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## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN SHADOW EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

Scholarly interest in the topic of shadow education has increased in the past three decades, as evidenced by the number of publications in education journals. Alongside teachers, students, and tutors, shadow education scholars have considered parents as key actors and have explored their role using different theories. The purpose of this article is to investigate the existing literature on parental perspectives of shadow education and to identify several commonalities and differences among these perspectives. More specifically, this review includes theories about parents' socioeconomic backgrounds and parental decision making. We found that the commonly used concepts about parental backgrounds stem from Bourdieusian theories of social capital, class, and socioeconomic background. Decision-making theories are most frequently borrowed from economics (e.g., rational choice theory and consumer theory) and from psychology (e.g., Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development). This article considers existing theories employed in the study of parental perspectives of shadow education that are currently at the forefront of this field, but it also identifies gaps. The article concludes with a suggestion of topics and perspectives for future research related both to new forms of parental involvement and to more conventional aspects of understanding parents that have been largely overlooked by shadow education scholars.

### KEYWORDS

shadow education; parents; private tutoring; theories; decision-making; socioeconomic background

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## Introduction

Among different forms of parental involvement, private tutoring – or as it is metaphorically called, shadow education – is a global practice found in different countries and jurisdictions. Previous studies have documented that parents around the world actively purchase private tutoring for various reasons, including losing confidence in mainstream education, hoping to achieve a competitive edge, catching up with curriculum, and responding to heightened competition (Bray, 2021; Gupta, 2020; Kobakhidze & Suter, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Parents' decisions and practices affect their own children and directly or indirectly influence schools and the wider educational ecosystem. The identification and critical exploration of the parental perspectives behind private tutoring deserve greater attention from scholars and policymakers both in Europe and internationally. Previous literature on shadow education has focused more on exploring the perspectives of students, teachers, and tutors; few scholars have studied parents as key actors (e.g., Ireson & Rushforth, 2014; Kobakhidze et al., 2023; Liu & Bray, 2020; Yung & Zeng, 2022).

Given that the specific theme of this special issue of the journal is *parental involvement* and the subtheme is *parents as customers of learning and educational processes*, the focus on parents' roles in shadow education is a natural fit. Specifically, this article explores the theoretical perspectives of parents in academic literature and aims to review key concepts and theories, such as parentocracy (DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016; Tan, 2017; Yung & Zeng, 2022), concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011; Matsuoka, 2019), intensive parenting or tiger parenting (Ball, 2003; Ishizuka, 2019; Kobakhidze et al., 2023; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), and parental decision making (Enrich, 2015; Jokić, 2013; Liu & Bray, 2020; Luplow & Schneider, 2014). The article critically evaluates the use of these concepts, explores their usefulness in explaining parents' involvement in buying shadow education, and offers an overview of the commonalities and differences in the concepts. Our focus is not on investigating the aspirations, values, and beliefs of parents that inform their decision but rather on what types of theoretical perspectives have been used in the field of shadow education to explain parents' stances regarding shadow education. In addition, the article points out some theoretical approaches that have not yet been used in the shadow education literature but may be equally relevant in explaining parental perspectives.

Shadow education research has grown at an incredible pace in recent years and expanded both qualitatively, by improving methodologies and investigating more in-depth issues, and quantitatively, in terms of published outputs (Hajar & Karakus, 2022; Kobakhidze & Suter, 2020; Štastný & Kobakhidze, 2020; Zhang & Bray, 2020). This article's update of theoretical considerations

and its summary of current knowledge should be a valuable contribution to the field. To some extent, the present article builds on a previous study by Štástný (2015), published in *Studia paedagogica*, which presented a broader view of the theories and concepts used to conceptualize shadow education.

After presenting the methodological considerations related to this literature review, the article scrutinizes the parentocracy framework and related concepts. It then discusses intensive parenting or tiger parenting as one of the most used concepts to explain parents' active, sometimes even aggressive, involvement in their children's education. A section on concerted cultivation follows, explaining its origin and application in shadow education studies. The final section explores decision-making theories borrowed from economics and psychology, which is followed by a discussion and the conclusion.

## 1 Methodology

Our focus in this article is on theoretical perspectives related to parents' socioeconomic backgrounds and decision-making processes in the field of shadow education. These two major perspectives are the most frequently used theoretical lenses in shadow education research with regard to parents. We chose a semi-systematic review approach (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019) to help identify major theories and concepts. According to Snyder (2019), a semi-systematic review approach is a good strategy as it can be used for mapping "theoretical approaches or themes as well as identifying knowledge gaps within the literature" (p. 334), and we considered this type of review to be well suited to our aims for this article. We looked at published studies on shadow education in key English databases, such as the Web of Science (WoS) and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), with a focus on various topics that combined shadow education and parenting, shadow education and parental involvement, shadow education and parental investment, shadow education and parents' socioeconomic status/social class. We also looked at the shadow education bibliography database by the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Hong Kong and searched for relevant publications. We complemented this thematic review with our own knowledge of the field, as both authors have been active in the field of shadow education research for more than 10 years.

