Bridging the Learning Gaps:

Schooling, Parenting and Asian Migration

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Australian Government
Australian Research Council

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Executive Summary

The Schooling, Parenting and Ethnicity: Asian Migration and Australian Education project examined the impacts of Asian migrants on public education in NSW schools in the context of their perceived educational success, including their dominance of selective programs and increasing use of tutoring.

The report cautions against reducing complex social and educational phenomena to single factors such as ethnicity because of the ways it intersects with questions of socio-economic status (SES), the long-term focus in NSW on selective programs and local school communities. The report shows that the undue emphasis on tutoring centres, selectivity and Asian students prohibits a nuanced understanding of the range of and reasons for the family practices that go into enhancing a child's educational future.

Parental choices in schooling are part of wider education cultures – configurations of schools, homes, and other institutional spaces shaped by systemic forces and local contexts – in which educational and home practices unfold.

For families of migrant backgrounds, these choices are also shaped by the 'migratory gamble' involved in moving to another country and adapting to another education system.

Parental involvement in schooling varies enormously in terms of what parents do, where they do it and how they do it, and may entail practices within and outside the school setting. The variety of practices it entails can be seen as constituting *family pedagogies*, practices which may include involvement in formal school activities, providing educational resources, sending children to tutoring, providing dedicated workspaces and supervising and setting homework.

These family pedagogies don't exist in a vacuum, nor do they simply derive from homeland cultures, but are often responses to and interactions with government policies, school practices, alternative educational organisations and local networks.

Family pedagogies, therefore, sit alongside the dominant *institutional pedagogies* found in schools and the schooling system more broadly, and those found in other educational organisations such as tutoring centres, with whom they may exist in relations of congruence and discordance.

The parental efforts represented through family pedagogies vary significantly in terms of ethnicity, SES and the dynamics of the education culture in which they are located: and particularly central are the desires of educated, professional migrants who,

often because of limited knowledge of Australian education or because they desire to make the most of their 'gamble' in migrating, put in 'extra work' to ensure their children's success.

This 'extra work' represents a form of concerted cultivation which is crucial to the development of a scholarly habitus amongst academically successful students, and crucial to preparation for entry into OCs and GAT classes and selective high schools.

These family pedagogies also rest on perceptions of certain learning gaps – either in their own understanding of the education system or in the school's provision of what parents might view as an adequate education. Even when they are positive about their school, many parents (particularly of academically successful students) see shortfalls in their child's education. Homework is a key priority amongst many parents, but they perceive a tendency for schools to downplay homework in primary schools. Issues of discipline and feedback also arose in what they saw as the 'better education' provided through specialist programs and external organisations.

Tutoring is one important strategy parents resort to in addressing these gaps, effectively outsourcing many traditional school functions. Some migrants turn to tutoring but there are dangers with seeing the growth in the tutoring industry simply as an 'Asian' phenomenon. It would also be wrong to ignore the diversity within this industry. Despite the many criticisms of tutoring practices, there is acknowledgement that it has been an important element in many students' academic success.

The long-standing focus on selective educational programs in the NSW system has played a crucial role in creating education cultures in which parents and students compete for places that are seen to offer educational success, but 'potential' for some may be inequality for others. Further, this competition has given rise to intensive study routines within many families that increasingly shape the primary years of schooling, as well as fuelling the growth of the tutoring industry.

The report identifies several ongoing and unresolved challenges in the NSW educational system that arise from a consideration of these issues.

Introduction

Introduction

This report is based on the findings of *Schooling, Parenting and Ethnicity: Asian Migration and Australian Education*, an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project undertaken by researchers from Western Sydney University and the University of Technology Sydney. The project was prompted by a need to better understand the growing impact of Asian migrant families on Australian schooling, the factors shaping their perceptions and practices around education and seeing these in relation to other Australian families.

Asian migration is transforming many aspects of life in migrant-based societies such as Australia. In education, an arena of both aspiration and anxiety for many parents, social anxieties are increasingly ethnicised, prompting moral panics about so-called 'pushy' Asian parents and their 'over-achieving' dragon children (Ho, 2019; Watkins et al., 2017; Watkins & Noble, 2013; Wu & Singh, 2004). These panics often draw on essentialist and simplistic stereotypes of 'Asian cultures' fuelled by publications such as Amy Chua's best-selling *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) and more recent reports in both legacy (Eng, 2023; Neill, 2017; Broinowski, 2015a) and social media that pit a hardline 'Asian' style of parenting against a more liberal 'Western' approach. Such arguments imply there are fundamental cultural incompatibilities between 'East' and 'West', often creating friction within schools and their broader communities.

The children of Asian migrants are disproportionately successful in education in Australia (Ho, 2019; Watkins, 2017). The project was keen to examine why this is the case and to delve more deeply into the basis of these stereotypes. Are there, for example, different Asian and Western approaches to parenting that contribute to distinct educational values and practices? If so, do Asian migrants maintain these after migrating to Australia? To what extent do factors such as socio-economic status (SES), parents' level of education, visa categories and length of residency impact upon parenting style? Explanations such as 'It's just their culture' close down meaningful discussion and, so, placing the behaviour of migrants and the majority population in a broader social context is vital for comprehending the complex factors behind people's attitudes and practices around education.

Domestic education policies are an important part of this social context. The acceleration of Asian migration has coincided with changes in the Australian education system such as the greater prevalence of selective schooling, standardised testing and the marketisation of education (Keddie et al., 2025; Stacey, 2019; Windle, 2015; Campbell et al., 2009) which play out differently in local communities with their own specific contexts (Ho et al., 2015). In what ways have these affected the parenting practices of Asian-, Anglo- and other Australians? With a detailed examination of what here are termed 'education cultures' – the ensemble of organisations, practices and values, familial and institutional, in which parental choices are located and educational dispositions formed – this report provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and schooling and the pedagogical role of parenting within this dynamic.

Aims of the Project

To do this, the research project set out to comparatively examine the educational practices and values of families of Chinese-, Indian- and Anglo-Australian backgrounds, focusing on those with primary school-aged children. Chinese- and Indian-Australians are the two largest, and growing, migrant populations with a language background other than English (LBOTE) in Australia (ABS, 2022), perceived as strongly valuing education and typically attracting criticism for the practices associated with this academic focus and drive to succeed. While these three groups were the initial focus of the research, given the student populations of the schools that comprised the final sample, and other families' willingness to participate, there were also those of other ethnic backgrounds such as Lebanese, Pacific Islander and those within the broader categories of South Asian (Nepalese and Sri Lankan), and East Asian (Vietnamese and Korean) who were included in the study. Yet it was those of Chinese and Indian backgrounds who formed the greater part of the sample of families. The study sought to also examine the commonalities and differences within and between these ethnic groups with the following aims:

1. to compare the parenting practices of Chinese-, Indian-, Anglo- and other Australians in relation to schooling, examining how ethnicity, SES, and other factors, affect parenting choices regarding education;
2. to identify how parenting practices are shaped by, and affect, Australian schooling, with a focus on schools and families in Sydney, NSW, particularly in relation to school choice, tutoring, homework practices and parental engagement with education;
3. to acquire a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the relation between ethnicity and education, and the role of parenting as an evidence base to inform public debate and educational and social policy.

Background

Much scholarship (Goh, 2015; Halse, 2015) and policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012) now proclaim Australians are living in an 'Asian century'. Globally, China and India host the world's largest and fastest growing middle classes, many of whom are migrating to countries such as Australia in record numbers, and particularly to capital cities such as Sydney (Megalogenis, 2017). This is aided by Australia's skilled migration program, similar to those in other Anglophone, migrant nations. These Asian diasporas are leaving their mark on their host countries in fundamental ways, transforming various spheres of life, and their presence in Australian schools is increasingly felt. Students from Asian migrant backgrounds often outperform others in standardised tests (OECD, 2018; Kwan, 2017) and are disproportionately admitted into selective schools and prestigious university courses (Ho, 2019; Watkins, 2017). While the high performance of Asian students is not unique to those of Chinese and Indian backgrounds – with many of those from Vietnam and Korea, for example, proving similarly successful (Maire & Ho, 2024) – it is Chinese and Indian students that tend to attract the most attention given their greater number and prominence within Australian systems of schooling. Scholarship around the relationship between ethnicity and education has previously foregrounded disadvantage and underachievement (Kalantzis & Cope, 1987), but the success of many students of Asian backgrounds suggests this is no longer the case. Public debate about Asian-Australian high achievers has increased over the last 20 years, reflecting the increasing 'ethnicisation' of academic achievement and intensifying

moral panics, and a racialised hostility in response to this (Watkins & Noble, 2013). Many Anglo-Australian parents, for example, voice concerns about growing competition in education (Watkins, 2017), ethnic segregation in schools (Ho, 2017) and the rise of tutoring (Dooley et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2019; Sriprakash et al., 2015).

Despite this attention, there has been little scholarly research comparing how families of Asian-Australian and other backgrounds approach education. Asian success is often explained in culturally essentialist terms, with hard work and ambition seen as inherently 'Asian', especially 'Chinese' and traceable to Confucianism (Ryan & Louie, 2007; Chan, 1999). Increasingly, those of Indian backgrounds are also perceived as 'aggressive' and educationally ambitious (Aris, 2017; Noble & Watkins, 2014; White, 2013), with many of these South Asian parents now referred to as 'Indian Tigers' (Singh, 2012). This so-called 'tiger parenting', emphasising discipline and schoolwork over freedom and 'fun' (Chua, 2011), is viewed as a distinctly 'Asian' phenomenon. Such cultural essentialism is also seen in much of the literature on ethnicity and education within educational psychology and human development. This literature often examines the causes of Asian migrant educational success by identifying distinct ethnic 'learning styles', e.g. the 'Chinese learner' (Ryan, 2010; Nisbett et al., 2001). Other studies identify 'Asian' parenting styles, including Chinese and Indian 'tiger parenting', evaluating their effectiveness for education and well-being (Juang et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013). These studies tend to view learning and parenting as inherent and static, removed from their social context, fuelling simplistic, culturally essentialist explanations of educational outcomes which are never put in explicit empirical juxtaposition with 'Anglo' or other cohorts.

Other scholars have challenged such perspectives, arguing that the image of the Asian highflyer masks enormous variation within this cohort (Li & Wang, 2008; Chang & Au, 2007). Others dispute the prevalence of 'tiger parenting' and question its association with superior academic performance (Kim et al., 2013; Archer & Francis, 2007). Sociologists of education and ethnicity highlight structural factors such as SES, migrant status, discrimination and ethnic capital, all of which, they argue, play a powerful role in shaping educational outcomes (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Other sociologists have demonstrated that the parenting styles of high-income groups in the Anglo population generally feature high expectations, discipline, and heavy investment of resources into children's education (Reay, 2004; Lareau, 2003), challenging the stereotype that these are essentially 'Asian' practices. But, thus far, these studies, almost none of which are Australian, have done little to refute the simplistic explanations of Asian success evident in public debates. This is partly because they rarely consider the qualitative detail of the relationships between ethnicity, parenting and educational practices, best obtained through ethnographic enquiry, which can reveal how ethnicity operates relationally and dynamically in shared contexts (not as a reflection of an assumed 'culture') and which can explore the pedagogical dimensions of social practices (how capacities are acquired). This was the focus of the research informing this report which sought to interrogate the stereotype of the 'pushy Asian parent' through a broader examination of the education cultures in which families from diverse backgrounds produce children who acquire, what Watkins and Noble (2013) term, a 'scholarly habitus' to excel at school and, conversely, the practices that do not.

Key Concepts

While a key aim of the project was to compare the parenting practices of Chinese-, Indian- and Anglo-Australians in relation to schooling, another intention was to address similarities between, and differences within, these categories, for example, in terms of SES. In doing this, the project was informed by critical cultural theories that reframe the ways people think about the relationship between ethnicity and education challenging the essentialism that often underlies

perceptions of migrant communities. Below is an account of the key concepts drawn from these theoretical perspectives that informed the research and are utilised throughout the report.

Culture and Ethnicity

Culture and ethnicity are complex terms often used as synonyms. Ethnicity, as a category, fell out of favour during the 1980s due to the disparaging use of the term ‘ethnic’ at which point it was ‘culture’, ‘cultural background’ or ‘cultural identity’ that were preferred. But such terms can create confusion as ‘culture’ is a much broader concept which, in relation to identity, may be influenced by not only ethnicity, but a myriad of other factors such as: SES, gender, religion, age, all of which are ‘cultural’. For this reason, throughout much of this report, ethnicity is the favoured term and, when used in referring to the project participants, was mostly derived from how they self-identified, together with additional information such as country of birth and language. This, however, requires some qualification. While the report favours ‘ethnicity’, in both the survey and interviews undertaken for the project, the terms 'cultural identity' and 'cultural background' were used respectively for the reasons referred to above, and because they now operate as the more common terms in everyday usage.

The project’s focus, however, is ethnicity, a concept representing a sense of commonality generally based on several characteristics: country of birth, language, physical similarities, customs, religion and so on, though, of course, country of birth is not a clear indicator. Nations are generally comprised of those of varying ethnicities, especially given increasing flows of migration, and, so, one’s country of birth, ethnicity and nationality may all be quite different. Ethnic categorisation is a complex process. Ethnicity is also often conflated with categories of ‘race’, described in terms of skin colour (White/Black) or geopolitical region (Asian/African). ‘Asian’, as a category, can be particularly problematic. Asia as a geopolitical region, includes a range of diverse national, regional and ethnic groups and, in any case, means different things in different national contexts (see Watkins et al., 2017). Yet, it is a term with wide currency and is employed here as a collective term but not to signify a specific ethnicity. While various characteristics are used to determine ethnicity, it is, in fact, a social construction based on the perception of shared qualities, born out of the interaction between self-identification and identification by others (Watkins & Noble, 2021). Articulations of ethnic identity are, therefore, always in negotiation and subject to processes of hybridisation: not just because of experiences of inter-marriage (which was the case for a number of the project participants), but also because of processes of cultural flows, exchange and adaptation.

Two final points in relation to ethnicity also require noting. The report makes use of the category ‘Anglo-Australian’, or ‘Anglo’, as an ethnicity, in order to compare the experiences of migrants with those of the majority population. Also, in some cases, the report employs composite categories to deal with people from a range of ethnic backgrounds – such as ‘Other East Asian’, ’Other South Asian’ and 'Other Middle Eastern' – to provide some points of comparison without aggregating all those not Chinese, Indian and Anglo, into one 'Other' category. This is especially the case in relation to the survey discussed in Chapter 3 where the sample includes many of those outside the targeted groups.

SES

SES is also a complex category. There is no single measure of SES: rather, it is constructed from a number of different dimensions. Here, these include occupation, household income, educational

qualifications and suburb of residence. A single focus on occupation can be misleading. A plumber, for example, could be an employee, a subcontractor or a small business owner. The boundaries between SES categories are, therefore, neither simple nor clear-cut. For this research, occupational categories were first considered in determining participants' SES, but these were checked against income, educational qualifications and suburb, to make a balanced and reasonable assumption about someone's status, which provided useful comparisons across both the quantitative and qualitative samples within the project. SES is used here rather than social class, though at points throughout the report the latter is mentioned. While related, SES tends to foreground stratification and social hierarchy and the intention here is to provide a relatively objective measure in relation to these. Social class, on the other hand, is a much broader concept commonly also denoting values and lifestyle.

Education Cultures

In general terms, 'culture' is a category used to denote a certain coherence in relation to social values and practices. 'Education cultures' is a term used to refer to the similarities and differences in the values and practices around education of the schools and families involved in the study that informs this report. It is unpacked here with reference to a number of related concepts: ethnic capital (Lee, 2006; Modood, 2004), concerted cultivation and natural growth (Lareau, 2003), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and scholarly habitus (Watkins & Noble, 2013; Watkins, 2012).

Education cultures, however, are not restricted to individual families and schools but are collective phenomena that emerge within local settings, including in school communities, as networks of parents, families and friends share experiences, perceptions and practices. Within these networks, what Modood (2004) and Lee (2006) term 'ethnic capital' in relation to migrant families and what Lareau (2003) terms 'concerted cultivation' within middle-class families, are brought into relation. Ethnic capital refers to particular forms of knowledge and networking shared within diasporic communities, in this case around education, which may be of benefit, for example, to new arrivals unfamiliar with the host country's system of schooling and further education. This could pertain to knowledge of the academic performance of schools, testing procedures, tutoring centres, variations in teaching practices, and expectations around parent involvement; knowledge that longer-term residents take for granted.

Lareau uses the term 'concerted cultivation' to characterise the parenting practices of the middle class which involve high expectations around academic performance but are generally less overt than the stereotypical 'tiger mum'. Typically, it also involves the cultivation of certain cultural pursuits evident in extracurricular activities such as playing a musical instrument, dance, art, drama, reading, sport, visiting galleries and museums, as well as certain cognitive skills, such as reasoning. Such forms of concerted cultivation are successful in engendering what the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, terms 'cultural capital', knowledge and skills that prove beneficial in schooling. In its embodied form, cultural capital can promote certain dispositions to learning, collectively termed a 'scholarly habitus', providing a firm foundation for academic success. Concerted cultivation also entails parents acting as advocates for their child within a school, questioning teachers' decisions, in contrast to what Lareau terms the 'natural growth' parenting of the working class, which tends to be less interventionist and, in relation with schools, leaves a child's education 'up to the professionals'. Both 'concerted cultivation' and 'natural growth' are used throughout the report but not uncritically so. As with 'ethnicity', any delineation related to class or SES can be quite complex and parenting practices may not be so easily categorised. They can, however, be useful heuristics typifying a certain coherence between SES and parenting approach.

The notion of education cultures utilised here is also influenced by two overlapping arenas of practice: i. institutional pedagogies and ii. family pedagogies, each of which is discussed below. Educational research frequently talks about the challenges of home/school congruence, but the value in analysing 'education cultures' through the notions of institutional and family pedagogies is in addressing the complexity in the social organisation of teaching and learning within and across diverse school communities.

Institutional Pedagogies

Through the notion of institutional pedagogies, the intention is to move away from a simple binary of policy and practice in studies of formal schooling, to capture the pedagogic dimension of institutionalised practices and discourses that operate across a range of educational organisations which feature in, and vary across, schooling communities. They are pedagogic in that they shape the practices of schools, parents, students and others (Watkins et al., 2015). While classrooms are central to this, education as a social process is a much larger phenomenon, involving structural logics (government policies around testing, selectivity and giftedness, school choice and homework, etc) that impact schools, and parents and students' perspectives of schooling, and other organisations which may provide services in local communities (tutoring centres, etc). Students experience a range of structures and practices which may compete and overlap with pedagogic practices within the home.

The institutional pedagogies examined here refer to the practices and values associated with:

- school-based pedagogies
- varying homework policies
- the growth of standardised testing
- the promotion of school choice
- increasing selective streaming
- the growth in tutoring services.

Family Pedagogies

Through the notion of family pedagogies, emphasis is drawn away from psychologically-oriented notions of parenting and from decontextualised 'student attributes', which have been too easily attached to a narrow focus on ethnicity, neglecting the many other factors already mentioned, towards examining the processes and relations of teaching and learning which structure the experience of family as the primary site of socialisation. Existing studies frequently privilege a notion of style to categorise people – and 'cultures' – into types, losing a sense of the complexity and dynamism of practices and reifying the significance of ethnicity (Kim et al., 2013). Moreover, much research tends to ignore the collective and negotiated nature of parenting, which is always in 'ecologies' or networks involving siblings, extended family members, neighbours and carers, diasporic communities and institutions such as schools (Kolar & Soriano, 2000). Phoenix and Husain (2007, p. 35) argued years ago that studies should not 'over-ethnicise' parenting practices, arguing there was a need for 'work that acknowledges the complexity of parenting and ethnicity by … recognising that all ethnic groups change over time and differ according to context'.

The family pedagogies examined here relate to (primarily parents') practices and values associated with:

- parents' engagement with their children and with schools
- school choice and how it may influence residential choice
- homework, study habits and expectations about children's performance at school
- use of academic tutoring for remediation, enrichment and/or exam preparation
- preferences for extracurricular programs, e.g., music, sport
- leisure time: how it is spent, and what weight it is given
- long-term goals associated with higher education and career.

Structure of the Report

The report is largely comprised of chapters on the various data sets from the project. First, though, Chapter 1 outlines the methodology that was employed and Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature around four key themes that informed the research: i. parental engagement with schools, ii. homework, iii. tutoring and iv. school choice and selectivity. These are then followed by an overview of the survey findings in Chapter 3 providing a closer examination of the demographics of each school and, among other things, parents' perspectives around the themes examined in Chapter 2. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 then each focus on one group of participants: principals and teachers, parents, tutoring centre providers and students, examining their perspectives on these themes and others by drawing specifically on the interview data. Chapters 8 and 9 then draw on both the interview and observational data in case studies of a selection of the students and their families involved in the study. Six of these are from the group of low SES schools in Chapter 8, and six are garnered from the high SES schools in Chapter 9, comparing variations in education cultures associated with ethnicity and SES that involve different practices around learning at home and school, and the role parents play in relation to these. This is followed by the Conclusion that returns to the project aims, summarising the key findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 1:

Methodology

Chapter 1: Methodology

To undertake the research, the project utilised a mixed methodology that was both quantitative and qualitative in design, although emphasis was placed on the latter with a strong focus on ethnographic enquiry. This approach was deemed necessary to capture the required data for an examination of the parenting practices around education evident in the diverse range of families involved in the study, namely those of Chinese, Indian and Anglo backgrounds but including others, all of whom were of varying SES. The intention was also to gauge how these practices affect, and are affected by, those within schools that have, in turn, been influenced by a range of departmental policies. The quantitative component of the research primarily involved a survey which was designed to yield broad-based data around these practices from a wide sample of families, before narrowing the focus to employ qualitative techniques to delve more deeply into these. The use of interviews with various participants (parents, students, principals, teachers and tutoring centre providers) and focus groups with members of Parents and Citizens (P&C) committees, combined with observation of numerous sites (homes, classrooms, and tutoring centres), ensured the project was able to ascertain not simply what participants said, but what they did in relation to education, yielding a comprehensive corpus of data that informs this report.

The research was initially intended to be undertaken in three distinct stages involving: i. a survey, ii. observation and iii. interviews and focus groups. Due to the impact of COVID-19, however, the timing of stages two and three was delayed, leading to an overlap in the collection of this data and the use of alternate techniques, more of which is outlined below, as is the wider impact of COVID-19 on the project.

Project Sample

Before considering what each of these stages involved, an account of the final sample of participants is provided beginning with the families and schools, including how and why they were selected. Thirty-eight students and generally their mothers, though sometimes fathers, participated in the project. In a small number of cases both parents were involved. The families included those of the following ethnic backgrounds:

- Chinese 12
- Indian and Sri Lankan 9
- Anglo 3
- Lebanese 3
- Russian 1
- Pacific Islander[1] 1
- Vietnamese 1
- Nepalese 1
- Mixed Heritage 7

The students of mixed heritage included two who were Anglo-Chinese, one who was Anglo-Dutch, one Lebanese-Egyptian, one Indian-Dutch, one Indian-Egyptian-Anglo and one Indian-Filipino-Anglo. Unless otherwise specified in Tables 1a and 1b below, students were in Year 5 at the commencement of the research. This was a strategic choice, as being the penultimate year of primary school, students and their families would be considering options for secondary education.

[1] To ensure anonymity, the collective term 'Pacific Islander' is used.

This could involve sitting for selective high school entry exams and so could affect practices of home and school-based learning and students' possible attendance at tutoring, all of which the project was keen to investigate.

Students were selected from one of six schools from within two groups; those located in a low SES area of Sydney and the others in a high SES area. The SES of these locations was based on Local Government Area (LGA) data of household median weekly income and the schools by their Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score. The reason for selecting schools of varying SES was to consider its impact on parental choices around education and its interrelationship with ethnicity and other factors.

Both of these SES groups included one school of the following type located in relatively close proximity:

1. a comprehensive school without any selective streams or programs
2. a school with a GAT[2] stream or program
3. a school with Years 5 and 6 opportunity classes (OC) with entry based on NSW Department of Education (DoE) centralised testing.

The rationale for including these different types of schools was twofold. Firstly, it allowed for consideration of the extent to which degrees of selectivity affect parents' choice of schools for their children and, secondly, how this affected the schools themselves, their demographic profile, patterns of enrolment and relations between different cohorts of students and parents.

While the intention was to include schools with large numbers of students of Chinese and Indian backgrounds, this was not always possible with the low SES schools. Australia's skilled migration program has led to disproportionate numbers of Chinese and Indian migrants of a high SES and so, with the exception of the low SES OC school that accepted out-of-area enrolments into these classes, the representation of these groups was far lower in the other low SES schools. This, however, provided interesting insights into the extent to which selectivity can skew school populations with considerable differences in the ethnic composition and SES backgrounds of the mainstream and OC cohorts in the low SES OC school, discussed throughout the report. Despite this, the overall sample of students included representation of Chinese, Indian or South Asian and other students in each school. The initial intended quota of Anglo-Australians, however, was not met. This was particularly the case in the low SES schools, but the student sample as a whole provided an interesting ethnic and SES mix to investigate the extent to which these factors impact parenting practices around education.

The sample of participants also included the principals of the six schools and the teachers of each of the students. A complete list of these participants by school is provided below in Tables 1a and 1b showing the relationship between each and relevant demographic information. Pseudonyms have been used for each school and participant. For the participants, pseudonyms reflecting their ethnicity have been chosen. While not always indicative of participants' actual names, this decision was made for stylistic purposes, minimising the need for repetitive reference to their ethnicity. A final group of participants associated with each school were the members of their P&C committees. These participants are not named in the report and the data obtained from them is used sparingly. For this reason, they are not included in Tables 1a and 1b but the focus groups in which they participated are listed as a data set in Table 3.

[2] During the course of the research, the NSW DoE (2026a) updated its High Potential and Gifted (HPG) policy and HPG became the preferred term. GAT, however, had wider currency within the project schools and so is used here and throughout the report.

Table 1a: Schools and their Participants in the Low SES Schools

Location: Sydney's Western Suburbs

Chesterton PS	Students	Gender	Ethnicity	Parents*		Teachers**
School Type: Comprehensive, i.e. no selective streaming **Description:** Chesterton PS has a student population of 723 of which 97 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups are Lebanese, Afghani and Chinese. The school's ICSEA score is 980. **Principal:** Bill	1. Fei Fei (Yr 6)	Female	Chinese	Chang	Mother	Bianca
	2. Yan-yu	Female	Chinese	Yuan	Father	Unavailable
	3. Linh (Yr 4)	Female	Vietnamese	Vinh	Father	Samantha (Chinese)
	4. Mei (Yr 4)	Female	Chinese	Dong	Mother	Samantha (Chinese)
	5. Sumitra	Female	Nepalese	Shristi	Mother	Rosie
	6. Zoe	Female	Sri Lankan	Fadwa	Mother	Rosie
	7. Keysar	Male	Lebanese	Maha	Mother	Georgia
Beechvale PS	**Students**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Parents**		**Teachers**
School Type: GAT Extension Class **Description:** Beechvale PS has a student population of 375 of which 92 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups are Afghani, Pacific Islander and those of various Middle Eastern backgrounds, especially Lebanese. There are also smaller numbers of Indian and Chinese students. The school's ICSEA score is 955. **Principal:** Julian	1. Jing-yao (Yr 4)	Female	Chinese	Rong	Mother	Vera (Vietnamese)
	2. Jayesh (Yr 4)	Male	Indian	Barati	Mother	Vera (Vietnamese)
	3. Ananya	Female	Indian	Riya	Mother	Sarika (Iranian)
	4. Aizi	Female	Pacific Islander	Kuiri	Mother	Linda
	5. Lama	Female	Lebanese/ Egyptian	Nelia	Mother	Linda
	6. Samara	Female	Lebanese	Aya	Mother	Linda
Acacia PS	**Students**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Parents**		**Teachers**
School Type: OCs **Description:** Acacia PS is a large school with a student population of 930 of which 92 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups are Lebanese, Chinese, Afghani and Indian. The school's ICSEA score is 957. **Principal:** Hussein **Deputy Principal:** Clara **Community Liaison Officer:** Karim	1 Bo-wen	Male	Chinese	Olivia	Mother	Elizabeth
	2 Yi-chen	Male	Chinese	Fen	Mother	Elizabeth
	3. Wai Kit	Male	Chinese	Guo	Father	Elizabeth
	4. Vijay	Male	Sri Lankan	Amara	Mother	Elizabeth
	5. Osman	Male	Indian/Egyptian/ Anglo	Anika	Mother	Elizabeth
	6. Harsha	Male	Indian	Arjun Rani	Father Mother	Elizabeth
	7. Aleena	Female	Indian/Filipino/ Anglo	Jaslene	Mother	Jamila (Lebanese)
	8. Rashid	Male	Lebanese	Leila	Mother	Jamila (Lebanese)

Table 1b: Schools and their Participants in the High SES Schools

Location: Sydney's North Shore

Colbyville PS	Students	Gender	Ethnicity	Parents*		Teachers**
School Type: Comprehensive, i.e. no selective streaming **Description:** Colbyville PS has a student population of 736 of which 54 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups, other than Anglo, are Chinese, Korean and Indian. The school's ICSEA score is 1170. **Principal:** Calida	1. Kirsten	Female	Anglo	Jill	Mother	Julie
	2. Katya	Female	Russian	Yevgen	Father	Julie
	3. Hai	Male	Chinese	Anru	Mother	Lily
	4. Ang	Male	Chinese	Tuan	Mother	Justine
	5. Kabini	Female	Indian	Dhwani	Mother	Julie
	6. Sarisha	Female	Indian	Manisha	Mother	Lily
Bidhura PS	**Students**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Parents**		**Teachers**
School Type: Year 3 – 6 GAT classes **Description:** Bidhura PS has a student population of 900 of which 68 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups, apart from Anglo, are Chinese, Korean and Indian though the majority of LBOTE students are Chinese. The school's ICSEA score is 1164. **Principal:** Carol	1. Saanvi	Female	Indian/ Dutch	Surya Gus	Mother Father	Helena
	2. Hui Ying	Female	Chinese/ Anglo	Hui	Mother	Helena
	3. Mei-Lin (Yr 4)	Female	Chinese	Nanxi	Mother	Vaani (Indian)
	4. Lulu	Female	Anglo/ Dutch	Kelly	Mother	Cody
	5. Michelle	Female	Anglo	Amelia	Mother	Sally
Alinta PS	**Students**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Parents**		**Teachers**
School Type: OCs **Description:** Alinta PS is a large school with a student population of 1054, of which 91 per cent have a LBOTE. The main ethnic groups, apart from Anglo, are Chinese, Indian and Nepalese. The school's ICSEA score is 1148. **Principal:** Denise	1 Manas	Male	Indian	Vedika Janani	Father Mother	Judy
	2 Meera (Yr 4)	Female	Indian	Shreya	Mother	Keith
	3. Shu-yi	Female	Chinese	Bai	Father	Karen & Josie
	4. Bo-Lin	Male	Chinese	Min Hua	Mother	Karen & Josie
	5. Jian	Male	Chinese/ Anglo	Enlai Don	Mother Father	Karen & Josie
	6. Samuel (Yr 6)	Male	Anglo	Angela	Mother	Eliza

* Some parent interviews and one teacher interview had two participants.
** Teachers are Anglo-Australian unless otherwise specified.

The remaining group of participants completing the sample comprises tutoring centre providers and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA). The former manage or own tutoring centres near the participating schools but, given difficulties obtaining consent and restrictions imposed during COVID-19, were not necessarily those attended by the student participants. They did, however, provide valuable insights into the industry, as did the CEO of the ATA, together with the range of services and the varied experiences of those attending

tutoring centres that typified those of many of the student participants. Each of the tutoring centre participants, including their pseudonyms, ethnicities and the location of their businesses, if relevant, is listed in Table 2 below. Given his position as CEO of ATA, Mohan Dhall gave consent to be named in the report.

Table 2: Tutoring Centre Interviewees

Name	Ethnicity	Location of Business
1 Ranlin	Chinese	Western Sydney
2 Amee	Chinese	Western Sydney
3. Yin	Chinese	Northern Sydney
4. Jade	Chinese	Northern Sydney
5. Terry	Anglo	Northern Sydney
6. Vanya	Indian	Northern Sydney
7. Mohan Dhall	Indian	Western Sydney

Phases of Research

Phase 1: The Survey

Administered from October 2020 to July 2021 to parents of Years 3-6 students in each of the six project schools, the survey aimed to develop an understanding of the educational experiences of families from different ethnic and SES backgrounds. The survey included questions on a wide range of topics including the demographics of each school community, student learning, practices around homework, tutoring, extracurricular activities, school choice, parent involvement and the impact of COVID-19. This allowed for the collection of broad data on parenting attitudes and practices necessary for contextualising the qualitative data collected in the later phases of the project, providing a strong sense of the education cultures in which parents make decisions across the primary years of education. In schools with OCs or GAT streams or programs, the project was also interested in the differences between these and mainstream classes.

The survey was available in paper form or electronically in four languages: English, Chinese, Arabic and Dari. Its protracted period of implementation was due to the impact of COVID-19 on recruiting respondents. The total number of responses was 590 with responses from each school varying from 51 to 164. The high SES schools had a higher completion rate than those with a low SES, accounting for 69 and 31 per cent of the total responses, respectively. The differences in completion rates relate to various factors, including the size of the school, the strategies each school used to distribute the survey, the level of parental involvement with the school, and the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdown in different areas during the data collection period.

While the total number of responses is large enough to provide meaningful comparisons, it is acknowledged that it is not large or wide enough to make wholesale generalisations regarding the broader population. Moreover, given the six schools were chosen because of their demographic and educational makeup, where possible focusing on schools with large numbers of students of

Chinese-, Indian- and Anglo-Australian backgrounds, the survey sample is not representative of NSW schools as a whole nor of ethnically defined communities. All responses were analysed with Qualtrics software, focusing on frequencies and relevant cross-tabulations. On completion of the survey, select data of relevance to each school were compiled into individual reports and presented to each school. In some cases, these were discussed at staff or executive meetings and community forums. Together with questions on a wide range of topics related to education, the survey included an expression of interest to participate in the qualitative phases of the research which, for families, involved home and school-based observations, student time-use diaries and separate interviews with parents and each student. The 38 families in the final sample were either recruited in this way or through direct invitation via their school principal.

Phase 2: Observations

Home Observations

Once the families had been recruited, the project entered its next phase involving home observations and the collection of data on students' home-based learning, extracurricular activities and pastimes, through the use of time-use diaries. The observations were undertaken following students' arrival home from school, recording data on their afterschool routines. This included whether or not they completed homework and where, when and how this was done, other afterschool activities, the organisation of spaces around learning in the home and interactions involving students, parents and siblings such as the extent to which parents provided support and guidance with these activities. The intention of undertaking the home observations at this stage of the project was to gain some sense of the families' approaches to learning outside the school to more specifically tailor questions around these topics for the interviews that would occur at a later date. The observations, however, were interrupted by COVID-19 which restricted home visits. Despite this, 29 home observations were conducted with a small number of families having more than one visit. Where home visits were not possible, many parents submitted short videos or photographs of their child's workspaces which were useful in providing additional data associated with their home learning environments.

Time-use diaries were an extra, optional source of data completed by 21 of the 38 families. These were completed over three weeks: two weeks of school and one week of holiday, to ascertain the regularity of students' afterschool activities and other aspects of their life outside school: homework, tutoring, extracurricular activities, free time with and without screens, family activities, travel to school, religious activities, eating, sleeping, etc. Parents and, in some cases, students recorded this data on their smartphone or tablet using the app, Toggl, or on a paper-based version.

Classroom Observations

Together with the home observations and time-use diaries, students were observed in class to gauge their levels of participation, application and interaction with their teacher and peers. More generalised data were also collected on the design, ambience and regimen of classrooms and curriculum implementation to gain a full sense of each student's in-class learning environment. These observations, however, were similarly affected by COVID-19. With long periods of lockdown where students were undertaking homeschooling, and with restrictions on research in schools following this, these observations did not occur as planned when most of the students were in Year 5. Rather, the classroom observations were delayed until most of the students were in Year 6 which meant that the two students who commenced the study in Year 6 were not observed in class because they had started high school by this time. Despite these drawbacks, delaying the observations also had some benefits. By conducting observations with the majority

of the students the following year, additional data were obtained from their Year 6 teachers who made comments that were recorded in researcher fieldnotes. Not being formally interviewed, these teachers are not recorded in Tables 1a and 1b, but many offered their perspectives on students' academic performance and their parents' involvement in their learning, adding to what had been obtained from their teachers who had been interviewed the previous year. A third set of observations was conducted at tutoring centres. Consent was only obtained from two of these centres. This was due to a combination of restrictions during COVID-19, forcing many to pivot to online classes, and the reluctance of many to have their classes observed.

Phase 3: Interviews

The third phase of the research involved interviews and focus groups. As indicated, while the intention was to conduct the interviews with various participants following all the observations, this was not possible due to COVID-19. Phases 2 and 3, therefore, overlapped as interviews with some of the parents and all teacher and principals were brought forward ahead of the classroom observations, given these could occur via Zoom. Some smaller P&C focus groups were also undertaken via Zoom, while others were delayed until COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and occurred face-to-face on school premises. Student interviews were also delayed as conducting them via Zoom was not considered appropriate for children. To allow students to speak freely about home and school, their interviews were held on school premises with two researchers present. A combination of face-to-face interviews and those via Zoom were also conducted with tutoring centre personnel.

Each of these sets of participants (parents, principals, teachers, students, P&C members, and those associated with tutoring centres), were asked questions related to education in general and specific to their own position and experience. Themes around homework, tutoring, school choice, selective schooling and aspects of parenting were common across groups and many raised additional points of interest relevant to their own circumstances. Interviews were initially uploaded into the transcription program, Otter.ai, and then checked by members of the research team. The transcripts were first analysed using NVIVO for emergent themes. More refined analysis was undertaken in stages to incorporate the various data sets, each of which is itemised in Table 3.

Table 3: Full List of Data Sets

Interviews		Other Data	
Students	38	**School P&C Focus Groups**	6
Parents	38	**Classroom Observations**	14
Principals	6	**Home Observations**	29
Teachers	20	**Time-Use Diaries**	21
Other School: i.e. Deputy and CLO	2	**Tutoring Centre Observations**	2
Tutoring Centre Personnel	7	**Survey Respondents**	590
Total	111		

Added to those above were the following additional data:

- fieldnotes of discussions with student participants' Year 6 teachers
- photographs and videos of students' home study spaces
- photographs of classrooms focusing on seating and displays
- worksheets and school newsletters
- relevant school and NSW DoE policies.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Research

Some of the ways in which COVID-19 impacted the project have already been mentioned. In summary, these involved delays and the rescheduling of much of the data collection, and, in some cases, finding alternate techniques for the collection of data such as the use of Zoom interviews and parents providing short videos or photographs to supplement the overall corpus acquired through the home observations. Most significant has been the delay in completing the data analysis and writing this report. These were not easily rescheduled and had to accommodate the research team's other commitments including other research projects that were similarly impacted by COVID-19, compounding delays. Yet, these delays also had an upside. As this allowed some distance between data collection, analysis and writing up, it afforded more time to reflect upon the findings and the richness of what had been obtained.

Ethics

To undertake this research, ethics approval was obtained from both Western Sydney University (Approval Number H13733) and the NSW DoE (SERAP Application 2020232). Given much of this research involved children aged 10-12 years, all researchers had Working with Children Clearance. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for all schools and participants with the exception of Mohan Dhall, CEO of the ATA, who gave consent for his name to be used.

As is evident from the outline of the methodology, the project yielded a wealth of data, gaining the perspective of a range of actors into the relationship between parenting and ethnicity and the factors that impact upon the choices parents make about their children's education, focused, in particular, on the various influences of families of Asian backgrounds. Adding to the survey and interview data, the ethnographic components of the research help to produce a comprehensive account of these matters. Before these data sets are considered, the next chapter provides a review of literature around some of the key themes of interest to the project, reflecting crucial issues on which participants provide their own perspectives in Chapters 4 to 7.

Chapter 2:

A Review of the Literature on Key Themes

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature on Key Themes

Understanding the impact of Asian migration on Australian schooling requires a broader contextual understanding of how parents engage with education and how factors such as ethnicity and SES shape their approach. This chapter reviews existing research on these issues, focusing on parental involvement in schooling, homework, tutoring, school choice and selectivity. This research provides the broader social and policy context for examining the education cultures Asian migrants participate in, showing how their choices and strategies reflect and negotiate competitive pressures and inequalities in the education system. The review also provides context for understanding the perspectives and practices of principals, teachers and staff within tutoring centres, which subsequent chapters explore.

Parents and Schooling

There has been substantial research interest in parental involvement in children's schooling over several decades, matched by increasing policy emphasis on the importance of parental participation in schools. The research tends to focus on several key issues: the forms of parental involvement, the impact of parental participation on student outcomes, the extent of and obstacles to parental involvement, the effects of social variables, especially SES and ethnicity, and teachers' views on parental involvement.

'Parental involvement', sometimes referred to as parental effort, engagement or participation, is, of course, a complicated set of phenomena. While the focus is often on parents' involvement in the formal life of the school, it is not a single thing. Research has consistently pointed to different categories and different degrees of parental involvement. While parents' participation in the school can be significant, it can also include home and community activities through which parents support children's schooling (Daniel et al., 2016). Epstein (1995) noted several decades ago that this could entail: parenting itself, school-parent communication, volunteer activities in schools, fostering learning at home, participating in school decision-making and involvement with wider educational resources. Research since has tried to specify the different elements and their impacts: home discussion, including parents and children planning for and choosing a school; homework supervision, structuring and monitoring; home-school connections, that is, good communications between home and school; and volunteering at school and in classrooms (Sui-Chu & Willms,1996). As indicated in the Introduction, this report characterises the totality of these efforts as constituting 'family pedagogies', or forms of teaching and learning in the home which shape the educational experiences of a child (Jacobs et al., 2021).

It is not just that there are different types of participation, there are also degrees of intensity of engagement with schooling: there is a difference between simply attending meetings and being actively involved in a child's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). Despite the extent of this literature, things like the growing parental focus on tutoring centres and selective educational programs have rarely been considered amongst this set of efforts (Sriprakash et al., 2016). The intensity of parental efforts is particularly important for many migrant families for whom education is a central reason for migrating; indeed, it is the basis of the 'gamble' migrants undertake in moving to secure a better future for their family (Hage, 2021, p. 40).

Much of this research, however, understands parenting practices not as socially produced but in terms of a psychological paradigm employing reductive notions of 'parenting style', developing typologies that rest on value-laden language: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglectful styles. The literature also entails generalisations about 'cultural values' defined through

binaristic models of individualistic and collectivist, Western and Eastern (or Asian) cultures (Haslam et al., 2020; Low, 2019). Sociological research, however, has often worked with equally simplistic characterisations of structural causation (of SES, for example). This is not the place to provide an extensive overview of the research – that has been done many times (see Avvisati et al., 2010) – nor of its disciplinary biases and assumptions. The discussion below focuses on research which, across disciplines, tells us something about the kinds of parental practices involved, informed by conceptions of the socially mediated nature of practice.

Research over many decades has demonstrated that parental involvement is associated with a range of educational and social benefits for students (Hattie, 2009; Jeynes, 2005). Castro et al. (2015) found, for example, strong relationships between parents' high academic expectations, their ability to communicate with their children about school, and whether they help their children to develop good reading habits. Importantly, given that most research in this area is done in North America (Boonk et al., 2018), such correlations have been found in Asia as well, such as Doley's (2018) study of Indian students which found that where there is high parental involvement there is high academic achievement. These studies also show that while some benefit will accrue from parent involvement across SES and ethnic categories, the benefits are spread unevenly, and that they might be different in various areas or levels of schooling (Daniel et al., 2016).

The nature and degree of parental involvement vary remarkably across schools, however. This is partly because not all parents are equally at home in the cultures of schooling. Many studies show that SES, or social class, is the major social factor behind educational outcomes, confirming years of research examining the correlation between parents' income and education and children's achievement (Teese, 2007). It is also the key element in studies of parental involvement, and these two findings are related. But a developing focus of this research has been to see this relationship less in terms of a simple structural correspondence (class=success) and increasingly in terms of the means through which this relationship is manifest, drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) argument that schools play a key role in the transmission of cultural capital – the socially valuable forms of knowledge and skill that are monopolised by middle- and upper-class families. Parental involvement in school is thus a crucial means of realising this relationship. Scholars have revised such notions to consider the role of ethnicity in the reproduction of disadvantage or its overcoming. In contrast to a predictable emphasis on ethnicity in terms of the absence of the forms of linguistic and cultural capital seen as central to educational achievement (Kewalramani & Kidman, 2023), some scholars have proposed new forms of 'ethnic capital' to explain the educational success of certain ethnic minority students, despite backgrounds of family disadvantage (Shah et al., 2010; Modood, 2004 in the UK and Lee, 2006 in the US).

Lareau (2003) demonstrated that middle-class homes involve high levels of parental intervention in children's lives – which she calls 'concerted cultivation' – that prepares them for educational and professional success. Parents of a low SES, in contrast, tend to invest less effort in such strategies or in education itself. A result of this is that their parenting practices and values are at odds with the cultural repertoires of educational institutions (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). This is significant because research shows that home-school congruence is of crucial importance for students (Timmerman et al., 2016). Parents have markedly varied resources which enhance or inhibit their capacity to perform these roles. Reay (2004) outlines several aspects of educational capital, a specific form of cultural capital, that contribute to these effects: educational knowledge and qualifications, system information, available time, material resources, and the social confidence to approach teaching staff.

These forms of educational capital are also unevenly distributed among ethnically-defined communities (Cardona et al., 2009). Much public discussion, however, tends to rely on simplistic equations of ethnic and racial background with parenting 'style'. While there is evidence that ethnicity shapes how many identify their parenting style, there is no simple correspondence between a particular way of parenting and a particular ethnic background – there are only distributions of responses of something being more or less likely and there are no generalisable findings about these relationships because parenting practices are shaped by a complex range of contextual factors (Phoenix & Husain, 2007, pp. 11, 21).

Consequently, research on the relation between ethnicity and parental involvement has increasingly identified a range of factors that shape practices. Antony-Newman's (2019) synthesis of this research demonstrates that language differences and lack of familiarity with the education system – particularly when intersected by SES – pose a major impediment to parents' involvement and subsequently to their contribution to students' academic outcomes. Home-school congruence therefore has much more significant consequences for families of minority ethnic or migrant populations (Barglowski, 2019) without resorting to simple ascriptions of ethnically defined 'culture'. An earlier UK review of research on students from ethnic minorities, moreover, shows that parental values and practices are but one aspect of a complex of factors that shape educational performance (Strand, 2007). Specifically, research into the success of Chinese-background students in Mathematics – one of the current foci in studies of parent involvement – also suggests that success arises from a combination of factors, in which parental help and extra study link with good teaching and student motivation (Cao et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2006). Importantly, many students from Chinese backgrounds in Australia in the early stages of their education have inculcated from their parents practices and attitudes which correlate with student achievement (Wood, 2021).

However, researchers must be wary of making grand claims about the homogeneity of ethnic categories. Certainly, research regularly points to significant patterns of difference based on ethnicity. Huntsinger and Jose (2009), for example, found differences between Chinese-American and European-American parents' involvement in their child's education. The latter volunteered more in schools, while the former focused on the systematic teaching of their children at home and on traditional measures of academic performance. Yet there are several problems with totalising claims about 'culture'. These are statistical tendences, not absolutes: when examined carefully, research data show distributions amongst practices, not hard lines of ethnic division. There are, for example, significant variations in SES *within* Chinese communities (Lan, 2018). Moreover, some research demonstrates the evolving nature of cultural values: the new rich in China are engaging in strategies (not simply traditional Chinese values) designed to enhance their children's international options and produce a 'cosmopolitan' orientation (Ying & Wright, 2023; Soong, 2022). Moreover, some of these 'traditional values' have as much to do with modern, socio-structural processes than some timeless past (Watkins & Noble, 2013; Wu & Singh, 2004).

Researchers and teachers must, therefore, interrogate explanations that resort to large claims based on homogenising notions of 'cultural values'. Just as values amongst families vary enormously in Australia, so too can they vary elsewhere. This has not stopped innumerable scholars arguing for the role of 'traditional Chinese values' amongst parents in explaining Chinese background students' success (Jacobs, et al., 2021; Wood, 2021; Kim & Wong, 2002). As Aris (2017) shows, essentialising categories of ethnicity masks the significant variations within cultures, such that some families of Indian background might engage in strategies that focus on educational credentialling, while others opt for the achievement of 'all-rounded' children or the accumulation of the social attributes of the new home. She points out that SES – and the specificities of family contexts – are crucial for understanding what happens in the uptake of educational strategies.

Subsequently, it is crucial that research analyses the micro-interactional processes whereby familial habits, knowledge and skills produce dispositions to learning which intersect with schooling and wider educational practices, knowledge and values (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Researchers have thus moved to more elaborate accounts of the mediating effects of parental participation. Marjoribanks (2005) argues that simple models, which correlated particular variables with outcomes, are inadequate for examining the complex of issues around the roles of parents, particularly for those of minority ethnic backgrounds. He employs an ecological model of the family learning environment that included aspects of economic, social and cultural capital – parenting, aspirations, style and practices such as reading. He argues that while ethnicity was a key factor in student outcomes, it was mediated by these broader aspects of the family environment (1996). This emphasis on the 'eco-cultural' nature of parenting has become increasingly significant (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021).

Campbell and Verna (2007) draw together much of the research on the role of family environment to formulate a notion of a positive 'academic home climate' which promotes curiosity and encourages the child to pursue academic interests. This generates positive behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and values that lead to higher levels of student achievement, especially when the academic home climate is congruent with the school's academic climate. While much of this research focuses on homework, to which the discussion will return below – this section stresses the importance of direct 'parental effort' in developing learning orientations and covers a range of aspects – reading, discussions around school, advice, as well as homework – which impact upon learning outcomes (Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Barnard, 2004), and that this rests on the role of family socialisation in students' acquisition of capacities to navigate the school system. As Xu and Corno (2003) and Dandy and Nettlebeck (2002) note, the significance of parental assistance in homework lies less in terms of immediate educational outcomes than in the development of forms of self-discipline, independence, study skills and the creation of an environment conducive to study. Daniel et al. (2016) argue that longitudinal data demonstrate the importance of students' capacities to master skills of self-regulated learning – it is not simply the broad factors of SES or ethnicity per se, but the way these are mediated through parents' and students' organisation of learning in the form of routines.

Crucial here is the consistency of parental practices, and the transmission of particular cognitive traits – such as inductive reason – distributed already in terms of class (Cano, 2022). Similarly, Conger et al. (2021) show that student 'conscientiousness' is shaped by the greater parental and material investments that a higher SES brings, but mediated by family practices. Xu and Corno (1998) point to the importance of parental creation, resourcing and management of an appropriate physical environment for undertaking schoolwork at home. Watkins and Noble (2013) found that students of Chinese backgrounds did more homework than other ethnically-defined groups, but it was not this alone: Chinese parents were also more likely to provide dedicated quiet space, set extra tasks, and enrol their children in outside activities like music as well as tutoring centres, encouraging the formation of a 'scholarly habitus'. But there is no simple picture here, because they also found that Anglo parents were more likely to read to their children and more likely to be directly involved in the school itself. Moreover, research on home-school congruence rarely, if ever, grapples with the increasing presence of tutoring centres and how this relates to both school and home practices.

Parental involvement in learning is not simply about what parents do – it is also about how it is encouraged, or not, in schools themselves or the system as a whole, and how it relates to both local and wider contexts. Teachers and principals, for example, do not always feel well-resourced or prepared for parental involvement, and view it as one of the most difficult challenges in their profession (McKenzie et al., 2014). This has only been exacerbated by the growth of tutoring,

which some teachers feel undermines what goes on in the classroom (Ho, 2026). Despite a prevailing discourse of partnership and collaboration, parent-school relations are complex and ambivalent, sometimes conflictual: teachers acknowledge this 'largely invisible pedagogical work' (especially of mothers) in the home, and yet also can find it a 'problem' that is difficult to manage (Sriprakash et al., 2016; Hornby, 2011; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010).

An under-researched area in this field is the extent to which parents' strategies are related to their child's experience of schooling (Bonesrønning, 2004). The concern with acquiring a 'better' education is particularly relevant for parents of students in selective programs. Roth (2017), for example, found that parents of students who make it into OCs perceive the quality of education they receive better than their previous mixed ability classes. These parents felt that their children were underachieving in those classes and not receiving opportunities to reach their potential. The OC, however, was seen to provide those opportunities. Even so, parents of 'gifted' students, further, felt that they needed to compensate for the failings of the system because it did not always meet the needs of their child, providing further resources, advocating for them at school and providing experiences to support the child's development (Vialle, 2017).

This desire to acquire a 'better' education is intensified when it comes to parents of minority background who may have limited knowledge of the system they are now facing – teachers acknowledge the value of parental involvement in principle, but in practice often see it as a problem, not as a resource the school can draw upon (Bromley & Yazdanpanah, 2021). Moreover, some research and public debate have been concerned about the negative aspects of parental pressure on academic achievement – on students' mental health and well-being (Eriksen, 2021). Unsurprisingly, there is much confusion among parents with regards to their role in schooling: whether they are co-educators, customers, partners or supporters (Epstein et al., 2009; Mills & Gale, 2004).

In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that some parents take matters into their own hands. It is therefore necessary to return to the complexity represented across the entirety of the parental involvement literature, especially in the context of a growing emphasis on tutoring centres and selective educational programs, to consider the array and intensity of family pedagogies in children's schooling.

Homework

One of the key practices linking home and school that involves parents is homework. While generally understood as work that teachers assign students to complete outside school hours (Cooper, 1989), parents, other carers, students themselves and, increasingly, tutoring centres, also set homework. Sites where homework is undertaken are not restricted to students' homes with many completing this work at homework centres run by their school or community organisations (Hallam & Rogers, 2018), before and after school care facilities, local libraries or even in transit between home and school with computers and mobile technologies affording easier access to the resources that students require. Homework also serves different purposes and is of various types. It can be undertaken to reinforce knowledge and skills such as through home readers and rote learning of spelling and multiplication tables; as preparation for classwork through pre-reading, as revision through re-reading and note taking; for home-based assessment, such as through projects, reports and essays or as extension or enrichment, generally for more capable or interested students. Jones (2021) also refers to forms of 'creative homework' such as model-making and 'finishing off homework' completing what students failed to do during class time.

Perspectives on homework are also quite varied prompting polarised debates as to whether it is,

> too much or too little, too easy or too hard, a spur to student achievement or student alienation; a marker of enlightened or lazy teaching; a builder of character or a degrader of self-esteem; too demanding or too dismissive of parents; a stimulus of national economic vigor or of behavioral conformity (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 174).

Gill and Schlossman (2004) also point out how debates over homework are not simply contemporary concerns. They document how favoured positions have dominated at different stages from the mid-nineteenth century through to recent times. Within the American context, they report on how homework was never viewed as a problem until the late nineteenth century with the rise of the progressivist education movement that cast it as a major imposition upon child development. Influenced by the educational philosophies of Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori and others, and later combined with the developmental psychology of Piaget, educators up until the 1940s were cautioned about its deleterious effects, to the point that the American Child Health Association in 1930 likened it to child labour and viewed it as the 'chief causes of the high death and morbidity rates from tuberculosis and heart disease among adolescents' (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 175). Such scaremongering soon dissipated after World War Two with the Cold War and Space Race during the 1950s and 1960s prompting a need for academic excellence and a far better educated populace. Homework was soon rehabilitated with critiques of previous concerns and dubious medical justifications for its prohibition (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). Since this time there has been a similar seesawing of opinion between the more traditional and progressivist camps with related debates about the type and time spent on homework. In Australia, similar historical trends are evident though the influence of progressivism was perhaps most pronounced during the 1960s and 1970s, significantly influencing not only perspectives on homework but on curricula and pedagogic approach (Watkins, 2005), retaining its influence, to some degree, most obviously in early childhood contexts.

