'm at work."*

Respondents also found that student care teachers were a good source of information on their child's behaviour. Alicia noted that:

> *"My son's* (student care) *teacher is very dedicated. She is observant and knows when my son is moody. She also updates me when he didn't do his homework."*

4.1.2. Lack of Alternative Sites of Support within Care Arrangements

For the respondents, their decisions to utilize student care services were due to the lack of alternative care options, or that they perceived the existing sources of care were incompatible with the care requirements for their children.

Seven out of the ten couples interviewed responded that their decision to use student care services was due to the fact that family members and relatives, previously a key source of care support, was no longer available either due to the advanced age and worsening health of their parents (grandparents to the children), or that their relatives were also preoccupied with their care duties to their own children or aging parents.

For instance, James was able to recount his circumstances:

> *"My mother was my son's nanny when he was in preschool. But she cannot help anymore after she has cancer. Actually, even if she didn't have cancer, she is already too old to care for him."*

Susan, on the other hand, faced similar circumstances, as both her parents and relatives were unavailable. According to her:

"My father often has to be hospitalized. Old people, even small illness like flu can be serious…My siblings and I used to take turns to help care for each other's kids…Now everyone has no time, not even for our own kids, and we need to take care of our father."

In addition, some respondents utilized student care services as they felt that grandparents and/or Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) were no longer adequate to care for their children once they entered elementary school. For instance, Serene mentioned that:

"When my kid was younger, my parents can feed him, and bring him out and play. Now he is in primary school, he needs to do a lot of homework…My parents are uneducated and don't know how to help."

Similarly, while nine out of ten couples employed FDWs to handle household chores, most of them feel that FDWs were not well-educated enough to care for their school-going children. Paul's responses reflected this finding best when he said:

"I'm not confident of her (FDW) *helping my child in his school work. She can speak basic English, yes, but I don't think well enough to assist him in his homework."*

In addition, Mary noted that her maid was not tech-savvy enough to effectively monitor her child's activities at home. She said:

"My maid doesn't know much about tech stuff, so if my child lies and says he is using his Ipad (a computer gadget) *to do homework when he is actually playing, my maid also won't know."*

4.1.3. Perceived Need for Greater Parental Involvement

All respondents reported a desire for greater involvement in the care of their children once they enter elementary school education. The oft-cited reason was the perceived need to directly nurture their children and manage their studies. For instance, Annie shared that:

"Primary school is very stressful for kids. The emphasis on academic achievement is so high in Singapore. I think all parents see a need to directly teach their children so they can excel in their studies."

Respondents perceived student care services as supplementary support for their care responsibilities, hence the need for continued direct parental involvement. For instance, Benjamin said:

> *"Student care is only supplementary. They don't do more than supervise and have some enrichment activities. This is not enough, not when children face social or even psychological problems in school today."*

Nigel stressed that student care services should complement direct parental care. He said:

> *"The* (student care) *teachers can help to supervise my kid's homework and safety when I'm working, but other that that, I definitely need to personally check on him - his mood, homework and everything to make sure he's really okay."*

In addition, many respondents compensated for the perceived insufficient care for their children by seeking to maximize their involvement in their children's lives during the weekends. Grace shared that:

> *"During weekends we do our best. Paul* (husband) *and I tutor our kids and check on their homework progress…We spend time having fun with them…We also teach them moral values. All these* (aspects of my child's needs)*, I don't think the* (student care) *centre can provide."*

4.1.4. Perceived Need to Reassess Care Arrangements

Respondents cited instances when care arrangements malfunctioned and prompted them to reassess these arrangements. The most oft-cited experience was when existing care arrangements could not solve the issues faced by their children in school, most notably academic difficulties or behavioural problems. Given the centrality of student care services to the respondents' care arrangements, Molly, whose daughter faced academic difficulty in school, shared that:

> *"Sometimes I wonder if student care is the right solution for my kid. I mean, the teachers there tutor her every day, but her results are getting worse."*