Methodologically, this article takes a qualitative approach that differs from what is called bibliometric analysis, which uses quantitative measures of publication and citation trends (e.g., Hajar & Karakus, 2022). However, these studies were still helpful in identifying keywords and providing direction. For example, we found that parenting was one of the frequently studied topics in shadow education, alongside topics such as academic performance, cultural

capital, credentialism, and educational inequalities (Hajar & Karakus, 2022). For this semi-systematic review, we searched for academic publications related to the core topic of the article – parental perspectives and shadow education – and compared, contrasted, and analyzed relevant themes within this research domain. In doing so, we identified gaps in the current body of research and demonstrated the need to extend previous research.

## 2 Findings

The findings below reflect the major theoretical perspectives identified in the review process. The section starts with the parentocracy framework and moves on to intensive parenting, followed by concerted cultivation. The review ends with extensive overviews of the theories of parental decision making in shadow education research.

### 2.1 Parentocracy

One of the most widespread theoretical perspectives on parents and shadow education is parentocracy, a word coined by sociologist Phillip Brown in Great Britain in 1990. According to Brown, students' educational outcomes are determined by parents' resources, be they economic, social, or cultural; the *wealth and wishes* of parents matter the most, rather than *ability and effort*. Brown (1990) argued that children's educational opportunities are not limited by what public schools offer but are also covered by what *extras* families purchase to increase the future chances of their offspring. Such "extra" services include academic tutoring and extracurricular activities, both of which require family wealth.

Since the introduction of the term *parentocracy* more than three decades ago, many scholars in education, sociology, child development, and psychology have used this term to frame the relationship between parental investments and their socioeconomic backgrounds. It has been argued that parentocracy challenges the idea of educational equity (e.g., Reay, 2002) because it demonstrates how the privilege of wealth helps the educational chances of some students while discriminating against those who lack resources. Earlier studies, such as Coleman (1988) and Arnett (1995) showed evidence of how family structures and socioeconomic resources served as a chief mechanism of the reproduction of social class, race, and gender inequalities. Similarly, Lareau (2011) and Mikus et al. (2021) argued that parental investment in extra paid lessons reproduces and maintains structural inequalities in society. In some locations, such as Singapore, parentocracy became a societal concern, as demonstrated by media headlines such as *Beware Growing Parentocracy* (Ong, 2014).

Liu (2019) used a theoretical lens of parentocracy to understand Chinese families' demand for tutoring based on data from the 2014 iteration of the China Family Panel Study (CFPS). Other scholars in England (Reay, 2002), Canada (e.g., Davies, 2004; DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016), Singapore (Tan, 2017), and Hong Kong (Yung & Zeng, 2022) also found this conceptual tool helpful in understanding parental investment. Many of these scholars have used sociological analyses of social class and capital, often drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's social theory. In terms of the social class identities of parents, Brown (1990) argued that middle-class and upper middle-class parents enjoy the privilege of parentocracy. Similarly, Reay (2002) reported that middle-class families employed more private tutoring and cultural activities than their working-class counterparts. Similar evidence prompted scholars to conceptualize the link between private tutoring and middle-class educational advantage (e.g., Gupta, 2020). Later studies, however, challenged this idea and argued that private tutoring was no longer the exclusive prerogative of rich parents (Tan, 2017); it had become more of a norm for parents of less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Yung & Zeng, 2022).

DeWiele and Edgerton (2016) extended Brown's original ideas about parentocracy and added two components: first, a sociopolitical logic existing in a free-market environment where parents become consumers within education; the second component is a proactive interventionist parenting style used by middle-class parents to maximize their children's chances. Both components thrive in a neoliberal environment that promotes parental choice, competition, and individual freedom (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010). Conceptually, other analytical tools related to parentocracy are parental agency, parental power, and parent entitlement (DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016).

Regardless of the mostly critical examination of the notion of parentocracy within the field of education and, especially, in shadow education literature, scholars agree that it is organic for parents to care for their children, desiring the best future possible for them. According to Heyneman (2011), "it is the natural inclination of all responsible parents to support the education of their children" (p. 184). He went even further and argued that "parental willingness to invest in their child's education is a positive aspect of a mature democracy" (p. 187). In other words, even if parentocracy creates educational inequalities, a "reduction of parental involvement will not decrease educational inequalities" (Reay, 2002). Instead, scholars provide a critique of the driving forces of competitive educational systems, structures, and policies that "nudge" parents to procure shadow education (Doherty & Dooley, 2018).

