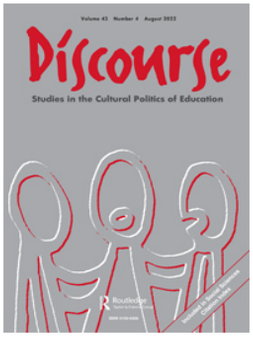

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Middle-class mothers' participation in tutoring for spoken English: a case of unlocking middle-class identity and privilege in contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Sociological inquiries on parental involvement seldom consider the investments parents make in *themselves* to realise educational advantages in their children's schooling. This gap hides the processes underlying class-making and class-produced privileges. To address this gap, this article investigates middle-class mothers' participation in tutoring and coaching for spoken English in Dehradun, India, focusing on their reasons for soliciting such paid tutoring support. It shows that mothers subscribe to these services to facilitate home-teaching, productive communication with their children, and effective home-school partnerships. Mothers' subscription to private tuition emerges in this context as a source of cultural capital that parents use to unlock their middle-class identity and privilege in the educational landscape. The article argues that English private tutoring is a case of a capital exchange – economic for cultural and social forms of capital – which parents may use to accumulate key resources and produce, maintain, and intergenerationally sustain their middle-classness.

KEYWORDS

Indian middle-class; shadow education; tutoring; middle-class advantage; home-school relationship; parental involvement

Introduction

Studies have shown how middle-class parents use their capital to gain social privileges and reproduce them intergenerationally, thus maintaining their class status in society (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, drawing on her study in the United States, Annette Lareau (2011) argued that middle-class families concertedly cultivate their children's educational experiences through proactively incorporating organised activities into their daily routine, motivating effective and persuasive language use, and promoting reasoning capabilities, among other such interventions. Doing so requires various economic resources, social connections, and parental attributes (shaped by parents' own family and educational experiences), and it often results in children's academic excellence and occupational success.

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These observations also resonate with Indian middle-class parenting, albeit with variations across families within this rather heterogeneous social class. For example, in my study, with 53 middle-class parents in India, I found that it was common for parents to invest a substantial proportion of their household income in their children's education, primarily by enrolling them in private schools and private tutorial centres (see, Gupta, 2020 for a discussion on this). Many of these parents considered these investments 'necessary' and a crucial way in which some parents could actively compensate for their perceived inability to help their children academically; indeed, investment in private education is a case of an exchange of economic resources for desired cultural capital, which families in privileged social groups use to consolidate their home-based resources to gain their class-situated social advantage (see Gupta, 2022a).

These and other such studies offer valuable insights into various critical social and educational processes; however, they seldom consider parents' *own* experiences with informal education that may potentially facilitate parental involvement in their children's schooling. Appraisal of such practices could shed light on the more extensive processes of social reproduction in contemporary society. This article redresses this gap in the scholarship by exploring middle-class mothers' participation in tutoring and coaching for spoken English in Dehradun, India. It focuses particularly on mothers' reasons for soliciting such paid tutoring support. The article shows that mothers subscribe to these services to teach their children effectively at home, productively communicate with them, and successfully partner with schoolteachers for their children's benefit. Middle-class parents consider all these aspects crucial for mobilising their cultural and social capital, thus accumulating key resources to produce, maintain, and intergenerationally sustain their class-based privilege. This article argues that mothers' subscription to private tuition is a case of a capital exchange – economic for cultural and social forms of capital. This exchange facilitates mothers' aspirations to unlock their middle-class identity and privilege in India's educational landscape and society more broadly.

The context: middle-class and class-making

The context of this study is the world's fastest-growing consumer group, the middle-class. Homi Kharas (2017) estimates that this group – with earnings between $11 and $110 (2011 PPP) per day – contributes to a total annual consumption of approximately $40 trillion. Kharas suggests approximately 3.2 billion people belong to this social category, with an expected yearly addition of 140 million. While there is evidence of the rise of the middle-class across countries, various Asian regions will contribute about 88% of the next billion added to this social class globally (Kharas, 2010).

