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Shadow Education: Broadening and Deepening Research in the Field

# Undermining Classroom Teaching? Teachers' Perspectives on the Impact of Private Tutoring on School Education in Sydney, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The growth of private academic tutoring is having some profound effects on school education. Drawing on in-depth interviews with primary school teachers in Sydney, Australia, this paper examines teacher perspectives on how classroom teaching is impacted when large proportions of students receive private tutoring. While students' advanced knowledge gained through tutoring can have benefits in classroom environments, most teachers in this research emphasised negative impacts, especially in relation to student disengagement in class and the fostering of overly instrumental and narrow approaches to learning. As such, the teachers saw private tutoring as undermining classroom teaching in many ways. Yet while the teachers were generally critical of private tutoring, they did not always understand or acknowledge the reasons for students' participation in tutoring. For many students these reasons were rooted in an anxiety to secure a competitive advantage in an increasingly marketized education system. Teachers had different priorities, especially in relation to fostering critical and holistic thinking, but were in many ways stymied by the narrow, test-driven education system in which they worked. Their antipathy towards tutoring highlights the tensions between the stated values and goals of mainstream education, and the practical reality of competition and the test orientation that often preoccupies families and students.

## 1 | Introduction

The rapid growth of private academic tutoring around the world has raised many questions in relation to its impact on students' academic learning (Seo 2018; Zheng et al. 2020; Guo et al. 2020; Sun et al. 2020; Wiseman 2021) and their wellbeing and mental health (Zheng et al. 2020; Liang et al. 2022; Alam and Zhu 2024; Zhang and Liu 2025). Other foci have included the social impact of private tutoring in relation to educational inequality (Baker and LeTendre 2005; Zhang and Bray 2018; Bray and Kwo 2013). Less research has examined tutoring's impact on mainstream schooling, including daily classroom teaching. Questions include how school-based education changes when large proportions of students

undertake private tutoring, with a focus on positive and negative dimensions.

This paper examines teachers' perspectives on the impact of tutoring on school education, taking an Australian case study. Private academic tutoring in Australia has a long history, but its rapid expansion has been relatively recent, associated partly with the arrival of large numbers of highly educated migrants from Asia for whom private tutoring has been more normalised. The Australian Tutoring Association (ATA) has estimated that the private tutoring market is worth more than AUD 1 billion, with more than 50,000 tutors across the country (Australian Tutoring Association 2022). An estimated 17% of students receive private tutoring at some point during their schooling in Australia, with

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the figure rising to 25% in Sydney (C. Lee 2025). In some schools, the figure is much higher, as discussed below.

## 2 | Tutoring and the Marketisation of Education

The growth of tutoring across the globe has occurred as part of the marketisation of education, and fuels this marketisation. A 2025 UNESCO report (Bray 2025a, 15) stressed this point, with ‘shadow education’ being a form of ‘privatisation by default’. The growing focus on performance ranking, testing and selectivity has expanded the demand for private tutoring (Bray 2010; Aurini et al. 2013; Zwier et al. 2021; Dooley 2020). Tutoring has historically often been used as a remedial strategy by students who are struggling, and this remains common (J. Lee 2007; Baker et al. 2001; Heinrich et al. 2010). However, with a greater culture of competition emerging around schooling, the growth in tutoring globally involves extension, acceleration and test preparation, undertaken by ‘students who are already performing well and wish to maintain their competitive edge’ (Bray and Kwo 2013, 486). For example, many attend tutoring to learn subject content earlier than it is taught in schools (Dawson 2010; Jheng 2015; Liu and Bray 2020). Many of these students are high achievers, meaning that ‘students who often require individual assistance the least, actually receive the most’ (Kirby 2016, 9).

As such, tutoring can be seen as part of the ‘intensive parenting’ or ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau 2003) of middle-class families attempting to achieve competitive advantage for their children in a climate of ‘hyper-developmentalism’ in childhood (Ball 2010). More generally, the rise of private tutoring reflects the intensification of competition, uncertainty, and anxiety. The middle class ‘fear of falling’ (Ehrenreich 1989) requires stronger emphasis on qualifications and other forms of symbolic capital, meaning greater attention to education in all its forms.