Such historical shifts are important to note as they demonstrate the historical and cultural specificity of not only perspectives on homework but the research upon which they are based (Hallam & Rogers, 2018). They similarly draw attention to how different educational philosophies and disciplinary origins can skew research, or interpretations of its findings, factors that require consideration in judging the merits or otherwise of homework. It is definitely an area of education that continues to provoke dissenting views no doubt influencing the NSW DoE's Policy Guidelines on Homework to declare that 'research regarding the value of homework is inconclusive' (NSW DoE, 2012, p. 3).[3] But is this the case? Marzano and Pickering (2007, p. 74) state that 'Although the research support for homework is compelling, the case against homework is popular', suggesting that much of the evidence in favour of homework is sidelined by opinion and media commentary to the contrary. There is certainly a market for popular texts targeting parents that seem to endorse arguments against homework (Bennett & Kalish, 2007; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000), despite much research indicating that parents are largely supportive (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Coutts, 2004). These often focus on the busy nature of family life and the increased stress on parents and children as justification for an anti-homework stance rather than its relationship to educational achievement.

When a negative stance on homework is presented, it is often as a blanket statement that denies any benefit. This is generally the case when referring to homework at a primary level, though this perspective is not only found in popular texts (O'Keeffe et al., 2023; Pressman et al., 2015). In The Conversation, a website focusing on 'research-based news and analysis', commonly featuring

[3] This document was sourced online in 2024 from the NSW DoE website policy library. On 30/1/25 these instructions previously provided in the Homework policy were consolidated into the Curriculum policy standards document.

articles by academics, there are a number on homework (Zammit, 2021; Adoniou, 2014; Walker & Horsley, 2012). One of these by Adoniou (2014) claims, 'Research finds that homework doesn't improve learning outcomes in primary school and has a weak link to improved outcomes in junior high school'. There is no mention of the later years of high school. The 'Research', though not cited, that Adoniou is no doubt referring to is that of one of the leading researchers on homework, Harris Cooper (2001; 1989; Cooper et al., 2006). What is presented by Adoniou, however, is very much a misrepresentation of his findings. Rather than homework in the primary years not improving learning outcomes, his synthesis of nearly 120 studies revealed that improvement at this stage of learning was 'negligible', while benefits in junior high school were more obvious and that at high school homework 'substantially affects student achievement'. Importantly, he also provides some qualification of the seemingly 'negligible' benefits in the earlier grades stressing that 'homework can have beneficial effects other than knowledge acquisition' such as the development of good study habits, a form of embodied cultural capital essential for scholarly endeavour. Many, such as Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) and Corno and Xu (2010), are of a similar view, demonstrating the benefits of homework for promoting self-regulation, even in the early years of school.

The greater benefits of homework as students progress through school would seem reflective of this, namely that the self-discipline acquired in the early years has pay-offs when greater degrees of application and self-direction are required later on. In other words, it seems to indicate that the benefits of homework are cumulative, a factor difficult to research, requiring a longitudinal focus and posing additional methodological issues such as being able to isolate other possible contributing effects on learning outcomes such as teacher effectiveness, influence of peers, parent involvement, etc. There are also other issues related to the type of data collection techniques, i.e. examining test scores, attitudinal surveys etc. Hallam and Rogers (2018) indicate that methodological problems such as these are a key issue for research on the effects of homework and Cooper et al. (2006), in their systematic review of homework research in the US over the period 1987-2003, found that all of the studies they examined had design flaws. Such difficulties do not mean this research is of little value, rather it indicates far more caution is required when considering their findings, in which case simple generalisations without the required qualification can be problematic.

It is for this reason that Hattie (2009, p. 234), in his own synthesis of meta-analyses of homework research, declares that, 'the overall effects are positive, but there are some important moderators'. He arrives at this conclusion after examining five meta-analyses of homework research including those of Cooper (1994; 1989), Copper et al. (2006) and others comprising 161 studies, involving over 100,000 students. The 'moderators' to which he refers are similar to those of Cooper (2001), that the effects of homework are greater in the later years of school. He also refers to differences in relation to subject area, type of homework and duration. Time spent on homework is perhaps one of the most vexed areas of this research. Hattie (2009, pp. 234-235), for example, indicates 'shorter is better' but that best results occur when homework is monitored by teachers. Cooper (2001, p. 37), on the other hand, distinguishes between stages of schooling commenting that 'Although commonsense dictates that there is a point of diminishing returns, the more homework that high school students do, the higher their achievement rates'. This is a view supported by Al-Bahrani et al. (2022, p. 199) who state that, 'The majority of research concludes that an individual's success at learning a particular concept increases as they spend more time doing homework'. PISA results on 15 year-olds lie somewhere between these views. While findings from across their member countries varied considerably, from students in Finland reporting three hours a week to the 14 hours a week in Shanghai, China, evidence from PISA (OECD, 2014) suggest any time over four hours a week has negligible benefit. Once again, differing methodologies may lead to different results, with PISA relying on students' self-reporting study time.

An additional consideration is that much of the research on homework has tended to measure its impact quantitatively, often neglecting aspects that are best captured through qualitative enquiry (Hallam & Rogers, 2018). Watkins and Noble's work on the formation of a scholarly habitus in primary school-aged students examined a range of home and school-based practices to reveal that a combination of elements were pertinent in promoting a disposition to learning; the embodied cultural capital referred to earlier (Watkins & Noble, 2013). This was a mixed-method study, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques but the qualitative components, including interviews and observation, revealed it was not only the amount of time spent on homework, but its regularity and where it was completed that were significant, as was mentioned above in relation to parental involvement. Much work, across a range of disciplines, has been undertaken around the regularity of homework stressing its importance (Al-Bahrani et al., 2022; Xu, 2021; Fernández-Alonso, et al., 2015; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Trautwein, 2007).

The study by Watkins and Noble (2013) also examined factors such as ethnicity and SES but unpacked these categories in terms of varying practices, showing how SES, in particular, affected the way in which homework was approached, findings replicated in numerous other studies (OECD, 2014; Rønning, 2011). PISA 2012, for example, found that high SES students in all of the participating countries spent far more time on homework then their low SES peers (OECD, 2014). Previous PISA studies suggest that there are a number of contributing factors to this disparity including that higher SES students are more likely to have an appropriate place to study and parents who are more willing and able to assist them (OECD, 2014). Homework that requires students to access materials online is viewed as further disadvantaging low SES students who may not have the required equipment or internet access (Mzidabi et al., 2024; Dobozy, 2014; Cranmer, 2006), an issue evident with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Molla et al., 2024). Homework, therefore, can amplify social and educational inequalities, but given its benefits, rather than seeing this as an argument against homework, the OECD (2014, p. 4) stresses that, 'Schools and teachers should look for ways to encourage struggling and disadvantaged students to complete their homework'.

On balance, with certain caveats, the weight of research indicates that homework is beneficial. Ensuring that students revise classwork and reinforce their conceptual understanding has compounding effects. This is also the case with the much-maligned rote learning. Developing automaticity of certain phonological and orthographic knowledge for reading and mathematical understanding, for example, cannot be undertaken solely at school. Repeated practice, particularly in the early years of school, ensures this knowledge is embodied, reducing cognitive load and allowing students to give greater attention to higher order thinking. The regularity involved in doing this engenders forms of self-regulation essential not only for learning as students progress through school (Bempechat, 2004), it can also be applied in other areas of endeavour (Watkins, 2012). Clearly, when schools don't provide homework, many parents and students look for alternatives, such as academic tutoring, further exacerbating inequalities within school communities.

Tutoring

Private academic tutoring has always existed in some form since the beginning of formal education systems, historically used by wealthier families to support their children's learning. In more recent times, it has grown along with reforms to schooling that have increased competition and alongside social changes that have increased the importance of gaining formal educational qualifications. In many countries now, over half of all school students receive outside tutoring, with the number exceeding 80 per cent in some places (Zhang, 2023). In Australia, the tutoring market is estimated to be worth more than $1 billion, with more than 50,000 tutors nationwide

(ATA, 2022). ATA CEO, Mohan Dhall, explains that parents can pay 'upwards of $20,000' (Stewart, 2017). Across Australia, an estimated 17 per cent of students attend tutoring at some point in their schooling, with the figure rising to 25 per cent in Sydney (C. Lee, 2025). Among many Asian migrant communities, it is much more commonplace, with Dhall estimating that the vast majority of Asian background students in Australia are tutored (Broinowski, 2015b). The types of academic tutoring available in cities like Sydney vary enormously. They range from individual tutoring to large classes; from specifically tailored programs that align with students' current schoolwork to accelerated programs that can be terms or years ahead of the school curriculum. They include programs exclusively targeting the selective school or OC placement tests, or private school entrance tests, and others focused on particular exams, for example, NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate (HSC).

Tutoring has been labelled 'shadow education' because it is informal and occurs outside the formal school system. It is also largely unregulated by governments (Zhang, 2023). Bray (2011, p. 13) notes, 'The metaphor of shadow is used because much tutoring mimics the mainstream school system'. Meanwhile, Aurini et al. (2013, p. xv) describe tutoring as a 'hidden' form of education:

> Few governments regulate it or even count it in their official records. Students rarely list their participation in this sector on their school transcripts, portfolios or resumes. Nor does it necessarily look like 'school'. The sector operates across a wide variety of settings, from living rooms to church basements to libraries to office buildings to shopping plazas.

Tutoring can take many forms, including one-on-one tutoring, classes of varying sizes organised around particular subjects, or test preparation courses (Zwier et al., 2020). It can be for remedial or enrichment or acceleration purposes. Tutors can range from professional teachers to students with no formal qualifications.

Tutoring has grown in the context of the marketisation of education, and it extends this marketisation. Growing emphasis on performance ranking, testing and selectivity fuel the demand for tutoring (Zwier et al., 2020; Aurini et al., 2013; Bray, 2010). In Australia, Dooley (2020) has documented the association between the introduction of NAPLAN and tutoring, as parents feel greater responsibility for their children's educational success and future life opportunities. This expansion of tutoring exemplifies 'privatisation by default' where privatisation in education is 'a process through which private organisations and individuals participate increasingly and actively in a range of education activities and responsibilities that traditionally have been the remit of the state' (Verger et al., 2016, p. 7). Tutoring can be seen as 'a hidden form of privatisation behind the façade of public education systems' (Bray & Kwo, 2013, p. 480). Burman and Miles (2020) argue that 'supplementary' education decentres the 'settled' status of mainstream schooling and challenges the forms and functions of the mainstream. As such, Bray and Kwo (2013) argue that the prevalence of tutoring challenges the Universal Declaration of Human Rights principle that everyone should have the right to a free education. Indeed, the UN special rapporteur on the right to education has stated that the existing disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students in education 'should not be aggravated by private providers catering to persons with means, to the detriment of the poor' (UN, 2014, p. 19). Moreover, many researchers have expressed concern that the widespread use of tutoring may undermine equity and quality within a society's education system (Baker & LeTendre, 2005).

The rise of tutoring also reflects the higher levels of competition, uncertainty and anxiety that have characterised societies globally. A stronger emphasis on qualifications and other forms of cultural capital have intensified attention on education in all its forms (Ball, 2010, p.160). In recent decades, this has been particularly pronounced in Asia. For example, in China, until the 1990s,

parents generally considered state-provided education adequate. With growing capitalist forces, parents have turned to private supplementary tutoring to manage the increasingly competitive and uncertain environment (Liu & Bray, 2022). Even with government crackdowns on tutoring businesses, including a national prohibition in 2018, families have found ways to continue using tutoring. A 2017 survey found that 48 per cent of primary school students participated in tutoring, on average spending 6.4 hours per week during term time and 14.7 hours during the summer vacation (Liu & Bray, 2022, p. 886). In Korea, authorities banned tutoring in 1980, but the ban was ineffective and formally abandoned in 2000. By the 2010s, enrolment in tutoring was far greater than at the time of prohibition and was viewed as a core part of growing educational inequality (Bae, 2021).

International research shows that students who receive private tuition disproportionately come from advantaged families (Zwier et al., 2020; Kirby, 2016; Park et al., 2016; Aurini et al., 2013; Buchmann et al., 2010). In the UK, privately educated students are twice as likely to attend tutoring as state-educated students (Kirby, 2016). In the US, Kim et al. (2021) show that tutoring centres are heavily concentrated in areas with high income and parental education. In fact, nearly half of all tutoring centres are located in areas in the top quintile for income. In the US, Buchmann et al. (2010) found that generally, lower achieving students use test preparation tutoring for remedial purposes, while among socio-economically advantaged students, it is the higher achieving who engage in test preparation, for enrichment rather than remediation. Further, Buchmann et al. (2010, p. 447) show that higher income families are more likely to use tutoring, while lower income families are more likely to purchase books, videos or software for their children. However, while a private tutor provided the biggest boost in SAT scores, followed by taking a commercial course, using books, videos or software was not found to produce any meaningful benefit in relation to SAT scores (Buchmann et al., 2010, p. 450). Tutoring therefore exacerbates existing educational inequalities (Zhang & Bray, 2018). Bray and Kwo (2013, p. 487) argue that, left to market forces, ‘shadow education’ is ‘likely to perpetuate and increase social inequalities’, as higher-income families are able to afford superior quality tutoring, and greater amounts of it.

In relation to ethnicity, Asian migrants tend to use tutoring more than other groups. In the US, Zhou and Kim (2006) and Kim et al. (2021) describe the concentration of tutoring centres in ‘Asian ethnoburbs’ in major cities. Zhou and Kim (2006, p. 12) found in their interviews with Chinese and Korean young people that attending supplementary education provided by their co-ethnics was such a common experience that it was a defining characteristic of being Chinese- or Korean-American. For many Asian-Australian students, Ho (2020, p. 64) found that tutoring takes up many hours of the week, such that it is a ‘lifestyle’. In addition to weekdays after school, students often attend tutoring centres on weekends, including for whole day programs on Saturdays and Sundays. During the week they may attend several tutoring sessions at more than one tutoring centre. Moreover, Asian-Australian students often begin tutoring from a very young age, as they prepare for the OC test in Year 4, and then the selective test in Year 6. Additionally, Ho (2020) notes that some tutoring centres in Australia explicitly use pedagogies that reflect schooling approaches in Asia, following methods and sometimes even textbooks from China and elsewhere.

Tutoring is used for various reasons. Traditionally, it has been for remedial purposes by students who are struggling, and this remains common today (Heinrich et al., 2010; Lee, 2007; Baker et al., 2001). However, more recently, the growth in tutoring globally relates to ‘students who are already performing well and wish to maintain their competitive edge’ (Bray & Kwo, 2013, p. 486), for example, by learning subject content ahead of the school curriculum (Liu & Bray, 2020). Students attending tutoring are often pre-existing high achievers, meaning that ‘students who often require individual assistance the least, actually receive the most’ (Kirby, 2016, p. 9). Tutoring can therefore be seen as a form of ‘intensive parenting’ related, in narrow terms, to the

‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003) through which middle-class families attempt to achieve a competitive advantage for their children.

In Ghosh and Bray’s Indian study (2020, p. 349), almost all student interviewees cited dissatisfaction with school as an important reason for seeking tutoring. This dissatisfaction related to curricular load and feedback, lack of quality teachers, high teacher-student ratios, teacher absenteeism and poor infrastructure. In Australia, according to Proctor and Sriprakash (2017), parents turn to tutoring to compensate for a lack of information coming from schools. In contrast to the perceived vagueness of school reports and teacher feedback, tutoring centres provide more explicit results, particularly in numerical form, including student rankings. This has also been found in China, where parents utilise tutoring to receive more detailed information about children’s academic performance. Liu and Bray (2022) explain that Chinese parents sometimes find school assessment insufficiently explicit, whereas tests are common in tutoring classes, allowing parents to pinpoint children’s weaknesses and track their progress.

One of the fastest growing areas of the tutoring industry is programs focused on test preparation (Zhang, 2014; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Bray, 2011). Tutoring tends to be more prevalent where there are high-stakes tests, because these tests are associated with ‘intense competition for educational opportunities’ (Zwier et al., 2020, p. 413). Zwier et al. (2020, p. 415) note that high-stakes tests ‘enhance competitive behaviour and the pressure to perform in education and tighten the linkages between educational performance and labour market outcomes’. Often high-stakes tests determine entry into elite schools or classes. In Australia, Ho (2020, p. 63) documents tutoring providers in Sydney that advertise programs targeting entry tests for selective schools and OCs that feature an emphasis on ‘exam technique, speed, accuracy, concentration and experience with multiple choice formats as well as providing practice in typical questions and sample tests’. Selective preparation programs sometimes begin 12 months prior to the selective test. Tutoring for entrance exams has also been analysed in relation to selective schools in Korea (Exley, 2020) and for university courses such as engineering, medicine, management and law in India (Punjabi, 2020). Punjabi (2020, p. 25) reports that many tutoring providers offer ‘exam-cracking pedagogy’ rather than teaching subject content per se. Students learn ‘shortcut methods, alternative methods, analysis of questions for hints and manipulation of data’, as well as time management, for example, practising spending only a set number of minutes on each question, and attempting high scoring questions before low scoring ones (Punjabi, 2020, p. 26). Exley (2020) notes that families in Korea feel tutoring is necessary to prepare for competitive entrance tests because the difficulty of the tests far exceeds what students encounter in the standard public school curriculum. This is also true of the NSW selective school test. The format of tests, especially standardised multiple-choice tests, is also highly conducive to the methods of many tutoring companies (Exley, 2020).

Research on the impact of tutoring on academic outcomes, however, shows mixed results. Some studies have found positive impacts on student achievement or school engagement (Zheng et al., 2020; Seo, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Others have found very little impact (Zhang et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2020; Jung & Seo, 2019), positive impacts only for some cohorts of students, for example, younger grades (Nickow et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020), or even negative impact (Wiseman, 2021). The majority of these studies focus on China, although one Australian initiative showed the benefits of a one-on-one online tutoring program (Thompson, 2021). Impacts of tutoring on student wellbeing are also contested. Although this question has been less researched, some studies show positive impacts on emotional wellbeing, self-confidence and child-parent relationships (Liang et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2020). Others find that tutoring over-burdens students’ lives and negatively affects their relationships with teachers, peers and family (Alam & Zhu, 2024), and is associated with depression and sleep disorders (Zhang & Liu, 2025).

The growth of tutoring can also have substantial impacts on how students learn in school. In Australia, Ho (2026) has documented impacts including students and families prioritising tutoring work over schoolwork, students being disengaged in class because they have already covered the material in tutoring, students taking narrow or instrumental approaches to learning, and finally, student absenteeism from school, especially in the lead up to high-stakes exams (see also Liu & Bray, 2020). In Ghosh and Bray's Indian study (2020), students prioritising tutoring only attended school two or three times a week. They mainly attended on days of science practical classes since tutoring classes did not have laboratory facilities. A teacher interviewee remarked, 'they would rather take tutoring than waste their time in school' (see also Punjabi, 2020). In Bray's (2009) Turkey-based study, some students even bribed school authorities to be marked as present in school when they were attending tutoring.

Clearly, in an Australian context, there is link between increased tutoring and greater levels of academic selectivity in schooling. Such changes operate as a form of institutional pedagogy with multiple effects. The types of competition they promote encourage parents to alter their own practices around education, opting to have their child tutored to ensure they gain, what many see, as the better education that is offered in selective classes and schools.

School Choice and Selectivity

School choice policies aim to provide families with greater options when deciding upon a school for their children. They have become more popular since the 1980s (OECD, 2019), with the rise of market-based approaches to education that assume that greater competition between schools will encourage innovation and efficiency (OECD, 2019). School choice advocates argue that students should be able to enrol in any school, regardless of where they live. Some argue that this could create greater educational equity and alleviate poverty, if students from disadvantaged backgrounds can bypass local schools in impoverished neighbourhoods and receive a higher quality education elsewhere (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022; Saporito, 2003). School choice policies also promote the discourse of the democratic right of parents to have their children educated in a manner consistent with their personal preferences, including religious beliefs, values or educational philosophy (Kelly, 2009). Among other things, school choice policies include removing geographical zoning and adding specialisations or selectivity to schools (Windle, 2015).

In NSW, geographical zoning for public schools was relaxed in the late 1980s, enabling families to apply for their children to attend non-local schools. Meanwhile, the number of academically selective schools and schools with specialisations (e.g. in sports, performing arts, and so on) grew. Between 1988 and 2010, the number of public selective and specialist secondary schools in NSW increased by 955 per cent while the number of traditional comprehensive secondary schools fell by 24 per cent (Considine, 2012). International research suggests that families' perceptions of the academic quality of schools are key to their decision-making, driven by their definitions of a 'good' school or 'good' education (Reay & Lucey, 2000). School programs such as sports and extracurricular activities are also important (Condliffe et al., 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). However, other key factors include location and ease of travel, and social connections such as siblings and friends attending the school (Condliffe et al., 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014), that are more likely to channel students to local schools.

International research also shows that the opportunities and constraints experienced by families in the school choice process are significantly shaped by SES, ethnicity and other dimensions of advantage and disadvantage (Windle, 2015; Reay & Lucey, 2000; Ball et al., 1996). As such, school choice policies have been shown to lead to greater inequality and stratification based on

students' ability, SES and ethnicity, while delivering no significant overall improvements in student achievement (Musset, 2012; Kelly, 2009). Inequality grows because not all parents are equally equipped to 'choose'. Educated middle-class parents are more able to afford private school fees and to advocate for their children to be admitted into desirable schools. Those from less advantaged backgrounds tend to make choices based on necessity, perceived lack of entitlement, or from less informed positions. This can include many migrants, even those who are highly educated, because of their lack of familiarity with local education systems. Kelly (2009, p. 270) argues that parents less skilled at engaging with the education system are 'more disadvantaged by greater choice'. Those able to exercise choice gravitate towards more elite schools, whether this is higher achieving public schools or private schools. Halse (2004, p. 527) characterises this trend in ideological terms as 'conflating freedom of choice with responsible parenting'. As Windle (2009, p. 241) puts it, parents have been reduced to 'consumers' of individual schools rather than citizen-members of a common system of schools.

School choice policies also exacerbate inequalities within the public system. Public schools in higher SES areas that have 'desirable' students (i.e. those with the best potential to excel in external examinations) and capacity to raise funds from the school community, have grown in size and academic strength (Bonnor, 2019; Windle, 2009). Greenwell and Bonnor (2022, p. 253) report that, Australia-wide, the biggest school enrolment growth is happening in public schools with the highest number of advantaged students, specifically schools with an ICSEA rating above 1040 (the national average being 1000). As a result, disadvantaged public schools are increasingly left with the 'residual' student body – students from poorer backgrounds, sometimes coinciding with disadvantaged migrant backgrounds (see Halse, 2004). Without exposure to a greater mix of students, some who might serve as role models for higher aspirations and expectations, disadvantaged students may face even greater barriers to social mobility. As Windle (2009, p. 240) notes, the value of 'successful' schools is 'dependent on the relative failure of weaker schools'. Without this hierarchy, the impetus for 'choice' would be reduced.

In fact, Australia has one of the most segregated schooling systems in the OECD (OECD, 2018). Disadvantaged students are heavily concentrated in disadvantaged and poorly performing schools, and the opposite is true of students from wealthy backgrounds. Greenwell and Bonnor's (2022, p. 237) analysis of NSW, Victoria and Queensland shows that, overall, the most socio-educationally advantaged schools have seen an increasing concentration of high SES students, while the least advantaged schools have seen a growth of low SES students. This social segregation has increased dramatically over the past 40 years (Preston, 2018). School choice exacerbates academic segregation because desirable schools will (officially or unofficially) screen for the most promising students (OECD, 2019; Altonji et al., 2015). Of course, this occurs explicitly in the case of selective schools, OCs and those with GAT programs, that admit students on the basis of competitive testing or portfolios. But even schools without formal selective programs can informally choose higher ability students based on the reputation of the school. 'Desirable' public schools, for example, can select high-achieving out of area applicants, so long as they have enrolment capacity.

Increasing academic selectivity within school systems does not only create greater ability-based stratification, it also exacerbates class-based stratification. Although selective schools and classes are supposedly based on merit, they have been shown to be dominated by middle-class students (Reay, 2004). In Australia, selective schools are heavily dominated by students from socio-educationally advantaged backgrounds (Ho, 2020). As Reay (2004, p. 84) notes, 'While nominally directed at "the bright underachieving" working classes [selective programs] are highly susceptible to becoming yet another vehicle for middle-class "over-achievement"'.

Research on the relation between increased social stratification and academic performance has yielded interesting findings. The peer or cohort effect, for example, has been shown to shape student achievement. This is the collective effect of other students at a school on a student's educational outcomes, irrespective of the impact of their own family circumstances (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022). Being in a class with many struggling students is likely to be detrimental to the learning of all students in the class. Additionally, students attending schools with relatively fewer academically motivated students are likely to have less exposure to rigorous or demanding academic programs, and comparatively lower expectations and educational aspirations (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022). It is evident, therefore, that greater social stratification of schools leads to increased inequality in academic performance. Bonnor (2019) has shown that in NSW in 2017, while one in five students in the most socio-educationally advantaged schools were 'Distinguished Achievers' in the HSC (achieving a result in the highest band in a subject), in the least advantaged schools, just one per cent of students achieved at this level. Similar patterns were found in Victoria and Queensland. Given this increasing stratification, Greenwell and Bonnor (2022, p. 237) argue that 'advantaged schools are importing much of their success, while disadvantaged schools are losing many of their achievers'. There is evidence that attending a school with many low achievers has a detrimental effect (Ho & Bonnor, 2018; Burke & Sass, 2013; Sacerdote, 2011). However, high ability students are less sensitive to the composition of their classes (OECD, 2019). Therefore, sorting students by ability may not only increase the achievement gap between students but have a negative overall effect on the academic performance of the school system (OECD, 2019). The OECD's analysis of PISA results shows that isolating high achievers from other students is associated with lower PISA scores among socio-economically disadvantaged students, without any significant impact on advantaged students (OECD, 2019). The peer effect is therefore most pronounced amongst disadvantaged students, while grouping advantaged students together appears to have little benefit. Overall, then, it seems stratification further disadvantages the already disadvantaged, and yet, there is a trend of increasing levels of academic selectivity in schooling.

Despite this, there is relatively little research on selective schools or programs in Australia. This is partly because of their concentration in the state of NSW, with other Australian states having very few or no selective schools at all. However, the expansion of the selective system in NSW has given rise to a small but growing body of research exploring the social implications of selectivity in education. The existing research focuses on selectivity and inequality, the politics of ethnic diversity in selective schools, and the education and other outcomes of selective school students. Much of the research on selective schools has examined the inequality associated with these schools, as evidenced, for example, in their high levels of socio-educational advantage. Despite being public schools designed to cater for high achieving students regardless of background, selective schools are among the most socio-educationally advantaged in the state and enrol very low numbers of disadvantaged students (Ho, 2020; Ho & Bonnor, 2018). Tham (2021) shows that this inequality occurs in both Sydney and Melbourne, with fully selective schools enrolling the highest proportions of socio-economically advantaged students, followed by private and then partially selective schools. Selective schools' high levels of advantage are also evident in their significantly greater parent-generated revenue compared to comprehensive public schools (Rowe & Perry, 2022).

Other research examines issues related to the dominance of those of various Asian backgrounds in selective schools, including Asian migrant families' aspirations and anxieties that propel them towards selective schooling (Ho, 2020), student perceptions and relations within selective school communities (Watkins, 2017), everyday multiculturalism and positionalities adopted by parents and students within selective schools (Ho, 2019), and the historical context of racialised struggles over social and educational legitimacy (Proctor & Sriprakash, 2017). A small body of research has

explored educational and other outcomes for selective school students and graduates, generally finding that selective schooling does not offer significant benefits. Houng and Ryan (2018) found that fully selective school students do only slightly better than their peers in terms of university entrance ranks, reflecting their high levels of educational aspiration and socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. Tham et al. (2024), examining graduates' engagement in education or employment, years of education and life satisfaction, found that attending a selective school was not associated with major benefits for individuals. These findings are comparable to those of studies in the UK on the benefits of attending a grammar school. While some studies found grammar school attendance was associated with higher academic achievement and educational qualifications (Capsada-Munsech & Boliver, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018), others found no significant differences in terms of later socio-economic outcomes and life satisfaction (Henderson et al., 2022; Jerrim and Sims, 2020). Debates around the benefits of attending a selective school, together with the inequity they introduce in schooling systems has led some researchers to question their place within contemporary education altogether (Tham et al., 2024; Ho & Bonnor, 2018).

Conclusion

The research presented in this chapter provides an account of the social and policy contexts within which families engage with education in Australia. The impact of market-oriented education policy is particularly pronounced when it comes to school choice, selectivity, use of tutoring, and families' competitive and strategic approaches to schooling. Asian migrants, typically deeply invested in educational success, have often adopted particularly deliberate strategies in supporting their children's schooling, often by creating rigorous home study routines, using tutoring, and securing placement in selective schools and classes. These practices have in many ways changed the education cultures of local school communities and beyond. The next chapter, drawing on the results of the survey of parents of Years 3 to 6 students, presents a more detailed portrait of how families engage with schooling, across the project's six schools.

Chapter 3:

Parents' Approaches to Education: Survey Results

Chapter 3: Parents' Approaches to Education: Survey Results

This chapter presents the findings of the survey of parents of Years 3 to 6 students in the six project schools undertaken as Phase 1 of the project; three schools in a low SES area and three in a high SES area. These schools were:

- Chesterton (low SES) and Colbyville (high SES), the comprehensive schools without any selective streams;
- Beechvale (low SES) and Bidhura (high SES), the schools with either a GAT stream or program
- Acacia (low SES) and Alinta (high SES), the schools with Year 5 and 6 OCs.

The Backgrounds of the Respondents

Ethnicity

Among the 590 respondents, 20 per cent were born in Australia and 80 per cent were born overseas. The schools were chosen for their concentrations of students from Chinese and Indian backgrounds, and this was evident in the survey results. Figure 1 shows the most common ethnic backgrounds were Chinese (32%), Anglo (19%) and Indian (16%).

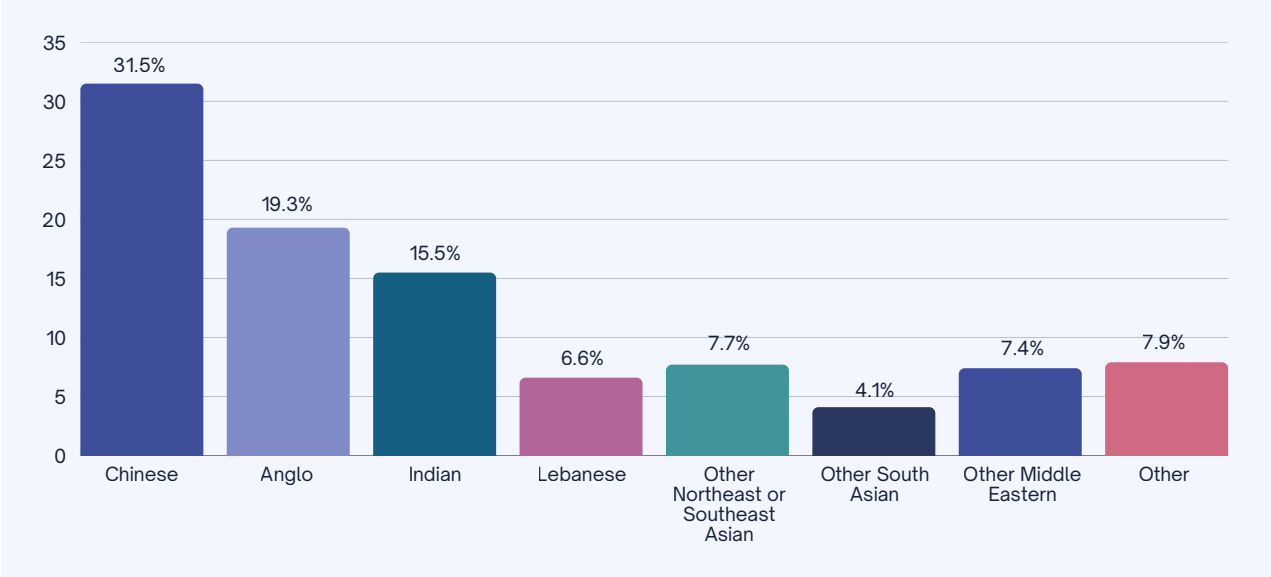


Figure 1. Ethnicity of respondents

Three-quarters (75%) of the respondents spoke a language other than English at home, with Mandarin (29%), Arabic (12%) and Hindi (11%) being the three most common. Over three quarters (78%) of the respondents reported that they spoke fluent to very fluent English, while about a fifth (22%) spoke basic or no English.

Among the 428 respondents who were born overseas, those from Indian backgrounds were most likely to have arrived recently, while those from Lebanese and Chinese backgrounds were longer-term residents of Australia. Only a minority of respondents from Indian backgrounds (38%) had

lived in Australia for more than ten years, compared to almost three quarters (73%) of Chinese background respondents and 100 per cent of Lebanese respondents.

Among those who had migrated to Australia, the majority arriving from Asia came on a skilled migration visa. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of these visa holders was particularly high among those from an Indian (77%) and a Chinese background (69%). On the other hand, the majority of respondents from a Lebanese background (57%) came to Australia on a family reunion or refugee visa. About 13 per cent of the respondents of an Anglo background (i.e. from the UK, Canada, US and New Zealand) came on a business visa, the highest proportion of all groups.

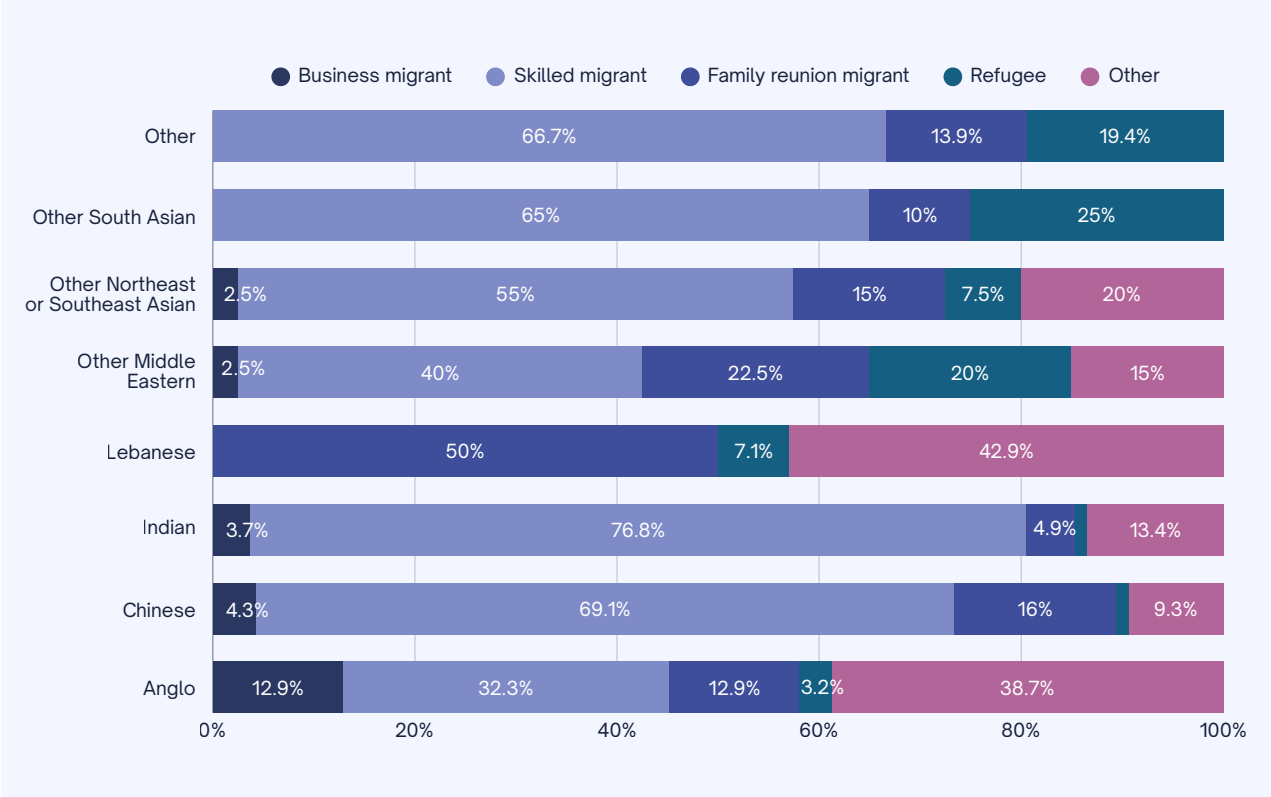


Figure 2. Respondents' ethnicity and visa categories

Figure 3 below displays the ethnic breakdown of respondents by school, showing that despite the high levels of ethnic diversity in all schools, each had a distinct profile. Respondents from a Chinese background were prominent in the three high SES schools and one of the low SES schools, while those from an Indian background were prominent in one high and one low SES school. Respondents from an Anglo background were prominent in two of the high SES schools.

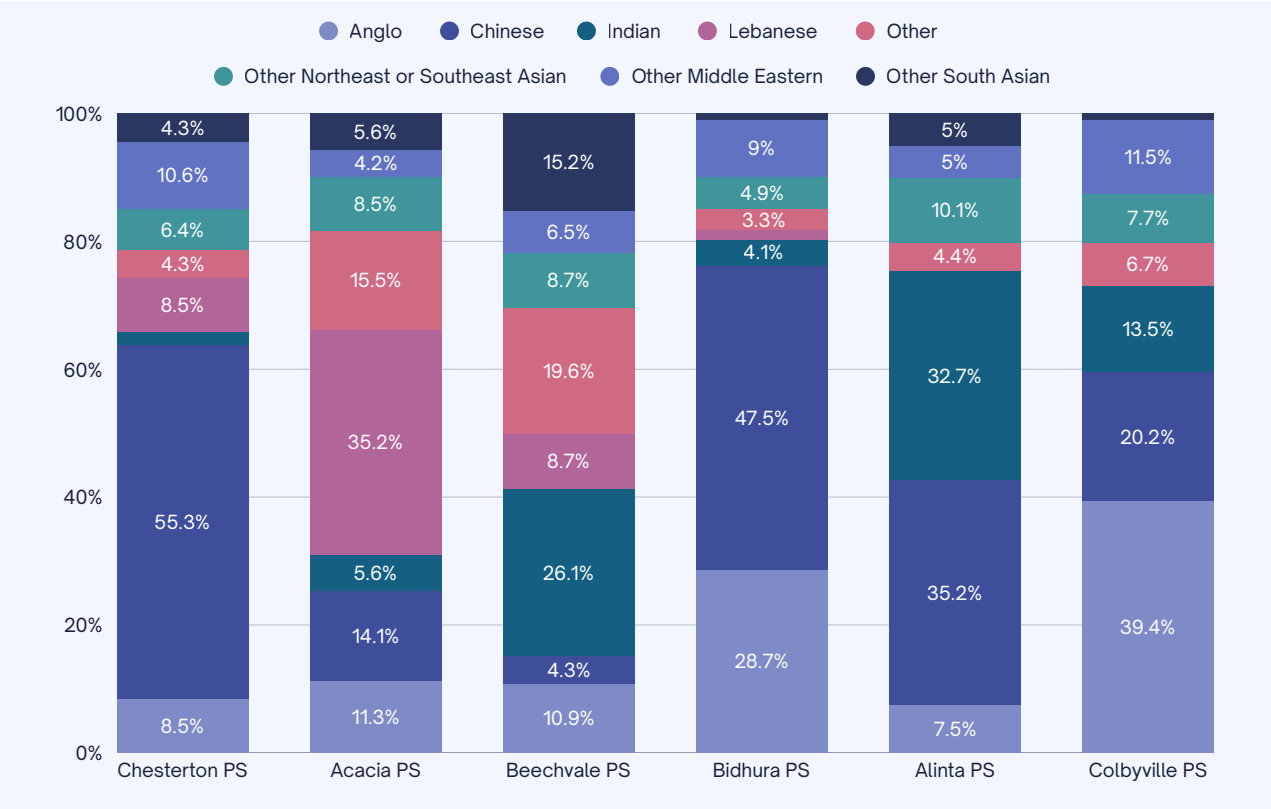


Figure 3: Ethnicity of respondents by school

SES

As mentioned in the Introduction, this variable was created to provide a more balanced understanding of respondents' SES by considering occupation, educational qualifications, household income and residential location. The results show that nearly half (47%) of respondents were of a mid SES, while just over a third (34%) were of a low SES, and about one-fifth (19%) were of a high SES. Figure 4 below shows the breakdown of SES by school, clearly distinguishing the high from low SES schools.

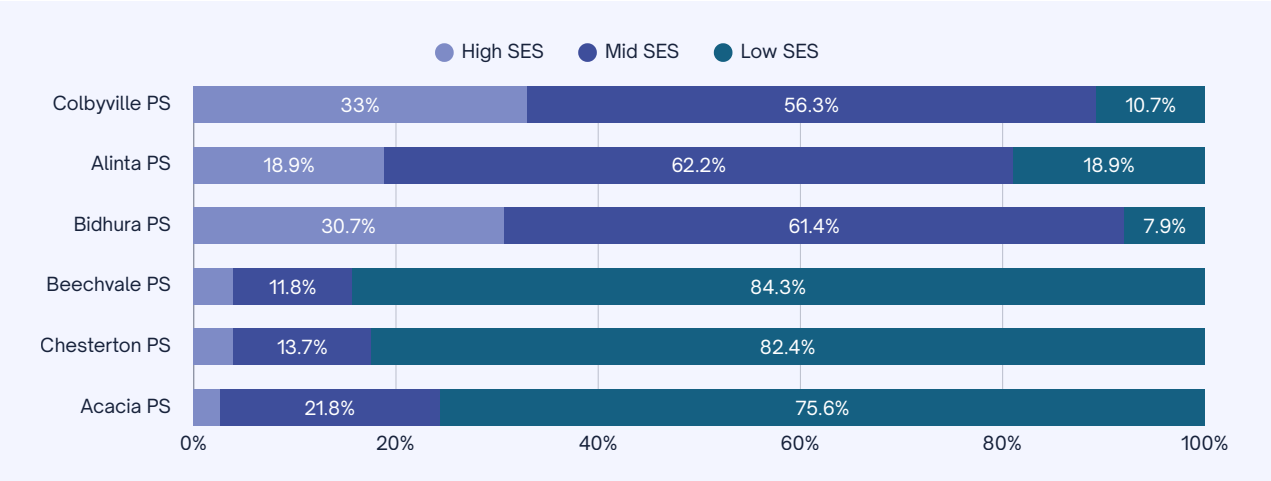


Figure 4: SES by school

The survey respondents worked in various occupations, ranging from the professions to those in sales and trades, with others unemployed at the time of the research. Just over half (51%) were engaged in managerial and professional occupations, which was higher than the Census figure of 40 per cent who worked as managers and professionals in Greater Sydney (ABS, 2021a). However, over a third (34%) of respondents reported not being in the labour force (e.g. home duties, unemployed, student) or did not answer the question. Over a third (37%) of the respondents reported an annual household income of over $150,000, which was higher than the median annual household income of $108,004 of the population in Greater Sydney (ABS, 2021a). However, 11 per cent of the respondents reportedly had a household income of less than $50,000 per year, and a sizeable proportion (23%) preferred not to disclose their income.

The survey results showed some ethnic patterns relating to SES, as shown in Figure 5. Over a third (38%) of the respondents of Anglo backgrounds were of a high SES. This proportion was the highest among all groups participating in the survey. This reflects the concentration of Anglo respondents in the high SES schools and their relative absence in the low SES schools.[4] The majority of Chinese (52%) and Indian (60%) respondents were of a mid SES. Respondents of a Lebanese (83%) or Other Middle Eastern (65%) background were predominantly of a low SES.

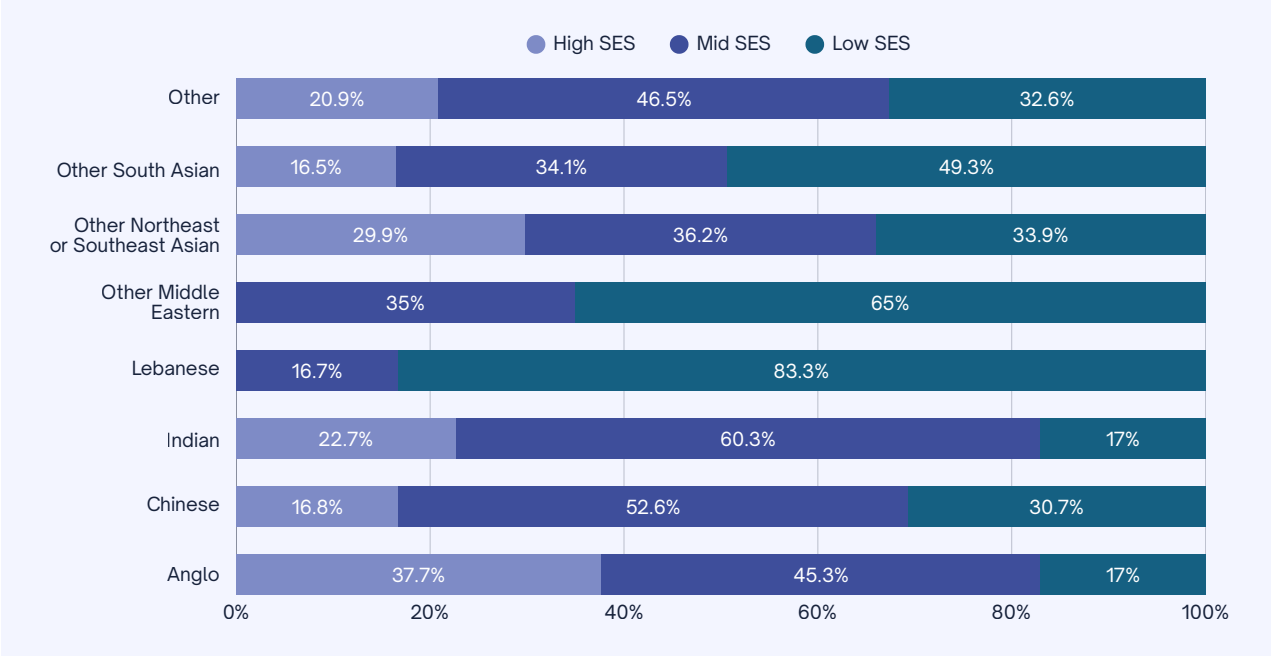


Figure 5. Respondents' ethnicity by SES

The survey respondents were generally highly educated, with 70 per cent having a university degree. This percentage was much higher than the 33 per cent of the population with a bachelor's degree or above in Greater Sydney reported in the latest Census (ABS, 2021a). Respondents from Chinese and Indian backgrounds were more highly educated than other groups, with the vast majority holding a university degree (80% for Chinese and 90% for Indian). This may be attributed to Australia's skilled migration program, which gives preference to migrants with higher academic qualifications, but is of significance in terms of what it suggests about these groups' stores of cultural capital, their attitudes to education and the ways in which this influences their approach to

[4] While the low SES schools were located in migrant-dominant suburbs, the schools were even more migrant-dominant than the surrounding community, demonstrating the ethnic segregation that characterises parts of the NSW education system (Ho, 2019). Hence the relative absence of low SES Anglo respondents.

parenting, especially in relation to their children's education. The corresponding figure for respondents of an Anglo background was 71 per cent. Those of Lebanese backgrounds were the only group with low levels of university education with only 17 per cent having a university qualification and 33 per cent having completed a TAFE certificate.

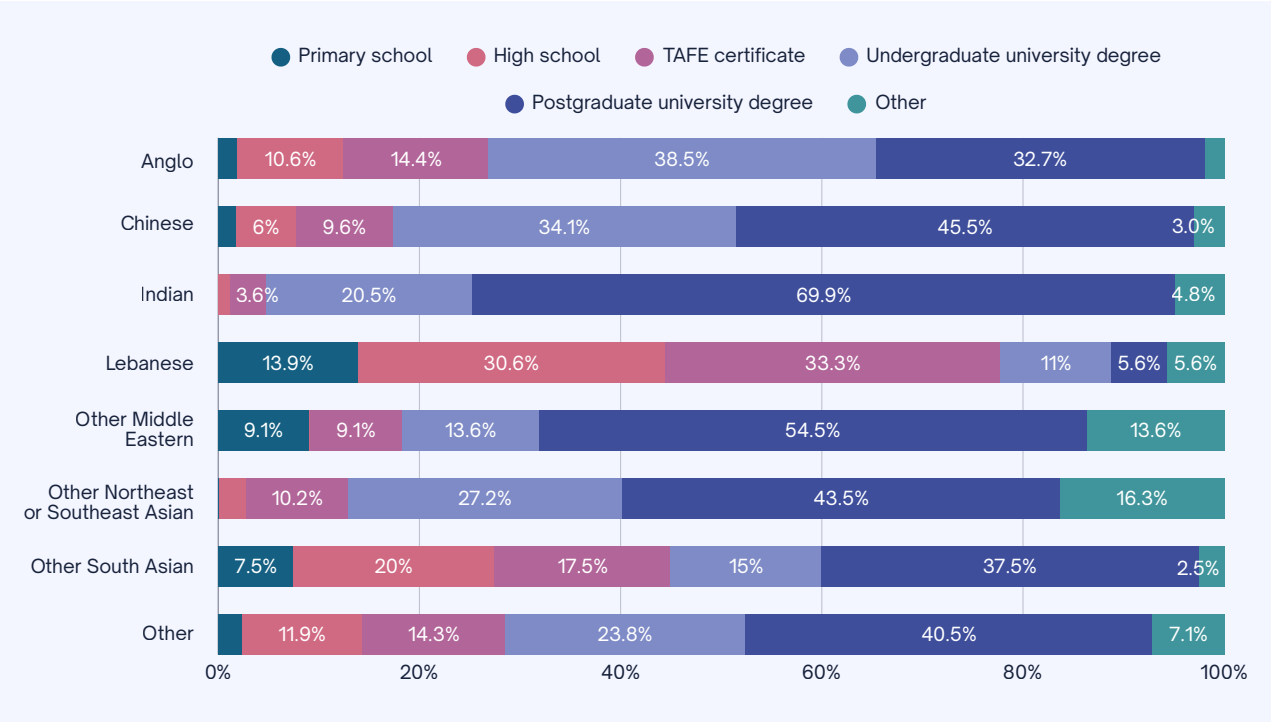


Figure 6. Parental education levels by ethnicity

Attitudes to Schooling and Education Practices

The survey asked parents about their attitudes to schooling and practices around the education of their children, including questions around school choice, selective streams, homework, tutoring and extracurricular activities.

School Choice

When asked about what factors parents considered when choosing a school for their child, the most commonly cited was being close to home (39%), followed by good academic results (21%) and a good school community (18%). However, there was some ethnic differentiation, as shown in Figure 7. Respondents of Indian (52%) and Chinese (36%) backgrounds were more likely to consider the school's academic results than those of Anglo backgrounds (21%). Choosing a school with an OC was nominated by 27 per cent of Indian respondents and 21 per cent of Chinese respondents, but only 2 per cent of Anglo respondents.

For some groups, residential choices were influenced by the perceived quality of the schools. Three quarters (75%) of those of Indian background and 60 per cent of those of Chinese background stated that school quality was the primary reason they chose to live in a particular suburb, compared to only 37 per cent of those of an Anglo background. Over 31 per cent of those

of an Anglo background did not consider the school at all when they chose their residential location; this figure was the highest among all groups surveyed. This may reflect the fact that respondents from an Anglo background were less likely to make a deliberate choice of residential location, given they may simply continue residing where they had grown up or where they had long-term family and social connections.

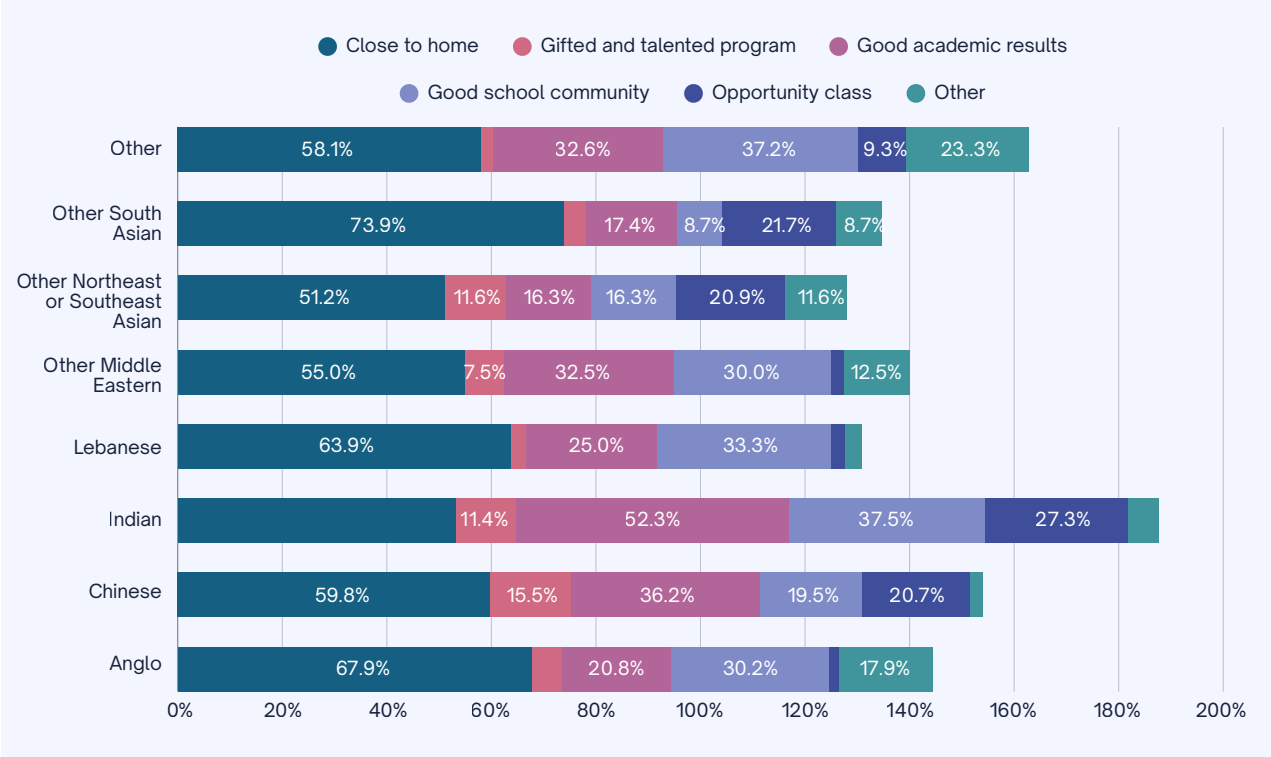


Figure 7. Reasons for choosing the school by ethnicity (results exceed 100% due to respondents selecting more than one choice)

When comparing responses by SES, the results show that low SES respondents were slightly more likely to nominate proximity to home, while mid and high SES respondents were more likely to nominate good academic results and a gifted and talented program, as shown in Figure 8.