This unprecedented growth of the middle-class is accompanied by increasing diversity of the people who identify themselves, and are identified, as members of this socioeconomic category. Although it is considered a privileged social group globally, what it means to belong to this group varies across societies. In their edited book, *The global middle classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography*, Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty (2012) show a variety of ways in which the middle-class is defined, lived, and experienced in different countries. These differences emerge from the nation-specific trajectory of the contemporary middle-class. This observation can be made sense of through Bourdieu's understanding of social classes. In his piece entitled, '*What makes a social class? On the*

theoretical and practical existence of groups', Bourdieu (1987) discusses both objective and subjective understandings of the contemporary social classes and the role of various *forms of capital* in determining individuals' positioning in the social *field*. Bourdieu (1985) defines *field* as:

> [A] multi-dimensional space of positions such that every actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent variables. (p. 724)

Bourdieu (1987) maintains that it is the positions that individuals occupy in any given *field* that offers them 'a location or a precise class of neighbouring positions, i.e. a particular area within that space'; moreover, individuals are distributed in a *field* as per the 'volume', 'composition', and 'trajectory' of their capital (p. 4). Notably, one's social class is determined not just by the extent (volume) and the nature (composition) of resources or capital that an individual possesses but also the 'evolution in time of the volume and composition of their capital, that is, according to their *trajectory* in social space' (p. 4).

Resembling the complexity of the middle-class globally, the Indian middle-class is also a contested category. It can be best explained *relationally* and *tentatively* rather than in absolute and definitive terms. Indeed, many scholars refer to this group in the *plural* – middle-classes – to signify its internal diversity. This is primarily because people who identify as middle-class tend to have a substantially different experience of *being middle-class*.

Some people – referred to here as the 'traditional middle-class' – have been privileged economically, educationally, and socio-culturally intergenerationally in colonial and post-colonial periods. They were educated in elite schools where the medium of instruction tended to be English, and they often gained higher education experiences in either England or elite Indian universities. These were, in many ways, 'ideal citizens' of modernising India (see Srivastava, 1998). More recently, with the advent of neoliberal globalisation, the middle-class group expanded further to the masses, offering entry to the professionals who were not as economically, socially and culturally resourceful as their traditional counterparts have been (see Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009; Heiman et al., 2012). This group is referred to here as the 'new middle-class', and the mothers who participated in this study belonged to a fraction of this rather disparate social group (the social positioning of the research participants is discussed later in the article). While the everyday experiences of these two factions – traditional and new – of Indian middle-classes might be very different to one another, English proficiency, nonetheless, has continued to be regarded as a symbol of privilege and power – and indeed 'social fracturing' in contemporary India (Faust & Nagar, 2001).

When we understand the Indian middle-class with a Bourdieusian lens, it becomes apparent that the middle-class in India has *evolved* variously through time, which has also resulted in remarkable differences in both the *volume* and the *composition* of various forms of capital (cultural, social and economic) among families within this social group. These differences arise from varied *trajectories* individual families have undertaken to *reach* middle-class status. This variation is notably reflected in the *position* individual families occupy in the *field* (see Gupta, 2020, for a discussion). This dynamic and its implications are the focus of this article. Here, I offer narratives – pregnant with hopes, fears, anxieties, and solutions – of a particular segment of the 'new middle-class' in India.

This heterogeneous sub-group although economically and socially middle-class, lacks the cultural resources – especially English proficiency – that are often associated with 'traditional middle-class' identity in India. In a nutshell, the article illustrates how the subscription to private tutoring or coaching services for spoken English emerges as a way in which *economically* privileged parents seek their place as *socially and culturally* middle-class.

The study

Fieldwork for this study was carried out between December 2014 and December 2015 as a part of a larger project on educational practices in India. The project findings have revealed the organisational framework of private tutoring (see Gupta, 2021a for how private tutoring *shadows* formal schooling; see Gupta, 2021b for how it *deviates from* typical schooling norms; and see Gupta, 2022b for how tutoring centres *circumvent* the formal education system) as well as the relationship between tutoring and schoolteachers (Gupta, 2021c) and parental investment in their children's education (Gupta, 2020; Gupta, 2022a). In all these articles, the empirical focus has been on schooling and tutoring for *children* in middle-class families. In comparison, this article focuses on *mothers'* participation in the private tuition industry, making it a novel exploration within the broader literature on non-state educational provisions and parental involvement in their children's education.