### 2.2 *Intensive parenting or tiger parenting*

Similarly to the parentocracy framework, the concept of intensive parenting signals parental agency in using additional resources to maximize their children's learning. These two frameworks overlap in their focus on middle-class parents. The literature, with some exceptions, associates intensive parenting with middle-class parents. Although both theories highlight the importance of the socioeconomic backgrounds of the parents, the theories differ in their emphasis: parentocracy is about parental capital while intensive parenting refers to parenting style.

Tiger parenting, a term coined by Chua (2011), is colloquially used to refer to intensive parenting. Since the publication of the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, the term gained popularity and replaced *intensive parenting* in many publications. In this article, we use these concepts interchangeably. Both terms characterize parents who are actively involved in their children's academic and social lives: they strictly plan and monitor children's activities. The link between tiger parenting and private tutoring has been one of the most discussed aspects of Chua's book and the subsequent academic literature (Ho, 2017; Zhang, 2020).

Within this theoretical framework, two major debates emerged: whether intensive parenting is only a middle-class phenomenon and whether intensive parenting is particularly associated with East Asian parents and Asian middle-class immigrant families. Private tutoring has been prominent in East Asia for decades, and the region was considered a "cradle of private tutoring" (Manzon & Arepattammannil, 2014, p. 389), leading to many studies that looked at tutoring and parental strategies (Sriprakash et al., 2016; Zhang, 2020). Below, we briefly review the major arguments of the studies using these analytical concepts, showing diversity in evidence and differences in opinion.

The first debate within this literature is concerned with the social class identities of parents. Most of the debating scholars use the social class lens to identify parents' behaviors and beliefs and observe that middle-class parents behave differently than working-class parents; these studies reported that intensive parenting is a middle-class strategy to secure intergenerational advantages (Gupta, 2020; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Concepts such as *middle-class anxiety* have been used to explain middle-class parents' concerns related to their children's education and future (Ball, 2003; Gupta, 2020). In contrast to these arguments, increasingly, scholars have noticed a shift in parental practices. Scholars such as Bennet et al. (2021), Irwin and Elley (2011), Ishizuka (2019), Kobakhidze et al. (2023), Rao (2018), and Sjödin and Roman (2018) have reported the widespread use of intensive parenting or tiger parenting, which has become common among parents across various categories of social class. Competitive education systems prompt all parents

to invest in their children's academic and non-academic activities, but low-income families have fewer resources for such educational investments.

The second debate is about whether tiger parenting is exclusively an Asian phenomenon. Chua's (2011) book prompted this discussion due to its emphasis on a dualist-cultural framework: Chinese parents follow different child-rearing practices (controlling, strict, and aggressive) than their Western counterparts (flexible and liberal). Rhee (2013) considered Chua's narrative to fit into the cultural clash framework of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* and Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Facilitated by these debates, various studies and media reports negatively stereotyped Chinese parents and some even used tiger parenting to explain Chinese students' success in PISA (Takayama, 2018). Regarding ethnicity as a major factor in intensive parenting signals cultural essentialism, as Ho (2017) maintained. Cultural essentialism provides a simple answer to a complex phenomenon. Scholars have argued that in increasingly competitive education systems in industrialized societies, intensive parenting exists beyond Asia (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). Doherty and Dooley (2018) posited that there is a need to understand structural policies and practices at the system level to unpack a neoliberal agenda shift that puts responsibilities on parents as customers in Asia and around the globe.

### 2.3 *Concerted cultivation*

Another prominent theoretical framework rooted in sociological theories is known as *concerted cultivation* – a term developed by Annette Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. This concept is used in literature to highlight the importance of parents' social class and to explain parental logic in childrearing. In her ethnographic study developed in the US context in the 1990s, Lareau studied three dimensions: the organization of activities, language use, and interaction with institutions; she argued that middle-class parents use a different parental logic that is more structured and what she termed *concerted cultivation*. She reported that working-class parents prioritize unstructured days with more freedom and autonomy – a style of parenting known as *the accomplishment of natural growth*. Similar to parentocracy and intensive parenting, the lens of concerted cultivation focuses on parents' socioeconomic resources, but it places more emphasis on class-informed cultural logic. Subsequent studies drawing on this theory have used both quantitative and qualitative methods and explored the class identities of parents who invest in extra lessons or tutoring. For example, Bodovski (2010) argued in her large-scale quantitative study that concerted cultivation could be explained by social class and also by race and gender. Using an ethnographic design, Calarco (2014) confirmed class-based socialization and differences in the parental logic of investments between the middle and working classes. Following Lareau (2011), who was influenced by Bourdieusian theories, these



authors argued that class reproduction strategies, including investing in private tutoring and extracurricular activities, reproduce social class and lead to inequalities.