In this culture, many families believe that relying only on schooling is insufficient for securing their children’s competitive edge. They may turn to tutoring to compensate for perceived weaknesses in school education, relating to curriculum, feedback, quality of teaching, teacher-student ratios, or poor infrastructure (Ghosh and Bray 2020). Some see tutoring as providing more detailed and explicit information and feedback compared to the more vague and generic feedback provided by schools (Sriprakash et al. 2016; Liu and Bray 2022).

Marketisation has also impacted on teachers’ behaviour, with some offering private tutoring alongside or instead of school teaching in order to maximise their incomes. Teachers may view entrepreneurial strategies as acceptable within neoliberal education environments (Gupta 2021). In countries where it is common for teachers to provide private tutoring, the growth of the latter may directly undermine schooling because teachers’ main income or motivation is attached to their tutoring (Bhorkar and Bray 2018; Liu and Bray 2020), and they may even deliberately omit some content in their school teaching in order to compel their students to pay for their private tutoring services (Dawson 2009; Jayachandran 2014).

Private tutors often follow different pedagogies to those found in schools. While the wide range of tutoring services on offer makes it difficult to generalise, as noted above, some tutors follow what Sriprakash et al. (2016) call a ‘visible pedagogy’, with more explicit instruction and feedback than that provided by classroom teachers, who in Australia typically follow a more student-centred approach.

Tutoring for exam preparation has grown particularly dramatically around the world, with many tutors marketing themselves as exam specialists. This is another aspect of tutoring that in many cultures, and especially in the lower grades, contrasts sharply with formal education. In comparison to school teachers, who generally are tasked with teaching their curricula in a more holistic way, tutors can choose to focus almost exclusively on exam skills and drilling in order to appeal to students’ immediate needs and their often utilitarian approach to learning (Yung 2020). Globally, tutoring tends to be more prevalent in countries whose schooling systems feature high-stakes tests, because these tests are associated with ‘intense competition for educational opportunities’ (Zwier et al. 2021, 413; see also Bray 2011; Bray and Lykins 2012; Zhang 2014). Zwier et al. (2021, 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’. As such, tutoring often peaks in periods immediately prior to tests, including end-of-school examinations (Bhorkar and Bray 2018).

Research on test-preparation tutoring has shown that many tutoring providers follow an ‘exam-cracking pedagogy’ (Punjabi 2020, 25) rather than teaching subject content or developing conceptual understanding. The emphasis is on exam techniques, shortcuts, strategy, speed, and familiarity with specific question types, commonly with many hours on repetitive practising of sample tests (Ho 2020; Punjabi 2020). In the case of some highly competitive admissions tests for placement in high achieving schools, families often see private tutoring as necessary because the difficulty of the tests exceeds what students encounter in the standard school curriculum. Exley (2020) has noted this for Korea, and the same is true in Australia. The format of tests, especially standardised multiple-choice tests, is also highly conducive to the methods of many tutoring companies (Exley 2020).

In Australia, test preparation tutoring, or coaching, particularly for school admissions tests, has expanded dramatically in recent years. It has been especially pronounced in New South Wales, where there is fierce competition for places in high achieving selective schools and opportunity classes.<sup>1</sup> The admissions tests for these schools and classes have created a proliferation of tutoring programs that sometimes begin 12 months or more prior to the test (Ho 2020). 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).

The growing significance and normalisation of private tutoring has changed the status of school education. When students receive private tutoring multiple times each week, they may view tutoring as their primary site of learning, particularly for subjects

where they are ahead of the mainstream curriculum. This can diminish the value they place on school learning (Punjabi 2020) and on their school teachers (Liu and Bray 2020; Yung 2020). As Burman and Miles (2020) argue, 'supplementary' education can decentre the 'settled' status of mainstream schooling and challenge the forms and functions of the mainstream. Indeed, school education may become the 'supplementary' or 'shadow education' of tutoring (Bray 2025b).