Specifically, this article is based on two group interviews involving 12 mothers who solicited private tutoring for spoken English in Dehradun city, the capital of the state of Uttarakhand, situated in the northern region of India. Dehradun city is relatively unique – it is a postcolonial educational hub and a rapidly expanding urban space with exclusive neighbourhoods. It has increasingly differentiated private schooling systems and tutoring markets that cater to families from diverse social classes within and beyond the city. Dehradun's history, its contemporary trajectory, and the specificities of its urban context are crucial for understanding the class positioning and class-making strategies of the middle-class families residing here, including the mothers who participated in this study. I will discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

The group interviews were 2–2.5 hours long; they were held in tutoring centres after the participants' scheduled spoken English sessions. It was challenging to access mothers who sought tutoring support for themselves for a variety of reasons – for example, mothers were not likely to openly admit that they were seeking coaching for spoken English because such an admission might have evoked stigma and embarrassment related to their not knowing how to communicate in English, as well as mothers feeling this may potentially signify a deficit in their parenting skills and capability. (These aspects will become evident in the discussion in this article.) Thus, before approaching mothers directly, I interacted with tutors in two English tutoring centres in the city (these conversations supported my interviews with mothers), who then introduced me to the mothers.

This referral was vital for building trust and gaining informed consent from mothers for participating in this research. Furthermore, I interviewed the mothers within the tutorial centres after their regular classes, as they were most comfortable with this arrangement, primarily because other on-looking family members were not present. Group, instead of individual, interviews were also helpful for the mothers as they were already familiar with

one another and had decided to solicit coaching support for spoken English together. This setup also enabled mothers to be vulnerable whilst being supported by other group members with shared experiences during interviews; however, I appreciate that it may have prevented some participants from sharing other, perhaps more unique, experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded. These interviews were conducted in Hindi and later transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. The data were coded using an inductive approach to data analysis; the coded materials were further analysed to derive themes from the data.

Social positioning of the participants

As alluded to earlier, the middle-class in India is a contested and profoundly performative social category, and as such, it is *defined* variously. Therefore, perhaps, it will be helpful to discuss where the families who formed part of this study are socially located within the overall dynamics of the Indian middle-classes. The mothers I spoke to were *economically* middle-class (Sridharan, 2011). They also identified themselves as members of this group, underscoring that they are placed 'in the middle' of the social hierarchy as they are 'neither super-rich nor poor'; they were neither elite (as *Zamindars/*landowners), nor upper class (as retired army officers) in Dehradun city. Notably, all participants in this study had migrated from hilly regions in the state of Uttarakhand to Dehradun; many of them relocated to the city in search of better employment opportunities and better quality of life for themselves and the next generation.

The participants belonged to privileged social groups not only by their social class but also because they were upper caste Hindus with close social ties to the Garhwali community in Dehradun and the villages from which they had migrated. As such, these families were neither part of the post-liberalisation middle-classes (Fernandes, 2006) nor were they 'new' entrants into the middle-classes *per se*. Instead, within the dynamics of class context in Dehradun, the research participants represented a group of the middle-class who, whilst privileged in the rural spaces where they once lived, were still exploring and actively curating (as this article shows) their *class position* in the urban *field* of Dehradun city, where the markers of social class were different to those in their respective hilly regions. This article illustrates this mismatch between mothers' economic positioning as *urban* middle-class and their embodied cultural capital of *rural* middle-class. It shows how this incongruity is reflected in particular facets of the more extensive processes of class-making. Specifically, this article demonstrates how through English private tutoring and coaching support, mothers attempt to acquire the cultural capital – in the form of proficiency in spoken English – that has been traditionally associated with India's *urban* middle-class.

Although fathers did not participate in this study, it might be relevant to note that most fathers in the participant families had at least one university degree and worked as professionals (teachers, small business owners, bankers, and so on). In contrast, despite being educated, and many with at least one university degree, the mothers I spoke with did not participate in any gainful employment. Fathers' educational levels and jobs contributed significantly to the parents' claim to middle-classness in the increasingly diversifying Dehradun city. While both parents' roles in building valued cultural capital can be seen through their choice of private schooling and tutoring for their

children, it was the mothers who appeared to do the *work* of maintaining and improving home-school relations.