Vincent and Maxwell (2016) regarded concerted cultivation as part of an intensification of parenting – a theme discussed in earlier sections. They argued that concerted cultivation represented the logic of interventionist parenting adopted by middle-class parents. Vincent and Maxwell (2016, p. 278) also warned against “the normalization of concerted cultivation” because those who do not follow such a parenting approach may be portrayed as providing inadequate parenting. Consequently, Vincent and Maxwell popularized the term *responsibilization of parenting*, according to which being a *good parent* meant buying into extracurricular activities. Other concepts similar to concerted cultivation include intensive mothering, *rigorous parenting* (a synonym of *concerted cultivation*), and *natural parenting* (a synonym of *accomplishment of natural growth*) (Matsuoka, 2019).

Although concerted cultivation appears to be a suitable framework for explaining parents and private tutoring, it has not been frequently used in shadow education research. Studies using this framework are relatively new, perhaps signaling an increasing trend. For example, Jansen et al. (2021) used concerted cultivation to frame a meta-analysis of studies in shadow education. They found that shadow education was a mediator between socioeconomic status and achievement across many studies. Matsuoka (2019) argued, in reference to Japanese parents, that they use a particular version of concerted cultivation according to which parents send children to *juku* (private tutoring institutions in Japan offering supplementary classes) early on and limit children’s media time. In the Chinese context, Peng (2021) used concerted cultivation and natural growth as a lens to understand Chinese migrant parents’ involvement in their left-behind children. Ying and Wright (2021) developed an interesting concept, *outsourced concerted cultivation*, to explain how high-income or *new rich* Chinese parents outsourced concerted cultivation to educational consultants and international schools in pursuit of admission to international institutions of higher education.

With some exceptions, such as Bodovski (2010) and Ying and Wright (2021), most of the aforementioned studies do not explain what variables/measures they used for concerted cultivation or what dimensions in their data correspond to this concept. Conceptual ambiguities remain because the term *concerted cultivation* is often used as a proxy for parental strategies used by middle-class parents. The most important missing piece in these studies is the absence of class analysis; Lareau (2011) developed this concept to understand the class behaviors, beliefs, and actions of parents, and so this analytical concept is best suited for exploring the interaction of parenting and social class. One may argue that parents with high socioeconomic status

do not necessarily exercise concerted cultivation or even that such parents may not necessarily fall into the category of middle-class in every context.

It is common for studies in shadow education to use socioeconomic status and especially parents' education level and family income as a proxy for social class. The usual finding presented in these studies is that socioeconomic status is positively associated with the use of tutoring (Entrich, 2015; Matsuoka, 2015; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). This is a pattern in Hong Kong (Bray et al., 2014), South Korea (Choi & Park, 2016), Finland (Kosunen et al., 2021), Vietnam (Dang, 2007), and Poland (Safarzyńska, 2013). Another common pattern in the findings of shadow education literature is that private tutoring is used mostly by middle-class parents, which closely follows the findings in parental studies, such as the one by Lareau (2011). Shadow education scholars subsequently made a conceptual link with inequalities and social stratification (Bray & Kwo, 2013; Gupta, 2020; Sriprakash et al., 2015; Zhang, 2020). Nevertheless, some studies reported opposing results – such as that family income is not a predictor of the demand for tutoring and therefore tutoring is not a catalyst of social inequalities (e.g., Entrich & Lauterbach, 2020; Jansen et al., 2021; Tan, 2017; Yung, 2020).

#### *2.4 Parental decision making*

A third strand of the theoretical perspectives on parental decision making about shadow education that is employed in the literature stems from rational choice theory. This prominent approach was used originally in economics but was further developed and applied within social sciences (Herfeld, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Rational choice theory assumes that individuals choose an alternative that they believe will result in an outcome that optimizes their preference and utility under subjectively conceived constraints (Sato, 2013). The wide application of rational choice theories in research on educational stratification and educational inequality (e.g., Maaz et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2003) showed that family background and institutional arrangements are important factors that affect educational decisions over the course of a person's life. Raymond Boudon distinguished between the primary and secondary effects of social origin on educational decision making. The primary effects are sociocultural or genetic factors impacting children's performance; they are manifested

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, there are also non-rational theories, which are sometimes called models of bounded rationality, procedural rationality, fast-and-frugal heuristics, or *satisficing* (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2015). However, these are not discussed here because our literature review did not find a single study in which these theories were explicitly used as a conceptual lens in relation to shadow education.

through family influences on children via the transmission of genetic traits and also through environmental conditions and the daily interactions between parents and children. The secondary effects are expressed via the educational choices made by children with varying socioeconomic backgrounds. These choices are affected by their social background, which forms their sensitivity to potential benefits and direct and indirect costs associated with educational investments and their tendency for risk aversion. Thus, children from more privileged social groups tend to stay longer in education than children from less privileged groups because their parents try to prevent downward intergenerational social mobility (Brooks et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2007; Ress & Azolini, 2014).