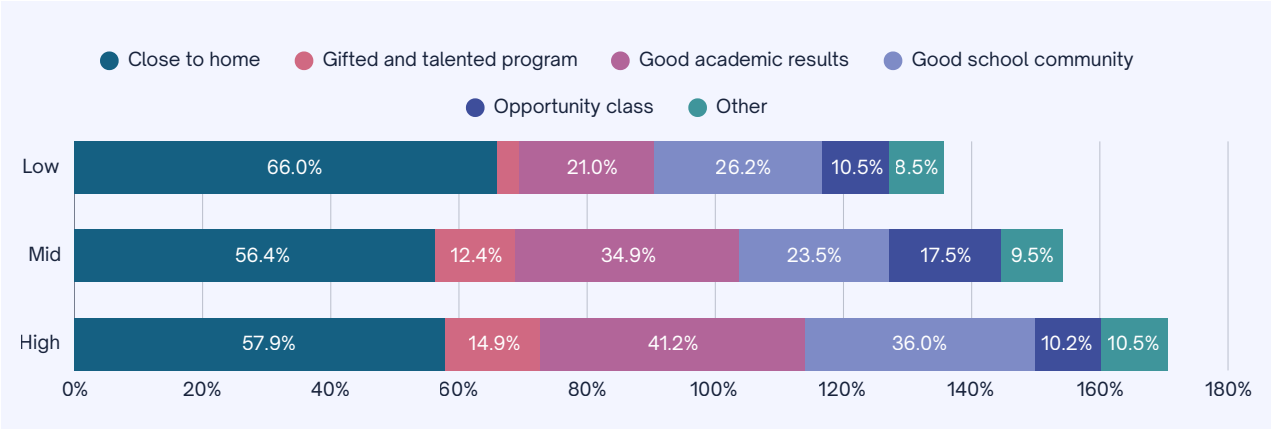


Figure 8. Reasons for choosing the school by SES (results exceed 100% due to respondents selecting more than one choice)

Homework

The survey asked parents about their approaches to homework and their child's engagement with it. As subsequent chapters explain, homework policies varied among schools, with most schools providing very little homework. Nonetheless, 44 per cent of respondents stated that their child did homework 3 to 4 nights a week, and over a quarter (28%) did homework five nights or more each week. The vast majority (86%) of the respondents stated that their child did less than 60 minutes homework each night, while 14 per cent did 60 minutes or more homework each night. This may have included tutoring or parent provided homework as well as that provided by a student's school.

Some key differences emerge when comparing homework practices on the basis of ethnicity, as Figure 9 shows. Respondents of an Anglo background were most likely (65%) to report that their child spent less than 30 minutes on homework each night. In contrast, one in five (20%) respondents from an Indian or Chinese background stated that their child did 60 minutes or more homework each night, compared to less than 2 per cent of the respondents from an Anglo background.

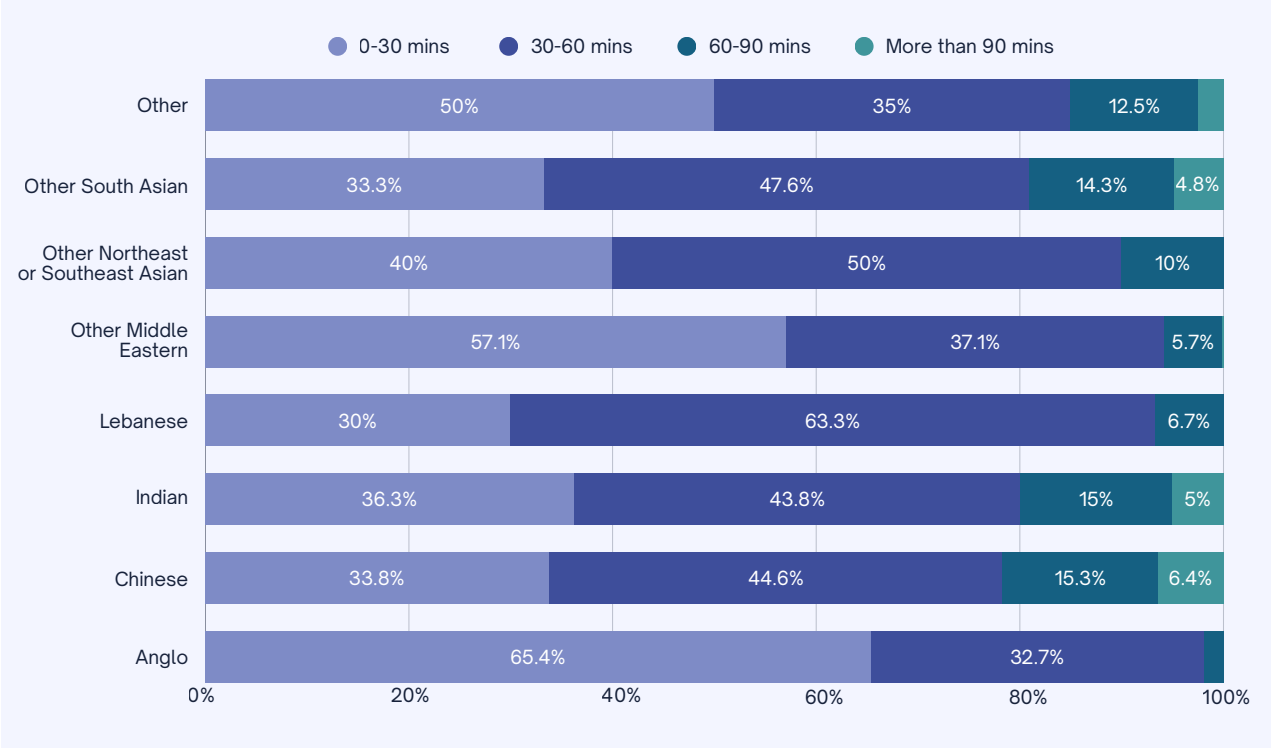


Figure 9. Time spent on homework each night by ethnicity

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they supervised their children's homework. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those of an Indian background stated that they often or always supervised their child's homework, compared to over a third (37%) of respondents from a Chinese background and 47 per cent of those from an Anglo background. The survey showed that respondents born in Australia (52%) had a similar level of supervision of their child's homework as those born overseas (50%).

Some figures in this chapter do not total 100% due to decimal rounding.

When considering setting extra homework tasks for their child, there were more significant differences between groups, as Figure 10 shows. Over half (53%) of the respondents of an Indian background and 44 per cent of those of a Chinese background stated that they often or always set extra homework tasks for their child. These figures were in stark contrast to those of an Anglo background with only 11 per cent always or often setting extra homework tasks, together with over half (54%) never setting their child extra homework. The survey also showed that overseas-born respondents (44%) were more likely to set extra homework for their child than those born in Australia (13%). Nearly half (46%) of the respondents born in Australia stated that they never set extra homework for their child. It should be remembered that the Chinese and Indian migrant respondents were more highly educated than other groups, which may partly explain their tendency to set extra homework for their children. As also seen with many of the preceding questions, Chinese and Indian respondents were more likely to emphasise education in their parenting and household practices, illustrating family pedagogies geared towards schooling success.

These apparent ethnic differences may also reflect some social desirability bias as some groups may over-report homework supervision and setting exercises in order to appear as educationally engaged parents, while others may under-report in order to appear as relaxed parents. Interestingly, the survey showed no significant differences in homework practices between respondents at high and low SES schools or between OCs and mainstream classes. However, some of the more nuanced differences between these cohorts are examined in subsequent chapters that draw on the qualitative data.

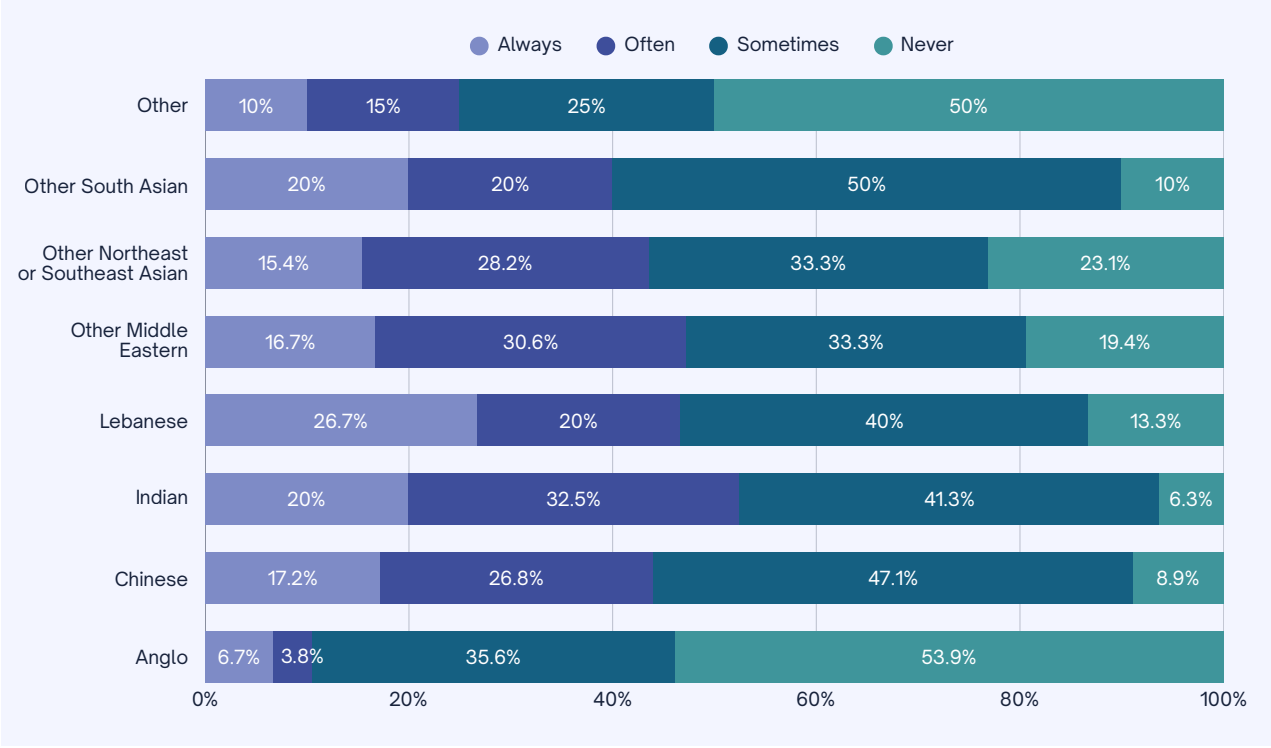


Figure 10. Parents setting extra homework by ethnicity

Tutoring

The survey asked parents about their child's engagement with academic tutoring, as already noted, a growing practice. Just under half (43%) of respondents stated that their child had external academic tutoring, with Maths (30%) and English (30%) the most common subjects nominated. The majority (61%) of respondents stated that their child attended tutoring once a week, though 15 per cent attended three or more days per week. Respondents were asked to indicate their main reasons for having their child tutored. About one-fifth (20%) reported this was mainly for external exam preparation. Over half of respondents of a Chinese background (56%) and Indian background (55%) reported that their child had academic tutoring. This was in stark contrast to over three quarters (78%) of respondents of Anglo backgrounds who did not send their child to tutoring.

When comparing the SES of those who sent their child to tutoring, the results did not show any notable differences across all three SES groupings: high SES (40%), mid SES (48%) and low SES (41%). However, ethnic differences were more marked in terms of reasons for attending tutoring, as shown in Figure 11. While most respondents of Anglo backgrounds (59%) stated that their child received tutoring for remedial support, the majority of respondents of Chinese background (80%) and Indian background (91%) stated that their child received tutoring primarily for extension or exam practice. As subsequent chapters explain, Chinese and Indian migrant families are particularly drawn to selective schools and are more likely to use tutoring to prepare for the highly competitive selective schools test. This, together with the high parental education levels of Chinese and Indian migrants, helps explain their distinctive patterns in tutoring use.

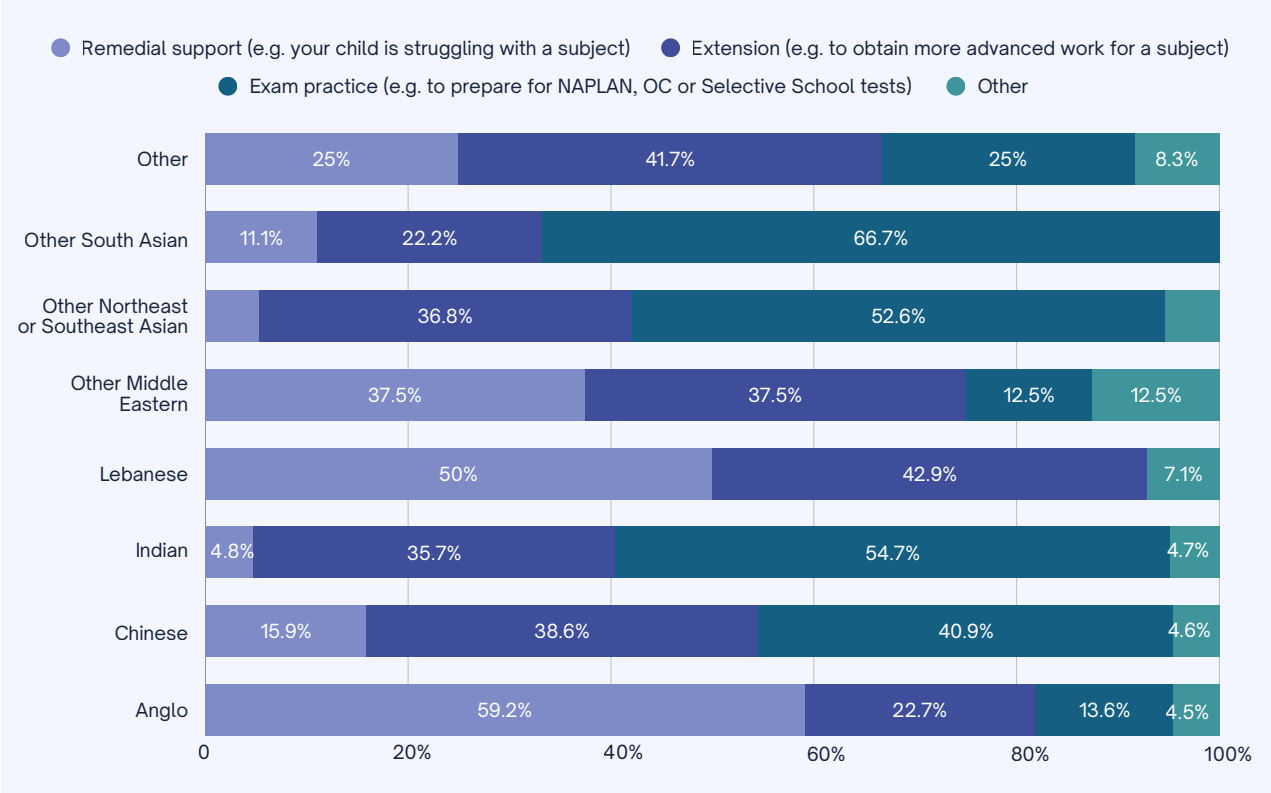


Figure 11. Reasons for academic tutoring by ethnicity

Use of tutoring is also divided when comparing OC and mainstream students. While a majority (73%) of OC students attended tutoring, this was true for less than half (44%) of mainstream students. OC students were also more likely to attend tutoring three or more days per week, compared to mainstream students. While the majority of OC students attended tutoring for exam practice (57%), this was only true for 39 per cent of mainstream students. These results are not surprising given the concentration of students from Chinese and Indian background in OCs, again reflecting the importance of education in the family pedagogies of these groups, and in particular, the important role of selective schools and streams in these families' approach to education.

Selective Streams

Among the respondents who were parents of a Year 5 or Year 6 student, 18 per cent had a child in an OC, compared to 82 per cent in a mainstream class. Among the parents whose child was in an OC, 90 per cent were born overseas, compared to 75 per cent in mainstream classes. The figures below provide comparisons of the ethnic profiles of the OC and mainstream classes in the two schools with OCs. They show a much higher concentration of students of East and South Asian backgrounds in the OCs compared to mainstream classes.

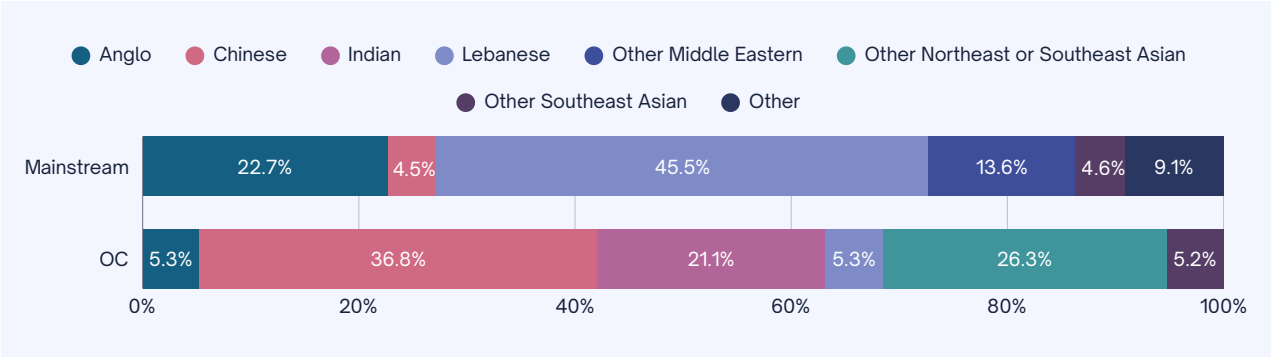


Figure 12: Ethnicity by OC/mainstream, Acacia Public School

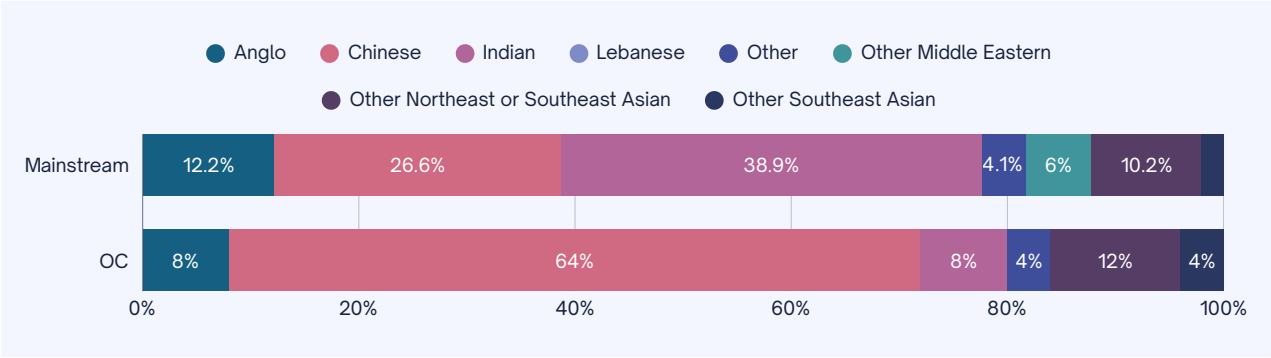


Figure 13: Ethnicity by OC/mainstream, Alinta Public School

These dramatic contrasts in the ethnic profiles of OCs and mainstream classes in both schools provide a clear indication of the educational strategies of Chinese and Indian migrant families while also showing their relative success in navigating the institutional pedagogies of the NSW selective education system.

Turning to SES comparisons, overall, the vast majority of the OC students were of a mid SES (49%) or low SES background (33%). Only 9 per cent were from a high SES background. This may reflect the low proportions of students from high SES backgrounds at Acacia and Alinta in total. Comparing OC and mainstream families showed some clear divisions at Acacia PS, where among OC families, 50 per cent were of a mid or high SES, compared to only 13 per cent mid SES among mainstream parents, and none in the high SES category. At Alinta PS the OC and mainstream cohorts were more aligned in relation to SES, with mainstream families slightly more advantaged (87% mid or high SES) than OC families (80%). This level of advantage largely reflects the profile of the local community.

There was also a contrast between OC and mainstream families in relation to parental education. This was particularly the case for Acacia PS, where 73 per cent of OC parents had a university degree, compared to only 17 per cent of mainstream parents, as Figure 14 shows. This contrast clearly demonstrates the much higher levels of socio-educational advantage and cultural capital among OC families compared to mainstream families at this school. The social implications of this division are examined in subsequent chapters.

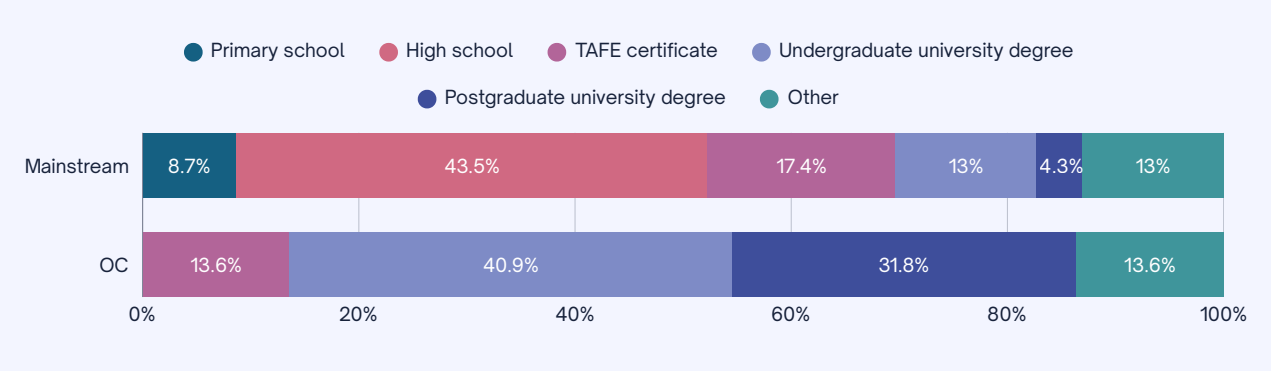


Figure 14: Parental education by OC/mainstream, Acacia Public School

The contrast was not as evident in Alinta PS, where even the mainstream parents were very highly educated, as shown in Figure 15, again reflecting the high SES community where the school is located.

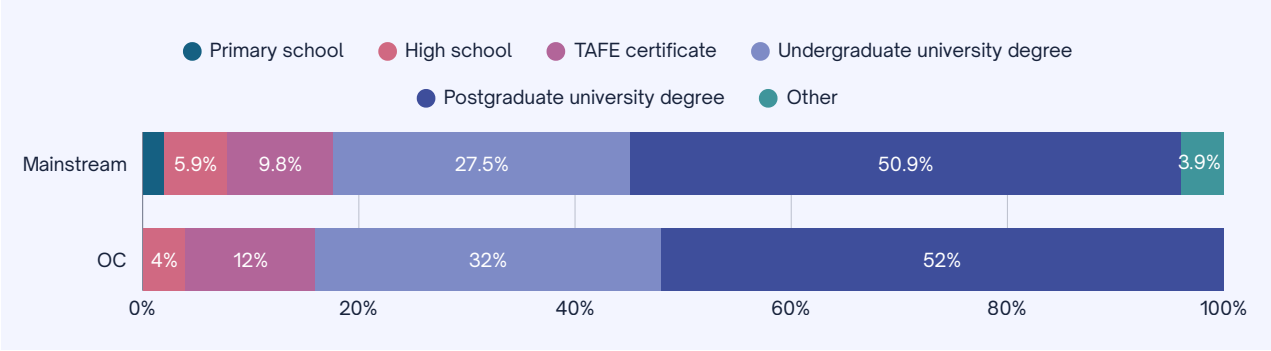


Figure 15. Parental education by OC/mainstream, Alinta Public School

Less than a third (31%) of the students in OCs lived within the school catchment area, compared to the majority (78%) of students in mainstream classes. This is not surprising given that entry into OCs is based on centralised testing rather than local residence, but it raises the question of whether OCs, placed in certain schools to service particular areas, are sufficiently meeting this need if the majority of their students are out-of-area enrolments.

The survey asked parents whether they would apply for a selective high school for their child. Over half (55%) of all respondents stated that their child would attend the exam in Year 6 to enter a selective school, while a quarter (26%) stated that their child would not attend the exam. A fifth (20%) of the respondents were still undecided. Children of overseas-born respondents (61%) were more likely to sit for the selective school exam compared to those born in Australia (27%). Almost all (90%) parents of OC students stated that their child would sit for the selective high school entrance exam, compared to only half (50%) of mainstream parents. Again, this is not surprising given that OCs are largely perceived to be 'feeders' for selective schools, and therefore attract those families who are aiming for this high school option.

There were also significant ethnic and SES differences around sitting for the selective school entrance exam, as shown in Figure 16. Those of Chinese (69%), Indian (79%), and other South Asian (76%) backgrounds were more likely to have their child sit for the selective school entrance exam compared to other groups, including Lebanese (17%) and Anglo (25%), again underscoring these groups' different educational strategies and engagement with the NSW selective education system.

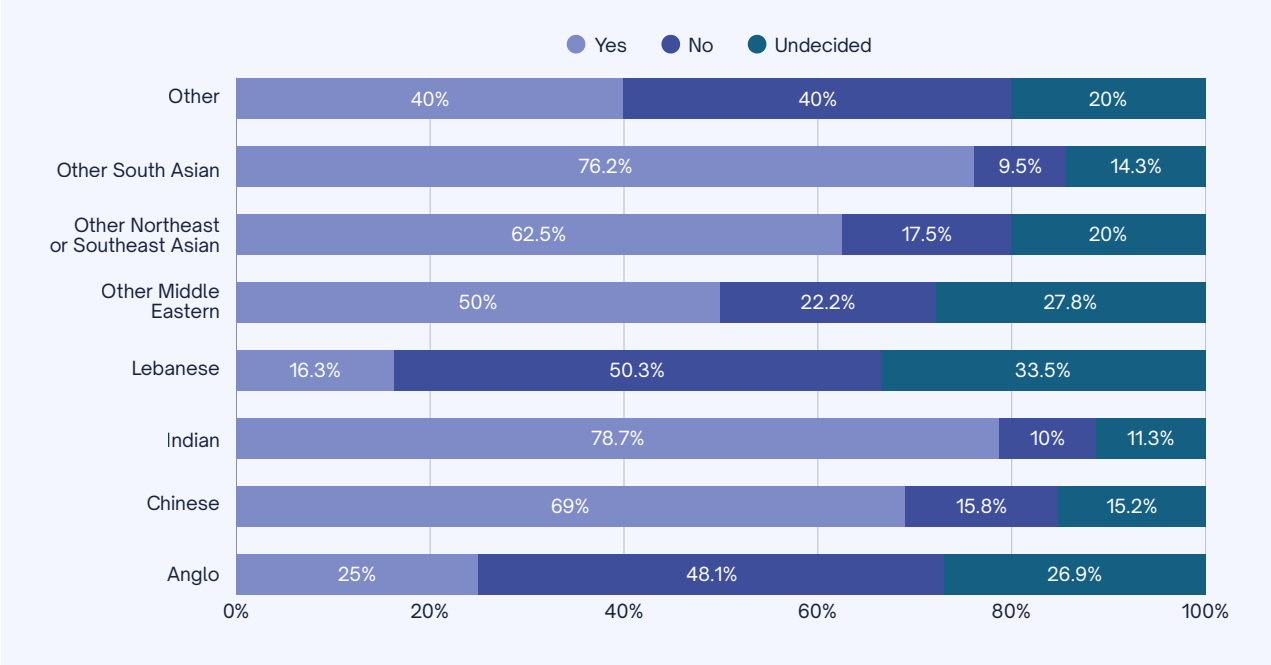


Figure 16. Intention to sit for selective school exam by ethnicity

In terms of SES, a majority (59%) of respondents of a mid SES stated that they would have their child sit for the selective school exam, compared to 55 per cent of those of a high SES and 48 per cent of a low SES, figures that may be somewhat skewed due to a social desirability bias. Considering high school choice more generally, four in ten respondents stated that they would like their child to attend a fully or partially selective high school, compared to 28 per cent who

chose a comprehensive high school and 14 per cent choosing a non-government school. The majority (78%) of parents with a child in an OC preferred their child to study at a fully selective high school.

Parental choice for high school also differed significantly among respondents from different ethnic and SES backgrounds. In line with the results above, over half of Chinese (55%) and Indian (55%) respondents stated a fully or partially selective school was their preferred choice of high school, while only 19 per cent of Anglo respondents chose this option. A larger proportion of Anglo respondents (31%) favoured a non-government school. The highest proportion of respondents who preferred a fully or partially selective high school for their child came from a mid SES background (44%). A slightly lower percentage of those of a high SES (40%) and a low SES (37%) intended to choose a selective high school. Over a fifth (21%) of respondents of a high SES preferred a non-government high school for their child, comparatively higher than those of a mid or low SES.

Parental Involvement in Schools

The survey indicated that most parents had limited involvement in their children's school, but also that there were significant variations across the sample. Asked how often they volunteered at the school, over half (54%) said 'never', though this differed across the schools. In two of the higher SES schools this dropped considerably – Bidhura (33%) and Colbyville (39%). Overall, levels of volunteerism increased with SES levels, as shown in Figure 17.

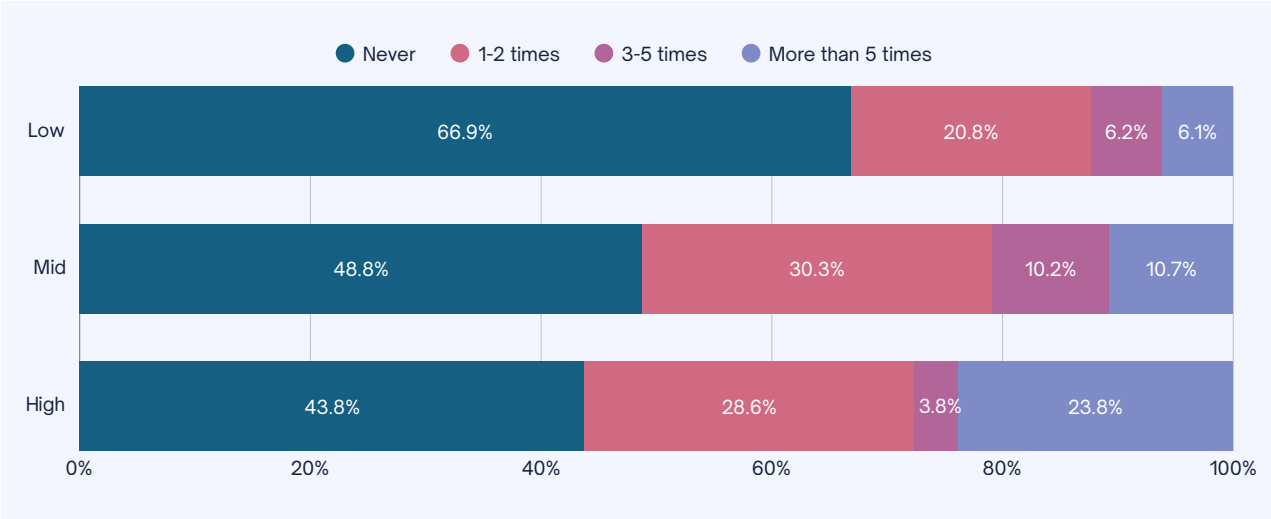


Figure 17. Volunteering at school in the last two years, by SES

While Australian-born parents were, perhaps predictably, more likely to have some involvement (54%) than overseas-born (44%), unpacking this into categories of ethnicity showed a more complex picture. Indian parents had the highest 'never' response (72%), followed by Lebanese (57%), then Anglo (47%), with Chinese parents having the lowest response (41%). Yet, while this meant the Chinese parents had the highest level of involvement of whatever frequency, they actually had a lower level of high-frequency involvement (22% said 3 or more times) than the Anglos (27%), suggesting significant variations with degrees of involvement.

This was echoed in types of involvement. Parent/teacher interviews and information nights were the most common types of involvement, but despite being almost obligatory forms,[5] Anglo respondents (79%) were more likely to attend than Indian (61%), Chinese (59%) and Lebanese (54%). This dominance was echoed in fundraising meetings, but was more complicated in P&C meetings, where Lebanese and Indian respondents had the same or more levels of involvement than the Anglos, followed by the Chinese.[6] There is a clear effect of SES on school involvement, too, with high SES parents demonstrating higher levels of attendance at all types of meeting than mid and low SES parents.

Extracurricular Activities

Finally, parents were asked about their child's extracurricular activities. The vast majority (81%) of respondents stated that their child attended extracurricular activities, with the most popular being sports (43%), followed by art and culture (35%) and language (13%). Participation in extracurricular activities rose directly with SES, as Figure 18 shows. The lower participation by children of low SES backgrounds illustrates long documented social inequalities in opportunities for the acquisition of cultural capital. It also indicates the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003) of children deployed by mid and high SES parents.

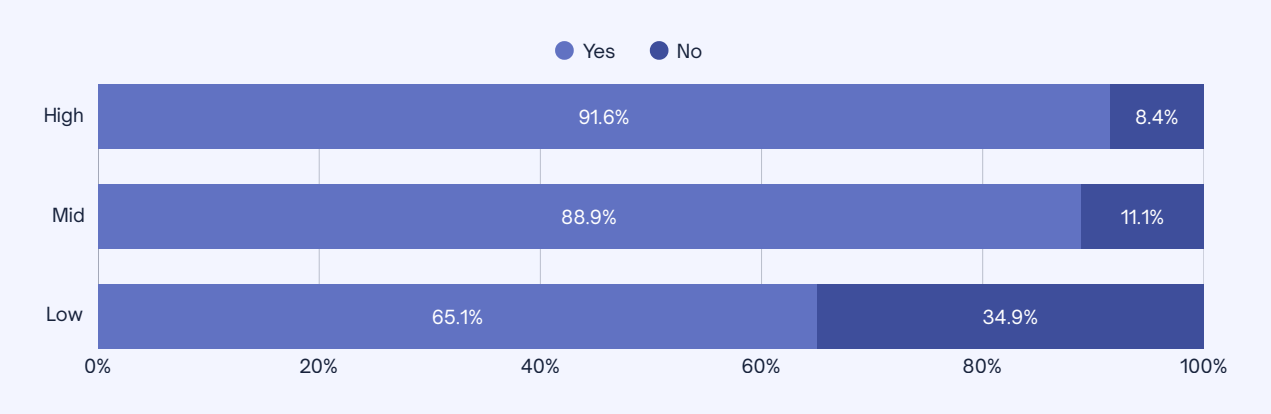


Figure 18. Participation in extracurricular activities, by SES

There were also notable differences among various groups in terms of the types of extracurricular activities attended. Chinese and other East Asian families were most likely to enrol their child in art and culture activities, while those from Anglo and Middle Eastern backgrounds were most likely to have a child participating in sport. Lebanese and Chinese families were most likely to enrol their child in language classes, as shown in Figure 19.

[5] Note that the COVID-19 effect might have exacerbated the effects of language, etc.
[6] This, of course, may be an effect of small samples.

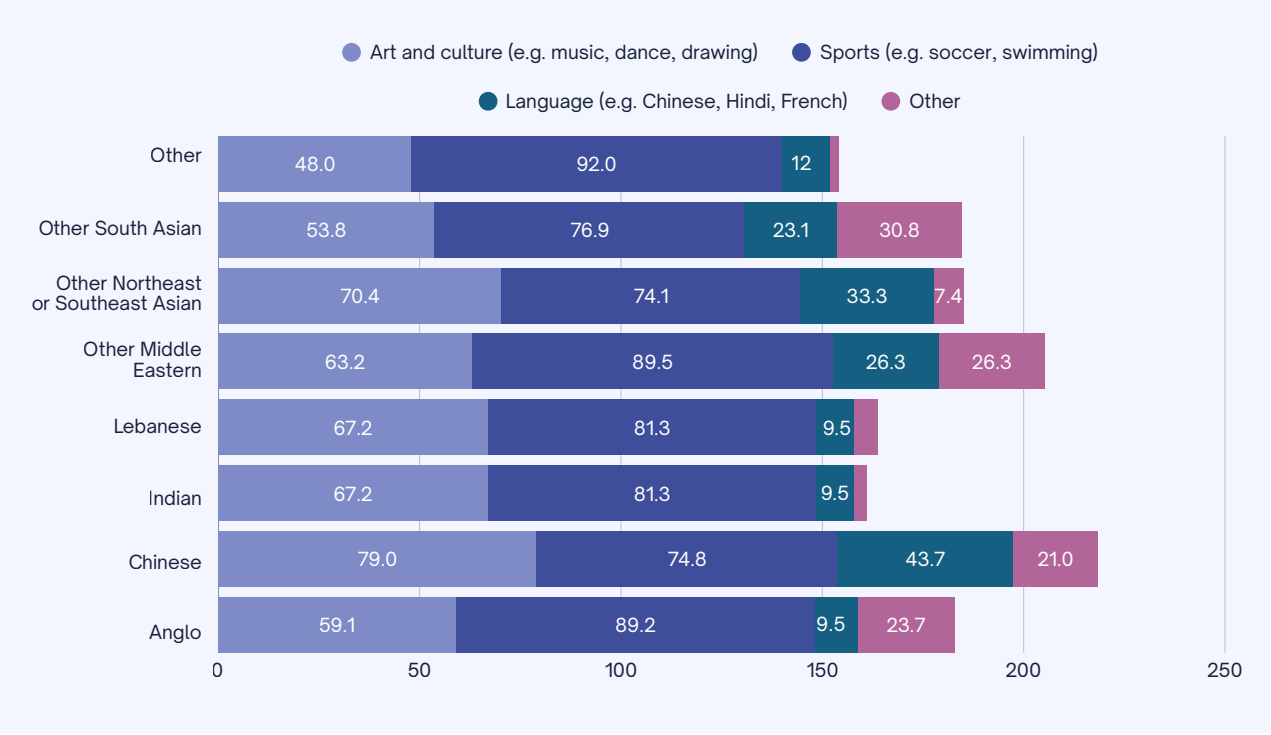


Figure 19. Extracurricular activities by ethnicity (results exceed 100% due to respondents selecting more than one choice)

Children with parents who were born in Australia (88%) were more likely to participate in sports activities, while children with parents with a migrant background were more likely to participate in art and culture activities (67%) and language classes (28%). These differences illustrate the various priorities of these groups in providing development opportunities for their children, with implications for educational success, especially with activities that contribute towards the acquisition of greater degrees of cultural capital.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a summary of the key findings of the survey of parents of Years 3 to 6 students in the six primary schools involved in this project. In terms of the general profile of the respondents, the survey shows that most were born overseas and spoke a language other than English at home and, in line with the sample of the overarching study, were primarily from China, India, and other parts of East and South Asia. Most were generally highly educated and came from a mid SES professional background, with a significant proportion coming to Australia through the skilled migration program. These findings demonstrated some consistent patterns of certain groups in relation to their child's education. In particular, Chinese and Indian migrants were more likely to prioritise academic results and selective schools and streams compared to Anglo and other respondents. Asian migrant background families also spent more time on homework than did Anglo families, including on work set by parents rather than schools, and made greater use of tutoring, particularly for extension and exam practice.

While these findings appear to reinforce some ethnic stereotypes, it should be remembered that this survey is not representative of the school system as a whole, nor of any specific ethnic communities as a whole. The inclusion of two schools with OCs in the research design meant the over-representation of aspirational families who are likely to be more educationally focused, and more strategic in their approach to their children's schooling. It is also important to remember that these Chinese and Indian migrants were highly educated and differences in SES were important in many survey results, including those around school choice and participation in extracurricular activities.

Despite the survey results demonstrating some broad patterns of parental approaches towards their child's education in relation to ethnicity and SES, the survey could not explain the complexity behind these patterns. For example, the survey showed significant ethnic differences in parenting practices towards a child's education but could not explain why these differences occur and what factors produce certain parenting practices. In the next chapters, analysis and discussion will focus on the qualitative data based on detailed interviews and field observations to draw out evidence and provide a more nuanced explanation of the patterns identified in the survey, using the qualitative data to help unpack the complex relationships between home and school practices and a student's education.

Chapter 4:

Principals' and Teachers' Perspectives

Chapter 4: Principals' and Teachers' Perspectives

As was evident in the previous chapter, there were some significant differences in how the sample of parents of the Years 3 to 6 students from across the six schools approached the education of their children. These differences were primarily considered in terms of ethnicity and SES, but it is the relation between these, together with factors such as visa type and length of residency which allow for a more nuanced understanding of these findings. The quantitative data from the survey are useful for revealing broad patterns in relation to these but provide little explanation as to why these differences occur and the particular influences, systemic and within families and communities, that impact upon the choices parents make about the education of their children. Gauging the perspectives of a range of actors is essential in this regard. Here, and in the next three chapters, the attitudes and understandings of various groups of participants are examined beginning with those of the principals of each of the schools and the teachers of each of the students involved in the study. In one school, the deputy principal and community liaison officer (CLO) were also interviewed, with this sample as a whole shedding light on a variety of issues pertinent in terms of the study's focus on schooling, parenting and ethnicity.

The data examined here are gleaned from interviews with these participants, 28 in all, that relate to the following four themes:

i. the impact of ethnicity and SES on parenting and schooling
ii. school choice and selectivity
iii. tutoring
iv. homework.

Ethnicity, SES and Parenting

One of the main motivations for the study was to explore what can be termed the 'ethnicisation of educational achievement' (Watkins & Noble, 2013), in particular the association of academic success with students of Asian backgrounds, as if this success was simply a function of ethnicity. The study was also keen to examine the role of parenting in terms of this and the extent to which achievement may be fuelled by practices that are ethnically or culturally determined or if other factors are significant. Principals and teachers from across the six schools were asked if they felt there were any noticeable differences in the academic achievement of students from different ethnic/cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Overwhelmingly, they identified students of Asian backgrounds as their top performers. At Chesterton, the low SES comprehensive school with large numbers of students of various Asian and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, teacher, Bianca, commented on how 'those children that sit in my top group are basically from Chinese-speaking backgrounds', referring to those of Arabic-speaking backgrounds as 'the ones that are in my middle and low group'. Bianca's colleagues, also teaching Year 5, made similar comments. Georgia, for example, referred to how,

> the top group that I have [is] from the kind of more Vietnamese, Chinese background. I would say probably a lot of the Lebanese, Arabic-speaking kids are more of the lower end of the scale. I am not entirely sure why that could be.

At Acacia, the low SES school with OC classes in Years 5 and 6, these differences were even more pronounced as the students in these classes were almost exclusively of Asian backgrounds. As Elizabeth, the Year 5 OC teacher, remarked,

> So, majority [in my class are], Chinese and Korean and then I do have some, probably the next biggest group would be … South Asian like India and Nepal, Pakistan. That's pretty much it. I don't have any Anglo kids. I don't have any Lebanese kids … But my OC beforehand … was probably about 80 per cent Chinese. So, year to year, it's pretty consistently Chinese make up the majority of the students.

Given the school has large numbers of students of Arabic-speaking backgrounds, ethnically, the OC stream at Acacia was markedly different. Very few of the Arabic-speaking majority, if any, were successful in gaining entry, if indeed they applied at all.

The student population of Beechvale, the third of the low SES schools, offering a GAT class in Maths, was ethnically quite different to Chesterton and Acacia. There were far fewer students of Chinese background at the school but a relatively large number who were South Asian and it is these students who tended to be the top performers academically. As Julian, the Principal, pointed out, 'Our aspirational students tend to be like the Indian families. Some say the Chinese but that's not always the case here'.

Similar patterns in relation to ethnicity and academic achievement were evident in the high SES schools. Calida, Principal of comprehensive primary school, Colbyville, remarked on the changing ethnicity of high achievers at the school: 'You definitely notice on presentation day that the ethnic balance has shifted, shifted particularly in Mathematics and Science and Technology, I suppose more towards the Asian and the Indian kids'. This was also the case at nearby Bidhura, though with a long-standing GAT stream in the primary years, these demographic shifts had a longer history. Vaani, who taught the Year 4 GAT class, mentioned how the 'majority of my students are from Asia and most of them speak another language at home. However, [the] majority were born in Australia'. Extension classes in different subjects at Bidhura were also open to students in the mainstream. Vaani's colleague, Helena, who taught a mainstream Year 5 class, explained how, 'quite a lot of my Chinese background students are going to the extension group in Mathematics, but I have Anglo kids as well that go but, yeah, just looking at the particular extension group, mostly Chinese or Indian'. At Alinta, where there are OC classes in Years 5 and 6, these were mainly comprised of students of various Asian backgrounds. As Josie, who shared the Year 5 OC class with another teacher, commented, 'We have quite a high percentage of Asian students, primarily Chinese, Korean and Indian. Maybe not as many Indian … so generally there's a very high Asian population'.

While Georgia at Chesterton PS was not 'entirely sure why' academic achievement appeared so ethnically marked, others attributed it to different parenting and community influences. Bill, Georgia's Principal, saw the two largest LBOTE groups at the school, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) and Arabic, as having 'different ways of seeing education, different, different backgrounds, different, different approaches to, you know, family set-ups and things like that'. One of his Year 5 teachers, Rosie, felt many parents of Arabic-speaking backgrounds had 'priorities elsewhere. School is not a priority, family is'. This was also the view of Clara, the Deputy Principal at Acacia, who explained how this focus on family impacted upon students' schoolwork and whether or not the requisite habits for academic success were augmented within the home. When stressing the importance of reading to parents, she explained how,

> I have conversations … where I just talk about reading to the children every night and the response I get is 'do you know how many kids I've got?' … they say, 'I've got no time for that'. So, you know, it's about the values … and for those sorts of families the time that they value is, 'I'm cooking for my family. So, I'm feeding my family, I'm cleaning and doing the laundry and those sorts of things', yeah.

Acacia's Principal, Hussein, on the other hand, referred to how, 'our Asian community is really engaged with academic success, academic results'. At Beechvale, Year 5 teacher Sarika had similar comments to make about those of an Indian background: 'There's definitely the kids, the parents, that are kind of on top of everything … but it's primarily from the Indian community that we have that'.

At the high SES schools, teachers also made reference to particular approaches to parenting, generally singling out those of Asian backgrounds. Lily from Colbyville, explained how,

> I find that particularly the parents of Asian origin, and I'm including India and that area in that group, they really value education, and they see education as a real privilege, and also as a necessity to success in life … so there is that attitude of those kids that, that they want to learn, that they want to succeed, that they want to have opportunities in life because that's kind of been instilled into them by their parents.

Lily's colleague, Justine, expressed this in a different way referring to the practices that these attitudes generated, 'the Asian parents like to push, do you know, doing extra work … doing extension work'. At Alinta, mainstream teacher, Judy, conceived of these practices in broader terms mentioning the influence of other parents within the Chinese diaspora upon recent arrivals:

> But amongst other families, it's … they put pressure on, they come in and go, 'Oh we just moved here, and we've signed them [their children] up [into tutoring], because that's what they, other parents said to do'. And, it's very interesting that, that culture of it all.

The prevalence of tutoring, the signing up that Judy mentions, is considered in more detail below. Here, however, her reference to 'culture' is significant given what it suggests about a common approach these parents had regarding their children's education. It is a term similarly used by Vaani at Bidhura. Careful not to engage in ethnic stereotypes, she commented,

> So, I don't want to say 'Oh, it's because you're from a Chinese background, that's why you're like this'. I just do think that it is a cultural thing of that emphasis on being the best and academics being number one and you need to be the best.

Cody, also at Bidhura, similarly used 'culture' to help explain the parenting practices of those within the school's Asian communities, though linking it more to the education cultures of various Asian countries, 'I mean, it's no secret that the education culture in China and South Korea and Japan is totally different to here … you do see a lot of that seeping through'. Together with ethnicity, and similarities in Asian education systems, Cody also acknowledged the cultural influence of SES on how many parents of Asian backgrounds approached their children's education:

> The Chinese families that are living around here, because they're, you know, it's a really expensive area around here, they're successful, they rent and buy nice houses around here. They send their kids to a school that's pretty highly regarded. And they expect their kids to study and to work hard.

Lily, at nearby Colbyville, had a similar view about the impact of SES on parenting and students' academic achievement. To her, it was not only a matter of ethnicity:

> Generally, our area, it's an expensive area to live in, you're not going to get people who don't have well paid jobs living in our area because they can't afford it. So, of course, they're highly educated people with privileged positions in society. So, it's definitely a combination [of SES and ethnicity].

As with Cody, Lily recognised the significance of parents' economic and cultural capital on the academic performance of their children, a relationship long established within educational and sociological research (Reay, 1988; Lareau, 1989; 2003; Bourdieu & Passeron,1977). Parents' level of education guides how they approach their children's education, influencing what they value, and the family pedagogies related to schooling within the home.

The survey data discussed in the previous chapter revealed how those of various Asian backgrounds, within this sample, were more highly educated in comparison to, for example, Anglo-Australian respondents and, more markedly, than those of Lebanese background. As mentioned, these skewed demographics are indicative of differences in migrants' visa types and Australia's favouring of skilled migration of which many Chinese and Indians have been the beneficiaries. On a broader scale, ABS data (2021b&c) demonstrate that Chinese and Indian migrants are by far more highly educated than the Australian-born population (remembering this does not only refer to Anglo-Australians as the project survey results do). About 50 per cent of migrants born in China have a bachelor degree or higher compared to 22.7 that are Australian-born. For those born in India, it is 64.3 per cent.

Yet it is not only in the project's high SES schools where these ethnically marked differences in parental education, and hence cultural capital, were evident. Such forms of cultural capital, namely educational qualifications and the practices that enable their acquisition, can often make up for a shortfall in economic capital influencing parenting practices and the decisions parents make about their children's education (Watkins, 2026). It is what many migrants rely upon as a mechanism for upward mobility, if not for themselves then for their children. At low SES, comprehensive Chesterton, Year 5 teacher, Bianca, remarked, 'I also find that it's a lot of these Chinese-speaking children … they actually, their parents, I guess, are quite well educated too and want the same for their children'. SES, combining factors such as economic and cultural capital, clearly also had an effect at Acacia PS in terms of contributing to the marked differences between the students in the mainstream and opportunity classes. While it is the ethnic differences that are most immediately obvious, that is the numbers of Arabic-speaking background students in the mainstream and those of Asian backgrounds in the OC, as the results of the survey revealed, there were also marked differences in SES. This was particularly evident in the differences in the levels of education between the parents of students in the mainstream and OC.

Factoring in the role of economic and cultural capital, and SES more broadly, is essential in understanding the numerous influences upon parenting and children's academic performance. Far too often it is simply an ethnic lens that is applied with little or no consideration of the other variables that affect each of these. 'Culture', therefore, constitutes far more than ethnicity. As Bill, the Principal of Chesterton PS, explained, 'ethnicity is one small aspect of what determines a child's upbringing. Culture's much bigger that that … so I would say, yeah, [academic performance] is around the socio-economic aspect'. It influences the family pedagogies that either help or hinder the development of students' dispositions for learning, which are crucial in terms of academic achievement.

School Choice and Selectivity

Principals and teachers were also asked about their perspective on issues related to school choice and selectivity. The project was keen to gauge the impact of these on parents' decisions about their children's schooling and how these affected the different types of schools involved in the study in terms of such things as enrolments and relations between students. Chesterton PS was of particular interest in this regard. While at the time of the study it was a comprehensive primary school with no GAT streams, in the past, with a previous Principal, it had offered enrichment classes in Years 3 to 6, much like those at Bidhura. Bill, the current Principal, and quite new to the school, reflected on this:

> There was a large school, 1300 … very large number of Chinese background students. And the opinion of the staff that remain here [from that time] is that those students, who were out of area, were very much selected based on their academic, um, their cultural background, and also their, I suppose, perceived academic achievement.

Bill explained how this all changed when another Principal arrived:

> So, look, the boss after that didn't agree with that. He then started to accept a more diverse range of students … he then moved away from those [enrichment classes] and things like that … That, obviously, with a particular community, didn't sit well and I think they then sought probably enrolments at other schools who maybe did provide those opportunities.

Clearly, the courting of the Chinese community in Chesterton's past through the establishment of enrichment classes had greatly increased its student numbers and reputation in the area. Its academic results, evident in improved NAPLAN scores at the time, demonstrated how the enrichment classes were an effective marketing tool. Without these, parents, especially those of Chinese backgrounds keen to maximise their children's academic results, sought other schools for them to attend. Enrolments declined considerably and, at the time of the study, were at 723, almost half their high during the period in which the enrichment classes were offered at the school.

With the increased marketisation of education stemming from the uptake of neoliberal reform since the late 1970s (Campbell & Proctor, 2014), Bill was realistic about what he referred to as 'the need to market your school', but explained that, 'But, do I think I need to do that through having extension classes? No!', adding, 'I don't like the elitism that, that sometimes stems from opportunity classes within a school. Isn't that the teacher's job to then differentiate curriculum to ensure that (students) are getting extended?'. Such a view is in contrast to the NSW DoE's broadening focus on high potential and gifted education in that Bill saw extension as a job for every teacher working with every student, not simply targeting those who may be deemed 'gifted'. Bianca, a teacher on Bill's staff, was similarly dubious about selective streams in schools, 'I really think, once upon a time [they] may have been pedagogical, you know, the theory behind it, but I think now, it's probably more to do with marketing'. Hussein, the Principal at Acacia with long standing DoE OCs, acknowledged their impact on the school, 'it would be remiss of me not to say that the OC program definitely adds a level of, I guess, extension and superiority around the school'. Given the significant ethnic difference with the mainstream, his Deputy, Clara, remarked that, 'What's kept our Chinese community engaged with (Acacia) is our OC stream'. Without it, the school may have suffered the same decline in numbers as Chesterton. At the time of the study, it was one of the largest schools in the area and remains so today.

Policies of school choice, seemingly offering parents greater differentiation within the public system, affected Beechvale, the third of the low SES schools, in other ways. It had offered an extension class in Maths but, at the time of the study, this did not appear to be well established and whether it had a pedagogic or marketing rationale, or both, was unclear. Julian, the Principal, however, did refer to what he saw as another development affecting his school's enrolments:

> One of the interesting things I'm monitoring right now is that we're getting more and more families in the end of Year 5, beginning of Year 6, starting to move out of our area looking for a high school in their local area. I'm actually monitoring that really carefully because I'm starting to see the trend of that as we go on.

In other words, parents who intended their child to remain within the public system for high school and presumably feeling a selective school was not an option, wanted to ensure they were living in the catchment area of what they saw as a more desirable high school.

Movement into certain catchment areas was also commented upon by principals and teachers in the high SES schools. This was particularly the case at Bidhura. Having a long-established GAT program and a strong reputation for academic excellence, many parents sought enrolment for their children. Carol, the Principal, remarked how,

> Parents will actually say to us, we want to enrol in your school, and we'll say you can't enrol in the school unless you live in this catchment. And then they'll go and rent a property in the catchment, or they'll buy, and one family came in, it was a Chinese family, and said 'We wish to enrol our child. Here's our address' and Connie in the office said, 'You're one street out'. No problem, he went away and bought another house within our catchment and said 'I had bought another one. We are now in area'. And there's a lot of units down (near the school) and who knows what's going on in there because a lot of our children seem to live [there].

This was no surprise to Julie at Colbyville PS who had previously worked at Bidhura which she referred to as 'a magnet school'. She explained how, 'because of the gifted units, they had people moving into the area, housing in the catchment zone is higher … it costs more to live there because people wanted to move there … just so they could get their kid in'. She compared these inflated enrolments to a school near Bidhura:

> on the other side of the road is [another school] which is a beautiful school and only has about 200-300 students and so they're empty, and they don't have a gifted unit, so no-one goes there. And then you've got a school virtually on the other side of a major road and has about 1000 students.

Though not having a GAT program, Colbyville also experienced increased enrolments in the past due to their academic reputation stemming from the publication of their NAPLAN results. As Calida, the Principal, commented,

> It's quite funny. A few years ago, we got really outstanding NAPLAN scores. It was a particularly good cohort. They're always quite good but that year they really blitzed it, so all these people start ringing up. They wanted to come to the school. We had people try to move into the area [but] people can't shop around in the same way they used to because we're over our cap.

As with Julian at Beechvale, Calida referred to how Colbyville lost students in the final years of primary, though not in terms of parents relocating to catchments of more desirable public schools. Indicative of their higher SES, she explained how, 'we lose enrolments after … some of our children go to independent schools for Years 5 and 6'. She also referred to what she saw as a marked ethnic difference in terms of choice of high school, observing that of those going to selective high school,

> the majority would be Asians and Indians because they've been practising for it for the whole time whereas some of the other kids will throw their hat in the ring to give it a go but haven't had the same coaching and practice.