Most fathers were 'busy', as most mothers claimed, providing economic support to their families and did not have sufficient time to focus on their children's everyday educational needs. In comparison, the mothers, many of whom were highly educated but lacked skills and confidence in communicating in English, considered contributing to their children's education as one of their primary tasks as mothers. As such, there was a strongly gendered dimension to parental involvement in their children's education, with all mothers feeling solely *responsible* for their children's learning outcomes and future educational and career trajectories. In some ways, these patterns align with the notions of ideal middle-class mothering (as discussed in Donner, 2006; also see Gupta, 2020). Thus, mothers emerged as the focus of this study; the key themes with regard to mothers' rationales for attending tutoring for spoken English are discussed in the following sections.

Mothers' reasons for subscribing to tutoring and coaching for spoken English

During interviews, mothers discussed various reasons for subscribing to private tutoring lessons for spoken English. The most common reasons were to improve their knowledge of the English-language and English communication skills. It is interesting to note that mothers talked about these reasons *in relation to* their inability to engage in their children's schooling. Subscription to the tuition industry was a way for mothers to address this deficit in their parenting. The key reasons for attending spoken English lessons that mothers suggested, and how they were associated with participants' understanding of parenting roles and responsibilities, are outlined below, showcasing the processes underlying capital exchange, social class identity and positioning, and the unlocking of middle-class privilege.

English proficiency for effective home-teaching

For participants, one of the most valued forms of parenting was teaching their children at home. Notably, all participants had enrolled their children into high-fee private schools that used English as a medium of instruction (in contrast to low-fee private schools – see Srivastava, 2008), as opposed to state-funded government schools that used a vernacular language (Hindi, in this case) for everyday teaching and assessment purposes. The reason for this choice was the perceived quality of education offered at high-fee private schools and it being a social norm, articulated by a participant as: 'it is typical for middle-class families to choose such schools, otherwise what's the point of having money'. School choice, therefore, exemplifies mothers' economic investment in securing valued cultural capital in its objectified and embodied forms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Nevertheless, mothers realised that the school choice they had made for their children alone was insufficient for their children to realise the future educational and career aspirations they had for them. Many of these mothers dreamed of a professional career for their children in the broader STEM field within the globalising labour market. These shared dreams have been discussed as 'typical' in middle-class families across regions in India (Nambissan, 2009) because these professions are perceived as 'middle-class' in a rapidly changing social *field* produced by neoliberal globalisation in the empirical context

(Gupta, 2020). Mothers reflected on how these dreams were often portrayed in popular media, newspapers and television, as 'aspirational' and 'unattainable' in an increasingly 'competitive education system'. The mothers identified that a vital additional resource for teaching and career support could be *themselves*. Teaching their children at home was a way in which mothers felt they could help their children prepare for these future competitions, offering them 'an edge' as compared to other children who might be relying only on resources from educational institutions.

Mothers felt that English proficiency was one of the 'crucial skills' for them to provide effective teaching and learning support to their children at home. This is exemplified in the interview excerpt below by a mother who had an MSc degree in Chemistry (a daughter in Grade 4 and a son in playgroup):

> This [attending the tutorial centre] is mainly because it is absolutely essential to know English to be able to teach my kids at home … when I spend time with my kids, I realise that English proficiency is necessary for us [referring to other mothers] to be just able to engage in their [children's] everyday subject-based lessons as well as everyday learning. It is like I know the topic but don't know how to say things in English. I know, for example, what *Gurutvakarshan* is, but it does not easily translate into *Gravity* for me.

This is interesting because most mothers I spoke with were college graduates with qualifications in STEM subjects. Nonetheless, they felt the way *they* were taught in school and the language in which they knew various concepts were not particularly helpful for them to teach their children. All mothers studied in government schools that used vernacular language as a medium of instruction. However, as mentioned above, their children were invariably enrolled in private schools with English as a medium of instruction and assessments. Mothers said that although they had subject knowledge, they did not know the English term for various concepts and struggled to articulate what they knew. Furthermore, some of the mothers felt that while they *could understand* different concepts in English by drawing on their children's textbooks, it was the conversation *around and about the concepts* that they struggled with and wanted to address this by receiving coaching for spoken English.

