Testing times: selective schools and tiger parents

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It's the 3pm pick-up at my daughter's inner-city primary school - and the chat's turned, unexpectedly, to race. A Chinese-Australian friend is coaching her son for the competitive NSW selective high schools test. The other mums are rattled.

"Coaching is cheating," declares one, a selective-school graduate from the 1980s. "I never swotted for Hornsby Girls - they streamed us in year 6, and we just got in."

A second mum, an architect, asks: "Why would you take away your kid's childhood to drill him every week? If he's smart, and the test works, he wouldn't have to cram." Another, an academic, announces: "My daughter won't go to a selective even if she gets in. They're 98 per cent Asian, full of kids who rote-learn. I'd hate her to be [part of] such a tiny minority."

The "minority" is Anglo, of course - and for anyone whose kid sits the NSW test on March 12 or the Victorian test on June 14, it's the elephant in the room. If you value learning and are opposed to - or priced out of - the "choice" of a private education, selective schools are the holy grail. There are 21 in NSW (with another 26 "partially selective" schools offering a selective stream), and four in Victoria. The 4188 NSW kids who won a place this year (out of the 13,930 who tried) will save their families up to $180,000 in private school fees, and enjoy an elite education that enhances their chances of getting into the university course of their choice.

The ambivalence about selective schools stems from the fact that enrolments, in our major cities at least, are overwhelmingly dominated by children of Asian backgrounds - "75 to 95 per cent" of whom are coached, according to the CEO of the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA), Mohan Dhall. In 2013, according to the My School website, Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) students in Sydney's top selective schools comprised an estimated 97 per cent of enrolments at James Ruse Agricultural High, 88 per cent at Hornsby Girls, and 90 per cent at North Sydney Boys. In Victoria, the imbalance was almost as pronounced: with 83 per cent LBOTE students at Melbourne High, and 87 per cent at Suzanne Cory and MacRobertson Girls.

Is this an indication that extracurricular coaching, from kindergarten to university, works? One large US study released last year, by Amy Hsin of New York's Queens College and Yu Xie of the University of Michigan, found it was the sheer work ethic of Asian-Americans (including cramming and coaching), rather than higher intellect, that accounted for their academic superiority. But a more recent study, by the University of California, of more than 600 middle- and high-school students in China debunked the idea that strict parenting and coaching produces high-achieving kids. And the Chinese government, troubled by high suicide and anxiety rates among its youth, is now struggling to move away from its pressurised, exam-based system.

It's no easier to find clear answers in Australia. The Department of Education & Communities (DEC), which runs the selective-school entrance exam in NSW, does not collect data on coaching, and does not endorse it. Andrew Fielding, the department's director of business systems, and a passionate advocate for selective schools, describes the test as "similar to IQ tests - they're supposed to be tests you can't prepare for. Going to a coaching college doesn't necessarily mean you'll understand them."

The Australian Council for Educational Research, which designs the tests for NSW and Victoria, categorically states it "does not advocate coaching as preparation for sitting selection tests."

And yet, according to Dhall, coaching in Sydney and Melbourne is now endemic. "Tiger-mothering", the results-focused parenting style immortalised by Chinese-American Amy Chua's best-seller Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, is thriving in Australia. Parents are cancelling play dates and school camps to give their kids a competitive edge. More than 3000 tutoring businesses in NSW and Victoria cater to the demand, less than eight per cent of which are registered with the ATA. Part of a booming tuition industry that Dhall values at around $2.6 billion, coaching colleges pull in $200 million-$400 million a year.
The two biggest colleges in Australia, James An and Pre-Uni New College, target hopeful parents with impressive stats. Pre-Uni's July 2014 newsletter boasted that 1033 students won places in 35 selective and partially selective NSW schools. Dhall says the claims of schools can be difficult to verify, given figures can be doubled up between centres - and, he notes, colleges do not publish how many students fail.

Curious if my daughter meets the DEC benchmark for a "G&T" (gifted and talented) child, I download a sample test. There's one 20-minute writing task, and three 40-minute multiple-choice tests, with 60 "general ability" questions, 45 "reading" questions, and 40 maths brain-teasers like this:

*Con opened his book and laid it down. He noticed that when the two page numbers showing in his book were multiplied together, the answer was 1190. The right-hand pages had odd numbers. The left-hand page number was:*

A 30.

B 34.

C 36.

D 40.

The answer is B: 34. I'm spooked. So is my kid. No 10-year-old short of an Einstein-level genius could crack 40 of these in 40 minutes. But the data void between the test administrators and colleges leaves me - and thousands like me - without a roadmap. We must either accept anecdotal evidence that "tiger mothering" works and throw our kids at the mercy of the coaching jungle, or opt for one of the admirable but underfunded public comprehensive high schools. Joining what academic Christina Ho has called the "white flight" of middle-class parents to costly private schools does not appeal.