In addition, Thomas, whose son faced persistent discipline issues in school, shared that:

> *"My son's form teacher called and asked me to let the* (student care) *centre know his issues so that they can help him. I don't think it is of much use. He goes there for three years already, no change in his behaviour at all!"*

While probing further to examine the objectives of respondents in reassessing their care arrangements, the study surfaced a significant finding: Eight out the ten couples interviewed stated that they have considered the possibility of one parent quitting employment to fully focus on caring for their children. For example, Serene shared that:

> *"Maybe if I don't work and focus on the family, it will be better for them* (her children)*. It's a recurring thought, especially when arrangements now are not best."*

In addition, while respondents acknowledged the financial implications of one less working parent in the family, they felt that if current arrangements continued to be inadequate for their children, they would make the financial sacrifice. For instance, Sue noted that:

> *"Definitely it will be a strain if I don't work, but the child is more important. If she continues to face problems in her studies, one of us will consider quitting (employment), even if it means selling the car."*

4.2. Perception of Student Care Services

In this section, the study identified two findings. Firstly, many respondents voiced their dissatisfactions over the perceived lack of quality of student care services. Consequently, respondents perceived that such services were "not ideal" for their children's care. These findings are elaborated as follows.

4.2.1. Respondent's Dissatisfaction with Perceived Quality of Services

Respondents, through their experiences with Student Care Centre (SCC) teachers, generally perceived a lack of quality in the services that they utilize. Their responses focus on two themes.

4.2.2. Services as Not Specific to Children's Care Needs

Respondents stated that the activities conducted at SCCs were not specific to the care needs of their children. For instance, Molly shed light on the nature of "enrichment activities"

carried out in SCCs and casted her doubts over the compatibility of such activities to the care needs of her child. She shared that:

> "*Enrichment activities are like play time, letting children watch documentaries or sometimes cartoons, and also storybook reading sessions. These activities are good, but I prefer them to talk more and like counsel my kids if they are too stressed.*"

In addition, Lawrence felt that the SCC that his child went to placed too much emphasis on academic tutoring while neglecting his child's physical wellbeing. He noted that:

> "*My son goes to the centre right after school. After he finishes his homework, the centre conducts extra tuition. That means my son is exhausted after studying the whole day. I think the centre focuses too much on his studies but neglects his health.*"

Therefore, respondents generally perceived that student care services were either inadequate or not specific to the children's care needs.

4.2.3. Concerns on Qualifications of Student Care Teachers

Respondents also raised concerns over whether student care teachers were qualified to provide care for their children. For instance, Thomas shared that he was shocked to find that most SCC teachers are not well trained:

> "*I notice there are many A-level graduates* (teachers). *I am concerned because they are not MOE-trained* (referring to the Ministry of Education), *not professionals. Actually, only a few teachers at the centre are trained.*"

In addition, some respondents raised concerns that SCC teachers were not trained in childcare. Susan made a comparison with the early childhood professionals at her child's previous preschool to elaborate on her response:

> "*The pre-school teachers must be trained in early childhood before they can be qualified to handle children. Now the student care teachers don't have such training so I don't even know if they know how to care for my kid.*"

4.2.4. Student Care Services Perceived as Indispensable but "Not Ideal"

Consequently, many respondents perceived student care services as not an ideal care arrangement for their children. Nevertheless, given their work commitments, respondents also noted that student care services, for all its perceived inadequacies, represented an indispensible source of care for their children.

For instance, Susan shared the she would only cease to use student care services when her children were older. She said that:

> "It is not the most ideal. We would love to do more for our kids, but since we can't personally care for them, this is the best option already. We will make do with it until they grow older…"

On the other hand, Thomas understood student care services as an "unfortunate consequence" of a dual-income family by stating that:

> "Jenny (wife) and I have to work. It is unfortunate that the best option we have now may not be comprehensive enough…This is the consequence of having to support ourselves financially..."