> For me, it [learning to communicate in English] is important because whenever I teach my daughter, I struggle with holding a conversation in English … I have knowledge of the subject, but I really struggle with discussing it in English.

As such, mothers felt that although they knew a topic, they needed to work on their ability to communicate ideas to their children in English to educate them at home effectively. This observation typifies the mismatch between these mothers' economic and cultural positions within the *social field*. Specifically, while they were economically resourceful, the knowledge and skills they had acquired through formal educational experiences were not aligned with the cultural resources these mothers felt were valued at their children's school. Mothers felt that their children would learn all the concepts in English at school, and their teachers would also discuss these topics in English, making what mothers themselves knew and how they understood and discussed that knowledge 'unfit' and thus potentially disregarded and unvalued by their children.

All mothers I spoke with sought tutoring support for English to 'address' this mismatch, but not all mothers in Dehradun city would have taken this path. Participants in this study may have done so because they felt confident and likely derived this confidence from their own educational and socioeconomic status (the *habitus*), as they indeed were

highly educated and economically privileged. As highly qualified mothers, they felt they *should and could* help their children – and this self-imposed responsibility nudged their search for tutoring support for spoken English. Through learning to speak in English, these mothers were also expanding their roles in their children's education, from mere suppliers of economically purchased goods to being proactive supporters of their children's educational and career trajectories (as discussed in detail in Gupta, 2020).

Reinforcing English as a language of communication

Another primary reason mothers gave for attending tutoring for spoken English was to be able to communicate productively with their children. Specifically, mothers spoke about a perceived 'language gap' between themselves and their children, which they said prevented them from having productive and constructive interactions with their children, especially concerning school-related matters. These aspects will be explored in this subsection.

Speaking English was construed by the participants of this study as a marker of the mostly urbanised traditional middle-class in postcolonial India. The mothers I spoke with, however, were new entrants to the urban middle-class. As such, they did not necessarily have cultural resources – including English proficiency – that are typically associated with privileged groups, in the urban context. These mothers valued proficiency in spoken English for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of the perceived status and the symbolic value of English in Indian society (as discussed in *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky: education, language, and social class in contemporary India* by LaDousa, 2014).

This observation signifies the impact of *trajectory*, as mentioned earlier, in understanding differences in the *volume* and *composition* of various *forms of capital* which individuals possess (Bourdieu, 1987), even within the same social group. Thus, mothers tried to make up for this perceived 'deficiency' by enrolling their children in 'English-medium schools':

> It is easy to learn to speak Hindi because many family members speak Hindi, so a child obviously learns how to communicate with all these people. It is English that is difficult to learn because we seldom use it in our everyday life. So, it is important to send [enrol] children to English-medium schools.

Mothers valued this exchange of economic capital for securing cultural resources – of English proficiency – for their children and considered this an essential part of their middle-class parenting. At the same time, though, mothers felt that doing so was insufficient for their children to gain their social class advantage fully. Mothers articulated this feeling, as also captured in the following excerpt, by reflecting on the potential negative impact of the substantial difference in linguistic environments within their family, and which their children were exposed to at school, on their children's learning outcomes.

> Each teacher expects parents to speak to their children in English. Some teachers say that if you don't do this, all the effort they make to ensure that our children speak English will go to waste. Some teachers also think that if we continue talking to our kids in Hindi at home, they [the children] are more likely to struggle to learn how to speak English fluently in a school environment. So, if there is continuity in language at home and in school, children are more likely to progress with fewer difficulties.

Hence, although mothers made sure that they enrolled their children into 'English-medium' schools to benefit from such education and training for future careers and

jobs, they felt that they were unable to effectively reinforce *the culture of speaking English* at home. Mothers talked about how while schools promoted an English-speaking culture, this was not part of *their* everyday reality at home. Considering this difference as a source of potential disadvantage for their children, mothers felt that they needed to invest in, acquire, cultivate, and practise their *own* skills in spoken English.