Boudon's *rational choice model* (in various later adaptations by authors like Erickson, Jonsson, Breen, Esser, and Goldthorpe) has been used in several studies of shadow education as an explanatory framework for parental choices about private tutoring that are differentiated based on their socioeconomic background. For example, Luplow and Schneider (2014) argued that when German parents decide about shadow education, they consider, on one hand, their motivation for education (their educational aspirations for their children, composed of the perceived utility of the attended track and the risk of intergenerational downward mobility) and, on the other hand, the perceived investment risk of such choices. The educational aspirations rise with the perceived importance of (shadow) education in preventing downward intergenerational mobility and for future careers; the investment risks rise with higher financial costs associated with the (shadow) education.

Applying Boudon's model in the Japanese context, Entrich (2015) argued that because shadow education was seen as an indispensable investment that helped pass entrance examinations, from a rational choice perspective, decisions about the next school level and the decision to invest in shadow education were closely related, as both decisions depended on a student's academic achievement and educational aspirations. Therefore, Entrich (2015) expanded Boudon's original model, explaining the decisions about formal education (school choice), by adding the decision on shadow education; he thereby acknowledged the important role individual students (not only parents) might play in decision making about shadow education. The expanded model shows that student aspirations are affected by their social, cultural, and economic background and their parents' aspirations for them, as well as by the current school they attend. Entrich (2015) found that the model fits the data on Japanese students and may be applicable also in other contexts (especially in systems with selective entrance examinations). Furthermore, his analyses confirmed that student influence on the decision increases with the age at which they make decisions about their future career paths.

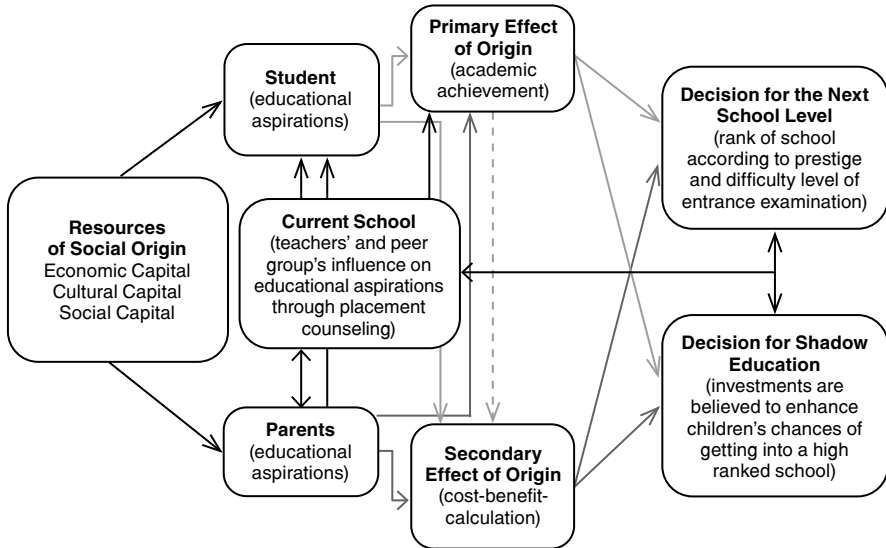


Figure 1

*Expansion of decision theory model following Boudon (1974)*

Rational choice theories were first used by economists, before entering other fields. The basic assumption that an individual makes rational decisions about consumer patterns is also reflected in the *consumer theory* (Barten & Böhm, 1982), which explains how people decide to spend their money in accordance with their individual preferences while taking into account various constraints. The theory maintains that when individuals make their consumer decisions, they strive for the maximization of their utility by buying products that bring them the greatest benefit, considering their available budgets. The marginal utility decreases with more consumption of the product: the more customers consume the product, the more they lose satisfaction (Varian, 2007). Elaborating on these economy-based perspectives, Liu and Bray (2020) applied consumer theory to parental decision making about tutoring in academic subjects in relation to tutoring in non-academic subjects. According to the authors, parents ranked different possibilities on the basis of how they perceived the extent to which they supported their children's education and considered both budget constraints and the (limited) time of children. In addition, parental preferences about private tutoring change over time and vary according to a child's academic performance and results, different stages of schooling, and education system reforms. Changes in parental preferences as well as in constraints may result in changes in parental demand for private tutoring.