When I confess to a wealthy friend that I'll unleash my inner tiger mum if it gives my kid a chance, she's horrified. Her idea of G&T is strictly alcoholic. "Do you really want her to be one of those grade-chasing automatons?" she asks.

**Sydney Girls High**, established in 1883, is the oldest girls' selective school in Australia. A gracious brownstone nestled beside Sydney Boys High in inner-city Moore Park, it is bordered by the most speed-camera-heavy strip of bitumen in Sydney. As I pull in at 10 km/h, I remind myself that these schools' modest buildings house 2121 of the smartest kids in the country. The cameras aren't collecting revenue: they're protecting the national brains trust.

Sydney Girls High principal Andrea Connell has educated G&T students for more than 20 years. She is warm, witty and firm: the ideal mentor for a precocious adolescent girl. Connell walks me through the corridors at a brisk clip - and every rumour I've heard about hot-housed, brainiac kids bites the dust. Sure, most students appear to be of Chinese, Indian or Arabic descent, but their accents are broad Aussie and they're lively, individual and thriving.

En route to the library, we pass a crew-cut girl playing Minecraft - "She's finished her monitor duties, I can't stop her," Connell says with a smile - and stop to chat to the bright-eyed leader of the Social Justice Committee. She enthusiastically describes their campaign for the advocacy group Not For Sale, where girls eliminated everything from their wardrobes potentially linked to child labour. "The girls feel a social responsibility," explains Connell. "It's in the bricks and mortar. They know how fortunate they are."

The Ethel Turner Library, named after the Old Girl who wrote *Seven Little Australians*, has well-stocked shelves and an impressive array of magazines. Beside the latest *Economist*, gangly year 7s curl around lapsops. "How's the ethics project going?" asks Connell, and two girls speak passionately about WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. "We have a strong parent base to draw from," Connell says proudly. For the ethics project, the dads providing the expertise included ABC reporter Matt Peacock and Dr Karl Kruszelnicki.

Connell values creative intelligence, and in the 1990s successfully lobbied for writing to be part of the selective schools test. She doesn't know how many girls are coached for it, and doesn't see it as her business. She rejects the idea that kids get in on cramming alone. "If it was really about that, you'd see a great cleaving of how girls learn here, and we don't see that. We have girls from the Western model who are exceptionally gifted - they love learning as much as girls from other backgrounds." The school's proximity to two universities means many have academic parents, which helps, Connell acknowledges. But her catchment area also "covers hundreds of postcodes. We've had a girl come from Wollongong. We've had girls whose parents are silks, and girls from one-room flats out west. It's everything."

The vast catchment area for Sydney Girls and Sydney Boys is hotly contested. With nearby inner-city
comprehensives at capacity, local parents are pushing for in-area places. In 2013, Sydney Boys principal Kim Jagger proposed that 30 of his places go to boys living within five kilometres, and sports and leadership skills be made part of the selection criteria. The DEC rejected his proposal. Regional selectives, however, are not plagued by the same anxieties. David Dietz, principal of Smiths Hill, Wollongong, says only 15 per cent of his students are LBOTE, and "coaching is not the big issue it is in Sydney. Parents know there are great public high schools in the area. The attitude is, 'If they get in [to Smiths Hill], great, but if not, there are plenty of options.'"

In the 4-unit maths class at Sydney Girls, a global village of laughing girls, three wearing hijabs, hand out papers. With 82 per cent of her students from non-Anglo families, does Connell face any challenges? She's upbeat: "On the first day of year 7, we take the parents aside for morning tea. Our community liaison person speaks Mandarin, she's a big personality. And she stands up and says, 'This is not China. The culture here is not smart-smart-smart, you-will-study. This is about connection and family. Your daughters will be doing lots of other things we think are important. Not doing them is not an option.'"

I ask Connell if the "Asianisation" of our top schools is a myth. "Fifty years ago, people were saying similar things about European ethnic groups," she replies. "It's a very negative phenomenon. It's creating enclaves that don't reflect the world we're living in. Sydney Girls, in its 132 years, is intricately linked to the history of NSW. The ethnic diversity has changed enormously. Welcome to the world, people."

Outside, on Cleveland Street, 4WDs speed east: private-school mums on their way to the 3pm pick-up.

**Kailin is a Chinese-Australian nurse** and single mum. Sydney Girls is at the top of her selective school wishlist. She has been sending her daughter, May, to a coaching college since she was six. May does an hour of piano every night, and on Sundays Kailin allows play dates. "One side of me wants her to be happy," Kailin says. "She's only 10. It's a beautiful age, and innocent. But she's a teenager soon. As a parent, you have to plan her future." That future does not include private schools because "people are too competitive over money."