All mothers maintained that they were not in a position to persuade other family members at home to communicate in English, or learn to do so. Yet, at the same time, they felt responsible for maintaining at least some conversation with their children in English to keep continuity between home and school regarding English communication. Furthermore, many mothers felt, as shown in the excerpt below, that their inability to communicate in English hinders their interaction with their children:

> Now, our children are going to school, and they talk to each other and sometimes to me in English. So, I feel very awkward that I cannot understand what they are saying and reply to them in English.

Indeed, mothers talked about fearing that the language barrier between them and their children may potentially negatively impact on their relationship with them. This was another reason why mothers attended tutoring services for spoken English.

In many ways, this also suggests how mothers' social position differed from what they aspired their children to have within the broader social *field*. This discrepancy, mothers felt, could create tensions in their relationships with their children, which they tried to address by subscribing to tutoring support for spoken English. Hence, subscription to such tutoring services emerges due to mothers' desire to reinforce English as a language of everyday communication. Mothers felt that doing so was essential for their children's development as bilingual speakers, which would help them along their future middle-class educational and career trajectories. They also believed this would improve their relationship with their children, and their English proficiency would prove to be a source for themto tap into membership of the post-colonially imagined social category of the Indian middle-class.

English tutoring for effective partnership with schoolteachers

Mothers' decision to seek tutoring support for spoken English was indeed influenced, in a significant way, by schoolteachers. As mentioned above, mothers felt that if they could communicate with their children in English, they would be able to do their part as mothers and support their children's education at home. At the same time, mothers felt that proficiency in spoken English would help them build a strong home-school relationship, which they felt, in turn, would also be beneficial in meeting their children's educational needs. Notably, these were *mothers' views* and did not necessarily mean that teachers did not accommodate parents' language needs. These views were nonetheless informed by the particular type of schools these parents had chosen for their children. In addition to the management type (private), the language of instruction (English-medium) and cost of education (high tuition fee), as mentioned earlier, these schools occupied a specific place in the schooling landscape in Dehradun city.

High levels of English-language fluency among teachers are not expected at all English-medium schools, including those that charge a hefty sum as tuition fees.

However, the specific pool of schools where these parents had enrolled their children represented the schools that aspired to be 'world class' and 'international' in their standing, attracting highly aspirational and economically wealthy habitants of Dehradun city. Alongside other reasons mentioned above, parents chose these schools for educators' ability to communicate in English, hoping their children will be exposed to a similar culture of sharing and exchanging ideas in English.

However, this cultural disparity between schoolteachers and mothers produced an interesting intra-class dynamic that made mothers feel they needed to improve their spoken English. Specifically, by learning to communicate in English, mothers were trying to 'speak the same language' as schoolteachers, so their voices were heard in school settings. This aspiration resonates with the discussion on how middle-class mothers competently use language to maintain a strong relationship with schoolteachers in the UK (see Reay, 1998). However, unlike in the UK, where Reay distinguishes parenting by social class (middle-class and working class), here we see the difference within middle-classes. This difference between middle-classness valued at school and the middle-classness of the mothers is illustrated in the interview excerpt below:

> English speaking is essential everywhere these days … in the office, in school, everywhere. I feel this, especially when I go to my daughter's school. Because if someone else is talking in English, then I feel like I am inferior and good for nothing, actually. (pause). Sometimes, teachers speak to me in English, and I cannot reply in English, so I felt it was vital for me to come and attend English-speaking sessions. I want to respond to teachers in English, but I am unable to do so. All teachers speak English. Usually I can somewhat understand what they are saying, and I reply in Hindi, but I want to be able to reply in English.

This excerpt signifies how while both mothers and schoolteachers were indeed economically middle-class, they occupied different *positions* in the social *field*. Mothers felt that they were not resourceful enough to meet the expectations that schoolteachers had from them. This came up mainly when mothers talked about their experiences of parent-teacher meetings – a periodic event that mothers defined as an occasion when teachers and parentsdiscussed students' performance, focusing primarily on academic achievements and failures. Mothers recounted that in such meetings, schoolteachers communicate their views in English, almost setting an expectation for them to respond in English, which they found challenging. Some mothers said although they could understand what the teachers said, they could not reply in English. For others, even understanding what the teachers were saying was a challenge. As shown in the excerpt below, these mothers noted that sometimes they found it hard to comprehend teachers because of their 'accent' – how specific words are pronounced – and not because of the language *per se*.

