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Abstract: This essay examines how Singapore's stratified education system perpetuates socio-economic disparities shaping children's use of profanities. Swearing is learned through socialisation processes: young children first mirror their parents' behaviours then adopt language from peers. Parents' socio-economic status (SES) affects the time and quality spent guiding children's language use. Families under financial strain often have fewer resources, making profanity more prevalent at home, where stress levels are higher. "Elite" schools mostly serve higher-income households, with better parental education and quality teachers who address swearing more effectively. Thus, students there are less likely to normalize profanity. Conversely, "non-elite" schools, located in less affluent areas, bring together peers more exposed to swearing, reinforcing each other's language choices. Physical clustering of elite institutions segregates children by SES, reducing interaction across class lines. Ultimately, profanity reflects deeper social inequalities. Addressing resource gaps, parental education, and economic opportunities can help reduce such disparities in language use, fostering a more equitable educational landscape in Singapore. Children's linguistic behaviours reflect broader systemic inequalities, making inclusive policies crucial for progress. Singapore can thus foster healthier language habits among youth.

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In this paper, I ask the following question: how does Singapore's stratified education system, which perpetuates socio-economic disparities, shape children's use of profanities?

I. Introduction

Once, while sitting at a food court with a friend, I was startled by a mother's sharp chiding: "Can you stop swearing?" Her concern seemed rooted in the fear that her young children might pick up on our language. This moment made me wonder: why is profanity so taboo, especially for children? What shapes a child's language use, and how do social environments play a role? In this paper, I explore how Singapore's education system contributes to disparities in the use of profanities among children.

Swearing involves using specific words that are emotionally intense, carry negative connotations, and are considered taboo within a particular language or culture, giving them a great potential to offend (Stapleton et al., 2022). The use of profanities is affiliated with an array of intrapersonal and interpersonal functions (Vingerhoets et al., 2013). Intrapersonal functions include reducing one's tension and relieving stress, while interpersonal functions include allowing one to feel a greater social connection in group settings where it is deemed to be the norm (Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

However, due to its taboo nature, it is not socially accepted in most social circumstances. For instance, formal environments like the court, workplace settings, and schools. This is especially since swearing often indicates a poor management of one's emotions, which is often negatively perceived by others (Vingerhoets et al., 2013). It is also adversely regarded due to its strong potential to offend and give rise to negative reactions from others through an utterance (Stapleton et al., 2022).

Considering that the use of profanities is often emotionally charged and associated with taboo subjects in our society, the use of profanities by children is usually astonishing for adults as young children are not expected to have been exposed to such language use.

II. Children's use of profanities

Since the 1960s, the use of profanity has increased dramatically (Nasser & al-Tamimi, 2021). It was found that by age seven to eight, children knew 54 taboo words, and 68 words by eleven to twelve (Jay & Jay, 2013). The top two most commonly used words also became more adult-like

as they matured in age, reflecting the influence of their expanding social environments and changing sources of exposure to language.

A. Socialisation agents and why children swear

According to social cognitive theory, language and behaviours are learnt through observing others' actions and their consequences (Simpson et al., 2016). This includes language development and the use of profanities. Parents, being the ones their children model and imitate at home, hence generally have the greatest influence on the language their children pick up (Maccoby, 1994).

As children begin to engage more with peers, especially upon reaching primary school age, their primary influencers shift increasingly towards their peer group, with peer influence becoming more prominent than that of family members or other older figures in their lives (Simpson et al., 2016). This is underscored by a study, which indicated that young individuals frequently make judgments based on their peers' choices, highlighting how sensitivity to social dynamics significantly shapes behaviour from a very young age (Haun & Tomasello, 2011). For instance, children may adopt inappropriate language heard from their parents, mimic it, and pass it along to peers, some of whom may come from homes where such language is not used. This peer influence spreads, creating a domino effect in their social circles.

In addition to picking up inappropriate language use from the people around them, children also use profanities because of the power they feel from using it. The use of inappropriate language often astounds adults and the people around them, as ascribed to the Instagram post by *Angie Kang*, which inspired this essay (Kang, 2024). In her Instagram post, she shares how the concept of profanities was something she realised wielded power because of its ability to trigger reactions of shock from her peers (Kang, 2024).

Since peers are among the most significant influences on a child's use of profanities, this essay will investigate the relationship between schools – where children in Singapore typically meet their peers – and the trends in use of profanities.

III. Singapore's "*elite*" schools and "*non-elite*" schools

In Singapore, schools are stratified into "elite" and "non-elite" schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016). According to the study conducted by the *Singapore Children's Society*, students – regardless of their school – view those from elite schools to have higher social status and academic competence than those from non-elite schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016).

In this meritocratic education system, students who are evaluated through selection tests to be intellectually gifted are invited to enter the Gifted Education Programme (GEP). The programme is made available only in selected primary schools, which is one way that elite schools are identified (Ong & Cheung, 2016). The stratification is also based on students' performance in national examinations, such as the Primary School Leaving Examination. As the schools of top-scorers were once publicly announced before the practice was abolished in 2012, the stellar academic track record of these schools was, and still is, a means of being stratified from neighbourhood schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016).

A. Socio-economic class

An excessive proportion of students in elite primary schools are from families with higher socio-economic status (SES), with of 60% elite school students living in private housing, in contrast to the 20% national average for all primary schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016). The evaluation of SES comprises objective measures such as income and education level (Ong & Cheung, 2016).

This could be ascribed to the resources these more affluent parents are equipped with to ensure their child's enrolment in these elite schools. For instance, some parents may buy or rent a house within one kilometre of the elite primary school to increase the chances of their child's enrolment via Phase 2C of the Primary One Registration Exercise (Chloe, 2023). However, the less well-to-do parents would not be able to spend so much just for their child to enter an elite school, especially in Singapore, where property prices are extremely high. Many elite primary schools are also located in wealthier neighbourhoods, allowing for greater chances of enrolment for children with wealthier backgrounds (Ong & Cheung, 2016).