It is also important that the individual actors do not make (rational) decisions in isolation but consider the wider context and the decisions of other actors. It can be observed that purely rational choices could lead to detrimental situations. One such example is the *prisoner's dilemma*. It refers to situations in which two parties are involved and in which both tend to *defect* following their own self-interest instead of cooperating, which would, in the end, lead to a more desirable outcome for both (Poundstone, 1993). Without mentioning it explicitly, Bray (2021) expressed the prisoner's dilemma in a metaphor about a sports stadium. When all the spectators are sitting, everybody sees the game easily. But when people at the front stand, people behind them must stand too, if they want to see the game. Eventually, almost everybody is standing in order to be able to see the game, with the exception of those who cannot stand and who, consequently, can only hear the game. Applied to shadow education, when almost everyone uses private tutoring, individual parents do not want to risk their child falling behind compared to other tutees, and the social pressure makes them invest in private tutoring.

Such *educational arms races* can be observed in many competitive national contexts, which led Yu and Ding (2011) to apply the prisoner's dilemma to parental decision making about shadow education in the context of the highly competitive Chinese society. They concluded that if every parent chose not to pay for tutoring, the overall outcome for all parents would be more beneficial than if every parent chose to do so.

Another broader conceptualization of parental decision making was provided by Jokić's conceptual framework. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development, Jokić (2013) introduced a conceptual framework in which the decision to use private tutoring was located in the center; in concentric circles around it, Jokić placed several socially organized subsystems – intrinsically interconnected structures that potentially influence the decision to use private tutoring, with those that are closer to the center having a more immediate influence than those that are further from it (Figure 2). Among the most proximal are factors related to an individual pupil (individual characteristics, such as cognitive abilities, motivational patterns, and work habits) and their parents (parenting styles, the quality of communication between pupils and parents regarding educational issues, and levels of parental monitoring of their child's educational achievement and performance). Other subsystems include the school (teaching and learning practices within the school setting, school climate, assessment practices, class processes, and teacher competences), the education system (overall structure of the educational system, educational policy, prescribed curricula, and assessment arrangements) and wider societal and cultural influences (value placed on education within a specific society and levels of competitiveness).

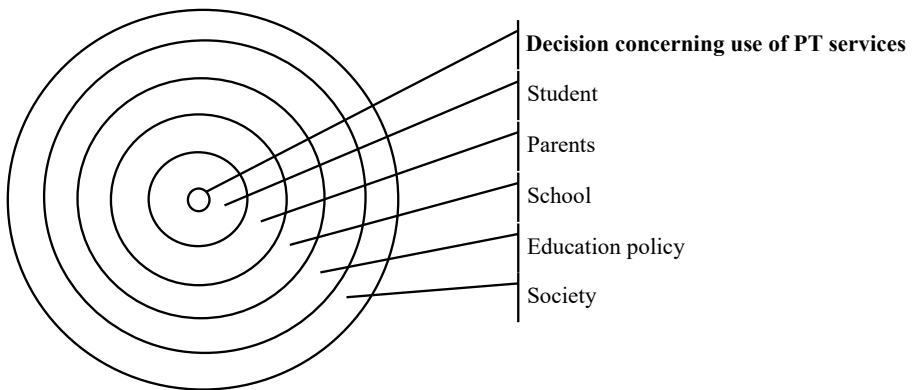


Figure 2

*Conceptual framework for decisions concerning the use of PT services (Jokić, 2013)*

By placing the decision to use private tutoring amidst various factors, Jokić (2013) explicitly assumed that “the decision is almost exclusively made by pupils and/or their parents” (p. 26).<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Jokić’s model “does not implicate a focus on the analytical exploration of the actual decision-making process undertaken in choosing whether or not to use PT services, but instead on the varying perspectives of multiple educational stakeholders on the potential influences and impacts of this decision” (2013, p. 25). In the subsequent text of the study, Jokić (2013) used this conceptual framework to structure the findings of their comparative qualitative study from five post-socialist countries and to describe the mechanisms and ways in which the decision to use private tutoring was influenced by various factors generated by various layers. This influential ecological perspective inspired later works (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015; Luo & Chan, 2022; Mischo, 2014). However, it did not provide more systematic information about the micro level of the decision-making process: for example, the order of mental steps that parents take before they reach the decision to invest in private tutoring. This would assume a more psychological approach that would also take into account psychological processes related to decision making. However, psychological perspectives are rarely used in shadow education literature (Št’astný, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The framework might be more accurate if the decision was not placed in the center of the conceptual framework but instead extended over the subsystems of pupil and parents as an underlying circle.