As to whether the parents of the 'other kids', by which she meant those of Anglo-Australian background, were concerned about this, Calida remarked,

> I really get the feeling that the Anglo parents are very happy in as much as they, if their child can get into a selective high school then OK, they're probably happy to go but they are worried, I think, that they won't have very many friends there because their interests and schedules will be very different … And so, the Anglos that can afford to, would go to the independent schools with a more diverse range of activities. And I mean, the Asians apply for all those as well … but I think the Anglos would prefer … that, would be their preference if they could afford it.

Alinta, the third of the high SES schools, also experienced high enrolments with just over 1000 students. While entry into Years 5 and 6 OCs is determined by the results of NSW DoE centralised examinations, many parents, it seems, felt it was an advantage for their children to attend the school in the K to 4 years in the hope of heightening the chances of gaining entry into the OC stream. They may have also felt there was benefit for their child attending a school with a good academic reputation in terms of later securing a place in a selective high school. Karen, who co-taught the Year 5 OC at Alinta, said parents were told at the OC orientation that 'this is not a hothouse for getting ready for selective'. Denise, the Principal, tried to similarly impress this upon parents, explaining how,

> My main priority is to show that we're not focused on, we're not results focused, and that we're not pushing our kids. And we're not teaching to tests and things like that, particularly for our Chinese community, but they tend to ignore us anyway and they just go and do their thing.

Yet it seems understandable why parents paid little attention to this given, as Denise pointed out,

> We got a lot into selective high school this year, like 160 kids in selective high school which is huge … even a lot of our kids outside of our OC got into selective. Like it doesn't make a difference actually.

There was not the same spill-over effect into the mainstream from the OC at low SES Acacia, however, where success at gaining entry into a selective high school was restricted to the OC, but, even this was not guaranteed. Clearly, the difference in SES between the two schools had a significant role to play in this regard, especially in terms of the cultural capital of parents, reflected in their contrasting educational qualifications as revealed in the survey findings. At high SES Alinta, there was little difference between the educational qualifications of the parents of students in the mainstream compared to the OC. This was not the case at Acacia where the

difference was stark, clearly affecting how parents approached their children's education and aspects of learning beyond the school. These differing family pedagogies influenced the degree of academic engagement of students which is evident in the case studies presented in Chapters 8 and 9, which draw on the home and classroom observational data. But it was the institutional pedagogies, such as the impact of policies of school choice and selective streaming, that clearly influenced the decisions of parents and pedagogic practices within the home associated with their children's schooling.

The Positive and Negative Aspects of Selectivity

Principals and teachers also spoke of what they viewed as both the positive and negative aspects of OC and GAT streams in schools. They could see how forms of selective streaming worked well for some students but raised concerns about their possible detrimental effects on others, such as relations between different cohorts of students and also on, and between, schools themselves. At low SES Acacia, for example, Year 5 OC teacher, Elizabeth, remarked that,

> the positive is obviously [students] are in a class where they're surrounded by, you know, similar abilities, you know, like-minded students, like-minded families where there are high expectations on education, they're expected to work hard and do their best all the time.

Josie, one of the Year 5 OC teachers at Alinta, felt that 'an OC is about enriching kids' learning and helping them reach their potential'. Vaani, who taught the Year 4 GAT class at Bidhura, was 'not actually that big a fan' of selective streams but recounted her brother's experience on entering an OC as a child; he had commented, 'I feel like I've come home'. In other words, he felt like he belonged with a class of like-minded students, much in the way that Elizabeth had characterised her class at Acacia. Such positives, however, were not always replicated in the mainstream. As Elizabeth explained,

> By the time the kids get to Year 6, you've got some students that are still, you know, working at a Year 1 or 2 level sometimes. And then you've got students that are working above a Stage 3 level.

And so, the benefits of being with 'like-minded' students is not afforded those in the mainstream where mixed-ability classes prevail. Jamila, who taught a Year 5 mainstream at Acacia, felt many of her more capable students were disadvantaged by such extremes of ability: 'A lot of these kids unfortunately are impacted. If they'd been in a different school or in a different environment, they could be pushed a lot further'. While such extremes were not as evident at high SES Alinta, Josie, one of the Year 5 OC teachers, remarked, 'I think you'll find that many of the students we have in our classes, in mainstream classes, don't grow because they don't learn anything new'. While clearly an exaggeration, such a comment does suggest that, from Josie's perspective, mainstream students do not generally experience the same opportunities as those in the OC, limiting their academic potential. At comprehensive Colbyville, Justine queried the rationale behind mixed ability classes. She not only felt 'it will make it easier for us to teach if all kids [are] at the same level, you can cater to that, extend them' but 'that's just not the case usually'.

Another frequent comment of teachers in the two schools with OCs, and at Bidhura with the long-established GAT program, was the lack of interaction between students in these classes and those in the mainstream. As Clara, the Deputy at Acacia remarked when referring to the OC

classes, ‘generally they will be closeknit, little classes that stay together’. When asked about association with the mainstream, Elizabeth, the Year 5 OC teacher, replied, ‘no, which is something I try to encourage but, yeah, not really’. The marked ethnic difference between students in the OC and mainstream at Acacia may have contributed to this lack of interaction but, also, given the mainstream students had well-established friendships having been at the school from Kindergarten, it was difficult for the OC students, who were all newly arrived in Year 5, to develop relationships outside the OC. Yet, similar comments were made by teachers at Bidhura where the GAT classes began in Year 3. While the Year 4 GAT teacher, Vaani, felt that her students were ‘good at mixing with the other classes’, her colleagues felt otherwise. Helena, for example, commented that, ‘Mostly the GAT class play with each other’. Cody made a similar comment that ‘the GAT kids seem to stick together a bit more’.

Tutoring

The Role of Ethnicity and SES

While students of various ethnic backgrounds from across the project schools attended tutoring, such as those belonging to the target groups of Chinese, Indian and Anglo backgrounds, there were many others, such as Lebanese and Afghani, who did so as well. Significant numbers, however, were of various East and South Asian backgrounds, and principals and teachers from across the six schools remarked upon this. Carol, Principal of high SES Bidhura with long standing GAT classes, referred to how,

> more of the Asian kids [by which she meant East Asian] would go to the coaching centres than the Anglo kids. Indian children also go to the coaching centres. The majority of the Anglo children would be still working to achieve well, but their parents would just expect them to do their homework and the work set and maybe they’ve got an extra book that they’re doing at home but not many of them would go off to the coaching centres.

She estimated that, ‘About two thirds of every class’ did tutoring, explaining how, ‘I think they go for a short amount of time from Kindy onwards really, that by Year 2 they’re maybe doing two sessions at least a week’. Cody, teaching a Year 5 mainstream class at Bidhura, referred to how, ‘It is definitely more of a Chinese phenomenon and a Korean phenomenon than for any of the other kids’. Judy, a Year 5 mainstream teacher at Alinta which has Stage 3 OCs, commented on how tutoring was ‘very driven by your Indian, your Chinese … your Anglo kids don’t [do it]’. In terms of numbers, Denise, Alinta’s Principal, referred to how another Stage 3 teacher ‘reckons 70 per cent of our kids are tutored’. Tutoring was also prevalent at comprehensive, high SES Colbyville with Calida, the Principal, noting similar ethnic preferences: ‘I think it would definitely be more our Indian and Chinese parents’ who send their children to tutoring.

External academic tutoring, be it with tutoring centres or one-on-one tutors, was also prevalent among students in the project’s low SES schools though, as with the high SES schools, it was mainly students of various Asian backgrounds who attended. Elizabeth, who taught the Year 5 OC at Acacia where the ethnic differences between the OC and mainstream student populations were significant, explained how, ‘I would say majority of the Chinese parents send their kids to tutoring’. As Clara, Elizabeth’s Deputy, had pointed out earlier, many Arabic-speaking parents of students in the mainstream had different ‘values’. They did not put the same emphasis on

academic performance as did the parents of Asian backgrounds. Much of this can be attributed to the contrasting levels of parental education and cultural capital between these different ethnic communities at the school. Many Asian parents sought tutoring for their children to increase their chances of gaining entry to OC and selective high schools. For other parents of various Arabic-speaking backgrounds in the project's low SES schools, this was generally not considered an option. As Jamila, herself of Arabic-speaking background and a Year 5 mainstream teacher at Acacia, explained,

> I don't think OC is, for a lot of these [Arabic-speaking] parents, I don't believe they believe OC is achievable. Because, when you see the break-up and you know the type of kids in OC and the type of kids in mainstream, it's so out of reach.

Very few parents of Arabic-speaking backgrounds, therefore, sought tutoring for their children and, if they did, it was more likely for remedial purposes rather than to gain entry to these classes.

Bill, the Principal at low SES comprehensive, Chesterton, also acknowledged the popularity of academic tutoring among Asian families at his school: 'it's massive in the Asian community to get your child tutored, it's just something that's done regularly'. He compared this to those of Arabic-speaking backgrounds, who were generally of a much lower SES:

> Within the Arabic community, I'm not sure. And if it is, you know 50 per cent of our families sit within the bottom 40 something per cent, in the bottom quartile of the socio-economic advantage, or disadvantage in this case. Those families I would expect can't afford tutoring, with the vast majority being those of Arabic-speaking backgrounds.

At Beechvale, the third of the low SES schools, whose student population was of a slightly different ethnic mix, Julian, the Principal, made particular reference to his Afghani students as those who tended to be tutored: 'I think there's a bit of aspiration there, that we need to do more than just school … and that's borne out in the fact that … we are getting more and more students sitting the selective and OC tests'.

Reasons for Academic Tutoring

Students attend academic tutoring for a range of reasons, but these generally fall into three broad categories: i. remedial support, ii. extension or acceleration in specific subjects and iii. exam preparation and practice. As the survey demonstrated, there were clear ethnic differences between the reasons that parents gave for having their children tutored, and the comments from principals and teachers confirmed this. Bianca, a Year 5 teacher at Chesterton, remarked that for those of Asian backgrounds, 'it's purely for them to get into selective high school':

> I've got a couple of mine that have made it into selective. We used to have, a long, long time ago here … we used to have a lot of kids that used to go to selective high school. Not so much anymore. It's sort of reducing. But I think it's due to the fact that our numbers of maybe Chinese children are sort of reducing as well.

As discussed, this reduction in the number of Chinese students at the school was due to the school's enrichment program ending. Bianca's colleague, Samantha, referred to how those of South-East Asian backgrounds attended 'tutoring centres' for 'exam preparation'. Whereas for two Arabic-speaking students in her class, who opted for a private tutor, it was for remedial

support as they were ‘below grade level and parents are aware of that and want to, I guess, give them the extra individual support at home’. As mentioned, many of the students in Acacia’s OCs attended tutoring, the vast majority being of various Asian backgrounds, where there was a focus on gaining entry to selective high schools. Jamila, a Year 5 mainstream teacher at Acacia, also had a few students who attended tutoring. These students may have had similar aspirations as the reasons for them attending were ‘more acceleration because these kids that are doing this tutoring are generally at the top end, like the high achievers’. When questioned as to whether those needing remedial support attended tutoring, she replied, ‘The ones that I believe need it, aren’t the ones that are getting it’. Julian, Principal at Beechvale, made a similar comment about tutoring at his school, ‘I don’t think it’s a remedial thing, I think it’s more advancement’.

Comments akin to these were made at the high SES schools. Sally, a Year 5 mainstream teacher at Bidhura, said, for students in her class, tutoring was, ‘more test preparation, just the style of questions and just the language and even just in terms of the way they want to answer them’. Her Principal, Carol, commented,

> And that’s why they go to coaching centres because they get the Maths at the higher level which is part of what the selective school test is about. They also get trained in general ability papers … so that they can be taught the answers to some of these very common problem-solving things.

At Alinta PS, Year 5 OC teacher, Karen, gave similar reasons for her students attending tutoring, emphasising exam preparation: ‘They do the tutoring until the selective high school tests’. Her colleague, Judy, teaching a mainstream Year 5 class, remarked that with her students,

> they’re so tunnel vision on the selective that they forget about other things … it’s just constant practice tests, general ability tests. They’ve got thinking skills test this year and they say, they come to school [and I say], ‘How’s your afternoon?’ [and they say], ‘I did this in my test, I did that’ and they compare tests at those tutoring [centres]. They’re doing practice tests all the time. The way they do tutoring, freaks me out.

Lily, a Year 5 teacher at comprehensive Colbyville explained how ‘the Asian families tend to pursue tutoring for their children. Often their children, on average, [are] high achievers and they are wanting to tutor their children to get them into selective high school’. This type of tutoring would involve exam preparation and/or extension work. The former in preparation leading up to the exams and the latter as a more long-term investment over a number of years. Calida, Lily’s Principal, explained how there are ‘a few that go for remedial work … but I think the ones that go to more intensive, or more often to coaching, are probably the other end of the spectrum, to be academically challenged and to move ahead’. Calida’s comment here about attending tutoring to be ‘academically challenged’ is particularly interesting suggesting this is not occurring within the school itself. As a comprehensive primary school with neither an OC nor GAT classes, perhaps she felt the means to do this were far more limited. Yet, as Bill, the Principal at Chesterton, remarked earlier, ‘Isn’t that the teacher’s job to then differentiate curriculum to ensure that [students] are getting extended?’. In many respects, Lily concurred with this. She was critical of the influence of selectivity within the public system and felt, ‘schools just need to get more creative at how they embed enrichment and extension … I think the selective high school, I think there’s too much emphasis on that’.

The Positive Aspects of Tutoring

Despite some criticisms of tutoring, considered in more detail below, many principals and teachers commented on the benefits, either in general terms or in relation to specific techniques and outcomes. Bill, at Chesterton, took the view that 'any additional learning is going to have a positive effect'. And one of his Year 5 teachers, Rosie, felt students who attend tutoring 'tend to grasp things a bit quicker which is awesome'. She added, however, that 'I do think that homework and a bit of parental support would do the same thing'. Her colleague, Georgia, also saw benefits with tutoring: 'it does kind of help them academically at school. They're a whiz at all those kinds of really quick mental calculations at school'. Maths, it seems was one of the subjects where tutoring appeared to really pay off. While some teachers below recounted certain negatives in relation to Maths, the capacity of tutoring to promote rapid recall was repeatedly mentioned by others. In referring to particular tutoring centres, Clara, the Deputy at Acacia and a Maths curriculum specialist, commented that,

> What they're good at, is that giving our kids retrieval practice, repeated practice … so it lowers the cognitive load of the kids that usually go to tutoring because they're doing things really regularly and really consistently. So, that's where they've got that little advantage over the other kids because the other kids have to, 'Oh, I've got this cognitive load. Now I've got to figure out, what did I learn last week', whereas the other kids are, 'I did that yesterday in my tutoring'. So, the other thing is, they've got a lot of different strategies.

At Beechvale PS, Year 5 teacher Sarika felt that tutoring was beneficial as it 'just helps them a little bit under pressure because that's all about drills'.

Many of the principals and teachers at each of the high SES schools, where there tended to be greater numbers of students attending tutoring, similarly spoke of its benefits. Carol, Principal of Bidhura, referred to 'rote practice and practice, practice, practice of things', lamenting 'that probably in a school, we don't do as much anymore'. As Clara, at Acacia, had explained, achieving a certain level of automaticity through practice of the fundamentals of Maths reduces students' cognitive load allowing them to give greater attention to more complex Maths problems. Students acquiring such capacity led Vaani, the Year 4 GAT teacher at Bidhura, to remark that she had 'kids in here that can do things that I wouldn't dream of'. For these and other reasons, mainstream teacher Judy, at Alinta, commented that, tutoring was 'definitely helping them', and that 'mostly they have quite a positive outlook on it'. Her colleague Josie, one of the Year 5 OC teachers, tended to have mixed opinions on tutoring, but felt,

> one thing that tutoring does that I think we don't do very well in schools is they individually assess kids and move them forward. We're stuck in a chronological mindset that, if you're 10, you're in Year 5, and I think some of the tutoring centres advance kids beyond what we do in our classrooms because they can, and parents pay for it.

Such comments relate very much to those of Lily's at Colbyville regarding how schools need to 'get more creative at how they embed enrichment and extension'. If parents feel schools aren't catering for their children's needs, tutoring then becomes an attractive option.

The Negative Aspects of Tutoring

Principals and teachers also discussed what they saw as the negative aspects of the practice. Bianca, at Chesterton PS, referred to how,

> there's a lot of pressure on them … They're highly stressed these children, and you know … I would say to them, 'you have a good holiday?' [and they'd say], 'No, I had to study all holidays' and it's quite sad. And once it's finished [the selective schools test], you almost see that weight lifted off their shoulders … it's just this huge relief for them. Because not only do they, I think, they get a lot of pressure from their parents to perform, I think their parents actually pour a lot of money into them being tutored. And they're not just tutored one day a week either … they're tutored quite a number of days through the week, and it obviously does cost a lot of money.

Her colleague Rosie felt that tutoring, 'breeds anxiety in kids because their parents feel the need to see them achieve in a lot of things'. Vaani, at Bidhura, similarly spoke of the time and pressure associated with tutoring: 'They spend a lot of time at coaching centres, there's a lot of extra homework, a lot of pressure from home'. Vaani's Principal, Carol, gave the example of 'one little boy here who goes three nights a week into the city, it's about 8 o'clock at night and for dinner, he's exhausted. So, there's that downside of the overcoached child and he doesn't want to do it'. Helena, also at Bidhura, was similarly critical of the time spent on tutoring and what children missed out on from doing it: 'I feel that on the weekend, kids need to be kids and play. I've spoken to a kid before who really wanted to play soccer or a team sport, but he didn't, he couldn't. He had to go to coaching'. At Alinta with Stage 3 OCs and with a significant number of students undertaking tutoring, Keith, one of the Year 5 mainstream teachers, commented on how the students,

> have got a lot more pressure at home. Just in connecting with the kids and families, like, there's a lot of focus on having tutoring and some of the kids are tutored for hours after school everyday. And that's their main focus.

His colleague, Judy, remarked on the time devoted to tutoring: 'Fridays, they're all rushing to get to the bus because they'll say we have tutoring from 4 till 7'.

Other criticisms of tutoring related to the effects of the drill and practice pedagogy that the centres generally employed. While some of the teachers referred to earlier saw benefits in this and were concerned that it was often neglected in schools, others felt it limited students' capacity for critical thinking and deeper understanding. Rosie, at Chesterton, felt that tutoring, 'crushes creativity'. She explained how,

> We have a kid who is a human calculator. Because of tutoring, all he does is like Maths things, like sum, after sum, after sum … And he can, like that, give him a problem-solving question, give him a word problem, no idea, no idea. And even if it's done verbally or in Chinese … still, like that understanding of how to put things together, their creative thinking and their critical and lateral thinking, it's just, it almost gets zapped by tutoring because tutors are there to drill information into a kid and then that's it. If tutors were encouraging creativity and curiosity, I'd be all for it.

Elizabeth, the Year 5 OC teacher at Acacia, was of a similar view in that she felt students who were drilled in Maths had difficulty applying this knowledge in other ways,

> With all of the training and coaching that they do outside of school, a lot of what they do and what they're trained to do is not, it's, it doesn't involve a lot of, like problem solving, or you know, if I ask an open-ended question that could have a range of answers, where they need to justify an answer, they find that a bit more challenging as well because I find that they're generally just used to there being one correct answer and one way of doing something and it's just about being correct.

Carol, Principal at Bidhura, referred to this as a 'robotic understanding of Maths, instead of a deep understanding', and yet, she had earlier seen benefits in 'practice, practice, practice'. Maths and other subjects often rely on the acquisition of foundational knowledge. In Maths, it involves a range of elementary functions. To master reading in English, for example, letter-sound correspondence, phonological and orthographic knowledge are required that can actually provide the basis for deeper understanding. Yet, acquiring this knowledge is not always guaranteed in schools, or, as early as some parents would like, with some teachers seemingly 'outsourcing' this aspect of the curriculum to tutoring centres, or not giving it the required attention. Such was the case in the Year 5 OC at Alinta where, co-teacher, Josie, remarked that,

> one of the things [that] sometimes happens is when kids aren't tutored, they come from a school where their Maths is very low level and we expect the kids' Maths to be high, so we don't spend a lot of time, we don't do multiplication practice, we don't do, you know … I'll do one division test at the beginning of Year 5 and not even look at anything after that.

Here, it seems, there was a reliance on the skills students had acquired through tutoring raising questions about what happened to those who did not attend.

Vaani, at Bidhura, had criticisms about the way tutoring centres approached the teaching of English. She commented on the lack of 'originality' in the writing of tutored students: 'I find I can tell a child is being coached or not, just by reading their stories because I'll get the same language. Everyone uses the same word … I'll read it in every single child's book'. Such techniques are probably those associated with exam preparation that involve students learning formulaic responses to reproduce under exam conditions, one of the main reasons, in the survey, that parents nominated for sending their children to tutoring. While not ideal if students' writing does not develop beyond this, such formulas for writing can operate as useful scaffolds to assist students to understand different genres of writing. The mistake here is to oppose originality and creativity with practice and application, both of which are of importance in education with the former generally reliant on the latter. It begs the question, however, if the techniques that tutoring employ are so poor, how is it that so many children who attend seem to excel academically, especially in Maths?

This relates to another of the principals' and teachers' criticisms of tutoring, namely, that it results in children who are far ahead of the school curriculum and not only bored with what they encounter in class, but are creating problems for teachers who found it difficult to cater for their advanced needs. This was especially the case with Maths. Bianca, at Chesterton, remarked,

> I mean some of these Chinese-speaking children … they're working at a Year 8, Year 9 level in Mathematics. That makes it difficult because we then have to extend them and extend them. Like I've got these children, they're doing Year 7 work right now but, you know what, they're above and beyond the Year 7 work, they know all that, that's nothing new to them. And it's trying to, you know. I've got to get my head around Year 8 and Year 9 Maths and I really don't think that probably really fits in. Yes, we can go into that sort of Stage 4 [Years 7 and 8] but beyond that, I think that's probably asking a little bit too much.

Calida, Principal at Colbyville, recounted her experience of a boy with similar capability beyond the staging of the curriculum:

> One of our little Year 4 boys came in earlier this year showing me these Maths problems he was doing, and I thought, 'Man you must be bored in that class. You can do this?'. They don't complain and the parents don't complain.

Josie, Year 5 OC teacher at Alinta, referred to how,

> there have been occasions where kids have said, 'I've already seen this', like the Maths, the problem-solving Maths and the book that I use to take stuff for the problem solving that relates to the Maths Olympiad, some children say, 'I've got that book at home'.

Keith, Josie's colleague in the mainstream, also found it difficult to keep up with some of his students given their tutoring and extra work:

> when they show me how they do their, the level of Maths they're doing, I can't even comprehend how they do it from their head. It's quite impressive. And, yeah, beyond my level of Mathematics some of them too … just the speed and pace that they're able to do a lot of it.

Many parents, it seems, found tutoring a way of extending their children's knowledge especially in Maths. This may be driven by a desire to ensure their children's success in the OC and selective school entry examinations, but it is clear there were parents who felt schools were not providing a curriculum that would allow their children to excel in the way they expected. As indicated in Chapter 5, many parents of East and South Asian backgrounds drew parallels with the study of Maths in their home countries, making transnational comparisons with the children of relatives who seemed to be far more advanced. As Calida at Colbyville pointed out, 'I think you'd have to assume … that they think that the education isn't pushing them along fast enough. Either that or they think, I want to get ahead of this pack'. Cody at Bidhura agreed. While he acknowledged that many parents of East and South Asian backgrounds really like the focus on social and interpersonal skills in schools, he also explained that, 'You know from speaking to a lot of the parents, because they're aware of it too, they're well aware that the Australian schooling system is really, frankly, I think not up to their standards'.

Perspectives on Homework

Another reason why many parents had their children tutored was to provide an alternate source of homework, given schools did not provide it, or implemented it in an ad hoc manner. This seemed the case with a number of the project schools where approaches to homework varied considerably. Homework at Chesterton PS had been a vexed issue for a number of years. As teacher, Georgia, explained,

> Since I started here, we've gone through lots of different homework policies. When I first began, every grade was doing their own thing for homework, then we went through a phase of every class had to be doing the same thing, just obviously differentiated for different grades. And then we went to online homework and then it was zero homework. That pretty much leads us up to now. We were told you cannot send anything home.

This had, in fact, changed again with the arrival of the new Principal, Bill, who said,

> Is there a strong enough policy? No, not yet. It's a Band-Aid approach at the moment to essentially get something going, to get the teachers going with it … getting them to change their mindset that no, no we need to do this.

At the time of the research, teachers were still trying to sort this out, but it was generally considered that homework was optional and, with no consequences for students' non-compliance, and little or no feedback, it was often not done. Year 5 teacher, Rosie, explained how difficult it had been during the two years when there had previously been a no-homework policy: 'For me to then say actually we're not doing that anymore was really hard for me, especially when I do think that some of these kids would really have benefitted from that'. Her older colleague, Bianca, who had been at the school for over 20 years, provided her thoughts on the matter:

> Look a long time ago, homework was always a thing. It was handed to the students every Monday, you know, handed back in on a Friday. You sat down, you went through it all, you marked it. And then, obviously, there's been a real push for no homework, but we found that there's a lot of parents in the school and all the students, that they want homework … they thrive on this extra homework, especially the Chinese students.

Bianca's reference to a 'real' push for no homework may relate to the NSW DoE policy from 2012, discussed in more detail below, which somewhat bizarrely states, 'while the Policy itself is compulsory, the setting of homework and any indicative time allocations across year levels are not' (NSW DoE, 2012). Schools are required to develop policies 'in consultation with key stakeholders' though it seems in the past, at Chesterton, this was not done. With the new Principal, however, changes were afoot. At Acacia PS a similar situation prevailed. As mainstream teacher, Jamila, explained, 'It's not mandatory, but because it's not mandatory, we do have a lot of students, I know from last year, a lot that didn't do it'. But there were clear differences between the approach to homework in the mainstream and OC. Elizabeth, who taught in the latter, commented on how,

> there's no follow-up necessarily for mainstream students. If they're not bringing the homework in, just kind of like, well, if you're doing it, that's fantastic and I'll mark it and give you feedback but if you're not doing it, well, yeah. Whereas with my students [in the OC], if they're not doing the homework that I need them to get through, then it becomes an issue because the next day you know, in writing for example, if they haven't done a previous task, it's like OK, well, we're moving on to this now … so you're going to have to get this done for me today so that we're able to move on.

This different approach for the mainstream and OC was confirmed by Clara, the Deputy, who remarked,

> So, our OC classes do a lot more … They have the ability to, and they are the only … all of our students have this ability, but it's the OC that actually do it, where they've got that agency around what they would like to do in their own homework program.

This two-track approach, however, seemed to create further differences between the two streams. While not considered mandatory, the stronger emphasis by Elizabeth in the OC to have her students complete homework created an expectation that it needed to be done. This,

however, is cast by Clara as the OC students having 'agency' thereby shifting responsibility for compliance from teacher to student and providing a rationale for the non-compliance of those in the mainstream.

At the third low SES school, Beechvale, homework was similarly not mandatory. Year 5 teacher Sarika explained, 'we don't push homework anymore' but she saw 'value in it' and so she had her,

> own way of trying to get the students [to do it]. I set up reward systems where I can because I do see the value in that, especially at a school like ours. But I don't make homework something completely new. I always make sure it's what I've taught them, because I'm well aware of the fact that 90 per cent of my students will not have support at home because their parents just can't read or know how to do that.

In other words, Sarika saw homework as an effective way to reinforce what students had encountered in class, not far removed from the reasoning behind some of the tutoring many students received. Her principal, Julian, however, felt that homework was of 'zero' importance and so Sarika may have been something of an outlier regarding homework at the school.

There was also little emphasis given to homework at high SES Alinta where it was very much outsourced to tutoring centres. Having recently arrived at the school, Year 5 teacher Eliza explained how, 'moving to Alinta this year I transitioned into no homework'. Her colleague, Judy, said, 'We don't give out weekly homework'. Instead, she left it up to students whom she provided with extra work if asked. Josie, who co-taught the OC at Alinta, simply stated, 'there's no Maths homework'.

It was a very different matter in the two other high SES schools. At both Bidhura, with GAT classes and comprehensive Colbyville, homework was mandatory. As Carol, Principal at Bidhura, explained, 'so there's virtually homework in every grade. In Kindy, it's just reading the little readers and then it just gradually builds up over the years until you get to Year 6. I think it might be 50-60 minutes a day', though this seemed very much dependent on individual teachers. Vaani, teaching the Year 4 GAT class, confirmed,

> Yeah, it's mandatory. My kids are very good at it. So, yeah, they do it every week. We mark Maths together, we do a spelling test at the end of the week and then I check through their words, and I mark their open-ended tasks. So, they get it back the same day.

Her colleague, Sally, in the mainstream said,

> I try to have quite a structured approach to it just because I find homework might tend to be the thing, if you sort of let it go, they'll just get in the habit of not doing it … I try to make them aware that it's your responsibility … This is the expectation; this is what you should be doing.

The process at Colbyville was similar. One teacher, Lily, 'was not a fan' but gave her students homework, 'because it's expected at our school'. She did stress, however, that two things 'were standard every week. One is Maths, mentals and I'm OK with that because Maths is a practice thing … the other is read a book or read something that you enjoy for 20 minutes a night. Again, reading is a practice skill'.

Ethnic and SES Differences in Relation to Homework

Principals and teachers were also asked to consider whether ethnicity or SES influenced how parents approached homework with their children. Bill, Principal of Chesterton, remarked that, 'I haven't seen a difference. To be honest, I think all parents want the best for their kids and I would think that all parents do the best with the cards they have been dealt'. He raised issues such as parents' work commitments and the size of families – in other words issues generally related to SES – but felt there was 'not necessarily a cultural difference'. Teacher, Georgia, however, thought otherwise. With the introduction of a no homework policy in the past, she explained how,

> the Lebanese-Arabic community was really vocal … yeah it was that group that really wanted the homework. The more Asian-background parent didn't from memory, kick-up that much of a fuss, but all those kids are going to tutoring and stuff anyway after school, so I think it didn't make a difference to them …

In regards to who may have made requests for harder and more homework, Georgia's colleague, Bianca, explained, 'it's usually the Chinese parents asking for that'. At Beechvale, the Principal, Julian, made similar observations to Bill at Chesterton,

> There's no general pattern from an ethnicity point of view about homework … What I do see is that every parent's got high aspirations for their child, but they may express it in a very different way. Sure, there might be some families with low SES that homework's not as big a priority as other families but they still kind of want it … but the priority might be slightly different.

Not unexpectedly, in the high SES schools there was very little reference to how SES may have impacted parents' approaches to homework. Instead, there were teachers who focused more on what they saw as ethnic differences. When asked if there were parents who asked for extra homework and if they were of a particular ethnicity, Cody at Bidhura said, 'Yeah, I mean, it is usually the Chinese parents'. Justine made a similar comment, 'I've had some Asian parents maybe wanting a bit more harder work, or that's come through from the kids. "And can you give me more, more extension work"'. Generally, however, there seemed some reluctance to pinpoint any ethnic difference. In making his comment about Chinese parents, Cody added, 'Yeah, I imagine that probably the conclusion you're gonna come to is probably some kind of people are gonna accuse you of stereotyping. Who knows? Hopefully not'.

A number of issues emerge from this. There tended to be some ethnic differences, for example, in relation to those parents wanting harder and more homework, but SES was also a factor. The parents of Arabic-speaking backgrounds at Chesterton, who Georgia referred to, wanted homework because little or none was offered and they felt the school should take responsibility for this. The parents of Chinese background at the school were content with tutoring but, of course, this comes at a cost and the Chinese tended to be of a much higher SES, even in low SES schools like Chesterton. In the schools of a high SES, some Chinese parents may not have bothered asking for more homework or homework of greater difficulty – although as teachers reported, some did – as they had clearly become reliant upon tutoring, and school homework was deemed unnecessary or of far less value. Clearly, there is a strong relationship here between ethnicity and SES. A focus on the former without factoring in the latter could lead to the kind of stereotypical representations that Cody mentions.

Reasons for Schools not Offering Homework

There were a number of reasons why four of the six schools in the project either did not offer homework or it was simply optional which meant many students didn't complete it. At Chesterton, Georgia's perspective on homework was very much coloured by the influence of SES:

> I think homework can be beneficial, but I think it depends on the area that you're in and the kind of demographics that you have … A lot of our families here are really large, and parents are both working or we have parents that don't understand the language that we're sending homework in, so that's really stressful for them … And, maybe, in a more affluent area, homework would be really great and beneficial and the parents like it, the kids like doing it … so I'm not against it but I sort of agree with it not being compulsory here.

Georgia, however, seems to have forgotten her earlier comments about the Arabic-speaking parents, many of whom were among those with the lowest SES at the school, but were very vocal about wanting homework. While completing homework may have proved difficult for many of these families, not offering it, or making it optional, simply added to their disadvantage, widening the gulf between those who could undertake valuable additional work – either that available at school or through tutoring outside school – and those who could or did not.

Tutoring, it seems, was one of the main reasons why schools did not offer homework. Elizabeth, at Acacia, did require her OC to complete classwork at home but was reluctant to have her students do much more,

> because I am really aware of how much time is already taken up outside of school. I don't want to be an extra burden on them … because I know [they] do so much tutoring and everything else. A lot of parents give them homework to do as well, like daily. So, yeah, I try and be considerate of what they've already got going on.

At Beechvale, where homework was optional, teacher Vera also commented on parents setting their children homework which seemed to be a way of making up for the shortfall in homework not provided by the school. Cody, at Bidhura, also referred to homework provided by parents. Unlike Beechvale, however, homework here was mandatory, but Cody seemed reluctant to reinforce this. He said how he had explained to students that,

> There is homework, if your parents want you to do it, then you have to do the homework. If your parents say you don't have to do the homework, then you don't have to do the homework. That's where my responsibility lies.

He added, 'so many of these kids already do other things. I mean some of these kids have homework specially set for them by parents'. And, of course, many also did tutoring. This was especially the case at Alinta where all Year 5 teachers across the OC and mainstream classes, together with the Principal, indicated school homework was kept to a minimum because of the prevalence of tutoring. Denise, the Principal remarked that,

> So, yeah, we don't push a lot, because we know they're getting pressure on them anyway and then a lot of them have tutoring on top of that extra work so then they then tend to forget our stuff and do theirs.

Judy, teaching a Year 5 mainstream class at Alinta, made similar remarks, 'we don't give them

weekly homework. When I first started … we had a homework grid, and we did, but our kids are so bombarded with tutoring that they don't need the homework'. Having said that, however, Judy explained, 'The parents have an issue with that. The parents have always said, "What's happened with homework. What's going on?"'

Whether parents resorted to having their children tutored because of the lack of homework provided by the school or the school limited homework in response to parents tutoring their children is unclear but it now seems to be the case that Alinta has outsourced weekly homework to tutoring centres with them also providing tutoring in higher level Maths rather than the school itself. In doing so, inequities are created between those who do and do not attend tutoring, given many parents may not be able to afford this option, even in such a high SES school like Alinta. The public responsibility of education is then transferred to the private sector … privatisation by stealth.

It not only seemed that students were completing weekly homework and exam preparation via tutoring, but some students preferred the work that tutoring offered. As Keith, a Year 5 mainstream teacher at Alinta explained, the school homework 'really wasn't valued I found and that was the same for my colleagues as well'. Vaani, at Bidhura, made similar comments that students complained the school homework 'isn't hard enough for me' and so they tended to prioritise their tutoring homework instead.

'Research Says'

Another reason why many teachers didn't provide homework was that they felt it was of little value, indicating that 'research says' this was the case. Bill, Principal of Chesterton, remarked that, 'the research says that homework does not necessarily have a huge amount of impact on student outcomes'. When the no-homework policy was introduced at the school by a previous Principal, teacher Rosie explained how this was justified to staff, 'And basically it was, there will be no homework given. And they provided all the evidence, and the research says it doesn't help kids'. Bianca also invoked research, 'I think research has shown that, you know, homework really doesn't have … make any difference to their ability and their grades or anything'. At Acacia PS, Deputy, Clara, explained that she was 'yet to see any research that indicates one way or the other'. At Bidhura, Helena remarked how 'there isn't too much evidence out there that it's beneficial for the kids after a full day of learning', and her colleague, Cody, referred to his supervisor at the school who 'did her Hons. thesis on the impact of homework and she said, "It's all bullshit" so I'll go with that', despite the school having a policy where homework was mandatory. At Colbyville, where there was a similar policy, Lily, also had her reservations, once again, justifying her position by referring to 'research': 'There's no research to support it being effective in any way, shape or form'. Lastly, Denise, Principal at Alinta, claimed, 'it's been proven, you know, proven that homework doesn't actually make a difference', adding, 'until they get to the older years and it's supporting what they're doing at school'.

The source of this research, claiming homework has little or no value, especially in the primary years, seems to be the NSW DoE Homework Policy and its supporting document, The Homework Policy: Research (2012). The former, being the main guiding document, however, is misleading, resulting in these teachers' misinterpretations. As already indicated, the DoE policy does not require schools to provide homework, stating that one of the reasons for this is that 'research regarding the value of homework is inconclusive' (a claim examined in Chapter 2). The

juxtaposition in the document of no requirement to provide homework, and its value being debatable, has clearly influenced these teachers leading them to think it is of negligible worth. Yet, the policy itself refers to how homework may 'help students to develop effective study habits and broaden their understandings and skills across the curriculum' in primary schools (p. 5) and that in secondary schools, 'there is more evidence that homework can enhance student learning' (p. 5), not accounting for the relationship between the two. These points, demonstrating the importance of homework, seem to have been overlooked by these teachers.

The Benefits of Homework

While there were teachers who felt homework had little value, others spoke of its many benefits. In some cases, those teachers who were either critical of the practice, or non-committal, also commented on how it could be worthwhile, seemingly unaware of the inherent contradiction. Bill, the Principal at Chesterton was one of those who had made reference to the research that indicated homework had little value but saw its benefits in terms of engendering habits of learning. He spoke of,

> the habit side of things, especially when they get to the senior years of primary school. I know that they're going to hit high school. If they haven't done any homework, they're gonna have a huge cultural shock when they get to high school and homework is expected. We haven't done those kids justice by the by, and the parents justice by getting those kids into the habit of doing some form of regular homework prior to hitting high school.

Samantha, a teacher at Chesterton, referred to her own experience of doing homework at school: 'So to me that gives me routine and discipline'. Her colleague, Rosie, commented that, 'Homework is so important at a young age, just practising your spelling, something like that I think is really valuable. During the period of no homework at the school, she felt 'class work, fell out of their heads, the next day, just nothing was reinforced'. Hussein, Principal at Acacia, was of the view that,

> Homework is around building good educational habits. It's around building habitual capacity for students to understand that as they move through their academic journey, as they move through primary school and into high school and high school into university, there's elements of work that they need to complete outside of the classroom which is going to benefit them in achieving their success.

Despite their school putting little emphasis on homework, Sarita and Vera, at Beechvale, saw its value in terms of reinforcing class work. Sarita remarked, 'You don't just do something once and you expect that you know it, you need to revise it, even as adults we do that too'. Vera made a similar point:

> it is important for them to practise at home … the students who do do that at home, I do see the impact that it has on their learning because they're the ones that can retain more of the information and retain more of the skills and strategies that are taught to them at school.

Carol, at Bidhura, explained these ideas in terms of 'getting automaticity, when you're practising more, whether it be swimming, whether it be baseball, or whether it be Mathematics, you

shouldn't think that it just finishes when that finishes, you practise it'. At Alinta, where there tended to be no weekly homework, Year 5 teacher Eliza still felt it had benefits, explaining how it 'helps with developing those time management skills'. Lily, one of the teachers most opposed to homework at Colbyville, where she was required to provide it, felt it was useful in 'becoming a more independent learner ready for high school'.

It is interesting, therefore, that the DoE policy refers to there being 'little conclusive evidence of the learning benefits of homework in infants and primary' and yet also states that 'quality homework in these stages may help students develop effective study habits and broaden their understanding and skills across the curriculum'. Teachers here, however, saw a clear connection between the two, even with homework considered routine, given it could reinforce knowledge and skills and produce the automaticity to which Carol referred.

Conclusion

Principals and teachers from across the six schools were able to provide considerable insight into the key themes of interest to the project. First among these was whether increasing forms of selectivity within the public system, be it the influence of OCs or GAT streams, were creating issues within and between schools. Practitioners referred to how selectivity had affected the decisions parents were making about where to enrol their children, resulting in a favouring of some schools over others and skewed patterns of enrolment. Understandably, parents want the best for their children and many feel this is more likely achieved if they can gain entry to one of these classes given their needs may not be met within the mainstream. Yet, not every child has the same opportunity to do this, and it is generally those from families with greater stores of cultural capital that manage to secure a place. SES, and especially parents' levels of education, is a key discriminator in terms of a child acquiring a position in these classes, a finding similarly evident in the work of Ho and Bonnor (2018). As the principals and teachers revealed, a disproportionate number of these parents are also of various Asian backgrounds, especially migrants from China, India and elsewhere in East and South Asia. While much of this can be attributed to their status as skilled migrants with higher educational qualifications, other factors such as their child attending tutoring and a greater focus on academic engagement within the home were also discussed as having a role to play.

Clearly, the numbers of students undertaking academic tutoring within NSW has accelerated considerably in recent years with a good proportion of these being of East and South Asian backgrounds. There are various reasons for this. Teachers commented on how the highly competitive education cultures of these migrants' home countries, where tutoring is a common practice, had informed how these parents approached their children's education in Australia. Given many of these East and South Asian migrants are highly educated, a focus on academic excellence is to be expected. It generally represents the norm for those of a mid to high SES, no matter what their ethnic background. Others of a similar SES may not perceive the need to have their children tutored – as many of these migrants did – but their stores of cultural capital and familiarity with the Australian education system provides its own advantages that are not always available to recent migrants.

As mentioned above, these migrants are also confronted with a highly competitive educational marketplace in Australia. This is especially the case in NSW, where increased selectivity and policies of school choice have only exacerbated a perceived need for tutoring. These operate as institutional pedagogies clearly influencing parents' pursuit of tutoring for their children but, it was

also what they perceived as the inadequacies of schooling in NSW that had prompted them to do so. Tutoring, as such, was a compensatory measure (Sriprakash et al., 2016). This was particularly the case with Maths and approaches to academic enrichment, but it also extended beyond this to aspects of pedagogic approach; the use, for example, of repeated practice for students to acquire certain knowledge and skills. While these techniques were critiqued by some teachers, many also viewed a focus on practice and repetition as valuable, acknowledging how this was now generally missing in schools (Watkins, 2012; 2005).

Tutoring was also compensating for schools' reduced emphasis on homework. Despite many principals and teachers feeling it was important, NSW DoE guidelines, and how these were interpreted, had discouraged many from offering it. Practitioners also seemed buoyed by a misplaced belief that 'research' supported this stance. Yet homework is of particular importance given the expectations it creates regarding a focus on academic engagement within the home, building upon skills learnt within the classroom and encouraging the kind of habits of learning essential for students as they progress through school. As this was not an institutional focus, parents, and particularly those of East and South Asian backgrounds, saw tutoring as the next best option. These relaxed approaches to homework also operate as a form of institutional pedagogy affecting not only practices in schools but those within homes, influencing the choices parents make about their children's education. The next chapter garners the parents' own views on these and other issues to gain further insight into the degree to which ethnicity impacts upon approaches to children's education, alongside other factors that influence the decisions that parents make.

Chapter 5:

Parents' Perspectives

Chapter 5: Parents' Perspectives

All parents want the best for their children, but what this means for them, and how they can help achieve this, can vary significantly. This variation is shaped by demographic variables such as ethnicity and SES but, as suggested in the literature on parental involvement (see Chapter 2), it is always a complicated, situated process, so this report doesn't simply reduce parents' practices to these broad social categories. This chapter draws on interviews with over 40 parents and six focus groups involving 29 people, organised through the schools' P&C Associations, to examine parents' responses on a range of issues:

- involvement in their child's education
- school choice
- homework and study routines
- tutoring and selective schooling
- views of their school and of education in general
- aspirations for their children
- extracurricular activities
- ethnic differences amongst parents and students.

The chapter considers the degree and the forms of parental involvement in schooling, foregrounding the differences in the amount of labour many parents invest in their children's educational pathways. This is shaped by broad factors such as ethnicity and SES, but is also affected by other factors, especially for migrant parents, such as length of residency, the resources and networks parents can draw upon, as well as differences in educational philosophy and the specific and broader institutional and social contexts in which their children's education occurs. Importantly, many parents see their efforts not so much about gaining an educational advantage as addressing what they see as the shortfalls in the Australian educational system.

Parental Involvement

As the survey in Chapter 3 indicated, most parents had limited involvement in their children's school, both in terms of the extent and forms of participation, but there were significant variations in terms of ethnicity and SES. Amongst participants, this broader picture was complicated by the high representation, on the one hand, of parents with children in selective programs and, on the other, parents of migrant backgrounds. For many parents of migrant backgrounds, there were clear barriers to regular involvement despite their enthusiasm. As Yuan (who came to Australia on a skilled migrant visa but could only get a job as an administrative assistant) said regarding Chesterton's P&C meetings, 'we attended once a long time ago. They were having an election, but I did not fully understand what was going on, so I stopped going to the P&C'. This could primarily be a language issue, but it could also be not fully grasping the cultural dimensions of committee election processes. He happily attended the 'face-to-face parent-teacher meeting':

> During the interview, the teacher will tell you what they learn at school and give you the report card … We mainly talked about [his daughter Yan-Yu's] progress and areas she can improve further, but 15 minutes were not enough.

There is also a time constraint to involvement, which affects some more than others. As Yuan continued, 'if you have time, you can talk to the teacher after school … However, we have three children; it's difficult for us to do that'. Being hesitant to have direct involvement in school committees and so on did not mean that parents were detached. Dong, a Chesterton parent with some familiarity with education in Australia because he had completed a degree here, said,

'I do in other ways. For example, they need some donation, I'll do it'.[7] In contrast, Nanxi, with two children at Bidhura, not only became engaged in the school, but was also strategic in her approach, becoming a 'parent helper' in the classroom and volunteering 'a lot' in order to understand the Australian education system and the schooling her children were receiving: 'as a parent you have to involve into [your] kid's learning'. She was also actively involved in their education at home (see Chapter 9). Her degree of involvement was unusual amongst both migrant and non-migrant parents but shared many aspects with others interviewed in the project. Fen, who, like Nanxi, came as a skilled migrant twenty years ago, also opted to be a 'teacher's assistant' at the primary school her children first went to, where she also attended P&C meetings. Significantly, once her oldest child was accepted into the OC at Acacia, she stopped being involved. One of the members of the P&C at Chesterton, who was of Fijian Indian background, was quite upfront about her rationale:

> I want to know what the school was doing. Like any progress [the child makes] we are the first people who get to know about it even sometimes the teachers miss out as well. And just wanted to get involved in the school with the teachers with the other kids and other parents as well.

She continued to serve on the committee for over a decade. Of course, involvement in the institutional processes of the school, to find out more about school practices or to even intervene in them, is only one aspect of what we have broadly called family pedagogies, the array of practices parents employ to enhance the educational experiences of their child. Parental involvement in the educational life of their children – through choice of school, practices around homework, encouragement of children into selective schooling, support for extracurricular activities and tutoring – these are not simply 'values' that reflect pre-existing categories of ethnicity or SES, but are strategies parents engage in as part of the pedagogic work (Sriprakash et al., 2016) parents undertake as responses to the set of institutional pedagogies manifest in the local school and wider schooling system.

School Choice

The initial choice of school, or even the suburb in which people settle, is often the initial dimension of parents' impacts on a child's educational experience: especially pertinent for those of migrant backgrounds. Most of the parents of children in mainstream classes said that the local schools weren't the basis of their decisions to settle in a particular area, which were made in terms of what Rong, whose child attended Beechvale PS, called their 'financial situation'. Many therefore usually sent their child to the local school by default. As Vinh at Chesterton said, 'we have no choice but to send him there … we have to choose our local school'. This was especially the case for those who had been in Australia for some time. Maha, at the same school, was rare in that her husband had actually gone to Chesterton himself: she wasn't happy with it and tried to enrol her child elsewhere, but the alternative had already 'reached their capacity'. In practice, however, rationales for choice of school varied.

As Yuan, also at Chesterton, explained, 'we chose this suburb because … we have many relatives living in this area so we thought it would be easier to take care of each other'. He hadn't considered the school catchment though; if he had, he wouldn't have bought his house. When it came time for his child, Yan-Yu, to start school, he realised that he was 'technically' outside the

[7] Parents' comments are generally represented as they were spoken, without correction unless clarity required it. Some parents were also interviewed in Chinese.

catchment area for Chesterton and so, because he felt it was ‘better than’ the schools whose area he was in, he applied and was accepted because he was in the same suburb.

In the focus group at Acacia, one parent of Chinese background said that because she ‘wasn’t in the area’, her first child had to sit a test to get into Kindergarten. She wanted all her children to attend because she’d heard it had ‘a very good reputation’, so she moved to a house in the area. A school’s reputation could, therefore, have an enormous impact on house values. Kelly, a Bidhura mother who was also a real estate agent in the area, said her daughter’s school’s catchment area had a ‘$150,000 premium’ compared to schools on the other side of the suburb, and that this was largely driven by the influx of Asian families hoping to get into Bidhura who had done research on the school’s reputation.

Such an effect didn’t seem to occur in low SES areas where most parents were, like Shristi at Chesterton, what she knew about her local school was through ‘word of mouth’ from ‘my friends’ or, from others, such as their family networks. Many in the sample, however, put effort into their decisions. While this was often for academic reasons, particularly for some parents of higher SES or Asian backgrounds who accessed on-line information, some parents prioritised other factors. Before her daughter started school, Fadwa ‘went around six-seven schools’ and consulted the *My School* website. But,

> the main thing I did was I talked to my friends who already have kids who are going to schools in this area … And I was … part of … the community playgroup, I was taking my kids to the library, I was going to the community centres, I meet parents there. I was talking to the parents, and you're trying to get an idea about the schools in this area.

At Chesterton, though, she said, ‘I felt something special there’. This was ‘especially because of the multicultural environment’; ‘we are included there’. The ‘school supports’ were important, but the main factor in her decision was that ‘I felt more welcomed there … that's the main reason I chose [Chesterton]’. Aya had a similar reason for wanting to send her children to Beechvale: ‘I’m comfortable here. [The teachers] really appreciate diversity’.

In contrast, Riya, also at Beechvale, and who had been in Australia for two decades, said she did ‘extensive research’ when her son started school and put this effort down to her,

> background … in India, we always go for fancy buildings and all that, you know, private schooling is like that. So, you go for … you look for extracurricular activities that schools offering you … all that extravagance that they show you.

When she started looking at schools for her son, she,

> was a bit taken aback … we drove around and at that time, I didn't know much about Australian education system. But I did research, quite extensive research … about how the things go on here. So we decided to go for Catholic or a private school … Then I did research, I read articles and all that about education system. And then we decided because education is same … it’s just the activities that private schools are offering are different than public schools, obviously. And then I talked to other parents as well. And then they told me that if your child is in public school, you get a little bit of benefit when they set for selective schools, because … my husband and I said, ‘Okay, primary is same, regardless, it doesn't matter. Because end of the day, I will be teaching them more than what they are learning at school’.

Her educational ambitions, which she put down to being Indian, were initially directed at the private sector, but she then decided that a government primary school would serve just as well, and perhaps better, because of the OCs available in the school. Importantly, however, she pointed to her more active role in teaching her child compared to the school.

These efforts in choosing a school seemed to increase both in terms of the SES of parents and the school, and in terms of whether their child had a strong educational orientation, either in hoping to go to an OC or a selective high school. But there was also greater effort amongst parents of Chinese and Indian backgrounds than, say, those who were Lebanese or Anglo. Care is needed to avoid essentialising claims about what *all* parents of these backgrounds do or think – as illustrated with a few examples below. Yet some Asian parents shared a strong emphasis on education and a willingness to invest enormous effort. Nanxi at Bidhura, mentioned above, not only moved from southern Sydney to the leafy North Shore, but she also changed jobs to 'do something for the education'.

While other Bidhura parents of various backgrounds admitted they consulted *My School*, asked friends or attended open days at the school, many said the reason was 'not academic' but what the school offered in terms of 'community', its extracurricular programs, or its educational philosophy, though Kelly admitted that they still 'looked up the listings to see the school's rankings'. Shreya was straightforward about the reason she chose Alinta when she arrived in Australia two years previously:

> we had zero kind of firsthand inputs about what is a good school and what is not a good school, right? So, all we did was go into your rating of the school on the *Better Education* NSW website. And anything about 99 per cent [percentile] is the area we wanted to stay in. So, this was somewhere there. In fact, frankly … we had no clue that this area has so many Asian migrants and I had no clue about it. But all I wanted was a good rating for the school.

Videka was similarly pragmatic and prepared in advance of moving to Sydney because a friend had pointed her to the *Better Education* website: 'we actually made a list of all good schools. And we were, you know, about to migrate. Yeah. And Alinta Public School was one of them'. When the family arrived they spent two weeks in a serviced apartment checking out schools and suburbs, before they chose Alinta. While a number of factors were considered, such as being close to work and transport, 'academics was on the high priority vision'.

Anru at Colbyville also 'did some research on the school' and 'listed out' the variables that were important. For her, academic consideration was just one of many, such as school size and the quality of the suburban environment. Yevgeni, who had only been in Australia for eighteen months, described the research he did to find a 'good place to live' and 'to educate your children' as 'like a military operation'.

There is a clear range and variation of motivations and effort in deciding where to settle and send a child, and of the time and effort that goes into school decision-making – an important reminder that simple measures of ethnicity or SES don't give the full picture of what these choices entail. It is also particularly important not to 'ethnicise' these decisions because it often says more about the capacities that families from higher SES backgrounds have to make and realise their choices. It also says something about the temporal dimensions of migrating and schooling: for families who have always been in an area, or who have been settled for many years, these decisions can seem 'natural', born of long processes of accumulation of knowledge, experiences and networks. For others, more recently arrived, without those resources, it may be a decision that has to be made

in a compressed amount of time, and so therefore made more consciously and perhaps instrumentally. It also says something about the dynamics of the 'migratory gamble' (Hage, 2021, p. 40), the risk implicit in the decision to leave a homeland and the different strategies deployed in order to secure a future for the family, and especially for the second generation.

This future orientation shapes parents' early decision-making. Dhwani's family were living several suburbs away – and sending her children to that local school – while they built a home in Colbyville. The build took longer than expected, and Dhwani was worried the move would be disruptive to her daughter Kabini, who would be in Year 5. So, she went to the principal and organised to start at Colbyville early, while the family were still 12 km away, because she was thinking two years ahead and how the experience would affect her chances of getting into a good high school:

> that way she gets to know the teachers and everyone. So, this is like a main year … I want her to go to selective [high school]. I want her to sit in the selective [test] … so that way the teacher gets to know her, and she gets to get comfortable with all the studying moment in there. So, I just want her to get used to that local environment.

Importantly, Dhwani was also conscious of a gap between the two schools in terms of the quality of education:

> I shouldn't compare, but yeah, compared to what I've seen [at the two schools]. They're a lot different … Subject wise, [the other school] is a little bit behind. Whereas Colbyville is ahead … There are a few topics that [the other school] haven't covered in last year. But when we go to Colbyville, it's already finished … the teacher expected [more] … they should have known by that time … comparatively, I felt like Colbyville a bit … ahead.

Dhwani had also compared Colbyville, favourably, through the *My School* rankings to several local schools. Her perception of a 'gap' – what she describes as the first school being 'a step behind' and Colbyville 'next level' – is important to the ways some parents strategise their educational decisions and plans, and this capacity seems to be more in evidence amongst parents of a higher SES and in schools where there is a stronger focus on academic achievement, particularly through certain programs.