> Teachers speak English, but I find it challenging [to reply], so I mix Hindi words with English to communicate. Sometimes I also struggle to understand when teachers speak English fluently. Some teachers pronounce words differently from how many people I know would pronounce them. So, I just do not know what they are saying. This is incredibly challenging because I sometimes miss out on important information.

Mothers considered themselves heavily vested in their children's education – they talked about feeling *responsible* for their children's academic performance. Therefore, they perceived that 'missing out on important information' concerning their children due to their inability to understand teachers during parent-teacher meetings, as mentioned above, was *hugely*

problematic. This also meant that mothers found themselves unable to communicate their own ideas to teachers, which, in turn, meant these mothers were not able to discuss matters concerning their children freely with the schoolteachers. Some mothers also felt that if they responded in Hindi, they were not 'really listened to' – teachers would nod but not engage in the conversation – and felt, as typified here, 'If I am able to speak to the teachers in English, maybe they will be more satisfied with my replies to their queries.' Overall, mothers realised that this language barrier was hampering them from asking for the resources for their children, thus depriving them of the support they may need to excel academically.

In such a situation, mothers talked about feeling 'awkward', 'bad', 'disempowered', and 'inferior' around schoolteachers, to the extent that they felt they were not 'middle-class enough' to succeed in the school space. Moreover, mothers' notions of not being 'middle-class enough' reflect their understanding of the social class position they occupy and how they thought they were viewed by those who they believe are 'legitimately' middle-class. As studies focusing on home-school relationships have established (see Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998), private schools in India where these mothers had enrolled their children were indeed middle-class spaces. Yet, these spaces exclusively valued the traditional postcolonial English-speaking urban middle-class culture (Srivastava, 1998) and were not necessarily inclusive of individuals and families who may have experienced a different *trajectory* to reach the middle-class status, which indeed was the case for the mothers who participated in this study. Proficiency in spoken English was a key feature of the postcolonial urban Indian middle-class that mothers in this study aspired to belong to, so investing in coaching for this was what they felt was necessary for belonging to this imagined social category.

In other words, there was considerable distance between the middle-class *position* mothers had occupied and the middle-class *position* that schoolteachers were in – as such, the values, norms and behaviours schools upheld were different to what mothers followed in their everyday lives. The consequence was a stark difference between the middle-class cultural capital valued at school and the resources middle-class mothers who participated in this study possessed and could offer their children. Learning to communicate in English was one of the steps mothers took to compensate for this difference and to ensure they built better home-school partnerships.

English private tutoring for unlocking urban middle-class identity and privilege – a synthesis

This article makes critical contributions to the contemporary understanding of middle-class identity and privilege in the larger field of sociology of education. It shows the *diversity* of middle-class not just in terms of its types, trajectories and the forms of capital families in this social group have, but also the complexities in understanding this group across, and in the transience of, particular localities in rural and urban regions. The article illustrates processes by which newly urban, socially privileged families seek legitimacy of their position as members of an urban middle-class group, focusing mainly on the centrality of education and mothering in these processes of class-making.

Specifically, this article has discussed an under-examined territory of parental investment in their children's education. Moving away from the discussions on parental investments from the lens of educational choices the parents make for their children, in both the formal and informal schooling sectors as well as non-formally at home, this article

has illustrated a case of parental investment in *themselves* to engage more effectively and respond more proactively to their children's everyday educational and learning needs. This is illustrated in how mothers justify their participation in tutoring for spoken English. Mothers in this study considered English tutoring as a way for them to acquire English proficiency and teach their children effectively, communicate ideas and productively exchange thoughts with them at home, and build a positive home-school relationship. Hence, the overall purpose of mothers to seek tutoring for spoken English was to ensure their children had sufficient resources to achieve their full academic potential and succeed in competitive middle-class educational – and career – landscapes.