Kailin lives with her parents in a large brick home in Sydney's western suburbs. Every night after dinner, the family plays basketball in the concrete yard. Kailin's mother was a Red Guard under Mao Zedong, her father an engineer. "They came from Beijing in the '80s. They had no money. They worked hard, eight days a week, from blue collar to white collar. They set up an embroidery factory with lots of staff. Now it's slow again, because everything is made in China."

After two decades in Sydney, Kailin's English is halting; at home, she speaks Mandarin. She seems shy and fragile, but when I ask if she's perhaps too tough on May, she's firm. "May is like a blank piece of paper: you have to colour her in. Even if she doesn't get into selective, coaching is good, because the normal school is too slow. When you rear a child, it's your responsibility. My parents looked after May so I could study. I will look after them when they are old. It's the cycle of life."

May runs in and smiles at Kailin: they're clearly close. Confucian filial piety is one reason Amy Chua's tiger mum can be hyper-demanding, yet still be loved. "Asians must study twice as hard as Aussies. It's the bamboo ceiling," Kailin sighs. "I want May to be a dentist, but she wants to do fashion. She hates blood, so she can't be a doctor. Definitely, she'll go to university. She'll have no boyfriend until year 12 finish."

I ask Kailin if she's happy with the coaching college. "If normal school did its job, I wouldn't have to give this big business money!" she says, angry. "Why can't all high schools be selective? Then we wouldn't be stuck with this system. If Aussies want to do coaching, they can!"

Coaching, to most Anglo mums I canvass, is a crime that sends you straight to bad-mum jail. Janet, a teacher on Sydney's relatively wealthy north shore, has tutored many children for the selective test, but sent her own to private schools. She rejects the DEC's claim that the test identifies the naturally bright. "It's definitely coachable," she insists. "Even the written component can be learnt. I was tutoring kids as young as seven; 95 per cent were Chinese, then Indian, then Russian. One girl's essay was plagiarised from Harry Potter. Another boy tried to charm me into writing a paper for him to memorise."

Rachel, a lawyer, is letting her son sit the test on his own steam, without coaching. "I have an Asian friend who says, 'Bring him to college, I won't tell anyone,'" she says. "But her son got into [inner-Sydney selective] Fort Street, and had a breakdown. I've interviewed these kids for work. Are they the most intelligent? No. You ask them an unscripted question and they go to pieces."

Janet agrees: "It's a results-at-all-costs mentality. The Chinese are very savvy at working the system. The knee-jerk reaction is that I'm being racist. But I'm talking about different cultural values."
Marie, a mum of three, rejects selective schools altogether. "What have we created? The pressure the kids go through! You need to be good at maths to get in. But does that mean you should be segregated from society? Selectives are just a way for the government to cover up its lack of funding for public education."

Rachel sums up the mood: "You can take your selective and shove it. The biggest gift you can give a kid is self-esteem. If kids are breaking down, you're not giving them the opportunity to thrive."

Self-esteem is at the heart of the apparent split between tiger mums and their Western sisters. A Western mum will typically nurture her kids' individuality and will preference "fun" over "work"; Chua's tiger mum makes hers do Suzuki and algebra, to arm them with confidence. Aida, an Indian doctor with an Anglo-Australian husband, has a foot in each camp: "I'm not really a tiger mum, because I'll let my kids fail. But I don't agree with permissive parenting. I like to instil discipline. If that includes forced lessons, I'll do it. Barack Obama had a tiger mum - she made him get up at 4am to do maths."

Aida's son is one of the few to get into Sydney Boys without coaching. But her 10-year-old daughter goes to college every week and does extra maths, cello and piano practice every night. "She's not gifted at maths, but she's faster since we started coaching. I'm experimenting with her because I'm curious to see if coaching is getting these kids in. It sounds racist, but I can't believe only Asian kids are intelligent. Selectives are skewed Asian because what it takes to pass the test suits their culture."

Aida wanted to study music, but chose medicine because her parents "worked too hard to see us squander our futures on Arts degrees. The expectation was, 'You must succeed' - they'd moved here for you. I haven't given my kids the same guilt. I wish they were more committed, but I can't force them." While she could afford to go private, Aida prefers selective schools because they are "tougher, more character-building. The trade-off for that kind of success is anxiety."

Anxiety is something she's seen first-hand: in the selective "opportunity class" Aida's son attended in years 5 and 6 (also hotly contested), he was "kicked and punched" for not being "Asian enough."