Selective Programs

Reasons for settling in a suburb or choosing to attend a particular primary school are just two initial aspects of the ways parents shape the educational trajectories of their children hinged on the cultural, economic, social and ethnic capital (knowledge, money, networks) they hold. The reasons for choosing to pursue and then opt for educational programs premised on a degree of selectivity – such as OCs, GAT programs or selective high schools – were also important. The parents often echoed the rationale provided by the NSW DoE (2026b) that selective programs provide educational experiences which 'enhance the potential' of students. Moreover, the DoE emphasises that the focus is 'not competing'. Yet parents don't simply repeat the departmental line. It never says, for example, that selective programs are a 'better' education than mainstream classrooms, or that they produce more educationally successful students: rather, it is simply about providing the specialist programs that 'cater' for (already) 'high potential and gifted students'. Parents in this study, however, saw these programs clearly, as Guo, at Acacia, said, as 'better education' and 'better opportunity' for their children. Many spoke of the 'gap' between

mainstream and selective schooling and feared their children would miss out if they didn't have these opportunities. As a consequence, many put in enormous efforts to produce that high potential and 'giftedness', though not all had the capacities to do this effectively. Some parents were not interested in sending their children to selective programs. Leila, at Acacia, thought that the OC was 'too hard. I don't think my son is up to that level. Yeah, I don't think he's smart enough for it'. This is despite the fact that he had 'amazing' NAPLAN results, and she came from a highly educated family. She 'hated the pressure': 'for me, … it's not about, you know, getting the highest … I don't want to push him'. Riya had similar concerns about her daughter, because she thought it would be too 'challenging' due to her being 'the youngest in the class'; her older son, however, did go to an OC and has loved it.

Many parents at the schools which were either in areas of lower SES or whose children were in schools without specialist programs tended to have less knowledge of and interest in selective programs (whether these be OC, GAT or selective high schools). This tendency was also apparent amongst parents of backgrounds other than East and South Asian. As Kuini at Beechvale, who described herself as 'Pacific Islander', said when asked about the different types of selectivity in the schooling system, 'it really doesn't matter to me'. This didn't mean, however, that parents at these schools weren't aware of, or concerned, about the different levels of education on offer, they just didn't see their children as best served by them.

A different perspective, but still entailing an implicit criticism of mainstream schooling, was found in comments by Anika who homeschooled her son until he was accepted into the OC at Acacia: 'I decided to homeschool because I saw school doesn't really do much for you'. She felt that they could do their work 'in an hour a day'. She felt that 'he's learning' in the OC: 'in an ordinary class. I don't think he would be learning anything … here, he is being pushed. And he's picking up so much … it's been a really positive experience'. Significantly, Anika was a teacher who had also attended an OC, while her husband had also largely been homeschooled.

Many saw entry into an OC as almost ensuring a successful educational trajectory. Don commented on his son getting into the OC at Alinta: 'Now he's in OC, [a selective high school] should be guaranteed'. In contrast, a small number of parents were philosophically opposed to selectivity. Amelia, who had trained as a teacher but now worked in the public service, was not an advocate of Bidhura's GAT program:

> in New South Wales, it seems to be a big thing … for me, it's a Department of Education … money making activity, trying to encourage international students into the schools by offering these special, gifted and talented units. You know, which kind of promises a lot of things. To me, it's no different. I don't believe that a student in a gifted and talented class should learn anything different from a student in another class, all students should be given the same opportunity to be extended, and they shouldn't be branched off in streams that early in their life, because that then limits them to the social interaction and it limits their potential as well … all students should have the same opportunity. It's all about equal opportunity. So, I don't like them.

Implicitly, Amelia's view recognises that GAT programs (like OCs) provide educational opportunities not available to all students. She likes 'the whole idea of extension stuff, I think it's good that kids get extended and challenged', but she thought that all kids should be extended. Angela, whose son didn't get into the OC at Alinta, had 'mixed feelings about it'. 'I've got positives and negatives, and probably, overall positives', but the,

> negative is that there is a perception by the community that this school is really

> exceptional and that if you send your child in Kindergarten, that means they'll go to the OC, which and so this puts a lot of [pressure on] – this is why the school got so overcrowded.

She implied, in passing, that there was not much mixing between the OC and other classes – 'they're on their own' – but didn't seem especially concerned by it. She was also critical of the emphasis on selective high schools and chose not to have her children sit the test. She thought that 'other parents have considered [us] parents who don't care about … how well they do academically … we are both, you know, tertiary educated people, we, we actually care very deeply', but they have different emphases in education, such as doing a lot of sport and attending a co-educational school. She was also concerned that 'some children were punished for not getting into selective high school' and was 'a bit alarmed about how much pressure these children feel under'.

Riya at Beechvale had concerns that 'it becomes overwhelming over time, the way they segregate kids in the classrooms that [are] based on their capabilities'; but she still sent her oldest son to OC and was very happy she did, because he got 'the best teacher' being in the OC. Anika also commented on the tendency for the OC at Acacia to 'sort of separate themselves from the rest of the school'. While it was noticeable that 'you've got an OC class which is Asian' in a school which is primarily 'Arab', that separation is not necessarily an issue of ethnic division; like Riya, she saw it mainly in terms of capability: 'when I was there, as well, that that would happen', and they also had 'a good mix' in terms of ethnicity.

Fadwa, at Chesterton, 'checked' what they did in the OC at Acacia, which her daughter, Zoe, didn't get into, and found that 'it is a little bit advanced from what they are doing in Chesterton'. Although she put her daughter into tutoring to help prepare her for the OC exam, she realised when she looked at the OC papers that 'she won't be able to do it' and worried that she would get a 'frustrated feeling' for education. Rani, whose son was in the OC at Acacia, also noticed 'a big learning gap between what is being taught in the class and what level opportunity tests focus on'. She also noticed this was the same for the selective tests, which meant that 'children and parents have to resort to separate coaching for … selective and opportunity'. But Rani also made the important point underlining the attraction of OCs beyond the simple higher standard:

> when the calibre level of all the children is same, then they can focus more on a higher paced learning. So that is what made us make him approach for the opportunity classes … [in mainstream classes] teachers also have to focus on children … at all calibre levels, maybe some maybe high and maybe starting from basic … teachers have to focus on all.

Nelia, who saw her daughter as being in the 'average gifted range' at Beechvale, felt that 'the school doesn't really take that into consideration with her learning'. Because she is 'performing well' overall they don't take into account her limitations in some areas, like writing. Nelia, who had some relevant professional background in psychology, worried that the school may have missed an underlying problem that needed assessment. But she didn't want to be a 'pushy parent'. No one wanted to be seen as a pushy parent, of course, but the majority of parents talked about their role in needing to 'push' their child, especially if the school didn't.

As seen with Dhwani and others, and as noted by teachers in the previous chapter, many parents were concerned about the quality of education in mainstream schooling and went to some effort to understand and address this. Min-hua at Alinta was worried about the standard and the environment in some classrooms: 'in OC it's no problem. But in the normal class, I think, I don't know … Sometimes the kids are so noisy'. She voiced a common perception amongst many

parents that OCs and selective high schools offered a better educational experience than mainstream schooling. Min-hua saw this 'gap' in terms of the dominant philosophy in conventional classrooms, comparing it to her own experience in China:

> totally different. Yeah. When I was young, we go to school. Like, it's very strict … the kids got a little desk, everybody seated very straight. We're doing the same things in China, even now … kids, no free to talk, teacher just talk, talk, talk, talk; you can't ask question until teacher ask you. So totally different.

At first sight Min-hua seems to be critical of the Chinese education system, but then she made her views of Australian education clear by talking about the 'first time' her older daughter went to school: 'I said, "Is this a classroom or just a childcare full of toys?" The kids was, "lie down, oh, relax". Just totally different environment'.

The inference in these comments is that mainstream Australian education suffers by comparison with the homeland and that the OC program provides a better match with the expectations derived from her experience in China. The homeland comparison was common, even amongst parents who didn't have children in OCs. Chang at Chesterton complained that she 'cannot tell' what her daughter had learnt or what standard she was achieving: 'There is a problem with the school here. Unlike in China, we don't have textbooks here. If I know what she learns at school, I will have a better idea of her level'. This was significant because, as she elaborated:

> If you look at the selective high school entrance exam questions for Year 6 students, the questions are very difficult compared to what they learn from school. The school has taught her very easy stuff. I don't understand why there is a big gap between the two.

As a parent, Min-hua had to address this gap through her own efforts: 'Therefore I have to spend time explaining to her how to answer these questions' and, as will be seen below, using tutoring services.

This 'gap' wasn't just criticised by Asian parents. Don, of Anglo background from Alinta, said his son's previous teacher 'was terrible … he did OC to get away from her. That was the one of the biggest motivations he had, she was that bad a teacher'. But a common comparison for parents of migrant background was between their own experiences and those of their children. Parents could see value in both systems, but there was a common view that the homeland system had higher expectations. Fadwa, from Chesterton, said that, in Sri Lanka,

> the education system is like it's 100 per cent into books. It's not you just go sit, the teacher will write on the board, copy it, take the notes, go home, read it, memorise it and learn … But here learning [is] through experiences, they create, you know, they have resources here … the teacher will set up an activity, different activities.

While Fadwa appreciated the Australian system, she also pointed out that, comparing her daughter with her cousin's schooling in Sri Lanka, the latter was about two years ahead, especially in Maths.

Drawing on comparisons with their homeland systems, many parents of Asian backgrounds praised Australian education for what it did, whilst expressing concerns about what it didn't do, feeling that the balance between creativity and 'academics' is sometimes missing, so that their efforts – whether these be their own intervention or use of things like tutoring – represent a 'compensatory' function (Sriprakash et al., 2016, pp. 433-434).

As seen above, the language of choice pervades many parents' accounts of their children's pathways through schooling, but based on the kinds of efforts and strategising explored already, this language is a bit misleading. Min-hua, from Alinta, said of where her son would go to high school that,

> It's his choice. I don't force them to do choice. Yeah. Like, my husband said, yes. We can only recommend that we think it's better give us a reason. And you can persuade me too, like you think, okay, all my friends go there. I think friendship is more important for myself. So be fine.

Min-hua explained that such an option 'really depends on the kids … Bo-lin really don't want to study. I think just send him whatever he like … depends on what he wants to do'. But family 'culture' and its role in educational reproduction is important here, as well as conscious decision-making. As Min-hua added, 'he's okay. I think because he got model sister there, so he just follow. I think that's a good way'. As it turned out, they had extensive discussions with the older child about school choice, and she tried several elite private schools before she got into James Ruse: 'She said, "Mum that's the top one". I say yes. "Okay, I want to go to that school" … She is very strict for her target'. While Min-hua described, her son, Bo-lin as 'lazy', this was in the context of being in a family culture which was very strongly education-orientated and with a sister who was quite driven, representing the collective nature of a family's cultural capital. Moreover, while Min-hua said she didn't 'push him', she says her husband accuses her of being 'too strict' towards her daughter. The pedagogic work done here is more diffuse than simple strategies of policing work; it is more about the 'academic climate' instilled in the home (Campbell & Verna, 2007). Chang, like many parents, didn't think her school focused enough on academic results and believed 'the school can do better'. As a result, many parents were focused on the role of homework in helping their child.

Homework and Study Routines

As seen in the previous chapter, there is significant variation across schools regarding homework, not just in the amount and quality, but also in the extent to which it is encouraged and policed within a school, and the extent to which it is augmented by homework set by a tutoring centre or parents. While for some parents the amount of homework set by their child's school was not much of an issue, the majority of parents felt there was not enough, or not enough emphasis, on homework, or that it was not challenging enough. Chang, from Chesterton, like others, didn't feel her school focused enough on academic results and believed 'the school can do better'. As a result, many parents were focused on the role of homework in helping their child. Also, as suggested in the previous chapter, there is much debate, and some myths, about homework amongst teachers. While a few parents had reservations about the value of homework, and especially school homework, given time commitments, the majority supported it. The rationale could vary, however. Anru, from Colbyville, said,

> I actually support homework. Not because they need to do it for the sake of doing it, I think is a way for them to show their commitment as students. And, also, it's important to have daily practice, to get into that routine.

But, counter to the stereotype of Chinese parenting, Anru qualified this by saying that it could also be 'too much' and too early, and felt that was the case in China. Dhwani saw homework as 'important' because of the order and discipline it gave kids, particularly in the later years of

primary school: ‘They're all around the places … they don't know what to do’. She thought that children often couldn’t just ‘sit and do it’, so ‘homework is a must … my routine is to sit for two hours and do her homework’, by which she meant both her school homework and homework from tutoring. Others had a more instrumental sense of the role of homework. Vinh said that ‘every day I asked her to complete about half an hour, 45 minute with this book. To prepare for the OC, for example, or to prepare for the high school’.

Parents of OC students tended to want more, and better, homework. It was clear that Bai was still not satisfied with the amount of homework that Shu-yi got in the OC at Alinta: ‘one to two pages of Maths each week. It would take less than 30 minutes. Apart from that, the homework varies. Sometimes they have a project. At the moment she has to write a speech about multiculturalism’. Shu-yi also did tutoring every week:

> They give her homework. It would take a few hours, if you focus. But Shu-yi is not that focused. She would rather do more reading. So, it might take her half a day … I have to remind her to do the homework.

Returning to the idea of the ‘gap’, Fen said there were ‘big differences’ in the level and quality of homework between the OC her daughter was now in and her previous class:

> The homework was not the same. At her old school, they only gave out homework occasionally and all the homework was very easy. The homework she got from the OC was not easy. She had to research to find out the answers. The questions in the homework required a lot of critical thinking. It is not the same as the homework given to the mainstream students. In her previous school, they rarely gave homework. They only gave it once in a very very long time. But at the OC, they may give homework every two or three days, sometimes even daily. But my kid will definitely bring homework every week, and the teacher gives out homework to specifically train their writing skills. They have regular practice in writing, the teacher will teach them writing techniques and at the end of every term, all the students are given a test on their writing and the teacher will give marks to each student. And then I found that they need to do a lot of research to complete the homework they receive … They did intensive training on how to research, they taught students how to write a speech.

Fen concluded, enthusiastically, ‘the school is actually preparing them for high school’. She noted that her daughter initially didn’t want to leave her friends when she went to the OC, but now ‘she felt it was her right level'. Her daughter, Yi-chen, ‘wrote a letter to me on Mother's Day that year after she entered OC class. She said, “Mum, I thank you very much for encouraging me to take the OC exam” … And she's got good results because everyone in her class loves learning’. Again, a perceived ‘gap’ motivates parents to act. As Vinh argued:

> because, sometimes, our education industry doesn't put a lot of pressure on students, so they can give them a little bit of homework for them to do … What we need to do or what the parents need to do is firstly, to prepare them a little bit better if they sit for an exam … secondly, keep them busy for a while. Otherwise, they keep playing game or iPod or something.

The views were even stronger amongst parents at high SES schools and those with selective programs. Min-Hua, whose child was in the OC at Alinta, felt that being in the OC, they should be getting more homework:

> a lot of parents was asking [the teacher] what kind of homework especially for OC class. [She] said she already believed all the kids got a lot of activity outside school. So, she won't give a lot of homework … So, they even don't notice parents … the kids should be more prepared … it's very good for them to get ready for high school.

As well as the effort involved in understanding her children's schooling, Nanxi, at Bidhura, had been devising her own homework for years because she didn't think her daughter had enough homework for her to make it into the GAT program: 'if you want to get into that … you have to give them a little bit extra help, because … the school … don't really cover everything'. So, Nanxi gave her daughter 'extra mum's homework', which was at least as much as was given by the school. Moreover, she planned this 'program' on the basis of what was happening in the classroom over the course of a term, consulting teachers, departmental guidelines, and buying various books, while trying to fit with the school's approach. She supervised this homework closely. She might not have the extant cultural capital of an established middle-class family in the area, but Nanxi had accumulated enough knowledge and skill to stand in for what others had accrued over a lifetime. Nanxi represented the most intensive parental effort in this project, but other parents employed their own strategies rather than relying on the school. A few, such as Enlai, at Alinta, had a 'homework schedule' on top of that from Alinta and the tutoring centre comparable to Nanxi's 'program'. Most relied on less intensive, looser strategies. Many parents at Beechvale, for example, invested a lot in buying or borrowing books and papers that they thought would enhance their child's opportunities. As Riya explained,

> I spend quite a lot of time in Five Senses Bookstore, I do that. And I see what they can do and how can I challenge them … So, it's all at home … So, we all sit down together and work out the solutions.

It would be easy to dismiss this as embracing a kind of cargo cult mentality – that if you buy the right books the results will follow – because the point here is these investments only realise good outcomes if the parents have the time and capacity to oversee their use. These strategies represent attempts to quickly acquire a (limited) form of cultural capital in the hope that they can pay dividends quickly, although, as discussed in Chapter 2, using books such as these tend to have very little impact on students' outcomes unless coupled with suitable instruction and supervision.

Tutoring

Some parents were not interested in tutoring, but most had tried it at some point, and increasingly so if the child attended an OC or GAT class or went to a high SES school. The reason for attending varied, whether it was for the instrumental purpose of preparing for the OC or selective high school test, addressing areas needing remedial work (especially in Maths) or fostering skills that were deemed to be underdeveloped in the existing school curriculum, such as thinking skills. Dhwani saw tutoring in pragmatic terms: it was for 'practice' and for 'selective preparation'. Hui emphasised the remedial, initially saying that 'my kids didn't go coaching', she then explained that 'we've only had a tutor once because Hui Ying couldn't get through her Maths and she was behind, and she couldn't catch up'. For her, it was just about the tutoring helping to realise her 'natural ability', or 'what she 'actually knows … it was her anxiety that's stopping her from doing it'. Bai's rationale was also quite explicit, combining both diagnostic and rehearsal functions:

> We have two aims. First, getting her used to doing the test. They don't get any of that practice at school. Second, it would let us know the areas she needs to improve. One to two terms should be enough.

Some parents were more preoccupied with exam technique. Min-Hua described the coaching her son got just to prepare for the OC test:

> Every week they do trial. So, it's like a trial test for OC. So, they go there three hours. So, the two hours is just do the paper, like exam things. Last hour, they explain what happened. Right. Which question got a problem.

They would then also get 'a little bit homework' in the form of another sample exam. So, the exam preparation was quite extensive and very focused.

Unsurprisingly, some parents were philosophically opposed to tutoring centres. Amelia, who was critical of selective programs, was also against 'academic tutoring'. From Amelia's perspective, students,

> should get everything they need at school. So, my kids aren't tutored … the only reason for me why someone would need to be tutored is if they're that far behind, that they're struggling to keep up … but in which case, the school … that's their job.

Anika, who homeschooled her son until he was successful in gaining a place in the OC at Acacia, complained about the 'scheduled life' of kids who do too much tutoring. Min-hua, who had a child in Year 4, was ambivalent about her child trying for the OC if it meant having to do a lot of coaching: 'I would tell her to take OC. But I would possibly do it without any external coaching'. She worried because of the loss of socialising: 'some of her friends are not allowed to come to the park as much'. She also worried that she was doing the wrong thing:

> We heard about 'OC, OC, OC', I keep hearing everywhere and your coaching classes and everything that we said, are we missing out on something? Are we not doing something that is supposed to be done here if she wants to continue studying here?

The pressure of 'missing out' is quite intense. Viraj, from Alinta, thought the school was partly to blame: 'I don't think school is doing enough for them to be able … to get through that exam'. His wife, Janani, agreed: 'I feel there's a lack of exposure from the school to prepare a child for a test. And suddenly, when OC hits, it's like something falling on your head. And you're not prepared for it'.

Tutoring is usually presented as a strategy for gaining educational advantage (Sriprakash et al., 2016) but for many parents, and especially those of migrant backgrounds, it may be more a means of catching or keeping up with others, or even addressing the 'gaps' they see in their backgrounds or in the schooling system. These aren't incompatible interpretations, but a nuanced approach to parents' perspectives that often drops out of the analysis of the social implications of tutoring. Chang put this most straightforwardly when, echoing her comments above, she claimed that, 'what the teachers at school have taught her is very simple stuff. Therefore, we have to do tutoring … we as parents have to work with the tutoring centres'.

Maha, at Chesterton, had thought about putting her son, Keysar, into tutoring, but she was not enthusiastic about tutoring, believing that it was for the 'engaged' students, especially those of Asian background, because 'their main goal is selective public high school'. She was also somewhat suspicious of how they operated. She'd heard that,

> certain tutoring companies have people that put the HSC together that suit the children … Certain tutoring companies will tell you that they will teach you everything in the test. But how do you know everything that's in the test?

She felt they could only know if they knew the ‘people that are putting the test together’. This is not true, but indicative of a sense amongst some parents that some students were being advantaged by tutoring.

Shristi, from Chesterton, didn’t have a strong understanding of schooling in Australia, but she had recently put her daughter into a tutoring centre because her friend had started going, and because she hoped it gave her some chance of getting into a selective high school. But, as she admitted, she worried that ‘it's a bit [of] pressure for her’ and ‘it’s a bit hard for her’, but she did it because her public school ‘don’t push as much as the private’.

Rani, whose child was in an OC, was very ambivalent about tutoring: ‘I was not very eager to make him join. But then I, again, don't want to take a risk that he loses on some learning’. She was unhappy with the pervasive overemphasis on tutoring centres:

> too much importance is being given to the coaching. And as a parent, particularly, I was not initially interested in taking him to coaching and all but then you come across … most of the students 90, 95 per cent of the students are actually taking the coaching. So, as a parent, I would not like to risk my child saying maybe I am not exposed to that material … if [what ‘selectives’ are teaching is] so important, then … schools should also teach in that particular aspect. The same training should be given at the school level and not at the coaching level. Today, every child is prompted to join a coaching centre just for selective school coaching.

Rani gave the example of ‘thinking skills’. What might appear to be at the other end of the hierarchy of cognitive functions, repetition, also seemed to be left to tutoring centres:

> The material that they are being taught in, they don't teach anything. Basically, coaching centres don't impart knowledge, they just give you a lot of material wherein you can practice and practice and practice. And it is said that practice makes a man perfect. So, it's a practice, if you do one particular question 10 times or 20 times you get to know the concept. So, it is only the practice work that is being focused, which school doesn't teach.

Most parents who had children in an OC admitted to getting their child to undertake some preparation for the entry exam, whether it be via tutoring, looking at past papers or sitting practice exams. Many would claim like Bai, whose daughter was in the OC at Alinta, that ‘compared to others that we know, she did not do much, but yes, she did do some preparation’. In fact, the tutoring was quite substantial. Shu-yi did tutoring for three terms, and for one term, she did tutoring for the test involving a trial test every week. Bai remarked that, ‘every week after her trial test, I spent time with her, mostly working on Maths’. This reflects the effort that both parents and students put into achieving these results. Bai helped organise, facilitate and supervise this preparation, as well as actually doing the pedagogic work of teaching Shu-yi Maths. Despite this amount of work, Bai claimed that, ‘for me, OC didn’t matter’. But it clearly did. He was keen for Shu-yi to go to a selective high school: ‘Public schools you don’t know if it’s good enough’. In preparation for that path, as seen above, Shu-yi ‘does tutoring for selective school every week. Two hours per week’ and at least ‘a few hours’ of homework from them. He added (noting the plural pronoun indicative of this being a joint enterprise) that, ‘we will probably stop it sometime, not all year. We can just keep practising at home’.

Parents' Views about Ethnicity

In understanding parental involvement in children's schooling, a range of factors need to be taken into account, not just the role of ethnicity. The increasing presence of families of Asian backgrounds often arises in discussions on the expansion of tutoring centres, and the intensified educational competition that ensues from a (NSW) system reliant on selective schooling. This is too simplistic an attribution. As documented in earlier research, much discourse about what has happened in Australian schools (and elsewhere) is shaped by a process of ethnicisation, where things like educational achievement and parenting practices are understood primarily, and sometimes solely, in terms of essentialised understandings of ethnicity (Watkins & Noble, 2013). Decades of research have shown, however, that SES is perhaps a more significant factor in shaping schooling contexts, practices, and outcomes (Huppatz, 2015; Lareau, 1989, Connell et al., 1982; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The relations between these categories, and other factors, such as length of residency, need to be unpacked with a greater degree of nuance, and always returning to the insight that the complexities of practice rather than the purity of pre-existing categories need to be considered.

That's not to say that 'ethnicity' is not relevant. Indeed, most of the interviewees talked about educational outcomes and parenting practices – including their own – in terms of ethnic differences. Many parents saw both their views and those of others as representing cultural influences. As Chang said, 'as Asians we believe both academic results and whole-person development are important'. There were often stronger opinions about the nature of certain parents, particularly those from China and India. Don, an Anglo married to a Chinese woman, said that 'Asian parents chase', that is, to 'get information' from the teacher, especially around their child's 'rankings', which teachers are loath to provide. Some saw the increasing presence of Chinese and Indian migrants in their catchment areas as driving intense competitiveness: if there's an academically streamed class, then people from 'the Asian culture' will 'push to be in it'. As Angela, from Alinta, said of the pressure to sit the selective high schools test, 'one [Chinese] parent said to me, Well, in our culture, it is important to do this'. Janani, from Alinta, thought there were cultural differences between her homeland and Australia when it comes to schooling:

> It's just a difference in environment is what I feel. [Where] we've been coming from – it, it gets quite competitive, whereas the way of life here is quite easy and relaxed … rather than trying to master everything. So, it's a difference of culture, maybe … people who've been here longer, probably would have adapted to that over a period of time.

So, it's a difference of a 'way of life' rather than being some essentialised value system. Anika, of mixed South Asian and Anglo background at Acacia, had an interesting response to the issue of ethnicity and education. After describing the strong 'cultural mentality' in the way Asian parents approach parenting and education, she added:

> I don't think Arab parents value education a lot. They don't know how to get their kids ahead. They don't. This is just from my own teaching. They don't give their kids the best start when it comes to education. They're not the mums that are going to sit and read to their kids when they're six months old, and a year old and take them to the library. They're at the park every Sunday having a barbecue. They don't take the kids to the museum for fun. That's like, you know, 'that's what school does. We don't do that' … Arab parents … they value sport more.

Initially, it sounds like Anika is making a generalisation based on ethnic stereotyping, but what follows is a fairly good account of the distinction between what Lareau (2003) calls concerted cultivation, those (largely White) middle-class parenting practices which foster a child's educational capacities through organised activities, language development and involvement in schooling, and 'natural growth' parenting, in which leisure time is largely left to the children and education is left to the professionals, an approach she identifies as predominant in poor, working-class and many Black families. Anika elaborates: 'a lot of them struggle because, migrant parents in general, if they're not educated, they tend to not know how to help their kids become educated':

> They place a lot of faith in the school system, and the school system lets them down. So, they think, okay, I'm sending my child to school, they're going to teach them how to read, they're going to teach them how to, you know, be literate and numerate. And unfortunately, it doesn't happen … if you just rely on school, your kid's not going to do well. Yeah, there has to be some sort of support at home. So, if they're not being tutored, or their parents aren't helping them after hours, a lot of the families are really big, the mum's got heaps of responsibilities … they fall behind.

This reliance on the school had become problematic for Anika given what she saw as the parlous state of teacher training. Some of the weaker students she saw when she was a teacher,

> decided to do education at university … But when you've got unis … with the entry mark for education was like 50 or something. Like we need the education mark to be 90 up. Because they're the ones teaching the next generation. And if they don't know how to read themselves, how are they going to pass that on?

Teachers, she argued, 'need to be better educated'. So, there is a systemic dimension to educational inequity not attributable simply to ethnic 'culture'.

Many parents recognise there is a broader context to their schooling decisions and practices beyond their relation to their child and the school they are in. Some saw this in broad cultural terms, but others voiced other dimensions. It is worthwhile to look at one participant's comments to consider such a perspective. Manisha, at Colbyville, like Riya, at Beechvale, believed people of Indian background like her have a particular investment in education: 'for me, my obviously, you know, academics do matter. Coming from Indian background, we are so much about academics'. But she saw herself differently, much as Janani might have predicted: 'I'm not similar kind. I've changed a lot since [she was younger]. For me, it's more about my daughter's happiness'. She now believed that 'life is not a race'. She talked about the 'pressure' that comes from an increasing focus on selectivity: 'And there are a few cultures that get into this pressure too much, like Chinese, Korean and even Indian, they are not far behind in putting pressure'. She elaborated by talking about Alinta:

> It has been so much improved, but I would never want to send my daughter there, just because there are so many Chinese and Korean and it gets so competitive. And I know, I cannot keep pace with that. The only thing I will do is I'll also start to doubt my parenting style, you know, is it something that I am not spending time with her or I'm not giving an opportunity, which is why she's not doing … because I'll see parents, you know, giving up everything to make their kid shine … it's really human, natural human tendency to get into that comparison mode at times.

But then she changed her argument about the source of this competitiveness:

> One thing about Australia is quite weird. People here, judge you based on the school you come from, not so much from university. And it's really not the right thing … nowhere in the world I've seen … if you look at America, it depends which university you went to … school, no one cares. And here, it's all about schools. And it should not be because it's parent choice … I decided … she should go for Colbyville … this is what stands out when you're going for a job interview … people judge you based on your school … I was too new, still trying to understand because my daughter had just started to go to school … I found out people judge you by school, because it tells them which locality you grew up in. And obviously, we do profiling by which area we come from … So, if you come from North Shore … If this is how my daughter will be looked upon when she grows up, that she went to Colbyville … that comes from private pressure, like, you know, Colbyville is surrounded by the best private schools … we still happen to be in a good area, you know, obviously, they'll be profiling based on which private school you went to as well … I can't change the system, but I accept it.

There are many things going on in Manisha's response, but the crucial point to note is that she shifts from explaining the intense competition of schooling from the impact of Asian parents to the system itself, that education in Australia has been skewed by an increasing focus on the school: arguably an insight that is particularly clear for migrants of skilled professional backgrounds with experience of several education systems. In fact, what Manisha is expressing may be less about the schooling system in Australia as a whole and more about the peculiar emphasis on selective programs, and especially selective high schools, in the NSW system. More than this, though, she is expressing something about the very particular part of that system she finds herself in – the North Shore bubble, where educational competition is perhaps the most intense. Both a sense of the systemic and the local give voice to the variations of institutional cultures and pedagogies in play shaping the educational experiences of young people. This North Shore bubble, which is home to many skilled migrants, is quite different to the SES and migrant contexts in which Chesterton, Acacia and Beechvale are located.

Conclusion

Parents, usually those of Asian background, are often blamed for the growth of tutoring centres and the intensified educational competition they are part of, but parents are simply social actors who are responding in certain contexts with the resources they have and how they navigate the system in which they find themselves and the challenges and opportunities it entails. Tutoring does not, on its own, represent what Lareau has termed concerted cultivation, and can be quite instrumentally narrow, but as we have seen, this constitutes only one aspect of a wider array of practices parents undertake, what we have called 'family pedagogies'.

Moreover, Lareau's (2003) analysis of parental styles and their role in reproducing educational inequalities rests on an opposition between White, middle-class 'concerted cultivation' and Black, working-class 'natural growth' approaches. The data suggest there is greater complexity than this suggests, for several reasons. First, there is not a simple equation of class or SES with one style, because there are variations in mode and intensity of parents' practices in fostering their child's outcomes. This means that such phenomena should be seen in terms of distributions of cultural and social capital, that there are tendencies based on SES and ethnicity rather than simple identification of this category with this style. Second, other factors come into play in shaping

these practices, such as a migrant's length of residency and the capacity to rely on networks, including forms of 'ethnic capital'.

A third element should also be noted: that there are counter tendencies in each demographic category which are significant. There is evidence, for example, of aspirational parents from a lower SES trying to implement certain practices of cultivation, but they just aren't as effective because these parents may not have the capacities to realise the best outcomes from those practices. Alternatively, there is evidence that some high SES parents also voice a kind of 'natural growth' approach to parenting, eschewing competitiveness in schooling and leaving it up to the child's uncultivated talents. We've seen that in comments like those of Hui as to why she briefly got tutoring for her child. She elaborated why she wasn't focused on 'academic outcomes' or using tutoring to enhance children's results:

> If your kids have the natural ability to do it, all you need to be there to support them, guide them and, and have the subject area explained to them in a way that they can get it. And then they can move on and be interested in learning and learn how to learn … those are the two more important things to me in terms of academic outcomes, if they're interested to learn, they're motivated to learn, they'll learn.

There are strong ideological reasons for middle-class parents of educationally successful children wanting to see their child's success as a meritocratic reflection of their 'natural ability' rather than the result of their social privilege, and this is tied to a tradition of middle-class progressivism which eschews competitive tendencies of modern education systems. This argument is perhaps beyond the scope of this report, but the data suggest a set of complex relations between a family's SES and their strategies for reproduction, not a one-size-fits-all model.

Importantly, Lareau's model, in foregrounding parent-child relations, downplays the relation between family and institutional pedagogies, or the relation between what families do and the contexts in which they operate; as seen in the example from Manisha, where the specifically local ensemble of schooling organisations has some bearing on what parents see and do, compared with the contexts in which parents in areas like Chesterton and Beechvale (even those of a higher SES) are operating. These education cultures are not a uniform set of shared beliefs and values per se, but clusters of orientations and expectations and practices. And there are no hard boundaries between these 'cultures', nor are they straightforwardly aligned with ethnic communities.

The research 'bottom line', then, is the need to look at what particular sets of parents do in the contexts in which they are doing them, rather than attribute educational phenomena in terms of simplistic categories of ethnicity or SES, even though the parents themselves, including those of migrant backgrounds, often employ the language of ethnicity to discuss educational practices. Notions of ethnicity and SES, as stressed in this report, in themselves contain diverse experiences and factors related to things like length of residency, visa category or the availability of diasporic networks, and how these relate to the family pedagogies implemented and the institutional pedagogies to which they are a response. Importantly, the majority of the parents interviewed explained their actions in terms of what they saw as a kind of 'gap' in what schools do, and what they think their children need, and this is important for understanding the impact of migration on education cultures because of the resources and knowledges parents have, or don't have, in making their decisions.

Chapter 6:

Tutoring Providers' Perspectives

Chapter 6: Tutoring Providers' Perspectives

As discussed in previous chapters, school students' use of private academic tutoring has expanded dramatically in recent years in Australia. This chapter provides an overview of comments of tutors from some of the tutoring centres that student participants attended, together with others, to understand their perspectives on the rise of tutoring, why families opt for it, and some of the concerns that have been raised about the lack of regulation of the industry. It also examines the institutional pedagogies that drive tutoring and the ways in which this impacts the family pedagogies of parents in the study, especially those of Asian backgrounds where tutoring in their home countries is already a part of the education culture.

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with seven tutoring industry personnel based in Sydney, most of whom had operated their own tutoring business for many years,[8] and some observations conducted in tutoring classrooms. The tutoring businesses were evenly divided between western Sydney and northern Sydney, the two areas where the schools involved in the study were located. They ranged from franchises of large tutoring companies with dozens of local shopfronts to small and medium owner-operated businesses whose staff ranged from a small handful to over 50 instructors. All but one of the businesses provided tutoring in group formats, with varying styles of instruction. The other business offered one-on-one tutoring with customised lessons tailored for each student. Most offered tutoring in English, Maths, Science, General Ability and Thinking Skills, as well as OC and selective high school exam preparation. All but one of the interviewees were from Asian backgrounds, and they were mostly first-generation migrants. One interviewee was from an Anglo background. In addition to these tutoring business operators, Mohan Dhall, founder and CEO of the ATA, an industry body representing and supporting tutoring businesses, was interviewed.

Types of Tutoring

There are many different types of tutoring on offer in Sydney and other urban centres in Australia. Tutoring may be individual or in groups of different sizes. It may be remedial, aligned with schoolwork, or it may be for extension, acceleration, or exam preparation, including for the OC and selective high school exams. Traditionally, in Australia, tutoring was primarily for remedial purposes rather than for acceleration. As Mohan Dhall says, 'It was a catch up, not an ambitious thing'. Students who were falling behind or at risk of falling behind in a subject would undertake tutoring to catch up, and it could be a short-term intervention. Traditionally, this was largely one-on-one, with tutors targeting the student's area of weakness. In previous generations, tutors were typically individuals working independently, often hired through personal recommendations. As the industry has grown, tutors are now more likely to be formally employed by businesses. Dhall explained that even tutors offering one-on-one services are now often attached to agencies who match a tutor with a student. These agencies may have hundreds of contractors, who they link with clients, and receive an agency fee. It is then up to the tutor and the student to arrange the logistics of when and where the tutoring sessions occur.

Some tutoring businesses still rely on one-on-one tutoring, where a tutor assists a single student. One of the tutor interviewees, Amee, was employed by a small tutoring business in western Sydney that labelled itself 'boutique tutoring' because each lesson was individually planned by a centre manager and closely followed the student's school curriculum. Amee explained that the centre consulted the student's course outlines, assessment notifications and reviewed the

[8] This small sample reflects the difficulties encountered in recruiting tutors to be interviewed. Every tutoring centre mentioned by the student participants in this research was contacted, but most did not respond to a request for an interview, and some refused, seemingly wary of negative commentary.

student's previous work. She said, 'we have certain resources that might be core resources for a subject, but then we alter that … depending on the student's long-term and short-term weaknesses and strengths'. The fees for this service were high compared to other tutoring centres, with students normally attending only once a week, for a two-hour session.

With the expansion in the use of tutoring, it is much more common today to have group tutoring sessions which more closely resemble school classes, as they may have 20 to 30 students in the room. These group sessions are typically part of highly structured programs that largely follow Australian school curricula for specific subjects or offer exam preparation. As seen in the survey results in Chapter 3, Maths and English are the most popular subjects offered by tutoring businesses, with a greater range including Science and other subjects for those catering for high school students. For primary school students, standard packages of Writing, Reading, Maths and General Ability classes are common. Students attend one, two or more classes per week, as explained in Chapter 3. Some centres offer back-to-back classes in different subjects, so students might spend several hours in classes, for example on a Saturday morning. Among the interviewees, Ranlin explained that her centre only operated on Saturdays from a local western Sydney public school, from whom she leased several classrooms. Her students attended for two, four or six hours, depending on how many subjects they were enrolled in. Between the two-hour classes, students went outside to the playground for recess and lunch, mirroring a school day. Most tutoring businesses also offer intensive school holiday workshops that run all day for five days. While tutoring class sizes often mirror those of mainstream schooling, some tutoring centres pride themselves on having smaller groups, as explained by Ranlin and Terry who, in their centres, both capped classes at ten students. Interestingly, while Terry ran a small independent tutoring business in northern Sydney focusing primarily on English, Ranlin operated a franchise of a large, nationwide tutoring company, but was given some autonomy to manage her business.

Group classes are typically not targeted at students' individual needs, but rather follow a standard program designed for all students based on their age or level of achievement. When we asked Vanya, who operated a small business in northern Sydney, why she decided to open a franchise of a well-known international tutoring company, she explained that the head office provided all the materials, so it was 'so easy': 'it's everything. It's a structured program'. Her centre, which hosted classes of around 20 students, did not actually teach students, but just provided them with worksheets to complete, which she and other tutors then marked. Vanya stated that there was no capacity to provide individual attention for students, even if the content was new for them. She just watched them answer their worksheet questions and encouraged them:

> I can't afford to sit with one child for 20 minutes. But [the] first few questions I will watch. And then every now and then I will pass them and watch them. If they're on the right track, yep, you're good. Keep going.

Although there was little by way of instruction, Vanya explained that students benefited by being able to practise their knowledge in a structured way, through the worksheets. Additionally, she said, 'We're teaching them the discipline to sit down' and focus. As discussed earlier, discipline was a theme that arose for some parents, who worried that schools' academic standards and classroom routines did not always encourage sustained effort and commitment from students. This appeared to contribute to the demand for tutoring.

Structure and discipline were also on display during an observation of a Year 5 Maths tutoring session at Ranlin's centre. Facilitated by a Primary Education university student, the two-hour session consisted of students taking turns to solve Maths problems in front of the whole class, with the tutor providing feedback. This centre was also a franchise of a large tutoring business, so all the centres within the business used the same booklets 'designed by head office', Ranlin

explained, although there was flexibility to adapt the booklets at times. She was grateful for this flexibility, as Ranlin claimed that many tutoring centres had such a standardised formula that students were restricted from exercising much independence. She explained that, for writing, some centres enforced such a tight style on their students that she could identify a student's tutoring centre just by reading their writing:

> ... if I see a kid's writing I will know this kid from Pre-Uni, this kid is from CS. This kid is from STC. [How do you know that?] Because they have a set of styles, and the kids have to follow ...

This criticism mirrors those from teachers, discussed in Chapter 4, about the overly prescriptive approach taken by some tutoring providers, that teachers claimed limited creativity, independence and critical thinking. As Vanya mentioned above though, tutors often emphasise the importance of structured practice, which requires learning to be scaffolded. Again, this was something that some parents also wanted more from schools.

Tutoring Centre Employees

There are no qualifications required to establish a tutoring centre or to work in one. While some of the tutoring centre managers in this study were previously teachers, most had no teaching qualifications or experience. Two of the interviewees remarked on how their experience as mothers prompted them to set up a tutoring business, as they had tutored their own children at home. As Yin explained, she had been a full-time mother for six years and spent many hours doing schoolwork with her children and sometimes their friends, who came over for homework help from her. Similar to Bidhura parent Nanxi's experience, explained in Chapter 9, Yin began developing her own resources for her children's learning:

> ... when I look at the book they learn at school, to be honest, I'm not happy with that. And look at many coaching centres' teaching materials. I think they're not suitable for my child. So, I do my own.

Ranlin also quit her job to be a full-time mother and supported her children to excel in school: 'So all three of my children got into OC class. And then got scholarship to private schools, or ... went to North Sydney Girls'. Based on their experience with tutoring their own children, these women decided to open commercial tutoring centres. At the time of interview, Yin was operating a tutoring centre with over 1,000 students and employing nearly 50 staff, many of whom were casual teachers juggling school-based teaching and tutoring. These staff members designed their own materials for their tutoring students. Other tutors were university students studying in the field they tutored in. Ranlin's centre also employed a mix of currently-employed school teachers and university students. Many tutoring centres employ recent high school graduates with no teaching experience. Amee explained that her company recruited tutors by seeking out HSC 'high achievers' who had gained an ATAR of at least 95 and 'ideally' 99 and above.

Among the businesses that the interviewees represented, training for new tutors ranged from virtually nil to several weeks. In Amee's centre, although the tutors were typically inexperienced university students, the company gave them only 'half a day of training'. The new tutors were provided 'some training resources' and had a one-hour meeting with a more senior tutor, 'and then they kind of go into it'. As Amee explained, 'most of these tutors come in, and they are usually high achievers, they are kind of ready to just like, really be proactive'. Amee explained that her

tutors did not need to prepare any learning materials, but just had to implement the lesson plans prepared by the managers. Nor were they usually assigned the same student each shift, so there was a lack of continuity. Students did not know who their tutor would be each session: 'they have different tutors for each subject, and within a subject their tutors may change from week to week'.

Vanya, who ran a Maths and English tutoring centre, even employed some of the parents of her students to mark the work of the students. She explained,

> … we just ask the parents, okay, you're doing nothing at home? Why don't you come and sit here and mark? … there was an English lady … She was bringing two sons here. She sits in the car and read books. So, I went and tapped on the window and said … why don't you come to do some marking? And she said yeah.

In addition to parents, Vanya also employed high school students whom she knew from her previous experience as a teacher: 'mostly the prefects, right, they turned up in their blazers, and it looks so good, nice green blazer and sit down and mark, and because they know how I work, and I know how they work'. At the time of the interview, Vanya was even paying one of her primary school students to mark other students' work. Although this student was only in primary school, he was doing senior high school Maths, so Vanya considered him qualified to mark other students' Maths worksheets, explaining, 'we pay him $13'. In contrast, Ranlin explained that she trained her tutors for at least five weeks, and then observed them in the classroom or paired them with a teacher for two weeks, before allowing them to run a class independently. Tutoring centres often defend employing unqualified tutors, saying that tutoring is not the same as school-based teaching. As Amee argued, 'The process and pedagogy associated with tutoring is very different to what you see in schools … and you don't necessarily need a deep understanding of pedagogy and so on, to train students to do well'. Similarly, Yin said, 'as long as you're a good teacher, it doesn't matter if you don't actually have a teaching degree. We just need to make sure they're teaching what they need to teach really, really well'.

Those Who Attend Tutoring

While tutoring has existed in Australia well before recent waves of Asian migration, it has become increasingly associated with Asian migrants in Australia, and the tutoring personnel interviewed here largely catered for this demographic. Even the Anglo interviewee, Terry, explained that he deliberately set up his centres in suburbs with high concentrations of Asian migrants, such as Eastwood, Chatswood and Bella Vista. Almost all his clients were from Asian migrant backgrounds, particularly Chinese and Korean, and he designed his programs specifically to cater for LBOTE students. Meanwhile, Yin, who was a migrant from China, chose to open her centre in Epping. She explained that at the beginning, most of her clients were Chinese migrants, and over the years this had expanded to other Asian groups such as Koreans and Indians, as well as Anglo-Australians. Among the interviewees, Ranlin's centre was an exception, located in Bankstown, an area with a concentration of migrants from Middle Eastern backgrounds, and her students reflected this local demographic profile.

Terry estimated that around 80 per cent of tutoring businesses in Sydney were run by 'Asian businesspeople', many of whom specialised in catering for a particular ethnic group. As such, tutoring centres' business was generated partly through the conversations prevalent in diasporic networks, as discussed elsewhere in this report. Similarly, Dhall explained,

> … some of the coaching centres might cater to a Korean-Australian market predominantly, or an Indian-Australian market or a Chinese-Australian market or a Vietnamese-Australian market. I've actually heard a Vietnamese parent say to me, that 'we will go to X, Y, Z tutor, because he's Vietnamese, even though we don't like his tutoring methods, because we support the Vietnamese'.

Some tutoring centres use curriculum materials from overseas, as they consider them superior to the Australian curriculum. Vanya, a migrant from Sri Lanka, was aware of many tutoring businesses using textbooks from India, because they were 'harder' than Australian ones, which appealed to their clientele. Having been a teacher in NSW schools for 20 years prior to starting her tutoring business, Vanya was critical of this practice, saying, 'you can't just teach random stuff because I can say a lot of people can go overseas and bring textbooks from there and everything to them, but it has to be taught to match the curriculum here'. In contrast to migrants' tutoring choices, a few of the interviewees explained that middle-class Anglo-Australians tend to favour individual tutors rather than group classes. As Terry stated, 'Caucasian background parents might prefer, like a one-on-one tutor to come to their house, as opposed to going into a centre with 20 or 30 kids in it'. This aligns with Amee's comments below about Anglo families' preferences, but also points to the importance of SES, given the higher cost of individual tutoring compared to group-based tutoring. It also underscores the diversity of modes of delivery within the tutoring industry, with families' choice of tutoring provider shaped by both ethnicity and SES.

Reasons for Tutoring

In addition to the traditional reasons for using tutoring for remedial purposes, increasingly families choose tutoring to provide not just more educational support for their children, but also a different approach to pedagogy than what is provided in schools. In particular, tutoring centres often adopt a more explicit approach to teaching and feedback, stricter forms of discipline, and a focus on acceleration and test preparation. Some parents enrol their children into tutoring in order to receive more direct, quantifiable feedback, and to gauge how they're performing in relation to their peers (Sriprakash et al., 2016). As Chapter 5 revealed, many parents are frustrated that schools typically do not provide mandatory homework or numerical scores or student rankings. In contrast, most tutors set regular homework and, as Yin explained, in her centre, the tutor 'takes it home to mark' and returns it at the next lesson. Ranlin described how her students were monitored:

> … if the kids don't hand in their homework for two weeks [the tutor] will let me know. And I'll have a word with them. If they're still doing that, then I'll have a word with the mother. Usually it works, you know, for a while, at least.

Ranlin explained to her students that tutoring homework should be done every day. For primary school students, she says, 'I teach my kids, most of the time, you only need 15, 20 minutes, you know, but you have to do every day. You can't leave it till Friday night. That's not going to work'. This approach to homework aligns with what many parents want from school. As Terry explained,

> There is an expectation among, especially Asian parents, that they will have homework. And there is that expectation often among like, Western Caucasian background parents, that, not too much homework. So, rock and a hard place trying to get the balance right. I think that, generally speaking, I just think that a lot of the coaching centre market clients don't think there's enough homework in the [mainstream school] classroom.

In addition to structured homework, tutoring centres with large cohorts can also provide student ranks and other numerical feedback, on a regular basis, based on standardised tests. Many of these centres also publish success rate reports on their previous students' ATAR scores, or how many secured a selective high school placement. As Yin commented, parents 'just want to know better about their child. So that's why we do a trial test to see exactly. Give me a number rather than A'. As discussed in Chapter 5, some parents perceive Australian schooling to be too 'relaxed' and want to see more homework, feedback and practice. In this sense, the use of tutoring is a compensatory measure to address perceived gaps in mainstream schooling.

Also, discipline and behaviour management can often look different in tutoring centres compared to schools. While discipline can operate as a disabling mode of control, in the case of tutoring, tutors and parents are more likely to view discipline as enabling (Watkins & Noble, 2013). Students sometimes report (see Chapter 7) that disruptions are minimised in tutoring because students tend to be more focused and sometimes class sizes are smaller. During the observation of Ranlin's tutoring centre, the students were remarkably quiet, attentive and engaged in challenging and fast-paced Maths exercises, over a two-hour session. In comparison, as some of the student interviewees reported, school classrooms are often noisy and distracting, even leading some students, like Bo-lin at Alinta, to wear noise-cancelling headphones in order to concentrate. Compared to school classrooms, tutoring classrooms sometimes deployed stricter behaviour management. Terry described the approach of a tutoring centre in a nearby suburb run by a Chinese migrant, who specialised only in high school Maths: 'he gives detentions if you don't do homework. And the Asian parents love it'. The focus on discipline, like the explicit approach to teaching and feedback, illustrates some of the divergences in the institutional pedagogies of tutoring compared to mainstream schooling, explaining some of the appeal of tutoring for many parents.

Some parents choose to send their children to tutoring for purposes of acceleration. As discussed in previous chapters, it is now common for tutoring centres to teach content that is ahead of what students are learning at school. Ranlin's company taught curriculum that was 'at least six months ahead of the schools'. Jade explained that her centre accelerated students with work that was one or two years ahead. This was necessary because she said that many of her students found that the school curriculum was 'not meeting their needs, in the sense that they are already beyond'. She explained that they might set Year 4 or Year 5 work for a student in Year 3 'because they're already working at that level'. Given the number of student participants (see Chapter 7) who mentioned that schoolwork and homework were 'easy', it is not surprising that parents use tutoring to challenge their children academically. However, as some teachers mentioned (see Chapter 4), accelerating students terms or years ahead of the curriculum poses challenges for classroom teaching, as teachers need to deal with a much larger range of capabilities in already mixed ability classrooms. Terry, who was an owner-operator tutor, was critical of these practices in his industry, querying, 'How do you cater for a Grade 4 kid who's doing Year 9 Maths already? Very hard'.

As mentioned above, many tutoring companies provide preparation programs for admissions tests such as OC and selective high school tests, and private school scholarship tests. These are commonly taken up in the term before the test, but, as discussed in Chapter 7, other students undertake test preparation tutoring for six or even 12 or more months before the test. Most of the tutor interviewees emphasised that they did not focus on test preparation, but just general subject-based learning. Yin stated that subject based learning was the best preparation for such tests, and that repeatedly doing trial tests 'is not the best way to learn'. Rather, 'if you know the skills, you will do well on the test'. However, Yin's colleague, Jade, admitted that even if test

preparation was not a stated focus of the centre,

> … you will always have parents who will come in just for that one term, one term before the selective school tests, they pay for that term, and then that's it. They've done their selective school test, and then they're gone. We don't see them again.

The amount of time that some students spend in test preparation tutoring has become a heated point of contention in some school communities, as discussed in Chapter 4. It is this type of tutoring that many teachers are most critical of, as they see little benefit in terms of the learning of content, and view it as embodying an overly narrow approach to education.

Overall, though, for first-generation migrants, tutoring can be a means for assuaging their anxiety about their unfamiliarity with the local schooling system. According to Amee, tutoring was a way to bridge what she called the 'cultural capital gap', because migrant parents did not have the knowledge of the education system that other parents had:

> … parents, if they are migrants, they don't know what the best school is, at first, they don't know how to game the HSC the way that it has scaling, they don't know how to pick university enrolments, so they have to pay someone else to do it. If you are from a family, where they've gone to university here, you know, they have that kind of knowledge in the family, then you're less inclined to have to pay for someone.

Having said that, Amee surmised that the stereotype of Asian migrants over-tutoring their children simply reflected the fact that 'Asians openly talk about tutoring, it's very normalised'. Indeed, Asian migrants' strategic use of various forms of tutoring often reflects their ethnic capital, acquired through engagement with active, education-focused diasporic networks. As Amee explained, Anglo-Australian families also used tutoring – she said a sizeable minority of her centre's clients were non-Asian, despite its location in a suburb with a concentration of Chinese migrants. However, Anglo families 'don't talk about it with other people'. In fact, some of her Anglo clients had specifically asked for their children's names not to be mentioned in any publicity. This was partly because these families wanted their children to be seen as 'naturally smart': 'you want to seem like you did it all yourself'. As discussed in the Alinta case study in Chapter 9, some mid SES Anglo parents hold an ideological commitment to a 'natural growth' (Lareau, 2003) style of parenting that outwardly eschews structured developmental activities such as tutoring but in practice, involves the cultivation of cultural capital in other ways. As such, this 'natural growth' approach is quite different to how the parenting style was originally conceived as a practice of working-class parents. The seemingly more relaxed approach to education was also espoused in the educationally progressivist discourse adopted by many teachers.

The Benefits of Tutoring

Given the prevalence of negative commentary around tutoring, many of the interviewees were keen to challenge the criticisms of the practice. While critics of tutoring have argued that it can cause stress and anxiety among students, Amee claimed that tutoring can help to lower students' stress, because it provides the extra support they need. Ranlin agreed that tutoring did not cause anxiety but helped students to relieve anxiety because it made them feel more confident in school. Amee explained that the main instances of stress among her students were associated with entrance tests, especially among younger primary school students:

> Getting closer [to the test], they do feel the stress and have a few crying fits, or you know, they come in and they're a little bit down. But the cause of the stress is the entrance test, rather than the tutoring per se.

Sometimes, parents' expectations were a source of stress for students, as opposed to tutoring. As Amee noted, sometimes parents 'want results too quickly. They want, you know, like one term and my kid is like the top of the class. And no tutoring place can provide that kind of magic'.

Against the idea that tutoring gives some students an unfair advantage, Yin argued that tutoring helped to redress the reality that not all schools were the same, and that some students could not access a selective class or a private school: 'If they think they shouldn't do coaching then make all the schools the same'. Amee was extremely critical of the notion of meritocracy that stigmatised tutoring, arguing that tutoring was legitimate in helping students without privileged family backgrounds:

> So, a child with parents who are educated, who are taking them to art galleries, getting them to read, reading with them at night, is going to have much more general knowledge than a child whose parents are not able, for many reasons to provide that. And sometimes tutoring is what is needed to bridge that gap.

Amee is essentially arguing that tutoring bridges a gap in the cultural capital of migrants, helping to make the education system fairer by levelling the playing field. As discussed elsewhere in this report, many Asian migrants are highly educated and able to engage in 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003) of their children, being deeply engaged with their children's education and development. However, what they may lack is the kind of detailed understanding of the local education system that tutors may provide. Obviously, however, this cultural capital bridge is only available to those with the financial capacity to pay for tutoring. And some tutoring services, such as her 'boutique service', may be better equipped than others to provide this advantage to students. Amee also argued that attending tutoring inculcated discipline, organisation and willingness for hard work within students, which was just as valuable as a notion of 'natural intelligence', 'because it is ultimately a student's discipline and their hard work that gives them the opportunity to use that talent to then do better academically'. As discussed above, for many parents, the lack of emphasis on discipline in schools and the perceived low academic standard of schools, provides much of the impetus for tutoring.