### 3 Discussion

The review of theoretical perspectives used in shadow education research studying parents demonstrated that research in shadow education is often interdisciplinary in nature, borrowing concepts and analytic tools from sociology, psychology, and economics. Our finding is in line with Hajar and Karakus (2022), who reported that shadow education research (which includes a focus on parents and on students, teachers, tutors, and institutions) mainly draws on the disciplines of sociology, economics, educational psychology, and language education. Studies exploring parental perspectives in the field of shadow education frequently intersect with the broader literature on parenting, such as parental involvement, parenting styles, and parental psychology, and often produce similar findings. The distinctions between the theoretical concepts discussed in this article are not clear cut; they often overlap and use different terms to denote the same phenomenon (see Table 1 for an overview).

As is apparent from our analysis, the dominant perspective used to study parents is influenced by Bourdieusian theories of social capital, class, and socioeconomic background. Bourdieu's appeal to shadow education scholars is evidenced by the frequent use of theories such as the theory of capitals, parentocracy, middle class advantage, and intensive/tiger parenting. A related concept – concerted cultivation – was developed in the early 1990s and has only recently spread to shadow education research: studies applying this concept have mostly been published in the past five to seven years. Shadow education researchers confirm what Atkinson (2016) wrote about Bourdieu: “There is no doubt about it: Pierre Bourdieu is the single most influential sociologist of the later twentieth century” (p. 1). When it comes to understanding parents in shadow education, the explanatory power of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts is unparalleled. At the same time, discussion about the theoretical limitations of Bourdieu's theory, especially in non-Western contexts, is almost non-existent.

This literature review shows that one concept that has resonated considerably with shadow education scholars is parentocracy. Some scholars, such as Tan (2017) and Yung and Zeng (2022), have questioned whether parentocracy and meritocracy are complementary or mutually exclusive concepts in highly competitive education systems such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Similarly, Michael Sandel's book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good* (2020) reminds the reader that, in the US context, “high family income, not SAT scores, is your real ticket to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton” (Sandel, 2020). In terms of its attention to capital, most shadow education research has been focused on exploring economic capital (e.g., family income) and cultural capital (education level/credentials) of

Table 1  
*Overview of reviewed concepts*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Relevant mainly to...</b>	<b>Involvement in shadow education practices explained mainly by...</b>
<b>Parentocracy</b>	A system whereby the education a child receives must conform to the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the abilities and efforts of pupils	Middle-class parents	Wealth and wishes of parents
<b>Tiger parenting / Intensive parenting</b>	Active parental involvement in their children's academic and social lives, strict planning and monitoring of children's activities	Middle-class parents	Parenting style and mindset
<b>Concerted cultivation</b>	Parenting practice marked by a parent's attempts to foster their child's talents by incorporating organized activities in their children's lives and structured interactions with social institutions	Middle-class parents*	Social class and related cultural logic (habitus)
<b>Rational choice theory</b>	Individuals choose an alternative that they believe would result in an outcome that optimizes their preference and utility under subjectively conceived constraints	Decision-making subjects (including parents with varying socioeconomic status)	Rational decision that takes into account the socioeconomic position of the subject
<b>Consumer theory</b>	When making consumer decisions, individuals strive to maximize their utility by buying products that bring them the greatest benefit, taking into account their available budgets	Decision-making subjects (including parents)	Rational decision that takes into account the economic situation of the subject (available budget)
<b>Prisoner's dilemma</b>	Decisions that follow the self-interests of involved parties instead of cooperating lead to a more detrimental outcome for both	Decision-making subjects (including parents)	Rational decision that takes into account the potential decisions of others
<b>Conceptual framework based on ecological model</b>	A framework that identifies different ecosystems' influence on the decision to procure private tutoring	Parents (and/or pupils)	Various conceptually grouped factors with varying degree of importance

\* In contrast to accomplishment by natural growth, practiced mainly by working-class parents  
 Source: authors (based on the works reviewed in this article)



parents, leaving social capital (e.g., social connections) less explored. This type of capital was only recently addressed by Jo (2022), who considered the procurement of shadow education as a *market-based parental involvement*, contrasting it with *traditional* parent-school partnerships, and suggesting that much exclusive and non-public information about high-quality shadow education is shared within relatively closed informal networks of closely cooperating mothers, rather than publicly. One could argue that the symbolic capital (e.g., honor, prestige, and recognition) of parents also merits a closer look. This could be a useful analytical tool to study affluent parents from elite backgrounds, which is another segment of parents less studied in shadow education research. In her essay on the infamous college admission scandal, Bodovski (2020) highlighted the importance of social and symbolic capital; parents in the US who successfully bought their children admission to elite institutions of higher education possessed economic, social, and symbolic capital.