In summary, this section has found that while most respondents agreed that student care services were indispensible to their care arrangements, they also identified with various perceived inadequacies of such services that raised their doubts over the feasibility of their care arrangements.

4.3. Perceptions of Government Policies in Student Care Industry

In this final section, two findings were identified. Firstly, findings revealed that while respondents had diverse views on how the state could better support their care arrangements, the most common responses reflected the respondents' desire for greater state regulation of the private student care industry. Secondly, findings indicated that respondents were generally agreeable with the state's support for low-income families, and the understandings of the industry for some respondents were closely related to the state's narrative for the industry.

4.3.1. Suggestions on Possible Areas of State Support in Student Care

When probed for their opinions on how the state could improve the student care services to better support their care arrangements, respondents offered diverse suggestions. Two most commonly cited responses are discussed. Most respondents revealed their awareness that private Student Care Centres (SCCs) were unlicensed by the state, and many sought state regulation in two areas: (i) the nature of activities conducted in SCCs and (ii) the qualifications of SCC teachers.

Many respondents suggested that relevant state agencies could intervene to ensure that SCCs conduct activities that were relevant to the care needs for their children. For instance, Maria suggested that:

> *"MOE* (referring to the Ministry of Education) *can recommend activities that help children manage the stress they face in school. These can help a child's psychological well-being"*

Suggestions of state intervention in the qualifications of SCC teachers were also similar, in that respondents suggested the intervention by state agencies. While responses varied on their ideas of the appropriate qualifications, most respondents felt that the state had the capabilities to implement appropriate requirements. Sue shared that:

> *"Minimum qualifications for* (SCC) *teacher are necessary. MOE* (referring to the Ministry of Education) *has requirements for school teachers, so they can also implement some requirements for these* (SCC) *teachers."*

4.3.2. Identification with State's Focus within Student Care Industry

Many respondents shared the perception that the state focused on helping low-income families in the student care industry. Of greater significance was the finding that most respondents were agreeable to the state's focus on low-income families. For example, Jason shared that:

> *"Of course the government focuses on low-income families. Student care is after all, for these children…Their parents are not available... They deserve more attention."*

A review of all transcripts revealed that 4 of the interviewed couples mentioned the term "latchkey children". For these respondents, they seemed to assume that the term "latchkey children" naturally referred to children from low-income families. In this regard, they used the term to justify their rationale for agreeing with the state's focus on low-income families. For instance, Sue said that:

" *I first heard about student care in my twenties. Back then it was already for latchkey children. So, it's no surprise that our government focuses on low-income families today"*

These respondents seemed to have accepted the state's definition of the industry to be primarily for children from low-income families. In addition, these respondents sought to rationalise the nature of government policies through the use of the state's definition for the student care industry. The interview exchange with Serene reflects this finding best:

Serene: *"The government is doing right by focusing on subsidizing the fees of low-income families. These families really need more help."*

Interviewer: *"I'll clarify. You feel that the government should focus on low-income families but you also feel that the government should help your child by improving the quality of private services?"*

Serene: *"Yes. I mean the government can do more to help people like me, but you know, latchkey children are their focus. The government should not compromise that."*

This finding is significant in that the state's narrative on the industry (and its definitions of beneficiaries for state support) appears to have influenced how some respondents understood the nature of the student care industry.

5. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study will be analysed along three themes, namely, (i) the variations within the social network of care for older children, (ii) the circumstances of care

arrangements that working parents faced, as well as (iii) the influence of the state policies on respondent's perception of student care services. The analysis is elaborated as follows.

5.1. Reconceptualising the Care Diamond Framework for Older Children

In reviewing the social network of care for children in Singapore, significant differences had been identified between Ochiai's (2009) analysis and this study's findings. This study found that as children progressed to elementary school, the respondents' childcare arrangements deviated from the arrangements previously utilised at the early childhood phase. The study has traced this shift to the variations in influence of the respective care agents as children entered elementary school. Specifically, the findings captured three areas of variation.