Regulation of the Tutoring Industry

Concerns have been raised about the lack of regulation of the tutoring industry (Zunica et al., 2025) and therefore the lack of any oversight in relation to the employment of tutors, their qualifications, the conduct of staff, and the programs on offer, including their pedagogic styles and the ways in which they are marketed and promoted. The predominance of migrants within the sector, both as operators and clients, may also mean a lack of familiarity with rights and obligations under Australian law. Mohan Dhall, CEO of the ATA, has been lobbying for the tutoring industry to be more regulated, given the scope for exploitative or damaging practices to occur in a completely unregulated environment. He explained,

> ... my biggest general concern would be the promises made by non-educators to

> vulnerable parents, who don't know what their rights are, their commercial rights, let alone can ask a question about education, to be able to make a properly fully informed decision. That's a real problem.

The lack of formal qualifications among tutoring operators is another key concern, raising questions about their teaching skills, including their ability to cater for the needs of individual students. As Dhall commented:

> When you have people untrained and unaccountable and commercially driven, they cannot even recognise issues with kids, they can't even identify … I would say that most tutors are not in any way, even basically skilled enough to identify the learning needs of kids and remediate them where there's an issue.

Terry agreed, stating that the lack of regulation of the industry allowed exploitation and misleading communication:

> … I don't like the marketing tactics. I don't like the deception. When you know full well that child has no chance of getting to selective school, you take $1,000 off that parent, for a term, that's dishonest, but there's nobody that regulates it … You can put a sign on your door tomorrow, 'Bill's Tutoring Centre', there's no, all you need is public liability insurance. That's it. And there's nobody watching over your shoulder.

Terry said that for many tutoring businesses, there was little integrity in their practices, as it was 'all about money':

> So, there's no care for, generally speaking, no care for the kids, no care for how many kids in the class, no transparency to the parents, no integrity around the syllabus … how do we expect these people to create content? They're not educators …

Dhall was particularly concerned with the common practice of employing high school graduates with high ATARs, as described by Amee above, because these students may not be best positioned to help struggling students. He explained that because high achieving students were often skilled at independent learning, they could not necessarily understand the support that other students might need to achieve the same outcome. Therefore, this practice can 'replicate disadvantage', as students with additional needs can be further disadvantaged within tutoring.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the perspectives of tutoring providers on some key issues in the sector, including the role and benefits of tutoring as well as some of the challenges facing the industry and families who use tutoring services. Parents are increasingly opting for tutoring to address gaps they perceive in school education, including inadequate discipline, feedback, academic challenge and preparation for tests, such as the selective high school placement test. These drivers of tutoring illustrate the divergences between the institutional pedagogies of tutoring providers and mainstream schooling. However, there is no single pedagogical approach within the tutoring industry, but rather a diversity of modes, forms, practices, and philosophies. The lack of regulation of the industry enables this diversity of offerings to proliferate, giving rise to a high level of choice for families, but also risks, especially for migrants who may not be fully informed about

the services they are paying for, and the rights and responsibilities of businesses and consumers. The use of tutoring also reveals key aspects of family pedagogies, especially its use by students who are high achieving, but especially in the case of migrants, perhaps lacking crucial aspects of cultural capital such as parental familiarity with local systems and education cultures. Ultimately, using tutoring is an aspect of migrants' family pedagogies, the teaching and learning that occurs outside school that places a premium on educational success. The next chapter explores these pedagogies from the perspectives of students.

Chapter 7:

Students' Perspectives

Chapter 7: Students' Perspectives

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with students from across the six schools, where they were asked about their perspectives on school and study, including homework, tutoring, extracurricular activities, experiences of OCs, high school choice, and their parents' approaches to their education. To some extent, it also draws on observations conducted in students' classrooms and homes. As explained earlier, the research included a total of 38 students, with the majority in Year 5. Nine students were enrolled in an OC, one in a GAT class, and the remainder in mainstream classes. The majority were children of first-generation migrants, or had migrated themselves, and spoke their heritage language at home with their parents. All were fluent English speakers.

Homework

As explained in previous chapters, NSW schools have autonomy to determine their own homework policies, in consultation with parents, students and teachers. The student participants across the six schools generally described their homework as minimal and optional.[9] Minimising or abolishing homework, increasingly common among Australian primary schools following the COVID-19 pandemic (Loney, 2024), reflects a belief that homework is not useful for primary school students, and a concern to avoid burdening children and families. Among the participants, when Lama from low SES Beechvale PS was asked if she got homework from her teacher, she replied, 'Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't. It's an optional thing'. Fellow Beechvale student, Samara, said that homework was 'not all the time … Sometimes it'll be like specific dates. And sometimes it'll be like, optional, so you can choose which day you want to do it on'.

If offered, homework set by teachers usually consisted of weekly sheets of Maths questions and spelling activities. Some students also mentioned writing, comprehension and logging how long they spent reading at home. From the students' perspectives, it appeared that high SES Bidhura PS was the only school that had consistent homework that was taken seriously by students, although teachers interviewed in Chapter 4 indicated this was also the case at Colbyville. All the Bidhura student participants described weekly English and Maths homework. Michelle explained that for 'Math mentals', she spent 'quite a lot of time on that because it is pretty hard. It takes a while to figure out the problems and stuff'. Michelle said she would spend about 45 minutes on homework, a few days a week. Fellow Bidhura student, Lulu, said she did homework every night. However, most students said they spent much less time on homework, as little as 'five minutes', according to Wai Ming from Colbyville. And most did not do it daily.

Most students did not find their school homework very challenging, and did not engage with it in any significant way. The following comments were common among the student participants:

> 'It's quite easy' (Mei, Chesterton)
>
> 'Too easy … Sometimes I'm not bother to do it' (Yan-yu, Chesterton)
>
> 'I feel like I'm not challenged a lot in my homework' (Ananya, Beechvale)
>
> '… not that challenging to do' (Mei Lin, Bidhura)

[9] Interviews with students took place soon after COVID-19 lockdowns that closed schools, forcing students to learn at home. This meant major disruptions to study routines and homework practices. Many students said that since returning to school after lockdowns, there had been no homework set. However, they reflected on homework practices prior to and after COVID-19. These are described in this section.

> '… pretty easy. And you can like do it at home, but I've not bothered to do that because I can quickly do it during class' (Sarisha, Colbyville)

Some students said that although homework was optional, teachers expected them to complete it. Aleena, from a mainstream class at Acacia PS, said that if students submitted homework, it would be marked by the teacher. However, Sumitra at Chesterton PS said that homework was not always marked: 'If everybody handed in their homework, the teacher would mark it but if only one or two people hand in their homework, she usually wouldn't mark it'. This seemingly relaxed approach to homework from teachers contributed to some students' lack of engagement with it, and sometimes made it difficult for parents to encourage their children to complete it. As discussed in Chapter 5, there is often a lack of alignment between expectations of schools and families in relation to homework, as many parents support regular homework and indeed, create their own home-based study routines in the absence of school-provided homework.

Some students said they had no homework because their homework was simply to finish off any tasks they had not completed in school. As Meera, from a mainstream class at Alinta PS, explained, the teacher 'gives us a time to do the specific work. If we don't finish it at that time, it just becomes homework. But other than that, you're free'. This arrangement was particularly common for those in the OCs. These students typically finished all their work in class, so did not need to bring any work home. That is why Harsha from Acacia's OC said, 'We get homework rarely'. Fellow Acacia student Osman explained, 'Mostly we do the work in class, so we don't get much homework'. Jian from Alinta's OC said, 'overall we don't have much homework … if we're not productive [in class], then we have to sometimes work on it at home. But I haven't actually done that much at home yet'. As described in Chapter 4, the OC teacher participants explained that generally they did not set weekly homework because they knew that their students were doing tutoring and homework associated with that. Therefore, as argued elsewhere, the lack of school homework and the uptake of tutoring may be mutually reinforcing.

Students receiving tutoring tended to prioritise their tutoring homework over their school homework. Many referred to how their tutoring homework was more challenging than school homework and more closely monitored, while school homework was optional. As Sumitra, at Chesterton PS, stated, school homework was 'just like an extra' if there was still time after completing tutoring homework. 'We don't really have to do it as it's optional', she explained. Sarisha from Colbyville said that she didn't have time for school homework 'because my homework from my tutors are already too much'. She said she was glad not to get too much school homework 'because my tuition is making me too busy'. As Chapter 4 explained, tutored students' neglect of school homework was sometimes a source of frustration for teachers, who felt that schoolwork was devalued by students and families (Ho, 2026).

Most students seem to accept the fact that they had minimal or no school homework, or easy homework. As Sarisha said, 'It's really easy. So, I don't really mind it'. Similarly, Jayesh, from Beechvale, said that he liked homework that was easy: 'I like the easy stuff, like, you know how you have those Maths multiplication. I love my multiplication and homework because it's like, oh yeah, I just want to do it'. Meanwhile, Samuel, a mainstream student at Alinta PS, said, he preferred to get out of the house or do some cooking 'instead of just sitting in my room on an iPad or just some work sheet'. However, nine students thought there should be more homework, or that homework should be more challenging. All but one of these students was aiming for a place in a selective or partially selective school. Even though Jayesh said he liked easy homework, he also said, 'Sometimes I just feel like I'm not doing enough', especially as his mother regularly told him to stop playing online games. Fellow Beechvale student, Ananya, said homework was just 'a few Maths problems' so 'I feel like we should be getting a little more'. Sumitra, from Chesterton,

mentioned that her parents had asked the school to set more homework, but this hadn't happened consistently. Also, across the SES spectrum, students appeared to spend much more time on homework set by tutors than by teachers.

Tutoring

Over half of the student participants attended academic tutoring at the time of interview. This included all but one of the OC students, and the majority of students at low SES Chesterton PS and high SES Colbyville PS. The remaining schools, low SES Beechvale PS and high SES Bidhura PS, had only one student each attending tutoring. The use of tutoring in both high and low SES schools indicates the normalisation of the practice among all socio-economic groups. Even in relatively low-income families, tutoring is increasingly viewed as a necessary part of education, and has been integrated into their family's approach to education. For example, at Acacia PS, Bo-wen's father was a blue-collar construction worker and his mother a full-time housewife. Yet, the family spent $600 per term on tutoring for their son. Bo-wen had been receiving tutoring since Year 2 and at the time of interview had more than 10 hours of tutoring a week.

Almost all the students receiving tutoring attended large, franchised tutoring centres including Pre-Uni Centre, North Shore Coaching, CS Education and Kumon. Given the proliferation of tutoring businesses in cities such as Sydney, families have a great deal of choice and the participants mostly chose those located nearby, based on recommendations of family and friends. Some of the student participants mentioned that their parents had discussed different tutoring options with other parents in their ethnic communities, demonstrating the importance of ethnic capital in educational decisions. Three students used more than one tutoring company each week because each one had a specialised function. For example, some families preferred certain companies for OC and selective test preparation because of their structured programs. In the case of Meera, from Alinta PS, who had recently migrated from India, she had seamlessly resumed the Kumon Maths tutoring she had commenced in Bangalore. Four students also had individual tutors, including some that were based overseas who supported them online. Online tutoring had generally begun during COVID-19 out of necessity and these families found it convenient and cost effective to continue it. Students had attended tutoring for up to three years, with extra hours in Year 5 to prepare for the selective high school test.

Much of the tutoring being done by the participants was dedicated to preparing for this test. As described in Chapter 3, the parent survey showed that exam practice was the most common reason for engaging in tutoring across the six schools. Sumitra, from Chesterton, explained that she attended tutoring 'because I really want to make it into a good high school'. Students said that they needed to attend tutoring to prepare for the test because the standard of knowledge required for the test was so much higher than the standard of regular schoolwork. As recounted in Chapter 8, Vijay, from Acacia OC, said, 'I'm starting to leave it [schoolwork] because focusing more on schoolwork doesn't help us benefit because selective is more harder than schoolwork'. At the time of interview, Vijay was attending tutoring seven days a week, at three different tutoring centres, Scholarly, Alpha One and Pre-Uni. Others mentioned that the standard at tutoring was even higher than the test itself, so for example, Bo-wen, from Acacia OC, explained that 'when we did the actual OC test, we would be able to skim through it, because we did like, harder questions [in tutoring]'.

This tutoring generally consisted of completing many practice tests in each of the test sections, namely, Reading, Mathematical Reasoning, Thinking Skills and Writing. Students described

completing these tests under timed exam conditions, and then going over their results and working on areas of weakness. Over time, this kind of tutoring developed students' familiarity with test question formats and speed in responding to questions. Fei Fei from Chesterton explained that tutoring helped develop her 'time management' skills for the selective test. Kabini, from Colbyville, who completed two entire practice tests each Saturday, described her improvement: 'My previous English scores were the least, 18 out of 30. But now it's 25 out of 30'. Similarly, Vijay explained that he was focusing especially on Thinking Skills 'because I'm kind of weak at that right now'. But he had improved his scores: 'the score is out of 40. I got 19 out of 40 when I started and then now I'm like, 28 out of 40'. Tutoring for the selective schools test shows the intricate connections between institutional and family pedagogies. So many of the families in the study had shaped their home practices around the goal of securing a place in a selective school. Long hours of tutoring were part of their family pedagogies, alongside extra home-based study, all geared to the institutional pedagogies of the highly competitive NSW selective education system.

In addition to test preparation tutoring, most students also had tutoring for Maths and English, where they learnt subject content, often ahead of the school curriculum. Meera, from a mainstream class at Alinta PS, mentioned that her Maths tutoring in Kumon had accelerated her three years ahead, which was 'stressful but in the end … really cool' because she received a medal every year, which 'makes me feel proud'. Ying-yao, from Beechvale PS, said that Maths tutoring was at a 'higher level' than school: 'there's already algebras and those divisions and multiplication of fractions and decimals'. She explained, 'My mum said I'm smart. I'm good at Maths. It's all because of the tutoring'. For some of these students, including Sarisha, from Colbyville PS, Maths lessons in school were just 'revision' because she learnt the 'new stuff' at tutoring. Meanwhile, Hai, also from Colbyville, boasted about 'beating' his teacher in times tables activities in class and always finishing Maths worksheets more quickly than others and asking for extra worksheets.

Tutors generally set homework after each session, with students reporting spending one to two hours a day on tutoring homework. This is why they were so dismissive of any school homework they received, which was invariably less time consuming and less challenging than tutoring homework. Some students described doing their homework into the night, while others had tutoring sessions ending late at night. Kabini, from Colbyville, said her tutoring sessions ended at 9.20pm, which 'annoyed' her as it took up a lot of time. Some weekend sessions, for example, at North Shore Coaching and Selective Learning Centre, lasted for up to five hours. Students generally thought that tutoring was helpful even if they did not always enjoy it. As Bo-Lin, from Alinta's OC, put it, 'Wouldn't say I like them [tutoring classes] but they're OK'. Mostly, students were motivated by their goal to get into a selective school. Some commented on how they learnt in tutoring compared to school, with Wai Kit, from Acacia's OC, saying, 'Sometimes the school teaches differently to what the tutoring does. So, I want to learn both ways'. Fellow Acacia OC student Bo-wen said that he learnt 'better' in tutoring compared to school, but that there was more 'variety and fun' in school. These observations highlight the differences between the institutional pedagogies of tutoring centres and schools, and also the diversity of approaches within the tutoring industry.

Of those who did not attend a tutoring centre, nine described doing home study set by parents, who typically bought them workbooks to complete, particularly NAPLAN workbooks and selective test workbooks, as explained in Chapter 5. Some of these students completed two hours of home study daily, supported by parents, mostly mothers. Some said that they wouldn't mind going to tutoring to receive more support. As Aizi, from Beechvale, said, 'Because if I did tutoring outside of school, then I get to learn more and more … And then I will get better at what I'm doing'.

Similarly, fellow Beechvale student Jayesh said he would like tutoring 'for like, recapping my brain for learning like, Maths because I struggle with Maths and sometimes in spelling because my spelling and grammar are weak'. All but one of these students attended a low SES school, suggesting that there may have been financial barriers to their participation in formal tutoring. This points to the issues of equity arising from the escalating use of tutoring among primary school students. In contrast, Samuel, a mainstream student at high SES Alinta, declared that he was opposed to tutoring, saying: 'all my Asian friends … do tutoring, and I do not like tutoring. I find that I have so much better to do than sitting in a room learning stuff', before correcting himself, 'no – sitting in a room doing tests'. Samuel was typical of the other Anglo-Australian students in the sample. None were enrolled in tutoring (though two reported that siblings had received tutoring) and none were aiming for a selective school, with three preferring public comprehensive schools and one planning on an independent school. Samuel also mentioned that all his Anglo-Australian friends were planning to go to private high schools so were not studying for the selective test. While Samuel appeared to do very little home study, preferring to ride his mountain bike or cook, other Anglo-Australian students stated that they completed homework (spelling and Maths) every week, in addition to reading every night.

While Samuel suggests a hard ethnic divide between those who attend tutoring (Asian) and those who do not (Anglo), this is a simplification of the reality. In five of the six schools, students were interviewed from Asian backgrounds who did not attend tutoring. These included high achieving students who engaged in their own home study. However, the majority of students from Asian backgrounds did receive tutoring, and of those receiving the most extensive tutoring, for example, several sessions a week, all were from Asian backgrounds. This was typically connected to their selective school aspirations, so ethnic patterns in the use of tutoring may be particularly pronounced in the leadup to the selective test. Indeed, some Asian migrant parents stated that they were only using tutoring on a short-term basis for the selective test. Therefore, once students are in high school, these ethnic patterns may become more diffuse. Overall, though, as discussed in earlier chapters, tutoring is associated with Asian migrants in Australia for many reasons. Because of its ubiquity in Asian countries including China, India, Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere (Bray, 2025), Asian migrants in Australia typically view it as a normal part of education. And given that many of these migrants view Australian schooling as too easy or relaxed, they turn to tutoring to provide more academic rigour for their children, including to prepare for high-stakes tests, especially the selective tests that will enable their children to access what they perceive to be a higher quality education. Once a tutoring culture develops within migrant communities, supported by migrant-operated businesses who target fellow-Asian migrant consumers, it becomes increasingly normalised and self-perpetuating. Asian migrants' family pedagogies, shaped by the institutional pedagogies of competitive selectivity in education, have contributed to the normalisation of tutoring within and beyond migrant communities, but the instrumentalism attributed to tutoring also often ignores the fact that they may be part of a larger ensemble of family practices.

Extracurricular Activities

In relation to participation in extracurricular activities, there were some clear divides between the different student cohorts, most notably between the high and low SES schools, but also between OC and non-OC students. These divisions reflect the international research on the classed patterns of child-raising, theorised by Lareau (2003) as the difference between the 'concerted cultivation' of middle-class parents and the emphasis by working-class parents on the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. While this binary is complicated in the case of some of the

Anglo families' approaches to study routines, as discussed in Chapter 5, in relation to extracurricular activities, the distinction largely holds, demonstrating the inequalities between the family pedagogies of high and low SES households.

Students at high SES schools, Colbyville and Bidhura, were engaged in the most extracurricular activities, particularly sports. All of these students named at least one organised sporting activity they regularly participated in, including swimming, tennis, netball, AFL, soccer, cricket, softball, taekwondo, gymnastics and horse riding. Five students were involved in more than one of these sports on a weekly basis. Almost all students in these schools also learnt a musical instrument, including piano, violin, drums, euphonium and bass clarinet. Some high SES students had extremely busy weekly schedules with multiple extracurricular activities. For example, Saanvi, from Bidhura PS, described her week: a 45-minute piano lesson on Mondays, four hours of gymnastics on Tuesdays, swimming on Wednesdays, another four hours of gymnastics on Thursdays, and on Saturdays, four hours of tutoring, an hour of horse riding and yet another four hours of gymnastics. In addition to all this, Saanvi had recently quit from Nippers (surf lifesaving training for children) on Sundays because of COVID, and dance, 'because I was too busy … and I was always tired because of my trainings at gymnastics'. Gymnastics was her priority because she competed in state and national competitions. She specialised in the uneven bars and even had her own bar apparatus and mat at home. 'So, whenever I have free time, I go into some strengths or skills'. Saanvi also loved horses and participated in week-long horse-riding camps during the school holidays. She said that her career ambition was to become a 'horse therapist, an equestrian trainer or an equestrian vet'.

In contrast, in the low SES schools, the majority of students reported doing no sporting or musical activities, though some said that they had done prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of interview, only seven out of 21 low SES students said they participated in a sport, and only five learnt a musical instrument. Two also mentioned they did regular art classes and four attended community language classes (Mandarin Chinese, Nepali and Arabic/Qur'anic classes). The relative lack of extracurricular activities among low SES students likely reflects financial constraints faced by their families. It may also reflect the larger sizes of these families, as they were more likely than the high SES families to have three or more children. For example, Aleena from Acacia PS was one of seven children and explained that she had limited free time after school: 'Because I have a lot of siblings, I have to help my mum do stuff'. She and many of the low SES students spent most of their free time at home playing with siblings.

In between the two extremes were students at Alinta PS, the high SES school with OCs. The mainstream students at Alinta participated in many sports. For example, Samuel stated that his favourite subject at school was 'sport, if that counts', and listed all his activities, which included AFL, rugby league, rugby union, Oztag, running, mountain biking and rock climbing. The latter three he did in his spare time, and in total, Samuel estimated that he spent about nine hours a week in his various sporting activities. He mentioned that his career goal was to be a 'professional sportsperson'. Meanwhile, the OC students at Alinta did fewer sports. Only Bo-lin mentioned that he played tennis. However, all three OC students played a musical instrument, with Jian playing both piano and guitar. Some of the OC students said that they used to play sports or instruments but had recently quit, either because of COVID-19 or in order to dedicate more time to study. As Wai Kit, an OC student at Acacia PS, stated, 'I don't really want to do extracurricular activities. I just want to focus more on my studies'. Additionally, among Wai Kit's classmates in the Acacia OC class, most stated that they did not socialise with friends outside of school. Harsha mentioned that he was looking forward to seeing his friends more often, 'after selective [school entry examinations]'.

Opportunity Classes

As explained above, low SES Acacia PS and high SES Alinta PS were the schools with OCs, high SES Bidhura PS had a formal GAT stream, and low SES Beechvale PS offered a GAT Maths class. Ten students in the sample were enrolled in an OC or GAT class. Almost all had at least one parent employed in a professional occupation, reflecting the survey results showing the high education levels of OC parents, as discussed in Chapter 3. Of these 10 students, seven were from a Chinese background, and three were from a South Asian background (Indian and Sri Lankan). As discussed in Chapter 4, this sample is reflective of the dominance of students from Asian migrant backgrounds in the OCs at Acacia and Alinta. It also reflects the ethnic profile of Sydney's selective high schools, where typically over 80 per cent are LBOTE students, primarily those of various Asian migrant backgrounds (Ho, 2020).

Entry into an OC is extremely competitive, with only one in seven candidates being successful in 2025 (NSW DoE, 2025). The student participants enrolled in OCs had worked incredibly hard to achieve their place, with three students saying that they had spent 12 months or more preparing for the test. Harsha from Acacia had even studied 'for a year and a half'. Jian, from Alinta, had completed four practice OC tests a week, including at two different tutoring centres, and sometimes in the local library. Osman was the one OC student who had not prepared intensively for the test. He had been homeschooled prior to Year 5 by his teacher-trained mother. While Osman was a diligent student who particularly loved Science and Maths (he said his career ambition was to become an entomologist), he had only spent one week practising for the OC test and was surprised to receive a place.

All the OC students had transferred from elsewhere at the beginning of Year 5 but had settled well into their new school. While many said they missed their old friends, they had all made new friends relatively easily. This was partly because all students were in the same situation of being in a new school. This unusual context meant that OC students formed friendships almost exclusively within their class, and generally did not mix with other students. Bo-wen, an OC student from Acacia PS, even seemed somewhat scared of the others, describing non-OC students as 'very loud' and 'a bit violent'. Fellow student Harsha said he disliked being distracted by 'shouting' from elsewhere in the school, 'and we hear it in the class'. Being so separated from non-OC students (this may have been intensified by the COVID-19 lockdowns) meant that each group seemed very disconnected if not avoidant of the other.

This divide was also exacerbated by the differences in the ethnic profiles of the OCs and mainstream classes referred to in previous chapters. This was particularly the case at Acacia, where students from Asian backgrounds were dominant in the OCs, while comprising only a small minority in the mainstream. In their mainstream classes, the most common language spoken was Arabic, with the largest group being from a Lebanese background. Students in the Acacia OC all described their friends as being from a similar ethnic background to themselves. While they were all from Asian backgrounds, these ranged from Chinese and Korean to Indian and Sri Lankan, and included first- and second-generation migrants. Nevertheless, the Acacia OC students emphasised their mutual commonalities. Bo-wen, Wai-kit and Vijay all said that having Asian friends made it easier to 'understand' each other. As Vijay explained of his classmates: 'because they speak the same language, and for example, they have the same background, so I understand what they're talking about and understand what they're feeling'. Mei-lin also commented that most students in her GAT class at Bidhura were from a Chinese background. She and her class friends 'can all speak Chinese' and used WeChat to stay in touch, she said. Many of the OC and GAT students seemed pleased at the ethnic concentration of others from Asian backgrounds in

their classes, and were not very interested in mixing with the mainstream students. This was particularly the case at Acacia PS. For example, OC student Harsha, who was born in India, mentioned that he did not like the fact that 'most people here are Islamic', referring to mainstream students at Acacia. Meanwhile, both Aleena and Rashid, from Acacia's mainstream, said that most of their friends were Lebanese. Rashid said he enjoyed having so many other kids from a Lebanese background at the school and recounted how easy it was to make friends: 'like a minute in of being in [Acacia] and I already made three friends'.

All OC and GAT students appreciated that the standard and quantity of work was higher than in their previous schools. They enjoyed being challenged with what Harsha at Acacia described as 'higher knowledge', learning alongside more 'advanced' peers, according to fellow Acacia student, Wai-kit. Jian, from Alinta PS, appreciated that 'there's not as many interruptions during class', saying, 'it's a big improvement from my old school'. Harsha, from Acacia, also found the OC an improvement on the 'basic' level of his previous school that made him 'a bit bored studying'. Mei-lin, from Bidhura's GAT class, explained that the 'type of students' in her class now was 'very different' from her previous class. She said, 'in this class a lot of people are kind of, very smart, and then it's a little bit more challenging', before adding, 'But then I don't really mind how challenging it is, because I think it's very fun to learn'. Shu-yi, from Alinta PS, said she particularly enjoyed the project-based work provided in the OC, such as constructing a '3D city' out of paper in Maths. In the classroom observations, the complexity of the work being done in OCs was striking. For example, as discussed in Chapter 8, one class at Acacia PS made interactive posters about an aspect of World War Two. This group project involved historical research, script writing, audio recording, electronic circuitry, coding, and visual art. The class had also studied a 600-page novel set in wartime Germany. The level of focused engagement and productive collaboration observed in the class was extraordinary. Meanwhile, students in mainstream classes in these schools said they had almost no engagement with those in the OCs. In low SES Acacia, most mainstream students had not applied for a place, even though the OCs were in their own school, because they considered it to be too difficult. Some students in nearby schools agreed. As Jayesh, from Beechvale PS, said, his mother did not want him to sit the test because it would be 'too much pressure'. Similarly, Lulu, from Bidhura PS, said she did not apply for the GAT class at her school because it was 'really hard'. Generally, although students in mainstream classes understood that OCs were for 'smart' students, they had little awareness or interest in what OC students did.

At high SES Alinta PS, there was greater understanding of OCs among the mainstream students. As Manas explained, the OC had already finished the Year 5 curriculum at the start of Term 3, and had started on Year 6 work, 'So they're definitely ahead of us and learn a lot'. Manas had unsuccessfully applied for the OC and was still disappointed at this outcome. In contrast to Acacia PS, a large proportion of Alinta students applied for the OC each year, although very few were successful. As explained earlier, more Alinta students (both OC and mainstream) were successful in securing a place at a selective high school.

Failing to gain a place at one's chosen school can be demoralising and even a source of shame for students (Reay & Lucey, 2000). Yan-yu, from Chesterton PS, was another one of the student participants who had been unsuccessful in the OC test, and this seemed to have dented her self-confidence. She said that she had 'lost' in the OC test and was not confident about her chances of getting into a selective school, saying, 'it is very hard. If you cannot pass OC there is a high chance that you cannot pass selective'. Like Manas and the two other students who had failed to gain an OC place, Yan-yu was now escalating her efforts to gain a place in a selective high school, including attending many hours of tutoring to prepare for the selective test.

As discussed in the next chapter, the division between OC and mainstream classes was stark, particularly at Acacia PS, where the profile of the two cohorts was dramatically different in terms of students' and families' approaches to education. The contrast was also evident during the observations of OC and mainstream classrooms at Acacia. While the OC was engaged in the interactive poster making project described above, the mainstream class that was observed was set the task of writing one paragraph about refugees and two rhyming sentences. The level of disruption in the class meant that few students completed these tasks.

Overall, the lack of engagement between OC and mainstream students seems a missed opportunity for mutual learning and understanding, and raises questions about whether the institutional pedagogies embodied in the OC model undermines the cohesion of school communities. While grouping together high achievers is designed to enable optimal conditions for learning, the exclusivity of the OCs may be seen as a form of social closure (Coleman, 1988) that prevents exposure to different social groups and norms. As discussed in previous chapters, even if OC students benefit from this separation, mainstream students may be disadvantaged by it, as their learning seems often undermined by the concentration of behavioural issues and disruptive students in mainstream classes. This may be particularly the case for schools in low SES areas, where there is a greater divide between the OCs and mainstream classes. At low SES Acacia, it was extremely rare for OC students to have come from within the school community. As discussed above, there were significant differences between the OC and mainstream cohorts in relation to ethnicity and parental education levels. If this division applies in other low SES schools with OCs, this raises the question of whether the OC model entrenches existing inequalities rather than helping to alleviate them. At high SES Alinta PS, the division was not as evident, with OCs and mainstream cohorts more aligned in terms of SES, parental education and ethnicity.

High School Choice

The student participants were asked about what high schools they were considering and the reasons for their choices. While the parent interviews covered this in more detail, the students also had comments on the issue. Indeed, international research shows that students are typically highly involved in the process of choosing a high school, with the majority either making the decision jointly with parents or, especially in low SES families, being the primary decision makers (Mandic et al., 2018; Condliffe et al., 2015; Munro, 2014; Wylie & Hipkins, 2006). The student participants were generally informed about high school options, with all but two nominating at least one school that they were hoping to attend. Almost all mentioned that they had discussed high school choice with their parents, and some stated that it was a topic of conversation among peers. Compared to the international literature discussed in Chapter 2, perceptions of academic quality were more prominent in the students' decision-making, and this was true not just among OC and GAT students. For most of the sample, receiving a good education meant getting into a selective school. For these students, this trumped all other factors in the school choice process. Over half of the student participants were aiming to gain a place in a fully selective school.[10] Of these students, all but two were from an Asian background, primarily Chinese, with a smaller number from a South Asian background. The other two were from a Russian and Egyptian/Lebanese background respectively. High SES students were more likely than their low SES peers to be aiming for a fully selective school (excluding OC students). In fact, all but three of the participants at Bidhura and Colbyville (both high SES schools) nominated a fully selective school as their preferred choice, while this was true of under half of the participants at the low SES schools, Beechvale and Chesterton.

[10] The sample is clearly not representative of all students in these schools, as there was a deliberate over-representation of OC students and those from Asian migrant backgrounds. As such, our research provides more detail on the dynamics of selectivity in school choice.

The high SES students tended to opt for selective schools that were geographically close, while those in the low SES schools nominated schools that were distant from their homes, sometimes ones that would require commutes of over an hour by public transport. These choices reflect the respective reputations of Sydney's selective schools, with most of the highest ranked schools located in mid to high SES areas, and very few in western Sydney. The willingness of students at low SES schools to travel vast distances was striking, given that international research generally shows working-class families prefer local and familiar schools (Reay & Lucey, 2000; Ball et al., 1996). Those aiming for a fully selective school included all the OC students. For many of these students, getting into a selective school appeared to be their primary goal for the year. During the classroom observations at Acacia PS, many of the students' 'vision boards' in the OC had the name of the selective school they were aiming for, or simply the word 'selective' in large letters. In their interviews, many students listed their top three preferred schools and sometimes even explained their strategic inclusion of schools that were considered easy, moderate and harder to get into. For example, Manas, from Alinta PS, explained why his parents had chosen Normanhurst Boys first, then Manly (Northern Beaches Secondary Centre), and finally Chatswood High: 'So if I get a low score, I can still go to a selective school. That's why they chose Chatswood. And then medium is Manly and then high is Normanhurst'. Others, like Sarisha, from Colbyville PS, also seemed to know a great deal about the process:

> So selective exam is about competition. So, like, if you get like a lot, a high score, but people got higher than you, you might go into the waiting list. But if you get a low score, and people got lower than you, you still might get in.

Families such as Manas's and Sarisha's had done extensive research to maximise the students' chances of being offered a selective place and had clearly discussed their strategies with their children. Their family pedagogies included strategic and daily practices designed to achieve their selective education goals.

Of those aiming for a fully selective school, all but three were actively preparing for the selective high school placement test, mostly through attending commercial tutoring centres where they completed at least one practice test each week, often in addition to subject specific tutoring. Some had recently replaced subject tutoring for test preparation only. Those in OCs were often completing six to 10 hours of tutoring per week, sometimes at two or three different centres. Those in mainstream classes who had tutoring were more likely to be attending for two to six hours per week. These hours did not include the extra home-based study that tutored students completed, and some used resources from tutoring companies to guide their home study even if they did not attend classes. Manas, for example, had been enrolled at North Shore Coaching and was using their materials to work online four nights a week with a tutor based in India. This tutor, whom he had known in India, supervised him to complete several selective test sections each week. As mentioned in Chapter 2, online tutoring with overseas-based tutors has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, and other student participants studied with tutors in China.

Despite seemingly gruelling study loads, students engaged in test preparation tutoring did not generally complain about the hours they spent in tutoring and home study, explaining how important it was to get into a selective school to maximise future study and employment opportunities. For example, Vijay, from Acacia OC, said that he would like to have 'a little less homework, because sometimes I won't finish the homework that I'm given and I have to finish it the next afternoon on the next day'. He said that because he worked until late at night, he

sometimes felt ‘drowsy’ and would ‘yawn a bit and have water in my eyes’. However, he said that ultimately his workload was ‘okay, because I understand having the pain of studying, like for a big test coming up in a few months’. Others said that they did not particularly like their workload, but accepted it as necessary for succeeding in the selective test. Many were looking forward to being able to ‘relax’ and stop tutoring after the test because, as Sarisha, from Colbyville PS, said, sometimes it felt like ‘too much’. Another Colbyville student, Kabini, explained, ‘My mum’s said that after the test, I can do whatever I want’. Only one student, Jian, who attended Alinta’s OC, expressed resentment at his heavy workload, saying that he ‘disliked’ it but ‘don’t really get a choice’. His biggest complaint was that he was ‘completely forced’ to study advanced Chinese, which took 10 hours per week and was driving him ‘insane’. He admitted to having had ‘dozens of tantrums about it’.

The OC student participants were all successful in gaining a place in a fully selective school.[11] Remarkably, at low SES Acacia PS, all the OC students were offered a place in their first choice school. These included Sydney Boys High, North Sydney Boys High, Baulkham Hills High and Fort Street High, all high achieving schools regularly included in the top 20 ranked schools in NSW, and all geographically distant from the students’ homes. At Alinta PS, the OC student participants all gained a place in their first or second choice schools, namely Normanhurst Boys and Hornsby Girls. In contrast, of the non-OC students aiming for a fully selective school, few were successful, though some gained a place at a partially selective school. Others opted for their local comprehensive or a non-government school.

The next most popular high school choice (for six students) was a local partially selective school. Most of these six students attended a low SES school. Some had chosen the school because a sibling or cousin already attended, mirroring international research showing the importance of social connections in the school choice decisions of low SES students (Reay & Lucey, 2000). Preparation for the selective test was highly varied among this cohort. Two said they were doing no preparation. Rashid, from Acacia PS, said he ‘lost the form’ to apply, and Samuel, from Alinta PS, had forgotten to hand it in. At the other extreme, Sumitra, from Chesterton PS, was doing eight hours of tutoring a week at North Shore Coaching, including weekly practice tests, which she said were ‘stressful’ and ‘hard’. This was in addition to 30 minutes of tutoring homework per day. At least two families moved houses in order for their children to attend a partially selective school. Only five of the student participants were planning to attend their local comprehensive public school. Three of these students were in high SES areas, and two in low SES areas. Meanwhile, two students were opting for non-government schools, one Catholic and one Islamic.

Parenting and Aspiration

Students’ comments about parenting show the various relationships between family and institutional pedagogies. Students were asked if their parents were ‘strict’ and about how their parents expected them to spend their time outside of school. At one end of the spectrum were parents who focused heavily on home-based study. They created a family pedagogy that in many ways aligned with institutional pedagogies found in many school classrooms, with structured academic activities and close supervision of students’ time-use. Students in the OCs described having the strictest parents, in terms of ensuring completion of many hours of tutoring and home study, and restrictions on screen time and socialising with friends. As noted above, these students typically spent several hours a week attending tutoring and then hours more completing tutoring

[11] However, Osman from Acacia OC did not accept his offer, preferring to resume home-schooling.

homework. As mentioned in Chapter 8, Vijay, from Acacia OC, who attended tutoring seven days a week, described his parents as ‘pressurising’. He said he would like to have more free time but was willing to make sacrifices in order to do well in the selective test. Jian, from Alinta’s OC, said he was ‘frustrated’ with his mother’s ‘attitude’, and had regular conflicts with his parents about his study routine and screen time. His mother had confiscated Jian’s computer for two months prior to the OC test to remove distractions, and at the time of interview, Jian had screen time as a kind of reward after completing daily study.

The other students who described their parents as strict were typically aiming to get into a fully selective school. For example, Zoe, from Chesteron PS, was aiming for a place at Sydney Girls High, and was doing approximately eight hours of tutoring and home study per week. She explained some of her mother’s ‘rules’, including ‘devices only allowed on weekends’, the daily routine of reading the Quran as a family, the need to focus on studies rather than extracurricular activities, and limits on playdates. She also described that during the COVID-19 lockdowns, ‘Mum wanted us to be in almost the exact same routine of school’, meaning that she had to complete the same amount of work as she would have in school. Kabini, from Colbyville PS, who was aiming for Hornsby Girls High, attended three different tutoring centres and as noted above, sometimes did not finish these sessions until 9.30pm. She said this was ‘annoying’ because she did not have free time afterwards, as her mother insisted that she go to bed. Kabini also said that her mother closely supervised her homework and did not allow her to work upstairs in case she ‘cheated’. In addition, her mother limited screentime to twice a week, which Kabini thought was not enough. However, Kabini was excited at her mother’s promise that she would get a pet if she was accepted into a selective school.

As noted above, the student participants rarely complained about their workload or their parents. They had accepted the notion that hard work was necessary for success in the selective test, even if it was not always enjoyable. Especially for the students in OCs, intense workloads were normalised, as was strict parenting. The concentration of East and South Asian students in these schools also assisted with the normalisation of an intense study culture. Wai-kit, from Acacia OC, said that Chinese parents were ‘more strict’ than ‘Australian’ parents, so all the Chinese students in his class were the same ‘because they all do tutoring’. When asked whether he thought his parents were strict, Wai-kit said that they ‘just fit in with other Chinese parents’. Sarisha, from Colbyville PS, said that ‘Indian parents normally put some stress on the kids … like they push them to study even more’. She explained that Indian parents believed Australian education to be ‘very light’ in comparison to India: ‘So my parents are very shocked by that when … the first glimpse of my school, they were like, how light can this go?’.

These parents typically had high expectations for their children’s future career, with medicine being the most common aspiration, according to students. Most students were not sure what their career goals were, though in some cases, they did not share their parents’ aspirations. For example, Bo-wen, from Acacia’s OC, said that his parents wanted him to become a doctor like his grandfather. However, he said that ‘becoming a doctor is real hard’ and that he probably would not get a high enough score. He said his choice would be to become a gamer. Sarisha also said that her parents wanted her to be a doctor ‘because doctors normally have really good lives’. But she explained, ‘I feel nauseous when I see body parts … I don’t really want to be a doctor’. Instead, she would rather be a ‘YouTuber’. These were the cases where the gap between parent and child career aspirations was greatest, but they also indicate the relative immaturity of some of the students in terms of career ambitions. However, of the students who had possibly more considered career goals, most nominated professional jobs, including architect, lawyer, veterinarian, teacher and interior designer. Interestingly, there were few differences between the

high and low SES students in their career aspirations. Only one student, Keysar, from low SES Chesterton, nominated a blue-collar job, namely, builder.

A smaller number of students aiming for a selective school described their parents as more encouraging than strict. For example, Ananya, from Beechvale PS, was aiming for a place at Girraween Selective High, as her brother was a student there already. Ananya's mother bought her workbooks for reading, writing, Maths and Science, and Ananya was using these to prepare for the selective test. Ananya's goal was to study Science at UNSW and become a scientist. Her parents had bought her a chemistry set and Ananya described the 'controlled environment' needed for different experiments at home. She said that her parents were 'excited about me pursuing my dreams about science'. They also gave her control over her own screen time, and she explained that she did not go beyond 60 minutes: 'you should be controlled because if you have too much screen time, it could damage your eyesight'. Some students from Arabic-speaking backgrounds described their parents as very strict not in relation to studying, but in terms of screen time and socialising with peers. As Lama, from Beechvale PS, said, 'my parents are actually really strict when it comes to like, going out and seeing people and tech time … I can't show my face online'. Rashid, from Acacia PS, said that his mother limited his screen time to less than an hour and they had to go and play outside afterwards. As Chapter 5 showed, some of these parents had a strong emphasis on discipline and authority, but in the eyes of their children, this guidance was primarily around non-educational matters.

Ethnicity and Schooling

Given the cultural diversity within the six schools, the student participants were asked about the ethnic backgrounds of their friends. As discussed above, students in the OCs and GAT class mentioned that the majority of their class were from Asian backgrounds, meaning that most of their friends were also Asian. While at Acacia PS, many of the OC students commented on their appreciation of their Asian cohort, at Alinta PS, the OC students were more indifferent. Bo-lin said that although most of his friends were Chinese, because his OC was 'two-thirds' Chinese, it did not make a big difference to him, 'They all speak English', he explained. Similarly, Jian described his friendship group: 'Most of the OC is Chinese background, but I feel like overall, I have friends from everywhere'. He said he did not necessarily feel more comfortable with people from a Chinese background: 'I don't care honestly, like I don't really care about racial stuff. Just people'. In the other schools, the majority of students said that their friends were from a range of different backgrounds, and they did not deliberately befriend people from the same background as themselves. In fact, many were not sure of the ethnic background of their friends.

This 'race-blindness' was also evident when students were asked if they had observed any patterns in relation to how different ethnic groups approached education, with only a minority of the students discussing ethnic patterns in approaches to schooling. As mentioned above, some students from Asian backgrounds compared their parents' level of strictness to what they perceived as the 'standard' among Asian parents. Meanwhile, Sarisha, a student at Colbyville from an Indian background, commented that,

> Indian people in my class are all very good at Math. And we're all ahead … we're all completing our stuff really, really quick … it seems like I'm in, you know, the movies. There's the Indian kid is always the smartest, nerdy kid. Oh, I feel like that's us.

Likewise, Rashid, an Acacia student from a Lebanese background, commented, 'The people that like, are very good in Math are Chinese, I'm pretty sure … They like practising', adding, 'I want to be like them'. However, most of the students took a more individualistic approach. Michelle, an Anglo-Australian student from Bidhura PS, even took slight offence at the notion of ethnic patterns. She said, 'it depends on if you study or not', adding, 'some people are better and they have more talent … But I wouldn't really, like, connect that to race, because then that would be kind of rude'. Similarly, Zoe, a Chesterton student from a Sri Lankan background, explained that 'kids just work to how they feel … I don't really think that background really affects how we study'. Jing-yao, a Chinese background student from Beechvale, agreed, 'it's not their nationality, it's just their level of learning'. Overall, the vast majority said that students' approaches to studying were individually determined rather than associated with ethnicity.

Michelle's comment that it was 'rude' to associate educational performance with race is revealing in that it indicates the sensitivities around discussions of race and ethnicity that are common in Australia. It may be the case that some students were reluctant to consider ethnic patterns in schooling because they feared this would somehow constitute a form of racism, given the history of racist stereotyping based on supposed racial differences in IQ and other markers of ability. Within this framework, any discussion of ethnicity runs the risk of being racist. Alternatively, given their young age, some students may simply not have developed a clear understanding of the ethnic identities of their peers. Additionally, it is likely that students adopted the conventional wisdom that educational outcomes reflect meritocratic principles based on individual effort and talent, regardless of ethnicity or any other personal characteristics. The contrast between students and teachers' perspectives is striking, given how common it was for the latter to categorise students by ethnicity, with so many teachers describing their Asian background students as high achievers and hardworking, relative to other groups.

Conclusion

Students' perspectives across the six schools demonstrate the diversity of attitudes and approaches to education that characterise the NSW education system. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the research design, academic achievement and selective schooling were prominent themes for most student participants. The goal of securing a place in an OC or selective school significantly shaped many students' lives in the primary years, manifesting in their participation in many hours of tutoring and home-based study. In comparison, school homework appeared to be generally insignificant and unengaging. Students in OCs spoke highly of their experiences in these classes, appreciating the more challenging work and their motivated peers. While students and their families seemed happy with the education provided within OCs, this research demonstrates that the OC model has inadvertently created socially closed environments that have contributed to the growth of a culture of intense study. This culture is sustained by its omnipresence within the families that now comprise OCs. As Sattin-Bajaj (2014, p. 434) writes about Asian-origin students in GAT classes in New York City, there is a 'tight harmony' of students' social and institutional contexts that enforces 'shared behavioral norms'. In the case of NSW OCs, there is a strong alignment between Asian migrants' family pedagogies and institutional pedagogies in relation to the competitive selective system. However, as Chapter 4 explained, the institutional pedagogies within actual OC classrooms may be less aligned as they emphasise a more holistic educational journey and coverage of the whole curriculum, rather than a narrow focus on test results. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, analysing the various family and institutional pedagogies at play in the OC setting uncovers contradictory logics between systemic and classroom pedagogies that can cause tension when it comes to Asian migrants' family pedagogies.

Chapter 8:

Case Studies of Students and their Families from the Low SES Schools

Chapter 8: Case Studies of Students and their Families from the Low SES Schools

Up to this point, the report has utilised data primarily derived from the survey and interviews with the project's different participants to provide a broad view of experiences and perspectives. In addition to interviews, this and the next chapter draw upon observations conducted in the families' homes and the students' classrooms supplemented, in places, by available data from students' time-use diaries and various video and photographic evidence to provide case studies of particular families. Such ethnographic detail allows for a rich examination of the educational practices within these families and their degree of congruence with those in schools. This interrelation of family and institutional pedagogies is not an abstract formulation but one made concrete given the nature of the data used here which similarly unpacks the combined influence of ethnicity and SES in conjunction with the array of other factors that mediate how parents approach their children's education. This chapter focuses on the participants from the low SES schools: Chesterton PS which is comprehensive, Beechvale PS which has a GAT class and Acacia PS which has OCs in Years 5 and 6. While the research in these schools involved 21 families, six case studies are provided here, two from each school, that shed light on the differing family pedagogies of each, dispelling simplistic assumptions about the cultural dynamics at play here.

Chesterton PS Case Studies

These case studies focus on two Year 5 students from Chesterton PS: Keysar of Lebanese, Muslim background and Zoe, also Muslim, but of Tamil-speaking, Sri Lankan background. Of the six students and their families in the Chesterton sample, these two were selected to profile given the contrast they provide in terms of how they and their parents, in this case their mothers, approached their education, resulting in very different levels of achievement and schooling options post primary.

Keysar

Keysar lived in a multigenerational household with his grandparents, parents and three older siblings each of whom had also attended Chesterton and were now at high school, the eldest in Year 12. His grandparents had arrived in Australia in the 1970s. Keysar's grandfather was a baker, both in Lebanon and in Australia and spoke little English with there not being much imperative for him to do so given the high concentrations of Lebanese migrants in the area around Chesterton. In fact, much of Keysar's extended family (his mother is one of nine children), live in the local area. As Maha, Keysar's mother, commented, 'We all live within ten minutes away from each other … no-one travelled out of the area'. Maha has TAFE qualifications in early education and care, but explained that, 'I got married young … I've never really worked full time'. Keysar's father had his own business as a tree lopper and licensed botanist with all his equipment located at the family home, a modest two-storey timber house a street away from the school in a suburb of western Sydney.

When asked why her and her husband sent their children to Chesterton, Maha said, '[it's] the local public school to be honest. My husband went there'. She explained how for a period she 'wasn't happy with Chesterton' and tried to enrol Keyser in another public school in an adjoining suburb but was unable to do so as they had reached capacity and Keyser was out of area, but added, 'what I like about local schools is if there's an emergency, they can walk home, it's easy to get

them to school'. She referred to when Keyser's siblings were at the school, '[Chesterton] back then was a very hard school to [get into], a lot of people buying in the area because they [had] selective class, that enrichment class and a lot of the Asian community were buying in the area to send their kids … so I knew that it was a good school'. As indicated in Chapter 4, when a new principal arrived at the school, the enrichment program was discontinued and Maha referred to how 'a lot of people weren't happy with that … and a lot of the Asian community, Chinese community, leave the school. Academically, I have to say the school did drop a lot'.

One of the first topics discussed with Keysar was homework. He referred to how, 'it's optional' and so, 'If I get it, I throw it in the bin on the way home'. These comments were made in Maha's presence during one of two visits to their home, but Maha seemed nonplussed and didn't raise it as an issue with Keysar at the time. Later, when Keysar wasn't present, she commented, 'I think it should be a must, not optional … my son was throwing it in the bin. I wasn't aware he was even getting homework … now everything at school is you don't have to do it'. Keysar's Year 5 teacher, Georgia, also commented on his non-completion of homework, though Keysar was correct, it was optional, a topic of some debate at the school which was in the process of revising their homework policy. On arriving home from school, homework was clearly not a part of Keysar's routine. Maha's first priority at this time was ensuring her four children, and sometimes their friends who arrived home with them, were well fed. She always prepared an early dinner of various dishes that covered their large kitchen table. Assisted by her mother-in-law, the room evoked a strong familial atmosphere and, following this, Keysar spent time outside on his bike, one of his favourite pastimes. Home appeared a domain quite separate from school, a domestic realm with very little evidence of scholarly engagement. As a result, this created difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic and periods of home-learning when Keysar did very little schoolwork. In relation to this, Georgia, his Year 5 teacher, commented that,

> I know that Keysar spent a lot of time [during this period] riding his bike around [the suburb] with some other boys from my class who also weren't doing anything … They were all kind of hanging out together. And, at the end of the day, there's not much I can do about it. We really, really express that to the families, that we really want you to be doing work, but we can't force you.

Unsurprisingly, Keysar struggled at school. Georgia felt that,

> I wouldn't say he's at Grade 5 level for everything. He sits just below in quite a lot of areas … but I think he is much stronger in numeracy than he is in literacy. He has shocking, shocking handwriting … so he really struggles.

Keysar's difficulties were even more evident in Year 6 when he was observed in class during a lesson that began with an activity focusing on spelling and grammar, in which words from the week's spelling list were discussed in terms of their part of speech. This was reinforced with a discussion of how the teacher had used these words in a passage she had written where she also drew attention to synonyms she had used instead of those on the list. In a sense the activity was similar to an EAL/D dictagloss approach that provides detailed treatment of the construction of text with the teacher also asking students how they might improve upon what she had written. Reference was also made to sentence and clause types. Drawing on the pointers she provided, students were then asked to write their own passage using a selection of words from the list. It was at this point that Keysar sat with a small group of other boys who were given greater assistance with this task – what appeared to be a common practice – while the remainder of the class worked independently. Observing Keysar at other times during a Maths activity and then a literature-based group task which completed the morning session, he struggled to finish his work

and spent much time off-task. During these different activities, the class was well behaved, and Keysar's teacher seemed to have a tight rein on behaviour. Later, Keysar remarked that school was only 'alright' but he 'didn't like doing tests or anything'. The best thing about school was that 'I can see my friends … we play basketball and we just really hang out'.

To Maha, this was part of the problem. Keysar was one of a very tight-knit group of boys, all of Lebanese background. While Georgia referred to him as a 'really lovely kid', the other boys were 'a bit tricky' and Maha was not happy they were in the same class, even commenting, 'one thing I find hard is when you put too much of the one race in the one class … It's easier to muck-up when you're with your friends. And they're all Lebanese background'. Yet, rather than concentrations of any one ethnicity in a class, Chesterton was very ethnically diverse with a mix of students of various backgrounds. Keysar, however, tended to gravitate towards what Maha considered his 'kind', most of whom had little interest in school. Keysar also spent a lot of time outside school with these boys, riding his bike, playing rugby league and computer games, which he listed as his main pastimes. He was not fond of reading, especially in his own time, commenting that 'when the teacher says 10 minutes of reading, I just read then'. Maha mentioned that Keysar and his older siblings also attended Quran and Arabic lessons twice a week, something Keysar failed to mention and was not recorded in his time-use diary and so this may have occurred on a more irregular basis or was probably disrupted during COVID.

These were Keysar's main pastimes and, unlike an increasing number of other students at the school, he did not attend academic tutoring though, given Keysar's difficulties in class, it would probably have been of some benefit. Tutoring was something he'd never thought of doing, and, while he knew other students who did, he indicated they were 'just people in my class but they're not friends'. As Maya was concerned about Keysar's performance at school, she had 'considered getting him a tutor' but had decided against it as 'I know I won't keep up with it. [I'm] always at home, I thought I'm too occupied with something else'. In terms of which high school he would attend, Keysar said, 'I don't know but I don't want to go to a private school'. He had never considered a selective school and didn't really know what they were, but he was quite interested in the idea of being a builder as a career and felt he could obtain qualifications to do so through TAFE. Maha was undecided about where to send Keysar to high school and when contacted the following year about where he went, Maha did not respond, perhaps unhappy with the final choice and limited options available to her son.

Zoe

Zoe was the eldest of four children. Zoe's father came to Australia in 2004 to study information technology and hospitality. He then returned to Sri Lanka before migrating to Australia in 2008. Zoe's mother, Fadwa, arrived a year later. Zoe's father worked in customer service at a large public hospital and Fadwa described herself as a 'housewife' though she was studying online, part-time, for a Bachelor of Education (Primary). This was an impressive achievement given Fadwa spoke little English on arrival in Australia and balanced study with the care of four children, the youngest of whom was still a toddler. While Fadwa indicated that she had difficulties managing her time and with studying in English, given it was not her first language, she relished the opportunity to undertake the degree because, as she explained, 'if I was there back in Sri Lanka, I won't be able to do anything for myself. So, I'm happy that I'm here'. In indicating she would be unlikely to undertake a degree if she remained in Sri Lanka, Fadwa seemed to hint at familial responsibilities that may have prevented her, though she also referred to the intense competition for university places in Sri Lanka leading to those who could afford it going overseas to study. In terms of SES, Zoe's family seemed very similar to Keysar's, though they lived in a far less

spacious timber house located near the intersection of two major roads which was very sparsely furnished.

Before deciding upon Chesterton PS, Fadwa explained how 'I went around six or seven schools but decided on Chesterton because of the multicultural environment and the school support'. She referred to how 'we are welcomed in that environment, and we are included there'.

As with Keysar, Zoe was also asked various questions about homework. She explained how,

> before lockdown, we got like, a homework folder where we logged our reading minutes, how long we went for each night, and we got a sheet of Maths homework that had to be submitted on Friday. And then, after home-learning, we didn't get assigned any homework.