A relatively new phenomenon that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, commonly known as *pandemic pods*, *educational pods*, and *micro schools*, also deserves scrutiny. Pandemic pods were small homeschooling groups organized by parents. They took on various forms, from unstructured home arrangements by parents and teachers to well-organized homeschools hiring expensive teachers (Horn, 2021). Given the unequal access to pods, some scholars argued that they aggravated class and race disparities, which could have a long-term impact on education (James, 2021). Pods are another example of the shifting responsibilities of parents, and they deserve scholarly attention. Shadow education research has yet to speak out about pandemic pods and related tutoring practices, such as *Zutors* (Zoom tutors), but there may be emerging research on this new phenomenon that requires time for data analysis and publishing (Štastný & Kobakhidze, 2020).

Another set of theories covered in this article are theories of decision making that stem from economics and psychology. An important limitation of these decision-making theories and concepts is that (with the exception of Liu and Bray, 2020) they tend to focus solely on the mere binary outcome (i.e., to take or not to take private tutoring). They usually explain only the initial parental decision; they do not consider that decision making about shadow education is a continuous process that is complex and includes many additional choices, such as types, seasons, tutors, or subjects (Liu & Bray, 2020). Parents' involvement in shadow education is thus not limited to gathering information about private tutoring or paying for the service; it also entails monitoring children's progress, continuously checking and consulting with tutors, and so on (Kao, 2021).

More research may be needed to unpack the nature of decisions in these decision-making theories. For example, it would be interesting to know the role of mothers and fathers in decision making; which decisions are made by whom and how much coercion, persuasion, or autonomy is given to children. This can also be linked to parenting styles: parents who tend to be authoritarian impose decisions on their children, while those with a more liberal parenting style choose to negotiate. The age-related evolution of children's own decision-making agency is another important topic to study. The context and process of decision making also requires more attention and factors contributing to constructing or reconstructing a decision in the family. Some of these dimensions need more elaboration in the literature.

This special issue focuses on parental involvement in education. After more than fifty years of ongoing research, scholarly literature has established that parental involvement is an important element of effective education for children of all ages (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). As noted by Anderson and Minke (2007), although several conceptual models were proposed in the literature, much information remains unknown about how parents make decisions about their involvement in the education of their children. Similar observations could be made about parental decision making regarding shadow education, which can be considered a specific form of parental involvement in which parents *outsource* parts of their parenting tasks and roles to private tutors (Kao, 2021).

Moreover, shadow education literature has omitted some promising conceptual frameworks/ theories anchored in the literature on parental involvement that could be exploited and applied to explain parental decision making about shadow education. One example is the model of parental decision making developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and further adapted and elaborated by Anderson and Minke (2007). The model stipulates that parents decide about their involvement based on their beliefs and ideas about what their role should be in relation to the schooling of their children, a sense of efficacy, and general opportunities and demands from the child and the school indicating that parental involvement is desirable and appreciated. As parents' decisions about shadow education can be understood as one form of parental involvement in education, the model can be easily applied to cover parental decisions to procure shadow education – the shadow education literature has already established that when deciding about shadow education, parents consider their perceptions of their parenting roles (Jansen et al., 2022; Oller & Glasman, 2013), their sense of efficacy for helping their child (Liu and Bray, 2020), the role of the school/teachers (Kobakhidze, 2018), and the children themselves (Entrich, 2015). The model by Anderson and Minke (2007) could be further extended to cover other determinants of decisions that were discussed earlier in this article.

## Conclusions

This article presents a literature review related to parents and shadow education, with a focus on understanding the major theoretical concepts and analytical tools used by scholars in the field. The major theoretical directions covered in this article were related to parents' social background and parental decision making. We acknowledge two major limitations: the article potentially excluded other theories that did not appear in our selected databases and although most research in the field of shadow education has been published in English, as indicated by the bibliometric study of shadow education research by Hajar and Karakus (2022), this article excluded academic publications published in languages other than English.

We hope that our article, which echoes the specific theme of this special issue on parental involvement and parents as customers, can contribute to our field of research and will inspire scholars to continue this line of inquiry.

Future studies may advance and deepen scholarship in the aforementioned conceptual domains or pick up new topics through different theoretical lenses. For example, one of the understudied topics in shadow education is generational impact and parental socialization processes. It is worth reflecting upon parents' own lived experiences and exploring how these experiences shape parental aspirations and choices of shadow education for their children. Looking at generational changes could reveal structural changes and cultural shifts in parental norms that have accrued over the past few decades; they may have significant implications for education and parenting. Collecting biographic data on parents and understanding their life histories could shed light on some of their parental choices and attitudes within shadow education. Another equally understudied aspect is peer influence among parents with regard to shadow education use, as well as the sources and mechanisms of social emulation. Despite some conceptual gaps, shadow education literature is expanding rapidly (Bray, 2021; Hajar & Karakus, 2021), and we hope that new empirical research will give impetus to fresh concepts generated within the field rather than those borrowed from other disciplines.

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