"Twenty-four out of 27 kids in his class were coached; only four were Caucasian. The worst bullies were the coached kids. They saw school as easy, coaching as the hard part. They ran amok. One kid sat the selective test and then didn't go to school for a week. He was sneaking home to play computer games. His parents didn't find out for five days."

In his first year at Sydney Boys, Aida's son struggled. She blames it partly on the school's massive catchment area. "The social side of the school is very different to a local school. There are very few boys living close by. They use the internet to communicate. My son was getting up at 4am to play World of Warcraft. His marks slid abysmally. I threatened him: 'If you don't move 30 places up the ladder, you don't deserve to be here. You can go to the local high school.' There was lots of yelling. Our local is reputed to be rough."

Now, with her daughter about to sit the selective schools test, Aida wonders if she'll thrive in an ethnically skewed demographic, but likes "the Asian approach to discipline". If her daughter fails, she worries about "putting her in a public school, without that culture of learning". She's suddenly exhausted. "I'm stuck between two worlds. I'm not sure what's right. I feel like we're in an experiment for which there's no control. We're operating blind, we're fools. I'm just doing my best."

Natalie, the receptionist at pre-university new College, cuts me off on the phone: "Don't talk. Listen. We give your kid coaching to get into selective school. All our tutors are uni-educated. First, we grade your child. Then we decide where he needs work. You want the holiday course?" "Can I watch a class, before I decide?" I ask. "No." I try again: "Do your tutors teach in English?" She laughs: "Of course! Maybe Asian faces, but we are all Aussie!"

Natalie migrated from Taiwan in 1982. When I arrive at Pre-Uni's Strathfield office, she's swiping credit cards for a line of Indian and Chinese dads. Fifty exuberant seven-year-olds run in, pulling snacks from rucksacks. I study some statistics, laminated on the wall. "Academic Success with Pre-Uni College" it declares under a heraldic crest: a notebook and pens wreathed in laurels.

After 10 minutes, the kids go back to class, and Natalie is free to chat. In person, she's friendly and direct. "I tell you why Pre-Uni is best in Australia: this year, we get 55 places in North Sydney Boys, 54 in Sydney Girls. Here, take flyers." The printouts are dense with timetables and fees. One term is $720, with extra tuition at $44 a class. The course Natalie is recommending is a gruelling two-week crammer: five days of coaching, then five days of selective tests. It costs $835.
Natalie's eldest daughter got into Sydney Girls; her younger two did not. She shrugs: "It's fate. My oldest is a teacher now. She was a good girl. Always stood up for old people on the train." I ask what parents do if their kids don't get in, and Natalie looks grave: "They say, 'Poor thing, he couldn't do it.' Then whole family moves to a suburb with good public school."

School-hopping is common, says Smith Hill principal Dietz, and the frenzy around coaching colleges is partly to blame: "Parents are sucked into the fear factor - if you don't coach your child, they won't get in; Our waiting list is filling fast! Fear is driving them to enrol."

The ATA's Dhall is also critical of the way some colleges target communities "who don't know their commercial rights. If there are 14,000 kids taking the test and 4000 get in, who is telling parents to have realistic expectations?"
But coaching can help, he concedes: "It reduces exam anxiety and enhances skills. The question is, does it improve their ability to think? Drills lead to close-mindedness. One girl was coached and came to me as well. Coaching had taught her to memorise. I re-ordered the format of a question, and she gave the same answer. She said I was the only person who had taught her to think."

The Pre-Uni flyer promises to "minimise errors" and "increase speed". I wish I could access some unbiased advice, but with the DEC only prepared to acknowledge coaching is a "choice", I'm on my own. The wall of silence, Dhall suspects, is because colleges "imply a failure in mainstream education. I don't agree there's a failure. What I see is parents saying, 'We need more education.' We need to bring this out so we can help parents make informed choices. We need teachers to say where coaching pushes over to stress and low self-esteem, where it's unhealthy. We need a dialogue."

As I sign up my daughter for one week at Pre-Uni, I feel like I'm betraying the core principle of the selective school: to educate the naturally gifted.

At Sydney Girls' open day, AIDA and I run into each other again. We're chaperoning our dazzled daughters through a wonderland of science and art. I wonder if she's also trying, for her kid's sake, not to appear too enthusiastic. A student spins a roulette wheel of questions and gives my daughter a Fantale for answering correctly. "Don't worry about the test," she says kindly. "I flunked maths but I aced the essay, because I love writing." My daughter looks relieved. Coaching has definitely improved her maths. But doing multiple-choice tests six hours a day, for a whole week of the holidays, is her new definition of torture.


This story was found at: http://www.theage.com.au/good-weekend/testing-times-selective-schools-and-tiger-parents-20150120-12kecw.html