This didn't prevent Zoe from completing homework which was derived from various sources: the tutoring centres she attended (online during COVID), work supplied by her mother or simply self-directed revision which she organised in terms of topic area. As she explained, 'I have all my homework filed and any assignments or like pieces of tasks I'm working on, are kept in closer reach'. This was evident during a visit to Zoe's home. In her tiny bedroom, her folders were all carefully organised on her small desk which abutted the bed that she shared with her younger sister. Fadwa referred to Zoe's strong commitment to completing her homework:

> Everyday, after school, she'll come and sit here. And then, you know, she revise what's going on at school … if she has homework and she didn't do it by, like Monday morning, she has to take it in, and by Sunday, she didn't finish it, she won't come out with her family … she'll say, 'Oh I have to finish that'.

Fadwa felt by Year 5, students should be doing between one and a half and two hours homework each night. To supplement what Zoe and her other children were given at school, she explained how,

> So, I always have work for them too, like in the daytime like this time, I organise something for them to come and do after school. And then I will follow-up. The school has Mathletics and other things they put online, and I will follow up with that also. And then I will follow up with whatever the activities I have planned for them.

Zoe appeared to enjoy homework and felt the same about school. She explained, 'I really like going to school because there are so many opportunities. And there's like so many chances to do many different things like gardening club, Tournament of Minds and just being there with my friends as well'. She did, however, find 'most of the work a little, too little … more on the easiest side'. She preferred 'a good challenge'. Asked if she ever worried about schoolwork, she responded,

> No, not really. Sometimes I do like to reflect on my marks and just think, 'OK may just try and work on that a little bit more next time I'm at school'. So, I just like to target my weaknesses to see if I can get better at my learning.

Such an approach, led her Year 5 teacher, Rosie, to comment that, 'Her work ethic is amazing. She is determined, curious, persistent. She's just … Yeah, I can't speak highly enough of that girl' adding, 'She is one of my highest students. Her writing is beautiful. She's so eloquent … a wonder to teach'.

This was evident when observing Zoe in class, the next year when she was in Year 6. Coincidentally, she was in the same mixed ability class as Keysar. While he was on the floor receiving extra support from the teacher, Zoe was sitting at her desk diligently completing her work independently having earlier contributed to the discussion of the text the teacher was analysing with the class. Most impressive, however, was when the class later split into groups for the literature-based activity and Zoe took command as a group leader, questioning other students and guiding discussion in her group.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Fadwa was keen to ensure Zoe and her other children maintained their grades and so, despite finding it difficult, she supervised their learning for much of this period. As she explained, 'I had a very hard time when the schools were online last year because three of them were doing [schoolwork] … every morning the teachers put their work on and they have to do [it]. [I have] to sit, make them sit and do it with them … it takes my whole day!'. Together with the impact of COVID, Fadwa was a little concerned about differences between the Sri Lankan and Australian curricula. She was in close contact with family and friends in Sri Lanka and, while she preferred the Australian system, she felt it was deficient in some areas, such as Maths. She made comparisons between Zoe and her cousin:

> Take Zoe, I have, you know, my husband's sister's son, same age, his Maths is pretty much standard to Year 7, 8 (two to three years above Zoe) … The questions, they sometimes share the questions, you know, when we are talking to them, but she can't do it.

This may have prompted Fadwa to seek tutoring for Zoe but her other rationale for this was to supplement Zoe's school homework and prepare her for the selective high school tests in Year 6. Fadwa had a good knowledge of the different tutoring centres available, information she sourced from friends who she said were 'pretty much all from Sri Lanka'. Zoe similarly had a good understanding of the various tutoring centres in the area and her reason for attending was, 'I've been training for selective', ranking her preferences of selective high school: 'I want to get into Sydney Girls … my secondary school was North Sydney Girls and my third choice was, I think was, St Georges Girls'.

While Zoe devoted considerable time working hard to meet this goal, she also engaged in a number of extracurricular activities. She was an avid reader. At the interview, she mentioned, 'I'm reading an adapted version of *Anne Frank's Diary*'. She also enjoyed craft activities, swimming and writing. In relation to the latter, she commented, 'Whenever I have the time, I just like to sit down and write in my diary. And I really, really like writing narratives'. Another pastime was reading the Quran. She explained how, 'I just spend a quick 15 minutes on it before bed … just reading religious texts and sometimes I like to memorise them as well'. This was in addition to the family reading the Quran and learning Arabic which occurred each night around 6pm after Zoe's father had returned from work, activities, as with Zoe's homework, that Fadwa recorded in Zoe's time-use diary. Even Zoe's little brother participated in these activities, sitting at the dining table learning the Arabic alphabet.

Finally, Zoe was asked what she would like to do as a career. Her response was, 'I'd love to be a doctor', something she discussed with a friend's older sister who was studying medicine at Sydney University. I was informed by Fadwa at the end of Year 6, that Zoe had been successful in securing her first choice of high school, a place at Sydney Girls. This was no mean feat for a student from a socio-economically disadvantaged primary school to gain entry to a prestigious selective high school, but one enabled through Zoe's practices of home-based learning that augmented what she encountered at school.

Beechvale PS Case Studies

These case studies profile two students from Beechvale PS: Lama, a Year 5 girl of Arabic-speaking background, and Jing-yao, a Year 4 girl of Chinese background. Lama was chosen because, as a student of Arabic-speaking, Muslim background, she provides a contrast to the Asian cohorts – students typically seen as the products of 'tiger parenting' – and a group that is usually seen as disadvantaged in the education system, even in later generations. Jing-yao, on the other hand, provides an interesting case given she had moved between China and Australia and had started school with limited English. Despite this, she had successfully sat the OC test; the only student in her year at Beechvale to do so.

Lama

Lama described herself as 'Egyptian and Lebanese, and I'm a little bit Australian'. The oldest of three children, her family had lived in south-western Sydney for a long time, her grandparents having migrated several decades earlier. Both parents were born in Australia and had tertiary qualifications and professional occupations. Nelia, Lama's mother, was of Lebanese ancestry, while Lama's father's parents came from Egypt. Though Lama talked about 'my language', she only knew 'a few words' of Arabic.

Lama was a confident, outgoing and capable student. Linda, her Year 5 teacher, described her as being one of the students 'at the top of the class' who 'performed quite well uniformly across areas', one of those who 'always contributes' and is 'really engaged': she is often 'leading the group … has lots of good ideas, very creative'.

Lama liked school: 'I like to see my friends, I like to learn more. I like seeing my teachers'. Her friendship group was ethnically diverse and included Pacific Islander, Indian and Lebanese students. She said art was 'probably' her favourite subject, but added, 'I like lots of subjects like Math. The only one I dislike is writing'. As a consequence, Nelia had been seeking help with Lama's writing from her teacher. Lama emphasised art because 'I can put my emotions on paper … It's like writing, but with pictures'. She also admitted to being 'really good at Maths … I like it because … it helps me figure things out quickly … my goal for the future is to become an architect … Math and art are really important in that role'. She found schoolwork 'usually easy' and thought she did really well at NAPLAN. She only stressed about schoolwork when there was a 'big deadline', when they were 'under a lot of pressure'.

Lama described her class as 'unruly' and disliked the male students who would swear a lot. She thought the teacher, who was 'kind' and 'generous', was 'struggling' with that. It was not all that surprising that Lama's class often became unruly as it operated in a larger, open-plan teaching space that her Year 5 class shared with a Year 6 class. Despite Lama's view of the class as unruly, it was generally well-behaved during observations, apart from that small group of boys, and only once did noise levels and student interactions disrupt the lesson. Lama's class was typical of the institutional pedagogies of many modern primary classrooms, with a lot of physical, content and activity transitions in the space of a few hours, in contrast to teacher-centred learning found in 'traditional' classrooms. The students seemed used to the movement, and Lama's teacher maintained tight classroom management and lesson structure. There was not much development in each activity, or linking between activities, but it flowed smoothly. Lama seemed to enjoy the variety and was often the first to move to a new activity, adapting quickly each time.

Lama was a frequent contributor. In a session on a human rights activist, students were asked to respond to the question of what organisations they would contribute to – in writing and then verbally. Lama wrote and spoke enthusiastically.

It is surprising that Lama struggled with writing, because she was articulate and expressive. She saw her problem as partly physical – her hand got tired because she was 'double jointed', but also because, as her mum has told her, 'my mind is rigid. It's not really creative'. She got help from a family member with a background in speech therapy, which aided with the technical problem but also 'helps expand my mind' and 'plan stories'.

Lama said she preferred to work with friends in class but admitted that she learnt best independently: 'usually, it's on my own. When I don't have anyone distracting me, or sitting on a table with people who don't talk much. So I can have my mind focused on my work'. She said she was 'not a fan of homework … as soon as I leave this gate, my mind is like, "Okay, no more work", my mind is turned off'. But homework was neither a regular nor policed practice at Beechvale: 'Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't. It's an optional thing'. When she did work at home, she preferred to work at the desk in her bedroom, but sometimes it was at the dining room table, preferably away from her siblings. She shared the bedroom with a younger sister, who also had a desk. Lama's space was full of school things and other pursuits such as a 'caddy' on wheels spilling over with art and craft equipment.

Lama's routine was relaxed: the first thing she did when she got home was 'freshen up' then had a couple of hours on her iPad playing games. She also liked to read a lot (on her parents' bed), depending on what she was currently 'addicted' to: 'I'm a speed reader. I read a lot. I read at school, I read at home, I read before bed. And sometimes I'd read after dinner'. She'd eventually do homework if she had any, and her parents contributed only 'if … I really need help'. She did art and craft work a few times a week. She had tried dance and netball and t-ball, but these were short-lived. She also spent lots of time with her extended family.

Lama thought she was good at Maths because 'I've practised Maths a lot'. This is partly due to the effort Nelia had put into Lama's education: 'My mum gets me to do … "how to" writing books and Math books, mental Maths … My mum just likes pop quizzes out of nowhere'. Lama said her mother 'mostly doesn't really care about what I get in my NAPLAN', but still 'sometimes gets me to do NAPLAN books here and there'. Although Lama was good at Maths, she couldn't do the extension program that the school ran because this was only for Year 6 students.

Lama sat the OC test but wasn't selected, and she aimed to sit the selective high school test. She was keen to go, and her mother was 'looking at' taking her to a tutoring centre to prepare. She just completed an assessment for a tutor 'so they can see where I'm at'. She has talked with her mum about the options, and if she didn't get into selective, she would enrol in an Islamic school. She had a sense that the choice of school was important because 'it helps my future, and if I could do selective school, I'd better chances of getting into a university and if I go to public my chances are lower'. As indicated, she wanted to do architecture: 'you have to go to university for like five years'.

Lama was a very capable and well-rounded student, who was at the 'top' of her class but who wasn't, as yet, in the cohort of students who make it into selective programs. She didn't fit the stereotype of the struggling student from a Middle Eastern background, and that was partly due to parental effort, professional help, and extra contributions from teachers at the request of Nelia.

Linda, Lama's teacher, described Nelia as 'very onboard with their learning and wanting to help'. Nelia's efforts were interesting because she embodied the tensions many parents negotiate in trying to ensure the best for their child. Nelia was largely very positive about the school and very appreciative of its sense of community, and the importance of the social dimensions of schooling, stressing these over an academic focus of education in the primary school years. But, while she said that the 'sense of belonging and community here is really important', sometimes she felt parents were left out and 'kind of pushed to the side'.

Further, while she insisted that 'I trust teachers as experts when it comes to my child's learning', she was concerned there were areas where the school could be doing more educationally. One of these areas was writing; because Lama performed well across the curriculum, the school didn't seem to be too concerned about what Nelia saw as a weakness: because 'she's performing at an average level, maybe her handwriting is not so great. But [they] don't see it as an issue or concern'. Moreover, Nelia believed Lama was in the 'high [to] average gifted range' based on cognitive tests: 'the school doesn't really take that into consideration with her learning'. This is a specific version of the 'gap' that parents see in their children's educational experience, especially among those who are achieving well. This was part of the problem Nelia saw in teachers' professional learning, remembering that Nelia had expertise in child development: 'I … see a gap in teacher training … where there's a lack of science/evidence-based practices that are taught at university and that this should be an integral part of their learning, particularly for children who don't fit the "average" child mould'. As a result, Nelia grappled with the problem of how much effort she should undertake: how much 'pushing' (of her child and of the school) was OK without being seen as 'pushy'. Notably, she sourced that help through her diasporic networks rather than tutoring centres, and treated the issue as a technical and familial intervention rather than relying on the tutoring industry.

Jing-yao

Jing-yao was in Year 4 at Beechvale. She was born in China and had only lived in Australia for about three years, attending Beechvale in Years 1 and 2, when she had 'no English', then returning to China, then resuming at Beechvale for Year 4. She lived with her mother Rong and stepfather Tung (who were interviewed together in Mandarin) and her little sister in a small apartment. They chose to buy in Beechvale where the housing was 'cheaper' because of their 'financial situation'. Rong was not employed, and didn't speak English, while Tung had recently got a job as a warehouse manager.

Jing-yao successfully sat the OC test during the project and moved to Acacia PS; the only student in her year at Beechvale to do this. This reflects her capabilities as a student, remarkable given she started primary school with 'no English'. Rong explained that:

> she will still have problems with some special vocabulary, like the terms in Maths. Also, she has difficulties in subjects like history or geography because she knows nothing about them.

These were her 'blindspots' for which she needed help, Rong added. Because of her limited English, Jing-yao's parents sent her early to tutoring. Now, 'English is her best subject. She took two exams at [the tutoring centre]; her ranking was within the top 100 out of 600 students'. Tutoring is returned to below: the point here is to stress that Jing-yao was, at the time of the interview at Beechvale, a very strong student despite her difficulties with English. Vera, her

teacher, said she ‘is one of my higher performing students’: ‘Mathematics is definitely her … stronger subject. But in literacy, even her writing, I'm actually quite impressed. Her writing is actually quite strong. But what I do find with her writing is that she struggles with grammar a lot’. Vera elaborated:

> [she’s] very confident, … loves to participate, loves to engage in class discussions. She loves to give everything a go, she can be a little bit bossy with her peers. She has been told by her peers to tone it down a little bit … it's more her collaboration skills that need a little bit more development … [she] loves to think that she knows everything.

This affected how she operated in the classroom. While some students prefer to work one-on-one with the teacher until they build their confidence in working with Maths problems, Jing-yao,

> because she has a love and passion for Mathematics, and she's really strong in it, she's one of the ones who would rather probably work independently … and … because she's still developing and her social skills, she prefers to do things a little bit more independently. And depending on who she works with, if she knows that, you know, her knowledge and her skills towers over this other student, then she'll take the reins … She'll tell them what to do.

This ‘love and passion’ is clear in talking with Jing-yao: ‘I like school. There's nothing I don't like about school … I like Mathematics … Because I'm very good at it. And in my report, my Maths is high and outstanding’. But she was also quite pragmatic about this ability: ‘It's all because of the tutoring’ because the Maths is ‘a higher level’ than at school. However, it felt almost like the intellectual capability Jing-yao demonstrated was a ‘problem’ in the classroom. Jing-yao explained her preferences pragmatically:

> in Maths I usually like individual work, but in English, I like pair work. Because … I'm very good at Maths, but some students are not. So, in Math, I need to tell them why we need to do that. So, I need to explain it more. But if I do it individually, I just can do it quickly.

The disparity in levels, she is suggesting, makes collaboration difficult. Jing-yao’s parents see her needs differently. As their comments above reflect, they identified several ‘gaps’ in their daughter’s education early on stemming from her limited English, so they felt they had to act on them, sending her to a tutoring centre, and she ended up in classes two days a week, covering Maths, English, writing and thinking skills.

This was partly due to Jing-yao’s parents’ own limitations. They were ‘happy’ with the school, explaining, ‘the teachers are very good’, but Rong indicated that they didn’t understand what was going on with Jing-yao’s education. This was partly a problem of time (Tung worked a lot) and language – as Rong admitted, ‘I don't understand English’. Consequently, they were not involved in the school, only attending parent-teacher interviews twice a year. Vera admitted that she had very little interaction with them. Much of their concern arose from the fact that many things they had expected – presumably from their own schooling experiences – were not evident:

> There's no homework in Year 1 and Year 2, she only got reading … she just borrowed a book from school and read it. That's all. There's no homework, that's why I always wanted her to go to tutoring, because … she has no textbooks, no homework, no exams, and I don't know what she learned in school.

They eventually realised that Jing-yao was getting some homework, ‘but the quantity is relatively small, they usually finish homework in class’.

The ‘gap’, as Jing-yao’s parents experience it, is a combination of what they don’t know and can’t do – their lack of cultural capital – and what the school isn’t providing. Rong was particularly critical of the absence of textbooks, because that meant they couldn’t follow what she was doing. But it was also a philosophical difference in approach. As much as she praised the teachers, Rong said that ‘They think every kid is an angel. But sometimes, I want to know the weakness of my kid, and where she can improve’.

As a result, they felt they had to intervene, not by becoming involved in the school itself, but through what they did at home. Rong said they initially ‘brought some exercise books from China [in Chinese]’. In Year 3 they registered Jing-yao for tutoring:

> Our consideration … was she still has difficulties in English. If her English was not good, it would affect her learning in other subjects. Since she started attending tutoring, she has had a lot of [tutoring] homework … I will supervise her in completing the tutoring homework … after she comes home every day, she spends most of her time on the … large quantity of [tutoring] homework, and the level is much harder than … from school. It's almost one year ahead.

The tutoring, which included three and a half hours on one day, gave Rong the feedback she wanted: while the school teacher ‘praised’ Jing-yao’s performance in every subject, the tutoring centre ‘gave us feedback that her English writing was not good’, pointing to her spelling and grammar, and that gave them something to work on. As Tung pointed out, the ‘harder level’ of tutoring gives her a better chance of educational success: ‘If she does not do tutoring, passing the OC exam is impossible. The things she learnt from school are of no use for the OC exam’. As Rong added, Jing-yao gets ‘a sense of achievement from the exams’ at the centre.

Rong and Tung were not unhappy with Beechvale – they liked the emphasis on ‘values’, ‘conduct’ and ‘community’, and felt ‘the ‘education atmosphere in Australia’ is ‘quite relaxing’ – but they missed the focus of Chinese schools where ‘academic knowledge is definitely the number one priority’. While from the school’s perspective Jing-yao’s parents were not very involved in her schooling, in fact there was an enormous amount of parental labour being invested in her education, especially maternal effort.

Jing-yao had focused routines at home. The time-use diaries reveal that, apart from two days given to tutoring, most afternoons featured tutoring homework, free time (on-screen and off-), play or reading, with some given to home chores and family activities. She noted that ‘we don’t really have school homework … so it's the homework from tutoring … I like to do it every day … one book or two books … then I just take a break … and after dinner I keep doing it … or I just play after dinner’. Rong is central to Jing-yao’s routines. But her role is largely supervisory, as Rong explained, they can ‘check the answers’ but they ‘can't teach her’, so they rely on the tutor at the centre for more difficult tasks. This supervising is important: ‘I focus more on her attitude and behaviour, developing good habits. … I want her to focus and take it seriously’. Jing-yao didn’t have her own computer but was sometimes allowed to play on her mother’s, if ‘mum says’ it is OK. She was not an avid reader a few years ago, but ‘the teacher said it is compulsory’ and students had to borrow books from the library once a week. Now, she had developed a strong reading habit: ‘My dad bought me the whole set of Harry Potter and I'm up to [book] six now’.

The shift from the content covered in Jing-yao's Year 4 class and the lesson observed in the OC at Acacia was dramatic. In the latter, there was extended discussion and use of aspects of formal grammar in the students' writing as they planned narratives – working as a class on general aspects before working on their own stories. Significantly, grammar was one of the areas Vera at Beechvale nominated as a challenge for Jing-yao. In the OC, the teacher went through each sentence, pointing out issues of vocabulary, alliteration and embedded clauses. She asked the class to define the subject of a sentence, with the class answering in unison, which the teacher explained took some 'drilling'. The lesson had a teacher-directed format with no requirement for individual contributions or student interaction, where the students sat in conventional rows of desks. All students were, however, attentive, closely following the teacher as she moved around the room issuing instructions, explanations and suggestions. Jing-yao, like all the students, was quiet and attentive. Collaboration, another area Vera had identified as needing work, was not a feature of this lesson, but Jing-yao's teacher at Acacia said that she had integrated into the school, had made friends, and was doing well. Jing-yao was much more challenged in the OC and seemed to respond well to these demands. Jing-yao didn't seem to hold the ambitious aspirations characteristic of 'tiger' families. She explained, 'at first I think I want to be a doctor or nurse … [then] police, now I want to be a photographer'.

Acacia Public School Case Studies

These case studies focus on two students in Year 5 at Acacia PS. Rashid, from a Muslim Lebanese background, was in a mainstream class and Vijay, of a Tamil-speaking, Sri Lankan background, was in the OC. These two students and their families illustrate the diverse education cultures within the school, namely the strategic, results-driven approach typical in the OC, and a more relaxed approach to education in the mainstream. As discussed in earlier chapters, this divergence reflects different levels of advantage and cultural capital between families in the OC and mainstream classes.

Rashid

Rashid's mother, Leila, was a second-generation Lebanese migrant, and his father, Mohammed, had migrated 20 years prior. Leila was a full-time parent, but completed a Diploma in Community Services, and Mohammed was a tiler. Given that Mohammed worked long hours and had 'broken' English, Leila was the parent who oversaw the children's education. Rashid was the eldest of four boys. They were part of a large, close knit extended family who all lived nearby, and met together on a weekly basis. As Leila explained, '… when we get together as a family, we're about 75 … For another family that would be a massive party. But that's not for us. That's just immediate family getting together'.

Leila said that she chose to send Rashid and his brothers to Acacia because it was their local school, and she was very happy with its academic standard. She said she tried to be vigilant with her kids doing their homework, aiming for them to do 20-30 minutes, four days per week. If they had no homework, Leila encouraged the boys to read, and made sure they always had books at home. Leila had a strict 'no iPad' policy during the week, and preferred her sons to be playing outdoors if they had no work to do. Rashid played rugby league for a local club and soccer for the school, as well as basketball and netball.

Leila had also contracted a private tutor who came to the house once a week to support Rashid and one of his brothers with their homework and for 'general helping'. She said she believed in 'providing the support for the child rather than them struggle'. She had had the experience of working with speech pathologists because Rashid had a speech delay, qualifying him for publicly provided therapy. Leila then decided to continue with private lessons, now in the form of the homework tutor, a university student recruited through Facebook. She had sent Rashid to a tutoring centre but with three younger boys now, could no longer manage the logistics. Rashid was unusual among his peers (in the mainstream cohort at Acacia) to be tutored, telling us that he did not know of any other students who did tutoring. Leila relied on the tutor to fill in gaps 'because I can't always give it 100 per cent … there's so much else that I need to juggle'. She also explained that she was not up to date with the current curriculum, especially with Maths. 'Maths is a big downfall for me … especially jump strategy, and things like that'.

The family home was very large, with one room that Leila called a study room, and that Rashid called a toys room. This room had both toys and a large table and chairs. While Rashid and one of his brothers conducted their home tutoring in this room, it was also used as a playroom for all siblings. Rashid sometimes also did his homework at the kitchen bench while his mother cooked, so she could help him if needed. Although Leila said that she was 'very, very strict' with her kids, she emphasised that she wanted them to try their best, not to 'be number one in the class'. She said: 'You don't have to be number one in anything that you do. But if you can look me in the eye and say, mum, I tried my best, that's all I ask of you'. She said that even though she monitored Rashid's results closely, for example, through school reports, she believed that test results were not always the most important indicator, because 'sometimes we all make little mistakes', and 'on another day, he might have gotten that right'.

Leila was very happy with how her sons were performing in school. Rashid's NAPLAN results were 'amazing', she said. 'He got higher than the state average in a number of areas … I was very impressed'. However, when we asked Leila if she had considered applying for the OC, she replied, 'I don't think he's up to that level. I don't think he's smart enough for it', adding, 'like I said, for me, it's not about getting the highest. If my son can, by all means. But I don't want to push him'. She repeated, 'that's what I've taught my kids, like, you don't have to be the best to come out something'. She said, 'that strategy has actually made my kids want to excel a lot more than I feel that coming down hard on them'.

Rashid said that he was happy with his results at school, especially in Maths, though 'English is my weakness', and he wanted to improve his writing. He said that he looked up to the Chinese students who were very good in Maths and did a lot of practising at tutoring: 'I want to be like them'. However, Rashid's cohort in the mainstream class rarely mixed with the OC students, where most of the Asian-Australian students were located. Rashid had 'quite a few' cousins at the same school, though Leila discouraged him from spending too much time with them, because she wanted him to make other friends. She was even worried about Rashid having too many Lebanese friends, because of their 'cheeky boy' habits, such as wearing their caps backwards, 'the hand slapping', and being 'loud'.

Leila hoped that Rashid would secure a place in the selective stream of their local partially selective high school, 'because I know that you don't have to be really, really smart for that'. When asked if she would start preparing Rashid for the selective test, she said, 'Yeah, I would', before adding, 'If that's the way. Is it?'. Given that she was seeking information from us, we told her that the selective test occurred in Year 6, and asked her if that was something she would ask

[12] Jump strategy, taught in NSW primary schools since the early 2000s, is a method of mental Maths that uses an empty number line to visualise partitioning numbers into tens and ones in order to add or subtract.

her tutor to start working on with Rashid. ‘Yeah, 100 per cent, I would’, she replied. ‘Doing practice tests or something like that?’, we asked. ‘Yeah, I will do it,’ she replied, ‘that’s definitely what I would prefer’. Some months later, when we asked Rashid about doing the selective test, he said he had lost the form, and that he was planning to go to a private high school.

Coming from a low SES family, Rashid’s male relatives all had blue-collar jobs, mostly in the construction industry. Leila explained that Rashid had many successful role models, despite none of them having gone to university:

> In our family, so all the boys are very successful, but successful builders … And my husband’s a tiler, so he never went to uni. But he’s still very successful, you know what I mean? And he’s still able to provide for his family, and he’s still a hard worker and his morals are still right.

For Leila, being respectful and having good morals were more important than being academically successful:

> … they’re not the first in class … they’re not getting 95 out of 100 but I’ve never had a teacher call me up and say they back-chatted. I’ve never had a teacher call up and say, he swore. Or he played up, or he was disrupting the class … If anything, I’m always told they’re a golden child … They’re role models. And to me, that is the A plus that I need.

During the interview with Rashid, he was respectful and attentive, even though his responses were brief. During the observations of his class, Rashid was very animated and sometimes seemed distracted. The class overall was extremely rowdy and chaotic, with a lot of chatter, students calling out and moving around across the room, changing seating arrangements, eating food, and coming and going from the room. A small group of boys was particularly disruptive, singing and dancing in their seats and doing sign language to each other across the room, laughing and hassling each other.

The class teacher, a Muslim woman in her 30s wearing a hijab, regularly told the class to be quiet. Often, she simply stood at the front of the room, looking stern or exasperated, waiting for quiet, and never getting it for longer than a few minutes. At times, she sent particularly disruptive students outside to talk to them about their behaviour. Meanwhile, very little work was done, even on seemingly simple tasks, such as writing a paragraph to describe a displayed picture, and it appeared almost impossible to sustain a class discussion. During the observation of Rashid’s class, he did not appear to be very productive, but the class setting was not conducive to this. It was clear that he was an energetic and high-spirited boy who enjoyed interacting with his friends and others in the classroom. He seemed very comfortable within the school community, and in his final year, was even selected for a school leadership role.

The classroom was in one of the many demountables in the school, with a low ceiling, and dark grey blinds constantly closed, blocking all natural light, and presumably, distractions from outdoors. In contrast, one of the OC classrooms observed was spacious with plenty of natural light from the windows, and a view of the treetops outside. During one morning, after the lunch bell had rung, some of the OC students gathered to admire a rainbow that was visible out the window. The OC classrooms were both upstairs in a brick building, rather than in a demountable.

Vijay

Vijay was from a Tamil Sri Lankan migrant family. His parents, Ravi and Amara, came to Australia as students and eventually became citizens. Ravi worked in information technology and Amara in accounting. Vijay and his younger sister were born in Australia. Vijay's family was very focused on educational achievement and securing places in high achieving schools and classes. Vijay succeeded in gaining entry to Acacia's OC in Year 5, and at the time of the research, was intensively preparing for the selective school test. Amara later explained how he had been offered a place in his most preferred school, one of the top ten schools in NSW (as measured by HSC results).

Vijay had attended tutoring since he was in Year 2. Prior to the OC test in Year 4, he supplemented his usual subject-based tutoring with five months of weekly practice tests, in order to become familiar with the question types and increase his speed. In Year 5, in the leadup to the selective test the following year, he attended tutoring for English, Maths, Thinking Skills and Writing, completing one practice test each day. He went to tutoring seven days a week, attending three different tutoring centres. After tutoring, he completed two hours of tutoring homework per day. Amara explained this gruelling routine: 'because that's how we prepare for selective. You need to be methodical and … systematic, otherwise, it wouldn't make a difference'. She said that regular tutoring was important to keep up the momentum and for 'exam technique'. For example, she explained, 'You can't spend more than 50 seconds on a question'. Vijay was also extremely strategic in his approach to tests. He explained that the reason he preferred Maths over English was because English questions took a long time to read, which 'wastes time in our test and … decreases the mark of our results'. Meanwhile, he found it easy to solve Maths problems so he could finish questions faster. Vijay monitored his results closely, for example, he proudly discussed his scores in his Thinking Skills practice tests, which had improved from 19 to 28 out of 40. Still, this was his 'weak' area that he revised during his free time.

For Vijay, preparing for the selective test took priority over completing schoolwork. He explained, 'I'm starting to leave it, because focusing more on schoolwork doesn't help us benefit because selective is more harder than schoolwork'. This was an approach that was common among his OC cohort. His Year 6 teacher told us that in the leadup to the selective test, most of her class was absent from school, as they focused full-time on test preparation. 'I only had four kids left in my class', she said. She was upset that her students prioritised their tutoring homework over their school homework. 'School is where you do your learning', she told them. After the test was over, this teacher said that it was a challenge to keep the students motivated in class for the rest of the year. She commented that the whole duration of Year 6 was disrupted by the selective test.

Vijay had also given up previous activities such as playing the flute, swimming, soccer, and Tamil language school. Nor did he socialise with friends outside of school. Amara recognised that extracurricular activities contributed to developing a 'well rounded personality' but explained that 'at this point in time, I'm happy to, for him to just focus on academics … Up until selective'. Vijay also said that the 'pain' of studying was necessary for such an important test. He said: 'I work up [to] late at night. So sometimes I feel drowsy, and I yawn a bit and have water in my eyes. So sometimes, and sometimes I wouldn't feel that much active …'. He said he would prefer 'a little less homework' because he sometimes found it hard to keep up with the daily workload and had so little free time. However, he did not complain because he was committed to his goal of securing a selective place. In fact, in his classroom, his 'vision board' depicting his goals for the year was dominated by the word 'SELECTIVE' in large capital letters, with the name of the school he was aiming for. 'Improve English + Writing' and 'Improve sport' were in smaller letters on his poster.

The theme of aiming high and having to sacrifice and suffer for one's goals was evident in comments by both Vijay and his mother. Amara stated bluntly, 'as Asian parents we want them to be 100 per cent accurate'. She acknowledged that the selective test was difficult: 'Some of the questions you wouldn't believe; even an adult would struggle with that time limit'. She recognised that there was a degree of arbitrariness with test results because they only reflect your performance on one day: 'As with any exams what you do on the day, is what matters … you might be a better IQ person, you have a better understanding of topics, but … what answers you select on the day with the time pressure' is the sole determinant of your results. However, rather than downplaying the importance of test results, for Amara, tests reflected how much you had practised, and were also important for helping kids to 'step up and gear up for the future'. Ultimately, Amara stated, 'I think you need to pay the price. There's no pain, no gain'.
When Vijay was asked how strict he thought his parents were, he replied that he wouldn't say they were strict, but more 'pressurising'. He referred to a conversation he had had with his father, when he recounted observing a 'Chinese woman' outside a tutoring centre after a trial selective test. The woman was shouting at her son 'because he didn't get a higher mark'. The son 'started to vomit. On the road. And then my father said he will do the same if we don't study that well'.

Vijay's teacher, Elizabeth, spoke very positively about him, describing him as 'such a positive kid' and 'really enthusiastic, always wants to do well'. However, Elizabeth worried that like many in her class, Vijay had been 'bombarded with tutoring' and so had lost 'that love of learning, a little bit'. As explained in Chapter 4, Elizabeth believed that tutoring discouraged 'deep understanding', in favour of a 'very black and white' approach, and getting an answer 'straight away'.

The focus and commitment demonstrated by Vijay appeared to be replicated in every student in his OC. During the observations of this class, all students were almost unfailingly attentive, quiet and focused. The contrast with Rashid's class could not be greater, even though these two classes were located in the same school and just metres from each other. In the OC, when the students filed into the classroom at 9am, they immediately got out their own novels and began silent reading for 15 minutes. They also set up their laptops or tablets on their desks. When the teacher asked students to get their writing books, they did so without any fuss or noise. As part of their English studies, the students were studying a 600-page novel about wartime Germany.
On one of the observation days, the class focused on writing about the experience of children escaping from Hitler's Germany. Students had to learn about the geography of possible routes across various European countries, and deal with German place names. The teacher also led a discussion of different aspects of writing that she wanted the students to incorporate, including adjectives, adverbs, adverbial phrases, order of adjectives, chain of adjectives, cohesion, speech, complication, and figurative language. The discussion included technical and complex vocabulary including 'maelstrom', 'tenacious', 'henchman', and expressions such as 'heart in their mouth'.

The students were quiet and focused on the teacher. When she asked questions of the class, not many students ventured an answer, and those who responded tended to be extremely softly spoken, so much so that the teacher often had to ask them to repeat their response, or to speak up. When they were told that they could confer with one other student when doing their writing, hardly any spoke, and eventually when several students did, they had brief, whispered discussions with their desk partner. The teacher later told us that she felt that many students were 'not great' at public speaking, and they tended to be reticent to speak if they were not absolutely sure of the answer. She was trying to give them more practice and had designed another class activity where each student would perform an individual recitation of a Shakespearean monologue in front of the class.

On another of the observation days, the OC students were in the tech room making interactive posters about one chosen aspect of World War Two. In groups, students had researched their topic, whether this was the Hitler Youth, weaponry, or some other wartime theme, had written and audio recorded their informative text, and were now finishing illustrations and electrical circuits for their posters, which had several touch points that were wired to play the audio recordings. The students had to document the entire process and experimentation, with diagrams, in their Science books. It was a remarkably complex project incorporating historical research, visual art, writing, public speaking, audio recording, electrical circuitry and programming. The students had been working on their projects for three weeks, showing capacity for sustained attention and collaboration. The teacher explained that students had formed their own groups not based on friendship but on complementary skills. Because of the practical nature of this class, it was more animated and noisy than the regular classroom, but even so, the students appeared to stay on task and accomplished a great deal in one lesson. The teacher rarely needed to discipline them.

Conclusion

These case studies provide interesting insights into the educational practices of each family revealing both similarities and differences and the degree to which each was influenced by DoE and school policies such as those around homework and selectivity, instrumental, in some cases, in prompting parents to have their children tutored.

The two students from Chesterton, Zoe and Keysar, approached their schooling quite differently, as did their mothers, a result of the differing family pedagogies of each. Fadwa was more attentive to supporting Zoe's learning within the home, ensuring that her daughter not only completed her school-based homework but undertook additional work sourced from tutoring centres and what she devised herself. Given the regularity of these practices, by Year 5, Zoe had embodied a disposition for academic engagement; a scholarly habitus influencing how she approached her work at home and school. Maha took a very different approach with Keysar. While she was critical of what she saw as the school's lax approach to homework at the time, she did not attempt to counter this within the home. She would have liked Keysar to have performed much better at school but seemed reliant upon his teachers to ensure this was done, characteristic of what Lareau terms the natural growth model pf parenting, typical of many of a low SES. All this contributed to Keysar having very little interest in academic pursuits and, consequently, he struggled at school limiting his options as he progressed into higher grades.

The educational practices of those of Lama and Jing-yao at Beechvale were different again, though Zoe and Jing-yao appeared to have much in common. The efforts of Lama's mother, Nelia, amounted to what might be called restrained and selective rather than concerted cultivation – it was targeted on a particular area (e.g. writing), and it was extensive rather than intensive (encouraging Lama to try many things), and it was low-key. Nelia was not a strong adherent of homework and was keen to ensure Lama got time for leisure, but neither was she a strong opponent. She told Lama that, 'it's up to you'. She accepted the common claim that homework was not important, 'not at this age' and explained that 'I know what the research says about homework'. But she still saw it as useful for consolidating what Lama was doing at school and how it provided 'additional support'. There was also a recognition that Lama would need to do it at high school. Hence, she sought help from the teacher, a therapist or provided it herself. Jing-yao's achievements in securing a place at Acacia's OC came against significant odds – a lack of English, limited educational, cultural and economic capital – but on the back of significant parental labour especially that of her mother, Rong. Most of this labour was not a pedagogical intervention

common amongst professionals who engage in concerted cultivation, but fulfilled a more supervisory role, with educational oversight outsourced to tutoring staff. Nevertheless, there was a congruence between this parental supervision and the institutional pedagogies of Jing-yao's schools though this was more obviously the case at Acacia's OC and tutoring centres she attended. As with many Chinese parents, Rong was heavily invested in Jing-yao's education to ensure the gamble of migration paid off.

The contrast between Rashid and Vijay at Acacia, and their respective families and classes, is striking. Both families valued education, but this was manifested very differently, and the two boys were on different trajectories in the leadup to high school. The contrast between their two classes raises questions about the social and educational divisions within public schools with OCs. In schools such as Acacia, mainstream classes and OCs were sharply divided in terms of their demographic profiles. As discussed in Chapter 3, the parent survey showed that OC families tended to be of a much higher SES than mainstream families, with vastly greater levels of parental education and use of tutoring, and this was evident here with Vijay and Rashid. The OC and mainstream cohorts were also divided by ethnicity, with almost all OC students from Asian backgrounds, and the majority of mainstream students from Middle Eastern backgrounds. The stark contrast in the standard of work being done in OC and mainstream classes, and the differences in class behaviour, that these two boys experienced, also raise concerns about unhealthy segregation of students that may significantly disadvantage mainstream students.

Chapter 9:

Case Studies of Students and Families from the High SES Schools

Chapter 9: Case Studies of Students and Families from the High SES Schools

This chapter continues the case studies commenced in Chapter 8 but the focus here is on the high SES schools: Colbyville PS which is comprehensive, Bidhura PS which has a long-established selective stream and Alinta PS with OCs in Years 5 and 6. While 18 families from these schools were involved in the project, six are profiled here, two from each school, with representation from those of Chinese, Indian, Anglo and mixed heritage. Once again, these case studies reveal similarities and differences in parents' approaches to education with no definitive patterns emerging in terms of the impact of ethnicity, nor SES for that matter. Rather they demonstrate the extent to which families are impacted by the institutional pedagogies that shape not only what occurs in their children's classrooms but, at home, as parents try to determine what is best for their child's education.

Colbyville PS Case Studies

The following case studies profile two Year 5 students from Colbyville PS: Ang and Hai, both boys and both of Chinese background. While six students and their parents formed part of the Colbyville sample, these two were chosen given they provide something of a contrast in terms of stereotypes of, not only the 'Chinese student', but also of that of the so-called 'tiger mum'. This contrast is not only evident in the differences between Ang, Hai and their mothers, but also in terms of the stereotypes themselves which neither Ang nor Hai, nor their mothers, conform to.

Ang

Ang was born in Australia. His mother, Tuan, is from Hong Kong but came to Australia on her own at age 17 to complete high school before studying accounting at university, living in university accommodation. She explained how, if she had stayed in Hong Kong, she would have studied psychology but, because of 'the language barrier', accounting 'with numbers' was 'easier for me'. Tuan still had some issues with English and speaks with a relatively strong Chinese accent but has worked in some senior accounting roles with major companies. Since Ang's birth she has moved to part-time employment in the same field. Tuan met her Australian-born Chinese husband at university as, he too, is an accountant though he has, more recently, switched to commercial management. As Tuan says, 'he's thinking, numbers is so boring'. Ang also has a sister, three years older than him, who similarly attended Colbyville PS and, at the time of the study, was in Year 8 at a faith-based college not far from where the family lived in a four-bedroom brick house in a leafy suburb on Sydney's North Shore.

Tuan and her husband decided to send Ang and his sister to Colbyville PS because, 'all our neighbours go to Colbyville'. When her daughter started there, it was a much smaller school and, even though it has grown in size, she remarked how, 'it's the community feel that make the difference'. Neither she nor her husband had undertaken any research into schools before they bought their house, and Tuan now admits that 'if we do research like I think we won't be living in this area … I think there are more popular school in the area like [Alinta PS]', but she still seemed happy with their choice.

Ang also seemed happy at Colbyville. Although he was not particularly academic, he was well liked and participated in a range of school sports. His Year 5 teacher, Justine, said, 'I love him …

he's a fantastic kid', She had also taught Ang in Year 3 and felt at that time he was 'really, really low … he was low at Maths … like my lowest literacy group. He didn't really get it. He just didn't understand things'. Since that time, she commented on how 'he has improved in his academics' but was still in the 'lowest portion of the class, not the lowest, but yeah'. She reiterated that he was an 'absolutely beautiful kid, beautiful manners … He's been raised well'. She did explain, however, that in class, 'he likes to be funny and call out' though felt this was more because his best friend was 'so loud' and without him present, Ang was 'a nice student who just sits there and is quiet. He does his work'.

This was not really on display when Ang was observed in class the next year when he was in Year 6. Ang had a new teacher who, while not undertaking a detailed interview like Justine, viewed Ang as 'a bit of a plodder' but considered his work 'satisfactory'. The morning literacy session that was observed occurred after a half hour of scripture and comprised three different activities: a word study on morphemes and Greek roots, a grammar activity on identifying and writing prepositional phrases and a reading comprehension. This was followed by a short dance routine practice in the playground leading up to recess. Students worked in groups or individually, at desks or on the floor, with the teacher providing assistance as required. Two of these activities were 25 minutes in duration, the third activity was 15 minutes and the dance practice was also 15 minutes. There was a lot of movement and no period of sustained work. The class as a whole seemed quite distracted with minimal on-task behaviour and quite a bit of talk. The teacher continually asked for quiet to little effect. The exception to this was one small group of four students who were working quietly on their own. Ang, however, got very little work done and spent much of his time talking to the boy next to him. When he did give some attention to his work, he was holding his pen with a clenched fist. This really should have been attended to by this stage of his schooling as it was clearly affecting the pace, legibility and composition of his writing. Ang also put his feet up on his chair at times, as did the girl sitting on the other side of him. Neither seemed very focused on the activity they were required to complete. Perhaps the noisiest students during this time, however, who were also doing very little work, were two boys, one of Indian background and the other Anglo-Australian. Speaking to the teacher afterwards, he referred to the Indian boy as perhaps the most capable student in the class who was likely to get into selective. He added that he was heavily tutored. Maybe he did most of this work at tutoring and school was simply about having fun. At least during the period of observation, he appeared to do very little work.

Ang admitted during his interview that 'in class, like, there's loud noise that distracted me' and found he liked working at home during COVID-19 because it was quiet and he could concentrate better. Ang was also asked about homework. While compulsory at Colbyville, he said the 20 Maths questions he had each day only took him 'like five minutes' and he felt that 'I should get a bit more like challenging homework so I can challenge myself and see where I go wrong'. In Year 5, his teacher, Justine, did give him extra work, and Tuan would often assist Ang with it, but this was not sustained. Tuan actually compared Colbyville with her own experience of schooling in Hong Kong: 'It's certainly more relaxed here, less homework, less tests … So, the kids, maybe it's because of the public system, you don't … the teacher won't push them'. Maybe if Tuan had been more insistent this may have happened, but Justine commented on how, 'Mum's lovely, lovely. Receptive to that [more homework] but doesn't ever like email or worry about him or anything like that … '. Despite this, Tuan was not happy with how Ang's homework was approached. She explained how,

> I find that the homework is not marked by the teacher … I think [it's] marked between the students … I sometimes can see, or maybe the teacher, but it's ticked, well done, but Ang's answer is all wrong. It sends the wrong message. But the kid is just randomly put some number in. Doesn't care, you know.

These concerns had not led her to have Ang tutored, in fact, she felt, 'It's a good thing to enforce the kid's knowledge as a supplement but it's probably not a good thing if they already have a busy life outside the school'. This, in effect, characterised Ang's life. As he explained,

> in winter we do AFL and sometimes after school we have AFL training. So right now, I'm doing cricket and some soccer. So, soccer on Monday afternoon and cricket is on Saturday morning. We also have cricket training on Thursday afternoon, and we occasionally do swimming.

Ang also used to play the saxophone and was now learning piano. Tuan seemed to want to foreground these aspects of Ang's education commenting on how, 'I think sometimes, some kids maybe, not academically achieve something, but in outside activity, arts, music, sport, they achieve something. It gives them a sense of achievement'. She was critical of how,

> the system is driven by the exam and tests. That is the only thing that you can see from your kids, whether they can, where do they learn, like how much did they learn, the result and things like that is from the exam, like NAPLAN or get to the selective school or to get to the high mark, or get into a university.

Tuan was happy for Ang to sit for the selective test, but he was already enrolled at the same faith-based college as his sister, a choice he seemed happy about, with an ambition, at this stage, to be a pilot 'or like ground crew at the airport, something to do with the airport'.

Hai

Hai was one of Ang's friends at school and, while they had much in common, especially a love of sport, they were also very different. Hai was born in China and had only been in Australia four years prior to the study commencing. His first experience of schooling had been in China. His mother, Anru, was also schooled in China, but had completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in accounting and economics, respectively, in the UK. She had also worked there for a short period before returning to China where she met her husband and where Hai was born. Her younger son was born in Hong Kong. Anru worked as a business consultant and her husband, who had his own business in China, in retail sales. On arriving in Australia, Anru explained how, 'I was the only person who speak English in our household'. Her husband 'had to start from the beginning so that was hard'. Hai also had no English on arrival but is now fluent and speaks with a strong Australian accent. Anru explained how education had actually been one of the main reasons the family migrated:

> People don't believe the story behind it but two main reasons. First, is because my younger one was born in Hong Kong and then because of the single child policy in China, he couldn't get the same kind of public education and welfare in Mainland China. So, that's a big cost and lots of inconvenience and another reason is Hai actually did Year 1 back in China, even though the school we chose for him is already like minimum homework, but that proved too much even to myself … I had enough.

Education was important to Anru, but she wanted something a little less intense for her two sons. The family finally bought a four-bedroom brick house in walking distance from Colbyville PS. Anru and her husband liked the leafy green suburb and were keen for 'the house to be close to the school'. Like Tuan, she 'didn't want big school to start with'. Despite foregrounding these aspects of the school, she didn't ignore academic results. As she joked, 'I wouldn't say that's not

important because, come on, I'm a Chinese mum', but added, 'There are just so many things in our lives, I can tell like academic is not the only answer'. Anru explained how when she first arrived, 'like second-generation Chinese parents and friends … helped me, you know, actually you need to send him to tutoring school, you need to probably think about enrolling him on those independent school waiting lists'. Instead, she decided, 'I'm just going to let him settle down first, see how he goes, and I'll decide that later'. Anru wanted to get to know the Australian system and so she became heavily involved in the school:

> When I first came … I actually had a full-time job but after a while I realised that I need to help the children settling down. So, I actually quit that full-time job and so I was home for about a year and a half and so I started to be really involved in the P and C and … reading groups and volunteering and everything and because I had the time or because I actually wanted to, as well. I was actually on the executive committee for two years and a bit until recently.

This no doubt helped Hai who really excelled at Colbyville. His Year 5 teacher, Lily, commented on this at length:

> Hai's very bright. He's very capable. And I think that that is demonstrated in how quickly he is performing right at the top of the class … He's very capable in Mathematics. Very, very, like he's, he's what I would tend to call gifted, as opposed to knowledgeable, right, in Maths. I have kids who are really knowledgeable in Math because they've done a lot of coaching and they've learned beyond Year 5 content and so they're, you know, ready for higher challenges in that respect. Hai doesn't get any coaching. Mum's not a fan … so that he hasn't learned beyond what he's learned in the classroom … When it comes to problem solving and complex, open-ended problem solving, he's the one that will come up with the most solutions to a problem … I've got quite a strong group of high achievers in Maths … And despite that, those kids who are coached will sit there, they have found one solution. I'm like, come on, there's more … think differently and they'll persevere, and they'll be like, I've got two and Hai's like, I've got six solutions … Yeah, like he's got a really good mind for it … but he hasn't been coached.

Unbeknownst to Lily, Hai was coached. While Anru had resisted this initially, she secured employment in a consultancy position with Kumon and took advantage of this to have Hai attend. As Hai explained, 'She works at Kumon, so she gets like a discount sort of like … I do English and Maths. We go once a week, or we go Wednesdays, for an hour … then we go and we get a work folder of homework for the week'. At home, Anru referred to how Hai did 'English and Maths every day. I would say probably between 40-60 minutes'. Anru felt that at this stage of his schooling, this type of tutoring was necessary as she explained, 'Hai, to be honest, come home without too much homework'. She viewed it as 'daily practice for him' but commented that, 'I think if you asked him, he wouldn't say I want to do it. That's an honest answer. Like he wouldn't. But then he is enjoying it because he has a sense of achievement from it as well'. This was evident in how his 'timetable is superfast' but also in the application he displayed towards his Maths: 'He has moved onto a new concept. He spent two hours on it, not because I want him to but that he find it challenging and he's enjoying it'. Hai actually explained how,

> I like doing homework, but I don't get much because [my teacher] said that at the very beginning of school, at the beginning of the year, she said that if we don't finish the schoolwork we're doing, then it will be homework, but I finish all my schoolwork, so I don't get much homework.

He did refer to reading which he completed ‘before I go to sleep’ and mental arithmetic, but this was left at school, ‘because I finished like the week on Monday, the whole week’s work of mentals on Monday. So, I don’t have to bring it home to do the rest’.

Hai was not only good at Maths, he was something of an all-rounder. Lily, his Year 5 teacher, felt that,

> There’s nothing this kid can’t do. We do an art competition at the start of the year, and his art is amazing … but his English astounds me. Like he speaks with a completely Australian accent, and he sounds like English is his natural language … You see all those little ESL things in there, but he writes like, really well … but like he’s really good at sport. So, like, he always makes the school sports team for things and like, even when he was doing dance classes, he can dance.

Together with attending Kumon on Wednesdays and completing homework every day, including weekends, Hai did a range of other activities: Monday was band practice at school for percussion, he took drum lessons outside school on a Tuesday and practised on his own drum kit at home during the week, Thursday was cricket training and on Friday he attended an art class but it was sport that figured significantly in Hai’s life. His uniform was covered in the badges of several school representative teams which Lily had referred to and Hai indicated that, after finishing school, he hoped to be a professional sportsperson, ‘like play for a good soccer team or cricket team’.

Anru wanted to provide him with a range of opportunities which seemed to stem from her perspective when Hai first started school in Australia that ‘my priority is for him to adapt and feel happy to go to school, have friends, enjoy what he’s doing’. Along with sport, his various extracurricular activities were about ensuring this was the case.

Hai was observed in class in Year 6 and, as with Ang, who was in another class, this was also a literacy session though in this case occurring between recess and lunch. It, similarly, involved a number of activities: firstly, a teacher-led discussion around a character from the novel the class was reading. This provided the background for students finding ten adjectives to describe this character and incidents in the novel to support their use, followed by more discussion. After this, the class completed three activities on prepositions: a quiz, a game and questions in a textbook. Hai was far more attentive than Ang had been in his class, as were the class as a whole. Noise levels increased at times, but Hai’s teacher kept them in check. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the observation was watching Hai complete the textbook exercise on prepositions. He raced through the questions like one of his Kumon worksheets, mindful, it seemed, of the need for speed and focused attention.

Chatting to his teacher afterwards, she also spoke highly of Hai, viewing him as one of the strongest students in the class, especially in Maths. She made less favourable remarks about Anru, referring to her as ‘the most pushy parent in the class’ and ‘not as concerned with well being as with academic results’. Yet, such a description, does not seem to tally with the comments Anru made when interviewed as she very much foregrounded Hai’s well-being, ensuring he settled well into school and life in Australia. Interestingly, Lily, Hai’s Year 5 teacher, viewed Anru as ‘super anxious’, always wanting to check on Hai’s progress, particularly given English was not his first language. Maybe the Year 6 teacher mistook this anxiety for being pushy, but Anru’s concern seems justifiable being a relatively recent migrant and keen for her son to excel at school. In regards to high school, Anru explained how Hai was ‘going to sit the selective

high school exam' and that, 'we've discussed about this, my husband, myself and even Hai involved in that discussion', adding,

> I feel like now it's time for him to sit in some exams. This way, if he gets in great, if he doesn't, that's fine. But then I don't want him to go to tutoring specifically to prepare for that exam. That's not something we want.

The regularity of Hai's tutoring homework which, at Kumon, did not involve test preparation, and the application he displayed to his schoolwork appeared to stand him in good stead. Hai was successful in gaining a place at a partially selective high school near to where he lived.

Bidhura PS Case Studies

These case studies focus on two students from Bidhura PS: Mei-Lin, in Year 4, of Chinese background and Lulu in Year 5 of Anglo-Dutch background. Mei-Lin was chosen partly because her educational life represented perhaps the most intensive and extensive example of parental effort seen throughout the study. Lulu is profiled because her experience reflected the critical consequences of having a GAT program for students who don't make it into the program.

Mei-Lin

Mei-Lin and her older brother were born in Australia to parents who had migrated from China 12 years earlier. The mother, Nanxi, had arrived with university qualifications in publishing but, realising that it was too difficult to find a position in that industry in Australia, retrained in accountancy through part-time study at TAFE, and is now in a well-paid position in this field. Mei-Lin's father is in IT. The family moved to Bidhura from southern Sydney just before the son started school, with Nanxi changing jobs to make commuting easier and because she felt, 'I better do something for the education'. She talked to friends whose children attended Bidhura: the local environment was an attraction, but '80 per cent is because of this school … this is a very good school in a smart area … lots of good schools surrounding, not only private ones, but also the high school'. They are happy with Bidhura and Nanxi thinks that the GAT program is 'the highlight' alongside the emphasis on 'social skills': 'the one thing I can't teach my kids is this … social interaction with other kids … kids coming from different … cultural background'.

Mei-Lin was a very good student who had been in some of the 'extension groups' (which are for the mainstream, run alongside the GAT program). While she had not had the educational success of her brother, who attended the OC class at another school, she was eventually accepted into Bidhura's GAT program in the second half of Year 4 because a position had become available. One of Mei-Lin's GAT teachers when she was in Year 5 described her as 'impressive', 'highly capable in all subject areas'. Another teacher commented on her general abilities across academics, sport and music: she is not 'a pushy kid' in class but always has something to say if called on. During class observations she was quiet, though she was very articulate in her interview. Vaani, a GAT teacher who had taught Mei-Lin (and her brother) in the past, described her as 'creative' and 'extremely intrinsically motivated': 'she will work her butt off all the time. But she is obsessed with doing the right thing … she's not a risk taker … And she is very hard on herself'.

Mei-Lin enjoyed school: 'the best part is … when you can work together with your friends, and … learn about the ideas'. English was her favourite subject, where she could get 'carried away'. She

liked ‘challenges’ and what she called ‘what if’ questions, adding that through education you could ‘learn some of the ways to achieve other goals’.