The first area pertained to kinship support, which had diminished significantly by the time the respondents' children enter elementary school. The key reason was that the mutual dependency among relatives towards childcare had been eroded in two areas: (i) the incapability of grandparents to continue their care for the child due to advancing age, poor health or lack of education, and (ii) the need for relatives to assume new duties of elderly care due to their aging or ill parents.

The second area of variation pertained to the diminished role of the state as a provider of care for these respondents. Respondents were keenly aware that by utilizing private student care services, they did not fall within the purview of state regulation and support. In addition, respondents' diverse suggestions for greater state involvement further revealed the state's limited role within the existing social network of care for the respondents' children.

The third area of variation pertained to increased parental involvement in childcare arrangements, due to their perception that the needs of their children had changed after they entered elementary school. Thus, respondents identified with the need to the increase time and effort spent in nurturing and educating their school-going children.

In addition, this study's findings revealed that the market continued to be a significant source of care due to the reliance on paid student care services by respondents to care for their children (aged 7 to 12 years), while the community's role remained small due to the state's continued designation of this institution to benefit low-income families.

Based on this study's findings, this study argues for the need to conceptualise a new care diamond framework that is characteristic of the care arrangements for children aged 7 to

12. A re-conceptualisation of the framework should reflect the diminished role of the state and relatives, as well as the increased role of parents (family) and the continued significance of the market. Given these characteristics, a re-conceptualisation of the care diamond framework is proposed as follows:
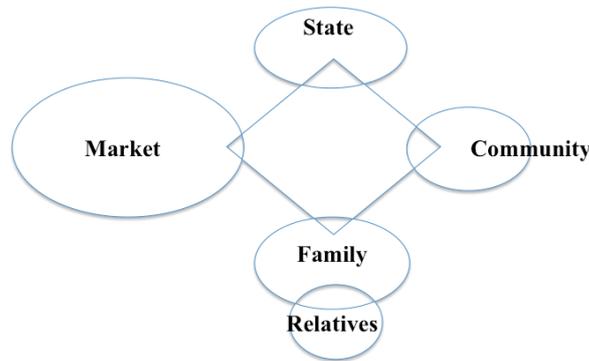

Figure B: Possible care diamond framework for children aged 7 to 12

This attempt to reconceptualise the framework highlights a key finding: Even when studying a respondent profile that is similar to Ochiai (2009)'s study, a different set of findings had been derived, and these findings call for conceptualising a new care diamond framework for children aged 7 to 12. Insofar as Ochiai's framework was meant to be representative of the social network of care for children across their childhood, this study argues that characteristics of this network can vary across the span of childhood, according to the shifting significance of each institution at various phases of childhood, and parents' perception of the changing needs of their children. Specifically, this study's findings indicate that families experience a different social network of care for their school-going children.

5.2. *Circumstances of Respondent's Care Arrangements*

This study has also shed light on the circumstances of the respondents' care arrangements for their school-going children. As mentioned, respondents faced limited options of care support, hence their decisions to utilise student care services. While respondents identified with the centrality of student care services to their care arrangements, many regarded such services to be inadequate to their children's care needs because they either perceived that the activities at student care centres were not specific to their children's care needs, or that student care teachers were often not qualified and trained in childcare.

In addition, respondents reported that their care arrangements were prone to malfunctions in instances where existing arrangements could not address their children's academic difficulties or behavioural problems. Such malfunctions prompted respondents to question the efficacy of their care arrangements in addressing their children's needs. Consequently, respondents sought to address the perceived inadequacies of existing care arrangements by increasing their involvement in caring for their children. In cases where care arrangements were increasingly prone to malfunction, respondents indicated the willingness for one parent to quit employment to focus on caring for their children. These findings are significant, in that they elucidate the circumstances surrounding working mothers who increasingly leave the workforce to focus on the family.