B. Differences in learning environment

Teachers are allocated to the different schools by the Ministry of Education (Debs & Cheung, 2021). However, there are both government-aided and fully government-funded primary schools, where most elite schools are government aided schools, which are privately owned (Debs & Cheung, 2021). They attain supplementary funds and have greater autonomy over administrative matters including recruitment of teachers and their curriculum (Ong & Cheung, 2016). Hence, elite schools are commonly regarded as having higher-quality teachers and a more enriched learning experience(Ong & Cheung, 2016).

IV. The effects of school stratification on a child's use of profanities

A. Parents and the relationship between stratification and language use

Parents are the initial source of behaviours and language that children later bring into their peer groups. The stratification of schools directly impacts the distribution of parents from different SES across schools, especially due to the way the admission process into primary schools – it intrinsically allows the more affluent to create higher chances for their children to enter the elite schools. This in turn influences disparities in the use of profanities among students.

A child whose parent fails to discipline the child when profanities are used would more probably use inappropriate language (Fu et al., 2015). If, conversely, the parent enforces consequences in a constructive way when the child disregards the language rules, the child would less likely to use profanities (Fu et al., 2015). While a parent may not have control over peers' influences on their child, *Fu* underscores the significance of mother-child relationships in educating and disciplining children on appropriate language use (Fu et al., 2015).

While a child's development is dependent on the parent-child relationship rather than their family's financial circumstance, their financial status still inevitably largely impacts their parent-child relationship. There is a causal relationship between financial situations and the development of family relationships as low-income parents would have less time, money, and energy to build a close connection with their children (Teo, 2019). They would typically be busy trying to make a living and are thus more remote in educating their children on appropriate language expressions.

Additionally, the quality of parent-caregiver interactions plays a fundamental role in children's language, being heavily influenced by the style of language that parents use in conversing with them (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009). When parents model the use of profanities in their interactions, children observe and internalise these language patterns (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009). However, this 'quality' of the interaction is dependent on the parent's education level and ability to demonstrate sophisticated language and literacy skills, which may be of a lower level than wealthier parents who are more likely to be well-educated (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009).

The parent-child relationship is critical in shaping a child's language use, including their predisposition to use profanities. While parental guidance can alleviate the influence of peers ascribed to the stratification of schools, the financial and educational circumstances of a family would affect the quality of their teachings and monitoring of inappropriate language. The style of language modelled by parents and mimicked by their children is also heavily influenced by parental education levels, which are typically higher amongst wealthier families.

Thus, in addition to peer influence in schools, the socio-economic background of a child's family shapes their language development, perpetuating disparities in language use, including profanities. This highlights the interconnectedness of school stratification and family circumstances in determining children's linguistic behaviours.

B. Peer influence and school stratification

The stratification of the different schools determines the socio-economic class of the other students that a child in the schools is more likely to socialise with, and hence, whom they are influenced by. In elite schools, students interact more with their counterparts from more affluent backgrounds, while those in neighbourhood schools interact more with other children from less privileged backgrounds. Even if a child does not pick up inappropriate language use from their parents, they are bound to learn it from their peers, who in the non-elite schools, have a higher likelihood of having picked it up from their parents.

Peer influence in schools is further enhanced by the physical clustering of reputable schools (Ong & Cheung, 2016). Such clustering not only increases the likelihood of students from affluent households attending these schools but also physically segregates the peers students interact with outside of school. As a result, children in less affluent areas primarily interact with peers from similar socio-economic circumstances, reinforcing the influence their peers have on them.

There is a heavy emphasis on peer influence and parental guidance in a child's use of profanities. But why exactly does such language use appear more normalised amongst the less affluent children, when parents of the different SES swear? After all, swearing is common amongst adults in appropriate situations, regardless of SES (Vingerhoets et al., 2013).

However, children in lower-income families may be more exposed to such language at an earlier age due to environmental factors that differ from those in higher-income households. In low-income households, financial constraints often result in smaller living spaces with limited privacy, increasing the likelihood of family tensions (Teo, 2019). Under these circumstances, older family members are more likely to swear in front of their children, especially since cursing is primarily used to express anger or frustration (Shek & Lin, 2017). When children are exposed to such language at an early age, it becomes normalised within the household. This, coupled with the aforementioned differing quality of parental guidance heavily impacted by the family's financial circumstances, results in greater, earlier exposure and normalisation of swearing amongst children in lower-income households.

C. Learning environment and use of profanities

While peer influence and parental guidance are significant factors, the learning environment within schools also plays a crucial role in shaping children's language use. The improved learning conditions due to having better educators could also mean students being more guided to have more proper language use in elite schools. Beyond being academic educators, teachers in primary schools play an integral role in students' social and emotional development. Hence, the distinction between schools that has resulted in a disparity in resources available to their students, such as better qualified teachers, is another factor that has led to increased use of profanities amongst children.

VI. Conclusion

This essay has explored how Singapore's stratified education system and socio-economic disparities influence children's use of profanities. While profanity appears more normalised in non-elite schools due to environmental stressors, peer influence, and limited parental guidance, it is important to recognize that its use spans all socio-economic levels. In elite schools, profanity use may take place in private peer settings, reflecting its universal role in emotional expression and social bonding. The distinction lies in the contexts and perceptions shaped by cultural and environmental factors.

Ultimately, profanity is not just a linguistic behaviour but a lens through which we can examine the broader impacts of social inequality. Addressing disparities in school resources, parental education, and socio-economic opportunities is essential to fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape in Singapore.

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