Nanxi felt differently about Mei-Lin’s abilities, seeing her as not ‘really top … I think above average’ and thought she was ‘not that balanced’ and has ‘some weakness’ in Maths. These perceptions may be why Nanxi put effort into her education. As seen in Chapter 5, Nanxi was highly engaged in the school and strategic in her approach. She didn’t understand the Australian system when her children started school, so she decided to ‘volunteer a lot … I basically commit a lot of my free time to the school’. She became a ‘parent helper’ in the classroom and ‘the music treasurer’ because she has a finance background:

> as a parent you have to involve into these kind of kids’ learning or education, because you can't just rely on school, say, the teacher responsibility to educate my kid, the parents have to be heavily involved and … find those things where you can volunteer your time, give you an opportunity to talk to the teacher … in the meeting the principal will talk about certain things, or talk to other parents, I think that's really good … I'm working full-time, you don't have opportunity to talk to other parents, what they think. It's mainly like for us as a first generation … you don't really have … someone really local, you can go to say, what are your local people think? … I want to … talk to other parents, in particular [of] the kids in Australia and who have been here for a long time, or maybe similar background as me [who are] doing … this trial on our children.

For Nanxi, this was about getting to know the school and understanding the ‘educational system’ but also ‘to absorb how the kids learn in the classroom’. As a parent helper, she found value in the system compared to her experiences in China, where ‘we focus too much on academic … you force the child to learn in a way, whereas in Australia, teachers ‘encourage you to think things differently or creatively’. This involvement was unusual compared to most parents. It runs counter to the view that Chinese parents don’t get involved though it was similar to Anru at Colbyville. Across the sample of parents, however, it was the most strategic attempt to work out the ‘system’.

This effort was reflected in what she called ‘mum’s homework’. Nanxi believed that her daughter didn’t get enough homework, and this had been shaped by her son’s experience in an OC class:

> look at this current … educational system … now I start to get a bit more understanding about the opportunity program, just because my other child, he gets into that unit, and you feel like this is such a wonderful program … [they] focus a little bit more on the academic … and you can find a bunch of the smart kids there. They all … excel in one, two areas … that's a good environment for them to be in.

For Mei-Lin ‘to get into that [OC] unit … you have to give them a little bit extra help, because from the school, they don't really cover everything’. So, Nanxi said, ‘I just give her a little bit of extra mum's homework’. While Mei-Lin did ‘about half an hour to 40 minutes every day, for three or four days a week’ with the school’s homework, which was already greater than other schools, ‘mum’s homework’ was ‘about similar’. Nanxi described it as ‘a bit Mathematics questions’ initially, and then ‘I ask her to write a piece of writing … on a weekly basis’. But it is significant that she paid close attention to Mei-Lin’s work, was ‘aware of some weakness’ and so targeted the areas where she needed to ‘practise it a bit more’. Moreover, ‘mum’s homework’ was planned over a term:

> I mainly rely on the teachers to give an overview at the beginning of the semester. And then look at, okay, that's the school going to cover these things, I'm thinking based on my

> understanding of the curriculum. I did have a read through of those from the government website, I say, okay, I think I need more practice … so I'll go to pick up some books from the government website, I say, okay, I think I need more practice … so I'll go to pick up some books from the bookshop … Mei-Lin might need to do a little bit, you know, practise on fraction, which I found she's really weak … that's how I plan mostly on a term basis. Many do that during school holidays, I usually take couple of annual leave [days] during school holidays, I can't have enough time interact with them. So we'll talk about couple of things and the area we feel … they need to improve for the term.

She qualified this programming by saying that, because they might have other activities on during the holidays, 'if you really busy, I say it's not compulsory'.

As well as consulting with teachers, departmental guidelines, books and what her son has done elsewhere, Nanxi also drew on her own 'educational path … in China', of which she was critical. Yet she had recently started sending Mei-Lin to tutoring – a 'combined' program of English, Writing, Maths and Thinking Skills, each components of the selective high school exam. This gave her three sets of homework. The tutoring had begun only recently, because 'if it's too early, it's too much for them'. So Nanxi had considered the appropriateness of tutoring, rather than just seeing it as the answer. Indeed, her pedagogic work extended to encouraging experience in extracurricular activities in and outside school – Mei-Lin had undertaken swimming, music, ballet, tennis, language classes, public speaking and a vacation care program.

Nanxi had a philosophy about these activities. It is one thing to give children 'choice', but,

> before they know what they really like … you're going to try so many things and that you're going to say, 'okay, I have tried basketball, I tried tennis, I tried everything. Now I know what I really want to do'.

Nanxi insisted she is not 'result driven', or 'being aggressive or bossy … the controlling mum', she just wanted her children to have as many opportunities with a range of interests so that they can make good choices about what they pursue: 'I encourage my kids, participate as many activities as you can at school, PSSA [sport], speech, drama, whatever. If there is an opportunity, put your hands up, get involved'.

Routine was important – Nanxi talked about their 'program' – and her philosophy is grounded in the belief that, 'the more you practise, then the better you are. So why not just start now?'. The family room – an open plan kitchen/dining/TV room – was lined with desks, one each for Nanxi, her husband, her son and Mei-Lin. The room contained shelves and tables of books, DVDs, folders, a globe, and writing and craft equipment. The children do their homework at the dining table while Nanxi is cooking – 'I want them to be within … my sight' – but they use the desks when the parents are also working, or their bedrooms if they need a 'quiet place'. Despite the mother's role, Mei-Lin said of her homework that 'I mostly do by myself, because I'm kind of very independent. I don't really want my mom to help me that much'.

This may seem a heavy load, but Nanxi also didn't want them to 'feel overwhelmed'. Consequently, she ensured that the homework was balanced by extra activities and 'play', whether this be swimming, riding her bike, playing in the park or badminton with friends. There is also a lot of reading in Mei-Lin's routine – 'she has to make sure she reads half an hour at a minimum every day' – though Nanxi worried she focuses too much on fantasy.

Mei-Lin's case represents the most intensive parental effort viewed; well-rounded, concerted cultivation. The regimen involved not just extra homework, bought resources, or tutoring. Nanxi

investigated her children's schooling, developed an understanding of it, designed term programs not to compete with but to extend and complement classroom work, has thought about the place of extracurricular activities, and she teaches them. While she admits her teaching is 'a little bit different' to the school, she aimed for congruence: 'I really don't want my way [to] have a … different impact [or] get them confused. So I will always ask them, "if you were at school, how the teacher will explain this?"'. She insisted that tutoring is just 'a practice session', 'the school is the most important thing'.

Clearly Nanxi was good at what she did. Mei-Lin stopped Mandarin classes because, as Nanxi recounts, she thought 'mum does better'. Indeed, Nanxi said that her 'passion' would be to retrain as a teacher. This is the substantive work of family pedagogies and their relation to their institutional equivalents deeply understood. 'Mum's homework' paid off. After missing out, Mei-Lin made it into the GAT program and is now 'aiming for James Ruse for selective' or a scholarship to a prestigious private girls' school. Nanxi did not have the same 'academic' aspirations for Mei-Lin as she did for her son, but thought she might become a teacher. Mei-Lin, however, said that 'sometimes I've just I wanted to … be … a writer. But … an accountant wouldn't be so bad … I'm still thinking about it'.

Lulu

Lulu was in Year 5. Her mother Kelly is of Anglo background and works in real estate while her father, of Dutch ancestry, works in finance. She has two older sisters in high school. Kelly originally came from a low SES western Sydney suburb but she and her husband moved to a large home on the North Shore. They chose to move to Bidhura a dozen years previously partly because the school had a strong program beyond the academic – a sports program, facilities for art and music, languages and extracurricular activities – 'I really wanted that sort of vibe of a school'. Coming from a family where her father was a teacher, she researched the local schools' academic standings but wanted a school with certain values: 'nurturing, sport, good discipline'. But she had noted a change in the dynamics of the local community since her oldest child started there – 'our school's probably 60 to 70 per cent Asian now' – and this was partly because of its good academic reputation and its GAT program.

Lulu's Year 5 teacher Cody described her as 'outgoing', a 'sweet kid' who was 'really engaged':

> she's very emotionally intelligent, as well as just generally intelligent. I'm not saying she's a high achiever … But I think she's much more intelligent than she gives the impression … she needs more self confidence in relation to academic things.

Cody added that she is 'above average' in the class and producing some 'good quality work' this year: while she's not 'academically orientated', she is more so than her older sisters. She was 'one of those all-round kids'. Her Year 6 teacher concurred, describing Lulu as 'a good average student … very sociable'. By this time Lulu had become a sports captain at the school. Kelly, her mum, said that it was through homeschooling during COVID-19 that she realised that Lulu's 'definitely got the ability … that really opened my eyes up', but agreed with the teacher's judgement about her lack of confidence.

Lulu was unequivocal about school: 'I love it', largely because her teacher makes it 'fun'. Maths and art are her favourite subjects: art is 'fun', as is Maths because 'I'm really good at it … it's challenging but … it's … fun'. She was very sociable, with friends 'all around school, in different schools and outside'. She liked 'working in groups, because it's not a lot of pressure on yourself. And it's just fun to be with other people'.

During the class observed when Lulu was in Year 6, Maths lessons which moved between whole-of-class activities and individual tasks, Lulu was attentive and focused, working relatively quietly on her own during the individual activity, and responding to her teacher's questions during the class sections. When the students were allowed to move on to other activities – Mathletics for most, like Lulu, and Maths Club for the more able – she became distracted and more interested in talking with other students.

The class received homework, a spelling sheet and Maths activities, but it fitted into Lulu's sports schedule, 'because I do a lot of sports'. She did her homework 'out on the kitchen table where we eat dinner': 'my mum doesn't let me do it in my room because she thinks I'm going to get distracted', but she doesn't like this because 'it's noisy'. As Kelly explained, she preferred Lulu to do her homework there because it wouldn't get done if she did it in her bedroom. Completing it on the kitchen bench could be good, however, because 'if it's hard' her sisters help. Cody wasn't sure, however, that she was completing it: 'if she does, she doesn't show me'. Though Kelly admitted she was 'not academic' herself, homework was important 'because that's the only way I know what she can and can't do … I have no other gauge'. She wished that they had better homework and that it was enforced and checked, particularly because they need 'a bit more structure' as they head towards high school.

Lulu thought 'we have enough homework' but she hit on a key problem: 'people that aren't really good at these certain subjects' don't want to do it but those 'that like it and know it all … do it really fast and easy'. She 'wouldn't give more homework to people that know it all, because then that would be kind of unfair'. This is a dilemma at the heart of the homework debate: how much, for whom, and for remediation or extension.

Lulu's routines were largely driven by her involvement in sports, which were clearly a priority. She played netball, AFL and soccer: 'I do a lot of things'. Including her training, sport occurred six days a week and homework was organised around that: 'I ask my mum in the morning, like, where and like, what time I'm doing my sports … and I'll get all my homework set up'. She also read about 20 minutes a night and had a few hours of 'screen time' each week. She had tried to get involved in music at the school but, as Kelly explained, it's 'a very full-on music program and she wasn't quite up to that. Like she probably didn't want to put in as much'.

Kelly didn't feel a strong sense of connection with the school any more even though her three children went there. That was partly because of COVID-19, and partly because of the changing demographic, but she also felt it had become 'disjointed' because of the lack of parental involvement at the school: with a sense that 'it's not encouraged', in contrast to Nanxi's experience. More importantly, she felt her children had suffered from the programs that attracted other families. Apart from the values listed, Kelly wanted a focus on 'equal opportunity, which I don't feel in hindsight … my children necessarily got academically': 'they've got a gifted and talented program where the kids go into a class, and they're picked from a Year 2 test … they're in that class until Year 6'. The gap here is different for Kelly: special programs which for some addressed the gap for their children, couldn't address those that didn't make it into the programs, and so left them with what she called 'learning gaps'. She felt aggrieved that the GAT students got access to all sorts of activities – like going to Parliament House – but 'our kids didn't'. In the wider scheme of things, 'they're putting themselves against kids that are getting tutored … my kids lost confidence in their ability'. Because Kelly was 'not academic' she was not 'able to help them when they had holes in their learning', and she was not keen to resort to tutoring. Because her kids ended up in mainstream classes which could be a bit 'rowdy', surrounded by other students who were focused on learning, they ended up with an 'unfair disadvantage' where the

opportunities to learn were lessened: ‘that's what I don't like about that system … they've literally been graded from Year 2’: ‘it’s so segregated’. Interestingly, a teacher at the school also felt there was a divide between the mainstream and the GAT classes because the latter tended to keep to themselves, a point discussed by other teachers in Chapter 4. Compounding this, school assessment practices meant that Kelly wasn’t getting enough feedback about Lulu’s progress. When she asked for Lulu’s actual test ‘so that I know what my child needs’, she was told it wasn’t their practice: ‘all I'm getting is this report card that says satisfactory or unsatisfactory’. She’s not ‘that parent that jumps up and down’ so she didn’t pursue it. She was unhappy that the ‘pushy’, ‘helicopter parent, which is a lot more common over here’, got more attention for their child.

Kelly was not enthusiastic about tutoring, which had intensified because of the changing demographic of Bidhura: Asian parents ‘value’ the academic focus more. ‘Some people’ she knew ‘in preschool had their children tested by a child psychologist to test their IQ to test their ability and what they could and couldn't do, to tutor, to manipulate getting them into Bidhura … I was like, “What's going on here?” … like before they went to Kindy’. That Kelly saw tutoring as a form of ‘manipulation’, underlined why ‘my kids don't get tutored’. In fact, Lulu’s sister had started one-on-one tutoring because she was struggling at high school. As Lulu explained, ‘it's really good because she has boosted up, because she was actually not that well in Maths and she didn't understand. So, she just boost up in Maths when she got her tutor’. Yet, Lulu was also aware that, while it can be ‘helping’, ‘some people might think it's unfair, because they can practise on the exams with tutoring’, and some ‘can't really afford a tutor’.

While Lulu was a good student it was clear that high-level educational achievement was not the main concern for her or her mother, despite her sense of being ‘disadvantaged’. As Kelly said, ‘if they're learning … academic results don't bother me, because I know it's not the be all and end all’. This may be because Lulu’s immediate educational future – high school – had already been resolved in a way that it hadn’t for those families in this study who were working towards entry into a selective high school. Initially, Lulu was going to go to the private girls’ school her sisters attended, though this changed later in the year. Instead, Lulu and Kelly, opted for the local public high school which also had a GAT stream and a strong sports program. Lulu didn’t have strong ambitions as yet, given her focus was mostly on sport: ‘In Kindy, I wanted to be a hairstylist and a hairdresser. Just simple stuff. But I don't really know my future. I feel like my mum is trying to get me into law … I hear it's very hard … my first job would probably be like a cafe or a clothes store to make it easier’. With her sisters, ‘we don't really talk about what we want to be’. This translated to her attitude to the GAT program: she didn’t try because ‘it's really hard … I just thought why, just stay, like, normal’.

Alinta PS Case Studies

These case studies profile two students from Alinta PS: Samuel of Anglo background and Meera of Indian background. Samuel was chosen as his family’s seemingly relaxed approach to education contrasts significantly with that of many of the other profiles presented in this chapter and the previous one, and while it represents a minority approach at Alinta, it brings into stark relief the diversity of family pedagogies within the school community. Meera was chosen to showcase how recently arrived migrants with temporary residency status may navigate the NSW education system, including the international comparative lens through which they view local schools. The two profiles provide a good contrast in terms of the families’ respective levels of satisfaction, comfort and belonging within the school.

Samuel

Samuel was a Year 6 student in a mainstream class at Alinta PS, where he had studied since Kindergarten. Samuel lived in the catchment area for Alinta with his parents and two younger sisters, both of whom also attended the school. Samuel's parents were university-educated professionals, with his mother, Angela, working as a physiotherapist and his father, Josh, as an engineer. Samuel's parents enrolled him at Alinta because they wanted him to attend the local public school. Angela explained, 'We wanted to have Samuel to have a network in the local neighbourhood, and other families in the local neighbourhood'. She also wanted a school that would support children to be an 'all rounder':

> ... having, you know, a commitment to learning, like, in your general, basic subjects, that's really important, to being able to be physically active, to being able to be creative, and to be able to be social and, and get out and have, you know, communicate and get along with peers.

Angela praised the school's 'holistic' approach and emphasis on student wellbeing and effort, rather than traditional grades. She contrasted this with other schools' approaches:

> ... as opposed to my nieces and nephews where they say things like, I got an A, or I got all As, and they don't really know what that means ... What does it matter to get an A when you're 7, I mean, doesn't matter. To be trying your hardest in class matters. So, those kind of things. They do measure that. And I think that's great.

The one weakness of the school for Angela was that it did not have 'a huge profile in sport'. Sport was extremely important for Angela and for Samuel, who nominated it as his favourite school subject. Samuel's sporting activities included rugby league, rugby union, Oztag, AFL, mountain biking, running and rock climbing. His time-use diary showed that he did almost 20 hours of physical activity in a week during the school term, and even more during the holidays. Unsurprisingly, Samuel said that his career goal was to be a professional sportsperson. Angela confided that this would be unlikely for Samuel, but she encouraged sport for other reasons:

> It's just about for us being physically active and being healthy and that social – I mean, I was saying to Samuel, you'll get more strategy on the AFL field today and communication skills, then you will anywhere else, you know, and that's honestly what we believe. It's got multiple benefits.

Samuel said that he found schoolwork 'mostly' easy, especially Mathematics, and he particularly loved geometry. Overall, he appeared to take a very casual approach to school. He said that most of the time, he did not think about schoolwork, and did not really care about tests such as NAPLAN. He said he did homework 'close to once every three weeks', explaining that, 'we don't have any set homework but like, sometimes I go onto Mathletics or Prodigy' (online Maths games). Samuel's time-use diary showed that he spent no time on homework or extra study during the two-week period that was recorded (during term and in the holidays). However, he did spend five hours reading in the week during term time.

While Samuel's teacher spoke highly of him overall, she mentioned that his level of commitment to schoolwork was not always adequate:

> ... he actually isn't showing, you know, doing his 100 per cent ... Because he's a capable student, but just I guess, he's like a kid, he just wants to, you know, like a regular kid, he

> just wants to have fun … I've always said to him, mate, I want you to show me your best. I know you can do so much better. And you know, his mum's saying that to him as well … But his mum's not putting that extra pressure that we're seeing in other families.

Samuel, however, preferred to do less schoolwork at home, saying: 'I have more stuff to, like, I like cooking. And I, after school I do a lot of cooking'. While Samuel spoke in detail in his interview about the dishes he liked to cook, his time-use diary showed that he spent the most amount of time on 'screen time' (over 20 hours a week) and 'free play' (also over 20 hours a week). Samuel said that his parents approved of his use of time and approach to homework: 'I think they joke around it because I've got so much free time but I think they like that I get out of the house a lot, and do cooking instead of just sitting in my room on an iPad or just some work sheet'.

For her part, Angela said she did not put a big emphasis on homework. She appreciated being able to check with the Google Classroom account to ensure Samuel had finished what he needed to. But she explained, 'I would hate that Samuel got home from school and just did homework. Because I think then his leisure and his relax, and his creativity would just not be there'. Generally, she was happy for Samuel to read every day, practise his trombone and work on any projects the class was involved in, such as experiments for the Spectra Science competition,[13] which she said involved 'really fantastic problem solving'. Angela was 'definitely' happy with the school's approach to homework, especially its use of projects. Overall, she said schoolwork took up 'no more than an hour a night, and probably not every day. And we try not to do homework on the weekends, because we want to sort of, you know, relax or do other things'.

Samuel's family's emphasis on sport and relaxed approach to schoolwork meant that they were atypical at Alinta, and Angela expressed concern about the 'pressure' created by the 'strong academic focus of many families'. While Samuel was less affected by this because of his 'resilient' and 'very relaxed personality', Angela worried about her middle child, who was anxious about 'being behind, when she's not behind'. Angela emphasised that the school tried hard to combat the culture of pressure and competition: 'They even brought up that, you know, they were disappointed to hear that some children were punished for not getting into selective high school, things like that'. However, the culture came from the parents, and Angela said that she and her husband had sometimes been judged as 'parents who don't care' about academic outcomes, 'which is so laughable'. This became particularly pointed when Samuel did not sit the selective school test, because Angela and Josh 'didn't feel that any of the schools would be right for him'. In response, Angela said, 'one parent said to me, "Well, in our culture, it is important to do this". And, I mean, I didn't really respond, I just sort of smiled and what can I say to that?'.

Samuel was acutely aware that his family's approach to education was very different to those of others at the school. He mentioned that unlike many others, he had never had tutoring, and did not feel pressure from his parents about tests:

> I've noticed that a lot of my Asian friends, they take the tests and things a lot more serious than I do. And like, they've always been really disappointed if their OC tests didn't come out, or, they didn't get into the selective school that they wanted to or anything, they take it a lot more serious. I think all the Asian kids that I know … they all do tutoring, and I, I do not like tutoring. I find that I have so much better to do than sitting in a room learning stuff – no, sitting in a room doing tests.

Samuel had also completed the OC test but had been unsuccessful. When asked if he was

[13] Spectra (Science Program Exciting Children Through Research Activities) consists of 'curriculum-aligned science activity cards' that guide students to complete experiments, observations and research projects (ASTA, 2026).

disappointed, he replied, ‘not really’. For high school, Samuel was happy to be attending his local public school, even though none of his friends would be joining him, opting instead for either selective or independent schools. Samuel said he thought he had also applied for the selective schools test, but later realised he ‘forgot’ to hand in the permission note. While his chosen high school had a gifted and talented class that Samuel had been accepted into, Samuel said that he ‘didn’t really care’ about that. He was happy with the school ‘because I could ride my bike there’.

While Samuel’s approach to education may have been different from many of his peers, he had cultivated a friendship group at school who shared the ‘same mindset’ as himself: ‘They love sport … they're good at academics, but they don't, it's not their main priority’. Samuel also mentioned that most of his friends were ‘Australian’, and not from other countries. This is surprising as 90 per cent of Alinta’s student body were LBOTE. Given Samuel’s negative comments about the tutoring practices of ‘Asian kids’ above, it is pertinent to ask about the extent to which there are tensions based on educational philosophy within the Alinta community.

Angela also expressed concern about some Alinta parents’ preoccupation with academic results and the ‘misinformation’ that circulated. She recounted being told by another parent when Samuel was in Kindergarten that Year 3 NAPLAN results were important for university admission, and ‘that if you send your child [to Alinta] in Kindergarten, that means they'll go to the OC’. She recalled several instances where she was upset by the pressure placed on children based on ‘misinformation’, including one of Samuel’s friends who, after not getting into the OC, transferred to a school outside Sydney, over an hour away from home: ‘I felt very upset about it because the little boy was, I mean, he's only ten. And he lives across the road from the school. And he was commuting all the way [to this other school]’. This was despite the fact that by staying at Alinta, the child ‘would have been with kids who got higher marks anyway’. Angela tried to explain OC and selective school admissions processes to other parents, and said that in one case, she succeeded in convincing one family whom she had befriended that their son did not need tutoring:

> I said, he doesn't need it, because he's actually a really brilliant kid. He's going to do really well, no matter what … [But] this is what they were told they had to do. So, when they found out that we weren't doing it, they were quite excited and they stopped it in Year 6 … So that made me realise, well, it was probably their own cultural circles of pressure, and also the information that they were being fed … And I've always just said to people, you know, if the website doesn't have education.nsw … don't believe it, like, that's it.

Despite these concerns, and ‘mixed’ feelings about the OC program at Alinta, Angela was positive about the presence of different cohorts of students within the school. She said that although Samuel did not mix with the OC students, he did benefit from their influence on the school, for example, being in band and sport together. Angela explained,

> … there's certainly always been those areas that Samuel benefits from being around them or seeing what they're doing, and so that's a positive, right? … I mean, some of these children are so exceptional. It's just actually wonderful to, when they play instruments and what they do with, so they're like being around little, you know, Albert Einsteins. They're interesting.

Samuel’s family, although not choosing Alinta for its OC program, found themselves enmeshed within a school community that in many ways was shaped by the institutional pedagogy of a competitive and hierarchical system. Their efforts to navigate the contradictions of these diverse approaches illustrate the complexities of students’ and families’ experiences in the current NSW education system.

Meera

Meera's family had migrated from India two years prior and were living in Australia on a temporary visa. Both her parents had backgrounds in Commerce and both had completed an MBA. Meera's father was working in finance at the time of the study, while her mother was still looking for employment. They had chosen Alinta after doing online research on school rankings, with Meera's mother, Shreya, saying that Alinta had been listed in the '99th percentile' for the previous three years.

Despite this high rating, upon arriving in Australia, Meera found schoolwork 'very easy', particularly Maths. Shreya described Meera's reaction to her Year 2 Maths classes: 'She's like, what is this? Why are we still doing addition and multiplication?'. Shreya was frustrated at the low standard and quantity of work at school, and felt that Meera could 'take in much more'. Likewise, Meera said that the workload was much lower than what she was used to in India, and explained that, 'in Maths, I basically know almost everything'. This was partly because she attended Kumon for Maths tutoring, and was working three years ahead of the curriculum. However, Meera was not selected for the advanced Maths group in her class, another source of frustration for her mother. Shreya claimed that only students doing a particular type of test preparation coaching (e.g. for the OC) were selected for this Maths group.

Meera had started Kumon Maths tutoring in India at the age of three, and quickly resumed with the same company after relocating to Australia. This was one way her family tried to ensure a smooth transition to education in Australia. Meera's dedication to Kumon was evident when she recounted that when she enrolled in Kumon in Australia, she was 'pushed a level back, which made me really sad. I had to redo some work'. While doing such advanced Mathematics was 'stressful', Meera said that ultimately, it was 'really cool' because every year she received a medal for working at such a high level, 'And that makes me feel proud'.

At the time of interview, Meera was attending Kumon twice a week and doing 20-30 minutes of Kumon homework each day. Even during school holidays, Shreya said, 'we carry Kumon on vacation. I make her do wherever we go'. Indeed, Meera's time-use diary showed that she did almost 20 hours of study per week during the school holidays. Shreya explained, 'I like the Kumon system. You have something to do every day, you have something to keep at, you have something to achieve there'. She said she was particularly committed to continuing with Kumon 'because anyway she's not doing enough in school'.

In addition to feeling that the academic standard at Alinta was low, Meera and her mother were also very critical of the hub education system that had been used at the school. In this system, up to 90 students shared one large learning space, with three teachers facilitating classes. Meera's teacher, Keith, said that this format facilitated a more 'collaborative learning style'. Although there were still 30 students in each class, three classes were co-located and students could 'wander through the learning space with the three teachers'. Shreya said that Meera felt 'lost' in this system. She and her husband had asked Keith how students received any individual attention. Keith had assured her that 'the students enjoy it' because the classroom structure was more interactive. Shreya was adamant: 'sorry, it has not worked for my child'. Meera also expressed dissatisfaction with her class, saying that she did not feel seen by her teacher because of 'favouritism'.

During the classroom observation of Meera's class (the following year, when she was in Year 5), the room partitions were closed so there was a regular single class with one teacher. The class

was well ordered with students working productively and transitioning between activities smoothly. During the observation, students engaged in teacher-led class discussion, small group work, and individual reading and writing. The teacher displayed professional and engaging slides for all activities, with clear instructions, timers for each activity displayed, and Dojo (reward) points and other behavioural incentives quietly operating in the background. Students designated as 2ICs (second in charge) had clearly defined roles and contributed to smooth operations. Students stayed on-task throughout all activities, with only some distracted chatter just before the lunchtime bell. Meera appeared highly engaged, often with a group of girls at the front of the room, and contributed thoughtfully and enthusiastically to class discussions. She seemed to thrive in this environment, unlike in the hub classroom system.

Apart from the hub classroom, Shreya was also unhappy with the homework set by Meera's teacher, which consisted mostly of online activities on platforms such as *Kids A-Z* for spelling, *Mathletics* and *Reading Eggspress*. Shreya was upset that students had to have their own iPad for homework:

> I tried to avoid the iPad in this house until this year. We both never used an iPad, because I knew the minute it would enter this house, I knew she would be on it. So, until it became compulsory from the school, I did not allow it. So, I have zero games on her iPad. I don't allow.

Shreya said that students spent 'enough time in school looking at the iPad and screens', so she preferred Meera to be off screen at home, even if that meant not completing homework online. Shreya was much more supportive of project-based homework assignments, including, as mentioned by Angela above, those connected with the Spectra Science program. Shreya said that Meera had spent 'quite an amount of time' completing Spectra projects, 'which I'm happy about … because it ignites a lot of research-oriented questions in children'. Meera also said that she enjoyed doing Science experiments: 'that's actually one of my favourites'. In his interview, Keith mentioned that Meera was 'very creative' and good at 'looking outside the box on how to get tasks done', adding that she had made a 'fantastic podcast to explain her science project'.

Despite being a strong supporter of Kumon, Shreya was against the test preparation tutoring being done by many other students at Alinta, particularly those she knew from Indian migrant backgrounds. Meera was not eligible to apply for OC or selective classes due to the family's visa status. Otherwise, Shreya said she would like Meera to sit the test, but 'without any external coaching or anything like that'. She explained, 'If you already have it in you, if you have the development, you will do it. That is my kind of approach'. She said she understood that test preparation tutoring might be appropriate 'for higher grades or for universities and centres … Not at Grade 4 or Grade 5'. Shreya was surprised to see such a prevalence of tutoring in Australia: 'there's literally a parallel industry running … the child comes from school, six hours, then goes to another coaching class. I am not for it'. Even so, Shreya admitted to being 'a little confused' by the frenetic efforts of other families to get their children into selective classes and schools: 'because everybody else around me is doing that. Am I wrong? … Are we not doing something that is supposed to be done here?'. Ultimately, she wondered whether selective classes should be so separated from mainstream classes, saying, 'the other students, I would say, are equally capable. You should not be differentiating it so much'.

Conclusion

The complexities involved in how ethnicity and SES affect parenting are clearly evident in the case studies presented here. There is no straightforward correspondence between these parents' relatively high SES and the decisions they made about their children's education. Nor does their ethnicity necessarily provide any clearer indication. If anything, rather than being 'Asian' seeming to suggest a certain style of tiger parenting, it may have more to do with length of residency, coupled with SES for those who are profiled here. Neither Tuan nor Anru from Colbyville, for example, fit the stereotype of the Asian tiger mum. This was especially the case with Tuan who was very relaxed about Ang's schooling and showed little interest in having him tutored even though some remediation may have been beneficial. This is less the case with Anru, as Hai's Year 6 teacher, rightly or wrongly, viewed her as 'pushy'. Her use of tutoring, however, seemed more a compensatory measure given the limited amount of homework Hai received at school. Also, Anru's regular monitoring of Hai's progress was probably more an example of Lareau's idea of concerted cultivation, characteristic of many middle-class parents rather than a function of ethnicity. This could also be explained in terms of Anru's anxiety for Hai as a recent migrant which, for Tuan, as a long-term resident, was less a concern. Either way, it was interesting when Tuan shared her thoughts on parenting, commenting that, 'I think that like tiger mum is, it now not only apply to the Asian people, but also the Western people as well'.

Other complexities were evident in the Bidhura case studies particularly in terms of the impact of policies of school choice and selectivity. Lulu, Mei-Lin, and their mothers, represent different experiences of selective streaming, different approaches to schooling and different outcomes, but within the same demographic and educational context. This contrast suggests that, while schools exist in particular educational cultures, the pedagogies families put in place, and their congruence with institutional pedagogies of schools and tutoring centres, shape children's futures significantly. Neither Mei-Lin nor Lulu 'know' their future, but their parents' different approaches to educational 'cultivation' produce quite different orientations to scholarly achievement. The degree to which these are affected by ethnicity and SES are similarly variable.

The profiles of Samuel and Meera and their families at Alinta also vividly illustrate the diversity of approaches to education found within a school community. The two families created very different home environments in relation to their children's education, with a seemingly more strategic approach in Meera's case, comprising more structured educational activities, including tutoring and homework, and strict control of screen time. In part this reflected the family's dissatisfaction with the perceived low academic standard and workload prevalent at Alinta. In the case of Samuel, Angela's routine monitoring of homework completion was accompanied by a much heavier emphasis on sport and free time, including much less regulated screen time. However, Angela's comments about the holistic benefits of sport, her considered commentary on the education cultures of other Alinta parents, and her family's careful decision-making about high schools indicate an investment in education and a form of concerted cultivation that may not appear as calculated as that found in families like Meera's, but is also not as relaxed as Samuel's carefree persona may suggest. In fact, it could be argued that Samuel's family performs an *ideological* commitment to a 'natural growth' style of parenting. However, unlike in Lareau's framework, this form of 'natural growth' parenting is heavily supported by middle-class resources, such that while appearing relaxed, ultimately enables children's acquisition of cultural capital that shores up their educational advantage. In contrast, Meera's educational success is the product of much more deliberate and targeted activity, reflecting her family's comparative lack of knowledge and comfort with local systems, despite the advantages associated with their high SES and no simple result of Asian tiger parenting.

Conclusion

Conclusion

This research set out to examine the impacts of Asian migration on public education in the NSW schooling system and the perceptions of teachers, parents and students regarding these impacts. The project included an examination of the growing presence of tutoring centres and selective programs, which are often seen as connected to these impacts, and the practices undertaken by families in relation to these institutions and programs. In public discourse, the growing numbers and spread of families from East and South Asian backgrounds – particularly from China and India – have been seen as contributing to an increasingly competitive schooling system through an emphasis on selective streaming within schools and commercial tutoring centres in schools' local communities, often framed about concerns around the rise of the 'tiger parent' (Ho, 2020; Watkins & Noble, 2013). Yet this research has cautioned against reducing complex social and educational phenomena to single factors such as ethnicity or SES because of the ways such factors intersect and because things such as ethnicity and SES are always mediated through situated practices. Moreover, focusing on 'Asian migrants' tells only half the story given the long-term, systemic focus in NSW on selective programs, to which many migrant parents are responding. Moreover, the report has shown that the emphasis on tutoring centres misses the point that the use of such services is best considered as part of the range of parental efforts that go into enhancing a child's educational future, especially when contextualised by an understanding of the 'gamble' involved in moving to another country, another education system. When this report speaks of 'Asian migration', then, it is referring to a complex ensemble of people coming from and arriving in diverse contexts, not homogenous ethnic groups defined by a single set of values or beliefs. That complex can only be understood through the practices people employ in the educational and social circumstances they find themselves in.

Drawing on a survey of parents, on interviews with key participants, on classroom, home and tutoring centre observations, on students' time use diaries and on P&C focus groups, the research aimed to obtain a broad and deep picture of the contexts, practices and differing perspectives regarding these issues. The term education cultures – or the wider set of relations and organisations in which parents make their decisions – was used to reflect the view that neither classroom practices, school programs, parental choices, homework practices nor tutoring centres' approaches exist in isolation, but interact in particular local and institutional contexts. Departmental policies that put high achieving students into specialised programs have three significant consequences that speak to the importance of context: they move those students within and between schools; they encourage other institutions to grow which facilitate entry into those programs; and they encourage forms of educational competition and marketing amongst institutions. These compel many parents to make strategic choices and to undertake their own practices in pursuit of their child's academic success.

This research has demonstrated that while parents typically want the best for their child, there is enormous variation in how they perceive what 'best' means, how they see their role in making that happen, what practices they undertake to help realise it educationally, and what capacities they have to undertake those practices. The parental labour involved in schooling varies enormously, in terms of what parents do and how and where they do it, particularly since it may entail practices both within and outside the school setting. This varies in terms of ethnicity, SES and the contexts or education cultures in which those actions occur. Parental participation in a school's formal organisation – such as P&C committees – has historically been low in most schools, as the survey showed in Chapter 3. Most parents see their school involvement primarily in terms of formal and informal parent-teacher meetings or occasional contributions where needed.

The interviews suggested a different story of participation outside the school, particularly among parents of educationally successful children (who were, through the design of the research, well represented in this project), and especially among parents of East and South Asian backgrounds. In Chapter 5 and in the case studies in Chapters 8 and 9 there were many examples of parents who often undertook extraordinary efforts to augment their child's educational experience, through what were characterised as family pedagogies. These entailed a range of practices, some of which were strictly pedagogic work, while others were forms of student management, resourcing, information-getting and involvement that also had a pedagogic effect. These could include decisions regarding school and suburb choice, moving homes (and jobs) to be in an area parents see as offering better educational options. It could also involve taking a more active role in the life of the school and a child's classroom, often to understand an unfamiliar system better and sometimes to take part in it. It could entail closer supervision of and participation in students' homework, creating a dedicated working space for them, buying commercially available resources or designing homework activities. Importantly, much of this parental work is invisible to the school. It could also involve sending a child to extracurricular programs such as sport, music lessons, art workshops and language classes etc. It is important to stress the variety of these tasks to ensure that attendance at tutoring centres and the fostering of ambitions for selective programs are recognised as aspects of, but not the only elements of, parental strategies for educational advancement.

Yet the enormous amounts of time and effort invested by parents and by students (as evidenced across Chapters 5-9) are not neutral processes of individual advancement. The research has also argued for examining the relationship between these family pedagogies and broad social factors, but also how these broad factors are always mediated through specific practices. It is common to dismiss the use of tutoring centres or the obsession with selective classes with simplistic claims about the dangers of educational competitiveness, but these arguments miss the empirical complexity of the who, why and where of parental strategies, especially for migrant parents. Moreover, much public discussion has reduced these strategies to being an 'Asian' phenomenon (as expressed amongst teachers and principals, parents and tutoring staff in Chapters 4-6). This ignores both the systemic contexts in which parents are acting and the intersection of ethnicity with other social factors. The importance of SES often drops out of the discussions – focusing on Asian parents – yet SES has a huge impact on family pedagogies, and for obvious reasons: some groups, such as those in educated, higher SES professions have the cultural, social and economic capital to successfully implement various practices to augment their children's educational opportunities.

The project drew on what Lareau (2003) has called concerted cultivation, where parents seek to augment their child's educational capacities, in contrast to what she calls the natural growth model, where parents limit their intervention. Concerted cultivation is crucial to what elsewhere is referred to as the production of a scholarly habitus (Watkins & Noble, 2013), or the ways of doing and knowing well suited to educational endeavour. While Lareau sees this distinction in terms of a simple division between White middle-class families and African-American working-class families, this research has suggested a more complex picture. First, it has suggested that SES interweaves with ethnicity in several ways. Asian migration has fuelled certain types of practices not because they are quintessentially 'Asian', but because many Asian migrants of the last two decades have come as skilled migrants from educated, professional backgrounds (compared with, for example, many of those from Middle Eastern countries who came as labour migrants, refugees or for family reunion). While many migrants share a lack of familiarity with Australian education and a lack of linguistic competence necessary for educational success, those of a higher SES, professional and

educated backgrounds tend to have the capacity and resources to address those issues, and the desire to do so. As Chapter 5 suggested, some parents of migrant backgrounds engage in strategies – such as buying commercial resources – but without the necessary capacities to realise their benefits. Second, the research also found the prevalence of a version of the natural growth model amongst well-off Anglo parents who had an ideological opposition to homework, tutoring and selective streaming, but also had the cultural or financial resources to help their child develop a scholarly habitus or succeed otherwise.

These broader factors also include what has been referred to as education cultures. It was clear, for example, that the higher SES schools were in an area in which there was a significant presence of highly ranked government schools (several with selective programs), private schools and many well-reputed tutoring businesses. The social (and particularly ethnic and sometimes transnational or diasporic) networks that many parents of Asian backgrounds relied on were crucial in providing advice on the choices parents were making, such as what was the 'best school'. In contrast, the schools in the lower SES area had fewer high achieving and private schools, even when they also had numerous tutoring centres. Many parents relied heavily on an educational bookshop for resources and many (especially those of Middle Eastern backgrounds) drew on ethnic networks and less educated diasporas that were more local in orientation. The high SES schools and their communities were more dramatically shaped by a local ethos of achievement (even if there were those who resisted it) while an ethos of community was more typical at the low SES schools (with the parents and students in the OC program at Acacia the exception). In other words, the ethnic capital (i.e. these social networks) of the high SES area was generally more geared to educational success than the ethnic capital of the low SES area.

As part of this local context where parents enact their decisions, family pedagogies may or may not align with the practices and philosophies found in schools and shaped by departmental polices – what have been called institutional pedagogies. At one extreme, some parents undertook 'research' to establish what kinds of curriculum and pedagogy were in play in their children's classroom (see Chapter 9) and adjusted their familial practices accordingly, to either complement or compensate. Home-school congruence is typically touted as a key factor in students' success, but this depends entirely on the practices in specific contexts rather than being about some generalising abstraction of 'what schools do', because classrooms can be highly structured or not, well managed or not, teacher-centred or not, homework-oriented or not. Yet schools are not the only sites of institutional pedagogies. Parental choices may include sending the child to tutoring centres which function as parallel educational organisations. These organisations also implement their own forms of pedagogy which may or may not align with those in the school or the home. Some parents, such as Nanxi at Bidhura PS made informed choices about the appropriateness of teaching practices in school and tutoring and acted accordingly. Others trusted that, while tutoring centre pedagogy may not necessarily be effective for producing students who could engage in 'problem solving', it was good preparation for exam procedure. The inter-relatedness of these three domains of practice – that is, institutional pedagogies of the school and the tutoring centre, and family pedagogies in the home – was of central concern to this project. Importantly, further research needs to unpack these broad conceptions of institutional and family 'pedagogies' into specific practices, and explore how they complement or conflict with each other, especially given that each learning context will always contain multiple pedagogic forms.

As well as considering the inter-relation of these domains in local education cultures, the research sought to understand the rationale for parental practices. A key finding of the project was the

identification of a number of learning gaps which underlay the sense amongst parents that their children were 'missing out' on better schooling experiences which thus impeded their future education and life chances. Chapter 5 showed that many parents of migrant backgrounds – even those with professional occupations – were deeply anxious that their lack of understanding of the education system or their, or their child's, lack of linguistic and cultural capital disadvantaged their children. Intensifying the 'risky' nature of the migratory gamble, many parents were thus motivated to do 'that little bit extra' to compensate for any shortfalls their child experienced. This was also clear in Chapter 6, which demonstrated that demand for tutoring centres was partly fuelled by these parental anxieties.

There was also a strong sense amongst parents, and echoed by teachers, that education in Australia was uneven – that there were places where a better education could be gained and this compelled many parents to strive to achieve access to these places for their children. This sense of a gap had various sources. On the one hand, many migrants felt that education in the homeland (whether this was based on their, their children's or relatives' experiences) had higher expectations of students or put greater effort into disciplining students and supervising their work. This was true even among parents who were critical of aspects of their homeland's education system (whether this be India or China, for example) and among those who were generally in support of their child's schooling.

This perception of a 'gap' also came from their sense that programs premised on academic selectivity – OCs, GAT and extension programs and selective high schools – all offered better opportunities for students. Chapter 5 indicated that while these perceptions could come from within their own social and ethnic networks, it could also come from within the education system itself, as parents could see or hear that there were significant differences between mainstream, OCs and GAT classes within their own school, or through knowing the rankings of other schools with OCs or of high schools with selective programs, comments that were echoed by principals and teachers. In other words, the system itself and the institutional pedagogies it endorsed helped produce the desire for specialist offerings rather than being inbuilt into the culture of the homeland. It was also clear in interviews with teachers, parents and students, that there was a lived experience of academic challenge and extension found in selective programs that was not necessarily available in mainstream classes, and one that was valued by students and parents involved in these.

Embedded in this sense of a gap were deep concerns about, and strong criticisms of, mainstream schooling in Australia, even among those who had praise for many aspects of Australian education. Indeed, many of the things that were praised – Australian classrooms are very relaxed, welcoming places, and they encourage students to think critically and 'solve problems' – were the flipside of the issues parents raised – they don't push students enough, there is not enough homework, there is too much play, they don't set enough work, they don't use textbooks, they don't test enough, they don't provide enough (critical) feedback, there is not enough discipline, and so on. Many of these criticisms were voiced in Chapter 5, and Chapter 4 showed that some teachers were aware of these issues, yet it was only in the OCs and GAT classes or selective high schools that parents felt these concerns were addressed, again fuelling the desire for their child to find a place in these.

One of these 'gaps' revolves around the recurring concern regarding homework. As Chapter 2 indicated, this has long been a contentious issue in Australian education, within schools and among education bureaucrats and researchers. Part of the 'common sense' of teaching has

become the oft-repeated claim that ‘research says’ that homework is of little or no value in the primary years, and in fact is dangerous because it takes time away from other things, like play. It is curious that many teachers continue to voice this (see Chapter 4) while many parents (though not all) continue to believe, and practise, the opposite. It is especially significant that parents of educationally successful students largely continue to devise, enforce and supervise their children’s homework while many schools have homework policies that discourage homework, where it is optional and so often isn’t done. The survey (Chapter 3) and interview data in this project (Chapters 4-9) would tend to reinforce the idea that students who succeed academically in schools tend to do more homework than those who don’t do well academically, and that this ‘extra effort’ is a reason for their success, not simply a consequence of it. These students who succeed educationally also tend to do more extracurricular activities, such as music, extra programs and even sport. Parents of these academically successful children are more likely to talk of the importance of routine, repetition, practice, habit, discipline and supervision. While many of these are central to other domains, such as music and sport, they have often become dirty words in discussions of schoolwork and homework. It is unsurprising, then, that many of these parents have turned to tutoring centres because they are seen, rightly or wrongly, to provide the things that are seen to be lacking in mainstream education. They help bridge the gaps.

As Chapter 4 suggested, many teachers were critical of homework and consequently many schools have increasingly lax homework policies. Some also felt that that schools should not compete with tutoring centres who did set homework, and which was often valued more by students. In effect, the consequence of this is that homework has been effectively outsourced, forcing those parents who want it to seek it elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, some tutoring centres ran homework classes. Despite voicing criticisms of homework, many teachers also conceded that this homework was one of the reasons behind the educational success of tutored students, suggesting the possibility that the absence of homework in some schools works to reinforce educational inequity. There were several examples of parents who had designed their own homework to make up this shortfall, a process that obviously advantages those of a mid to high SES with greater levels of educational attainment themselves.

While the research was never intended to be a focused evaluative study of tutoring centres – and, in fact, there was resistance amongst many tutoring businesses to scrutiny – the project was interested in considering the impacts of the rise of the tutoring industry in schools of different ethnic and SES composition. The research produced several insights into the place of tutoring in contemporary schooling, drawing on perspectives on tutoring from different participants – principals, teachers, parents, students and tutoring providers themselves. Of course, the research demonstrated that there were varying, and conflicting, views on the role and value of tutoring amongst teachers, tutoring staff, parents and students. Nevertheless, its findings reflected the pervasive and normalised use of tutoring, especially in relation to students in OCs and GAT programs, and those aiming for selective high schools.

Often perceived to result from the pressures put on schooling by parents of East and South Asian backgrounds, producing an intensely competitive educational environment, tutoring of course has had a long and often invisible presence in school communities. While there has been a significant expansion, commercialisation and routinisation of tutoring practices, this has as much to do with the increasing focus on selectivity (GAT programs, OCs and selective high schools) in the NSW system.

The common view of tutoring centres emanating from this perception is a room full of students laboriously racing through standardised worksheets. This is prevalent, but it exists amongst a range of tutoring practices. As interviews with parents, students and tutoring staff suggest, tutoring is taken up for various reasons and has various forms and aims. However, it is true to say that a traditional focus on remediation in tutoring, typically involving a one-on-one relation and a needs-based approach related to the school's curriculum has been largely supplanted by a highly structured, large group format defined by a commercial business model and where mass produced or imported standardised materials are used. It is also true to say that while a focus on Maths and English remains central, there is also an increasing emphasis on test preparation aimed to service the growing demand for places in selective programs. As several participants attested, the prescriptive style of some providers is highly identifiable, but this is subject to criticism within the industry as well as by principals and teachers.

Criticism is also directed at a range of other concerns with the contemporary tutoring industry: at the broadest level, the lack of regulation of the array of practices and organisations; the uneven quality of materials; their distance from and competition with school curriculum; the unskilled and inexperienced workforce found in many tutoring organisations; and the prevalence of poor pedagogical practices. While teachers expressed concerns that tutoring was undermining mainstream schooling, this didn't capture the central dilemma for public schooling: that, as schools turned away from having streamed classes in the mainstream, the parents of educationally successful students increasingly felt their children's needs were inadequately served in mainstream classes. The programs that Departments of Education, especially in NSW, promoted to stem that dissatisfaction – presented as focusing on high potential and giftedness – produced more segregated forms of streaming, and encouraged the growth of a poorly overseen tutoring industry that presented as enhancing students' chances of entering these programs.

Despite many concerns and criticisms, the demand for tutoring services continues to grow. As the interviews demonstrate, this is because they address various parental concerns and student needs, especially, but not exclusively, amongst many mid and high SES migrant families, who have enormous investments in ensuring the educational success of their children. It is important to stress, however, that while this growth is often seen to be a result of waves of migrants from East and South Asia, who have imported these practices into Australian schooling, it is as much to do with the increasingly competitive, stratified nature of education systems – especially in NSW, where there has been a proliferation of selective high schools, OCs and GAT programs. This competitive selectivity produces the anxieties of 'missing out', compelling more parents to opt for tutoring centres which feed off these anxieties, as Chapters 5 and 6 suggested.

The research showed that many parents, particularly those with heightened expectations for their children's educational futures, were increasingly opting for tutoring to bridge the gaps they perceived in school education, including inadequate discipline, feedback, academic challenge and test preparation. In a sense, key aspects of what were once central to the classroom experience have been outsourced to tutoring centres, as with homework. A consequence of this is the issue of the possible discordance between the institutional pedagogies of tutoring providers and those of mainstream schooling and the pedagogies of the home. However, there is no single pedagogical approach within the tutoring industry, just as there is no singular approach within the classroom, but the diversity of forms, practices and philosophies does complicate the usual language of home-school congruence. Moreover, the lack of regulation of the industry and its multiple services not only gives rise to a proliferation of choices for families but also leaves parents the task of managing the discordances. Again, those parents with significant and relevant

stocks of cultural capital are better placed to navigate this landscape of choice, while many low SES and migrant families struggle in the face of this complexity.

A key starting point for this research was a concern with the persistent role of culturally essentialist explanations of certain educational practices and outcomes, contributing to the ethnicisation of educational achievement (Watkins & Noble, 2013). It is one thing to use categories of ethnicity to make sense of complex social phenomenon. This report has deployed these categories, but it has gone to some lengths to point out that commentary needs to be careful with such terms; and it has argued that ethnicity needs to be seen in interaction with SES and other factors, such as migration regimes, the education cultures in which people operate, the socio-structural forces which shape institutions and industries, and so on. Participants were asked about the extent to which questions of ethnicity affected what they saw as causes of educational success, school involvement and demand for school and non-school programs, and legitimately recounted the prominent role that families of Chinese and Indian backgrounds had in these practices – which was the issue at the heart of this project. But many participants – especially teachers, parents and tutoring staff, though students themselves much less so – went beyond this connection and made certain claims pointing to the 'cultural' origins of the phenomenon under consideration.

Principals, teachers and tutors, for example, talked about how Asians value education more; that the Chinese having to be the best academically was a 'cultural thing', that tutoring was a 'Chinese phenomenon' that the Anglo kids didn't indulge in. Parents themselves, even those of Chinese or Indian backgrounds, bought into this framing of the issues: references to 'the Asian culture' or the 'cultural mentality' of Asian parents, and so on. This report has tried to emphasise several key things: first, that most of the Asian parents interviewed were educated professionals, so that SES plays just as significant a role, if not more so, than ethnicity in determining such 'values'. Second, as the survey data show, and the interview data illustrate, particular practices are distributed throughout a population: it is not that Asians do this and Anglos and Arabs don't, but that parents of some ancestries are more or less likely to engage in some practices. Third, there are other aspects in play, such as the combined effect of limited cultural knowledge of an education system and the 'gamble' for a child's future typical of new arrivals (Dreby & Stutz, 2012). Fourth, parents' practices aren't imported unchanged from a homeland but exist in response to the institutional pressures found in the country of arrival, what has been referred to as the education culture of a place, which is quite different to an 'ethnic' sense of culture.

This point is laboured here because the lazy use of culturally essentialist explanations of complex social factors has become manifest in a particular trope of the 'pushy' Asian as the typical 'helicopter' parent. As one interviewee said, 'Asian parents like to push' – and this was seen both in terms of 'pushing' their children and being demanding of teachers (for extra work, feedback, advice, etc). This is important to address because multicultural education has tended to reproduce such essentialising categories in the name of identity politics, but a consequence has been that educational 'problems' tend to be constructed in these terms (Watkins & Noble, 2021). It is also important to address because there is an important distinction to be made between parents who 'push' their children to succeed educationally and people who are 'pushy' in their dealings with school. This reflects an ongoing tension in education systems between a rhetoric that promotes community participation in schools and a reality that this can be an onerous burden because of the challenges of negotiating diverse and competing constituencies in a school community, their expectations and what impacts this has on established teaching practices (Kalantzis et al., 1990, pp. 57-67).

Despite the praise directed towards the educational quality found in GAT, OC and selective high school programs, and despite the enormous efforts many parents put into trying to secure their children places in those programs, there was also significant diversity in attitudes to selectivity; indeed, there was a degree of ambivalence towards many aspects of them, or at least towards the consequences of these programs within local contexts. Some parents and teachers worried about the degree of competitiveness introduced, both within their school and between schools, furthered by the growth of the tutoring industry and the reliance on mechanisms for ranking schools. There was a resulting concern regarding the degree of separation, or even segregation in some eyes, between students in mainstream and selective classes, and the encouragement of a sense of being special or different amongst students who find themselves in these programs. Likewise, there was a view, amongst some parents and teachers, that this competitiveness was resulting in a problematic emphasis on a narrow understanding of education, and even a narrowing of what counted as academic skills and knowledges, and undermining classroom practices (Ho, 2026). To this end, such programs were seen by some as producing or exacerbating degrees of inequality even if they realised the potential of students who benefitted from them. These are all claims that demand further investigation.

Challenges and Opportunities

This report has suggested that there is a compelling need to consider more closely the complex, interwoven phenomena around migration, parenting practices, selectivity and tutoring: rather than see this simplistically as driven by particular groups of migrants, there is a need to reintroduce a stronger sense of the impacts of SES alongside a more nuanced understanding of the stakes at play in some migrants' decisions to move home. These processes also have to be seen in terms of wider structural emphases in educational systems and the dynamics of local educational cultures. It is only by taking this more complex, socially informed approach to educational issues that teachers and parents can, together, provide the best educational futures for all children.

To this end, while this report does not seek to offer specific recommendations, it does seem important to end with a list of challenges facing the NSW schooling system evident in this report which require either departmental action or further research:

- There needs to be more extensive consideration of the role of parents in NSW schools, beyond the lip service of 'community engagement', which addresses the very real challenges this poses and acknowledges the enormous efforts many parents put into their children's education and the enormous diversity of approaches taken by parents. This needs to be better acknowledged and understood by schools – they need to pay more attention to the makeup of their communities.

- There needs to be a systematic evaluation of the place of selective programs in the schooling system, beyond their role in the marketing of educational choice; particularly OCs, which get almost no attention because of the focus on selective high schools and yet seem to attract teaching expertise and resources possibly at the expense of mainstream schooling. There is surprisingly little systematic research into the teaching practices in these classrooms.

- This evaluation of selective programs should involve a stronger engagement with the consequences of such programs for educational equity, and particularly the role of selective programs in intensifying a zero-sum competitiveness and segregating school communities, and in fuelling the tutoring industry.

- It also involves a serious re-evaluation of the role and quality of homework and its place in a wider sense of students' educational experience, beyond the current flawed 'common sense' that 'research says' it is of no value in the primary years.

- There needs to be greater effort put into examining and regulating the tutoring industry, in terms of the quality of its staff, its curriculum and pedagogy, and its relation to school practices.

- Lastly, there needs to be a reconsideration of the consequences of ethnicisation in educational discourse, and the role that multicultural education policies have unwittingly played in the fostering of reductive and essentialised understandings of the relation between ethnicity and educational achievement.

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