The devaluing of school education can create problems with attendance at school. 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 centres did not have laboratory facilities. A teacher interviewee remarked that, 'they would rather take tutoring than waste their time in school' (Ghosh and Bray 2020; see also Punjabi 2020). Absenteeism often peaks in the leadup to major exams, as students prioritise test preparation tutoring or coaching (Tansel 2013). In Myanmar, students often skip three or more months of school in order to prepare for the Matriculation exam (Liu and Bray 2020; Suante and Bray 2025). In some countries, families or tutoring companies have even bribed school authorities for students to be marked as present in school when they were attending tutoring (Bhorkar and Bray 2018; Bray 2009).

When students are present in school, they may be disengaged with classroom learning if they feel they have covered the content already in tutoring. Moreover, they may value the pedagogies of their tutors more than the approaches of their school teachers (Liu and Bray 2020). As such, students may use school time to complete tutoring work (Jheng 2015) or arrive too exhausted from their tutoring workload to focus well in school, even sleeping during class (Liu and Bray 2020).

Overall, the international literature on the impacts of tutoring on mainstream education demonstrates the many ways in which tutoring may be undermining schooling. The authority of schools and the expertise of teachers may be challenged by the growth of informal learning. Classroom teachers may therefore be expected to be wary of private tutoring. However, relatively little research has foregrounded the perspectives of teachers. This is the aim of this paper.

### 3 | Context and Methods

This paper draws on data from a larger project, titled *Schooling, Parenting and Ethnicity*<sup>2</sup> and focuses on interviews with 29 teachers from six public primary schools in Sydney. Three schools were in low SES (socio-economic status) areas in Western Sydney, and three in high SES areas in Northern Sydney.<sup>3</sup> Three had classes that catered for gifted and high-potential students, where entry was via a highly competitive admissions test, while the other three were comprehensive schools. However, all had culturally diverse student cohorts, with over half of each school's cohort coming from a language background other than English, including large numbers of students from East and South Asian migrant backgrounds. As we targeted schools with large numbers of students from migrant backgrounds, our findings cannot necessarily be

generalised to other schools in Sydney or Australia. However, in order to examine the impacts of tutoring and adjacent study cultures, it is useful to narrow the focus to the contexts where tutoring is more commonly used.

Interviews with teachers were semi-structured and covered many aspects of education, including their students' approaches to learning, social dynamics in their classrooms, selective schooling, school choice, homework, testing, and tutoring. In relation to tutoring, teachers were asked how many of their students received tutoring, for what purposes, and how they felt about tutoring generally. Interview data were thematically coded with the help of NVivo, and analysis was completed, compared, and discussed by multiple members of the research team.

The majority of our teacher participants were Year 5 teachers at the time of interview. Four of the teachers cited in this paper were teaching gifted classes at the time of interview, with the rest teaching mainstream classes. However, some mainstream class teachers had some experience of teaching gifted classes, either in their current schools or elsewhere. We also interviewed the principal of each school.

Our focus was on Year 5, the penultimate year of primary schooling, because this is the year when families generally start to focus on high school choice, and some prepare for high school admissions tests, including the selective schools placement test. In the state of New South Wales, almost 50 fully or partially selective high schools cater for high-achieving students (out of a total of over 400 public high schools (NSW Government 2024)). These public schools routinely dominate the annual Higher School Certificate leaderboards, outperforming even prestigious high-fee private schools. As such, gaining a place is highly competitive, and the admissions test is notoriously difficult, explaining why many students undertake private tutoring to help them prepare.

Within the six schools, we conducted a survey of parents with children in Years 3–6 ( $n = 590$ ). Of these parents, 18% had children in gifted classes, and the rest had children in mainstream classes. The parents were ethnically diverse, with three-quarters speaking a language other than English at home. Over half (59%) were from an Asian ethnic background (most commonly Chinese and Indian), 19% were from an Anglo-Australian background, 14% from a Middle Eastern background (most commonly Lebanese), and the remainder from a range of other migrant backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> The majority (65%) of migrants had arrived in Australia as skilled or business persons.