The discussion presented in this article also signifies middle-class mothers' efforts to *unlock* their social class identity. This observation can be explained through Bourdieu's (1987) understanding of the making of a social class. Specifically, the article has demonstrated that many middle-class mothers realise that they are economically middle-class. Still, they lack critical cultural resources – such as English proficiency – traditionally associated with *being middle-class* in India. Spoken English, therefore, appears to be a source of middle-class capital in its various forms – not just cultural capital in the state of linguistic competency but also social capital in the form of seeking membership of a privileged social group and building connections with other members, such as schoolteachers, in this group. Hence, investment in private tutoring exemplifies the case of an *exchange* of economic capital for securing socially valued cultural capital in its multiple forms (discussed in Bourdieu, 1986). Overall, the article has demonstrated how the investment in private tutoring and coaching for spoken English may help these mothers gain the symbolic capital of being middle-class in globalising India.

The research findings also allude to how the processes of class-making facilitate middle-class parents' greater access to the privileges that come with their class *position* in the social *field* (as discussed in Bourdieu, 1987). These parents already offered middle-class resources to their children by choosing private schools with English as a medium of instruction for them. However, they realised that this school choice was insufficient for their children to realise their class advantage. They discussed that other aspects, such as adequate educational support at home, everyday communication with children, and a strong home-school relationship, were needed for them to maximise their social class advantage in the *field* of education. As described in this article, these aspects were the core reasons for mothers' investment in English private tutoring.

Moreover, becoming and being middle-class are processes which require cultural practices that go beyond the choice of private school and the success of children within it. Mothers in this study saw proficiency in spoken English as a cultural resource that they needed to mobilise for building social capital and networks with other middle-class families, especially in the strata they aspired to belong. This is evident in the mothers' belief that acquiring competence in spoken English is a necessary cultural accomplishment to build social relations with privileged middle-class families, including teachers, thus contributing to the broader processes of class-making and exerting middle-classness. Hence, mothers' investment in coaching for spoken English can be seen as contributing to the processes underlying social mobility – which in this case involves privileged mothers claiming and occupying a middle-class position in an urban space – in contemporary India. The discussion here draws only on interviews with mothers. It would be interesting for future studies to explore fathers' role in class-making, and their perceptions of mothers' participation in tutoring for spoken English.

Importantly, this article shows the wider implications of private tutoring beyond 'shadow education'. Most studies on private tutoring focus on 'shadow education' provisions – tutoring practices that mimic the formal education system and its delivery (see Gupta, 2021a) – for children, aiming to prepare them for excelling in the school appraisal system. Instead, this article presents a case of private tutoring *for parents*, albeit with the aim to effectively support home-based educational practices and home-school relationships. In doing so, the article demonstrates the potential of viewing tutoring centres as places for people to pursue lifelong learning. As such, the article illustrates broader implications of private tutoring beyond the remit of 'shadow education', yet within the larger gambit of the middle-class processes and practices for social reproduction. While this article highlights the role of English private tutoring and coaching for spoken English in unlocking middle-class identity and privilege in India, the findings presented here are likely to resonate with other cultural contexts – comparing these contexts will allow for revealing further the complexity of privilege and class identity and understanding their relationship to social advantage more fully.

Finally, this article has provided evidence of the heterogeneity of the middle-classes and has demonstrated the *layers* of educational privilege, derived from one's social class advantage. While this is empirically grounded in one city in India, it has implications for understanding the middle-class as a diversified social group globally. Forces such as colonialism, neo-liberalisation, and globalisation have created multiple routes to reach the middle-class, making this social group complex and messy. These forces and others, all operating simultaneously, have not only transformed contemporary society but, in doing so, have reconfigured what it means to be middle-class across cultures – processes which will likely continue to evolve even more. The middle-class, like any other group, is an ever-dynamic social category. This article has explored the subjective experiences, identity-making processes, and aspirations of individuals and families – and indeed, the social realities – of this wide-ranging and diverse group. The experiences of other families in this group may likely be different to the cases presented here, i.e. the nature and extent of educational privilege may vary within this social group both within the given empirical context, in India generally, and beyond. Nevertheless, bringing these multiple narratives in dialogue with one another will help to understand the complexity of the contemporary global middle-classes more comprehensively.

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Ethics statement

This study was approved by the Departmental Ethics Review Committee (DERC) of the Department of Sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore.

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