5.3. State Policies and Respondent's Perception of Student Care Services

The majority of the respondents perceived a lack of quality in private student care services and regarded such services as inadequate for their children's care needs. In addition, these respondents attributed the perceived lack of quality of such services to the lack of sufficient state regulation in private student care services. These findings indicated a direct correlation between the lack of state regulation and the perceived lack of quality in private care services. Therefore, these findings are consistent with reviewed literature: In absence of government regulations on market-based care services, parents face uncertainty over the compatibility of such services with the family's ideas and needs of child-rearing (Uttal 2006: 222).

In assessing the role of the state in the student care industry, these respondents articulated the need for greater state support for their children's needs. In evaluating the respondents' expectations for state support, respondents agreed that the state should support them by improving the quality of private student care services, through the direct regulation of the activities and qualifications of teachers within such services. In addition, respondents perceived that the state, through state agencies (i.e. Ministry of Education), had the capability to regulate and influence the quality of private care services for children aged 7 to 12 years.

Finally, the state's narrative on the student care industry influenced how some respondents perceived the nature of state support within the industry. These respondents appeared to have internalised a normative perspective, premised upon the state's narrative for the industry, which was used to rationalise the state's focus on low-income families. Therefore, these findings suggest that while middle-class working parents expect greater state support for their care arrangements for children (aged 7 to 12 years), the discursive content

within state policies may shape their normative understandings that low-income families should still the key beneficiaries of state support.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Conclusion of Study

Through its findings, this study has established that children aged 7 to 12 face a considerably different social network of care once they embark on elementary school. This later phase of childhood is a challenging period for middle-income working parents, who not only perceive that their school-going children have increased care needs, but also face significantly lesser care agents and sites of support for their care roles. Despite utilising private student care services and increasing their personal involvement in caring for their children, middle-income working parents continue to struggle with their care arrangements. For these parents, a key reason for their struggles is the perceived lack of quality of the private student care services that they rely on heavily to care for their children while they are at work. Consequently, parents perceive that these private care services are inadequate for their children's needs, and also face malfunctions in their care arrangements.

Of great significance to this study is that working parents who utilise private care services directly attribute the perceived lack of quality of such services to the lack of state regulation of these market-based services. In this regard, this study has shown how the state's lack of oversight for private student care services has significantly shaped the experiences of middle-income families when they manage their care responsibilities for children aged 7 to 12 years. This study further argues that the government policies on the student care industry bear significant implications on the challenges faced by middle-income working parents in fulfilling their caring duties towards their school-going children. Therefore, this study highlights the need for the state to reassess its support and involvement in the family's care for older children aged 7 to 12.

6.2. Limitations of Study

The first identified limitation pertains to the non-probability sampling method employed in the methodology for data collection. While this mode of sampling was inevitable, given the lack of statistics on the demand distribution within the student care industry, it meant that

findings of this research are not representative of all middle-income families that utilise student care services in their care arrangement.

Another limitation pertains to the broad working definition of "care" in this study. While the literature review has established the rationale for this broad definition, the resultant complications are evident in data collection, as respondents refer to various aspects of their children's care needs. In this regard, this study's working definition of "care" does not allow for the study to analyse and identify the aspects of care that were more pertinent to the needs of children aged 7 to 12, which would have enhanced the clarity and relevance of its findings.

6.3. Significance of Study

This study concludes by examining its relevance to two areas, namely, (i) existing government policies on the family, and (ii) existing literature.

6.3.1. Relevance to Existing Government Policies

This study seeks to complement existing government policies by establishing the need for policy suggestions in three areas, namely, the scope, nature and strategy of state support for the family's childcare arrangements.