Survey results indicated that the proportion of students receiving private tutoring ranged from 23% to 59%, with the highest percentages in schools with the classes for gifted students. The survey asked respondents to identify the main reason their child received tutoring. The most common response (38%) was exam practice, for example the selective school test. Meanwhile, 37% stated that the main reason was extension (to obtain more advanced work for a subject). Only 20% attended primarily for remedial support (e.g., child struggling with a subject). This is important context for the analysis below. Teachers' criticisms of private tutoring were primarily related to tutoring for test preparation and extension (or acceleration),

rather than for remedial purposes. Given this, their comments may not be generalisable to contexts where remedial tutoring is more common.

Overall, our teacher participants were mostly critical of the tutoring that their students were engaged in. They reported a range of negative impacts of tutoring on learning in their classes. The most common criticism was that tutoring tended to follow a superficial or formulaic pedagogy that did not encourage deeper engagement or understanding. This, the teachers said, undermined their students' capacity for or inclination towards holistic or creative thinking. Another common criticism was that participation in private tutoring led some students to be more disengaged with school because they felt they had already learned the content and prioritized completing tutoring work over school homework. Teachers were also concerned when students were learning content in tutoring that was years ahead of the school curriculum, making it more difficult to cater for the wide range of levels in their classes. Finally, teachers felt that tutoring was causing exhaustion for some students, jeopardizing their engagement in school.

#### 4 | Benefits of Tutoring in the Classroom

While most comments from teachers about the impact of private tutoring were critical, some did acknowledge benefits. Students who attended tutoring developed skills in particular areas, especially where memorisation was important. As Georgia<sup>5</sup> (low SES school, mainstream class) explained,

...it helps them in certain areas. But I guess it's more of the rote-learned stuff. For example, timetables... kids that go to those classes are always, in any [classroom] games that we play or class activities, they're the ones that ace it every single time because they know them all off by heart. And it's those kinds of things that they get really good at.

Tutored students also developed skills in test-taking, which could be beneficial in saving teachers from having to cover this in class. As Emma (low SES school, gifted class) stated,

... it can help in a sense of, they're obviously very good at taking standardised tests. So I don't necessarily need to spend time going through that sort of thing and you know, just basic skills you need for test taking, they've already got that.

Most commonly, teachers expressed their support for remedial tutoring, to provide extra support to students struggling with a subject. As Elizabeth (high SES school, mainstream class) put it,

I think tutoring is helpful for those children that do need remedial support. If I'm not able to explain it in a particular way, the tutoring might be able to [cater] ... for their learning style, perhaps.

However, teachers noted that often tutoring was not for remedial purposes, but for extension and exam preparation (as noted in our survey results). These types of tutoring received much less support from teachers, for the reasons explained below.

#### 5 | Superficial Approach to Pedagogy

A common refrain among our teacher participants was that tutoring emphasised rote learning and a formulaic, superficial approach rather than deeper understanding. This meant that tutored students often prioritised quick solutions and could not always demonstrate understanding of processes. These criticisms applied particularly to Mathematics, the subject area most impacted by tutoring pedagogies. The following comments were typical of teachers' perspectives:

...they can do something, but they don't understand it  
(Emma, low SES school, gifted class).

...you might know all the formulas. But that doesn't necessarily mean you really understand it  
(Linda, low SES school, mainstream class).

...it's just like, moving them through content quickly, not the understanding part of it  
(Vaani, high SES school, gifted class).

...a lot of them also have a robotic understanding of mathematics instead of a deep understanding of mathematics  
(Carol, high SES school, mainstream class).

It's a lot of rote learning. So when you actually talk about what it actually means they can't explain it or they can't break it down. It was like, 'show me the working out'. It's like, 'Oh, but I just know the answer'  
(Judy, high SES school, mainstream class)

Sometimes tutoring will teach... to the test... with numeracy, they will teach an algorithmic sort of approach rather than a developing a sort of mathematical fluency, mathematical thinking type approach. So it's more about getting to the answer, rather than about the thinking that goes along with it  
(Bill, low SES school, mainstream class)

Teachers also commented that because students learnt content in tutoring before they learnt it in school, they were sometimes wedded to a particular approach that did not align with the pedagogy of the classroom. Linda (low SES school, mainstream class) said that tutoring sometimes 'hindered' school learning because students would say to teachers, 'I had tutoring and we do it differently there'. She said that at some schools she had taught in, some students were 'almost obsessed' with their tutoring and 'put more value into that.' Similarly, Sarika (low SES school, mainstream class) explained,

So, they're teaching...just one strategy, which doesn't always necessarily align with what we need to teach our kids. So, I've had comments from kids before where they're just so, so adamant to use the written algorithm, because that's what they've been taught, because it's the quickest way. Which [is] true and yes, it can be, but trying to then open their eyes to all of the different strategies that we have to teach them in Mathematics. It gets a little bit hard for those kids...