Firstly, since the state's family policies aim to support the continued workforce participation of working parents, this study establishes the premise for the state to re-evaluate the scope of its support for the family's childcare arrangements. This study has revealed that working parents face increasingly fragile care arrangements for their children aged 7 to12 years, which has led to increasing pressure for one parent to quit employment. Therefore, as the state's economic agenda hinges on the durability of the dual-income family model, there is good basis to recommend that the state place more emphasis in supporting the family's care arrangements for children in their later years.

Secondly, this study establishes the premise for the state to re-evaluate the nature of state support for the family's childcare arrangements. This study has identified that parents are sophisticated in their requirements for their children's care provider, and are increasingly concerned with the quality of care services and professionals. These concerns fall beyond the state's current focus on providing the awareness and availability of private care services to middle-income working parents (Quah 1994: 137). Therefore, this study identifies the basis of re-orientating the nature of state support to focus on the quality of paid care services.

Finally, this study establishes the premise for the state to rethink its strategy for supporting the family's childcare arrangements. The state's existing family policies reflect its preference for minimal state intervention to encourage private enterprises to develop and respond to the demands for higher quality care services (Quah 1994: 11). The state's existing strategy contrasts with this study's finding that parents expect direct state involvement, especially in managing the quality of such care services offered in the market. This mismatch between the state's strategy and parents' expectations suggests the need for a rethink of the state's strategy for supporting the family.

6.3.2. Relevance to Existing Literature

This study seeks to contribute to two gaps in the literature. Firstly, findings in this study have drawn attention to the significant differences in the social network of care for children between their early childhood years (ages 0 to 6) and their later years (ages 7 to 12). This is a departure from the existing literature, which tend to treat the characteristics of care arrangements for children as constant across the span of childhood. In this regard, the study has catered to the lack of specific studies on the care needs for school-going children in Singapore. In addition, it has provided the basis for future studies to be more discerning towards the variations within the care needs for children across the span of their childhood, particularly the varying influence of each care agent at different stages of childhood.

Finally, by examining student care services, the study has identified an increasingly significant lack of care agents for older children in Singapore, an area that has currently not been given its due scrutiny when studying the childcare arrangements of families in Singapore. In this regard, this study has contributed to the current lack of literature on paid childcare services for older children, and makes a case for future studies to evaluate the role of such services as an agent within the social network of care for the family in Singapore.

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8.   APPENDIX

A. Profile of Respondents

No.	Couple	Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Monthly Household Income* (Approximate)	Utilise Student Care Services for children?
01	A	Jenny	Female	Chinese	Managerial	$10000	Yes
02		Thomas	Male	Chinese	Auditor		
03	B	Mary	Female	Chinese	Managerial	$9000	Yes
04		James	Male	Chinese	Engineer		
05	C	Alicia	Female	Chinese	Lawyer	$10000	Yes
06		Lawrence	Male	Chinese	Managerial		
07	D	Serene	Female	Chinese	Banker	$11000	Yes
08		John	Male	Chinese	Engineer		
09	E	Grace	Female	Chinese	Civil Servant	$9000	Yes
10		Paul	Male	Chinese	IT Professional		
11	F	Susan	Female	Chinese	Managerial	$9000	Yes
12		Moses	Male	Chinese	Accountant		
13	G	Maria	Female	Chinese	Civil Servant	$11000	Yes
14		Benjamin	Male	Chinese	IT Professional		
15	H	Molly	Female	Chinese	Civil Servant	$9000	Yes
16		Nigel	Male	Chinese	Engineer		
17	I	Sue	Female	Chinese	Managerial	$10000	Yes
18		William	Male	Chinese	Managerial		
19	J	Annie	Female	Chinese	Clerk	$9000	Yes
20		Jason	Male	Chinese	Accountant		

* Based on the average monthly household income of Singapore in 2011, respondents belong to between the 50th to 70th percentiles of the population. Source: Singapore Statistics. 2011. "Average monthly household income from work" (http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/hist/hhinc1.pdf) (Retrieved 07 February 2012)