While Mathematics was the subject most heavily impacted by private tutoring, there were also impacts on the teaching of English. Kat (high SES school, gifted class) described a 'definite reading comprehension strategy' followed in tutoring, where students approached reading in an instrumental way, looking for answers to questions. Having observed this, Kat decided to give students reading without any questions initially, 'just to enjoy the reading'. Vaani (high SES school, gifted class) explained that tutoring caused students' writing to be less original and more formulaic: 'I find I can tell if a child is being coached or not, just by reading their stories, because I'll get the same language'.

Many teachers commented that the instrumental and narrow approach to pedagogy followed by tutoring centres undermined students' ability to think creatively or critically. As Lily (high SES school, mainstream class) expressed it, 'I don't believe that they really teach them, you know, those deep thinking skills, the higher level skills, which is what those kids need in extension'. Sally (high SES school, mainstream class) said that tutoring was very 'prescriptive', with a heavy emphasis on getting test questions correct. There was not enough 'creative or critical thinking around the ideas' or 'imbuing them with skills that they can use in a range of different learning areas'.

As Rosie (low SES school, mainstream class) put it, tutoring 'crushes creativity.' Describing a tutored student in her class as like 'a human calculator', she commented,

...their creative thinking and their critical and lateral thinking almost gets zapped by tutoring because tutors are there to drill information into a kid and then that's it. If tutors encouraged creativity and curiosity. I'd be all for it. But unfortunately, it seems to definitely go the other way. And that has a big negative impact in class.

Teachers often worried that attending tutoring meant that students lost their sense of curiosity and love of learning, with typical comments including:

I feel like they're just bombarded with tutoring and everything and they just like they lose that love of learning a little bit  
(Emma, low SES school, gifted class).

And going to these sorts of environments where it's drill, and repeat, drill and repeat. It's almost that the fun of learning is taken out of it  
(Vaani, high SES school, gifted class).

I think it takes away—you want children to be inquisitive and curious. And I think some tutoring programmes is more just about—this is what you need to do to succeed in an exam

(Linda, low SES school, mainstream class).

As the above excerpts show, teachers' critical comments about the pedagogy of tutoring centres recurred regularly, and were often strongly and emotively expressed. Their use of quite violent imagery, such as 'crushing', 'zapping', and 'bombarding', demonstrates the severity of the impact they perceived tutoring to have on students, who they believed were reduced to 'human calculators' performing 'robotic' functions. The intensity of teachers' criticisms of private tutoring was palpable, and perhaps surprisingly, came equally from those in high and low SES schools, and from teachers of both gifted and mainstream classes. This comparison will be further discussed below.

The perspectives of our teacher participants align with those documented in the international literature, with teachers often 'offended' by private tutoring, considering it 'a critique of their own operation', and bringing disruption and dissonance in their classrooms (Bray 2025a, 32). It is difficult to ascertain how much teachers' critical views of tutoring may stem from personal or professional defensiveness at having their authority undermined. However, the teachers in our study articulated substantive pedagogical reasons for their suspicion of tutoring.

Nevertheless, while teachers worried about tutored students' lack of curiosity or critical thinking, they also acknowledged that these students were often capable of getting the answers correct. Teachers may have felt that students took an overly instrumental approach to education, but it could be argued that the mainstream education system rewards such an approach, given that success in schooling is overwhelmingly reliant on results achieved in standardised testing. Arguably, tutored students and their families employ an effective and legitimate strategy for succeeding in a competitive system, with tutoring a logical part of this strategy.

## 6 | Disengagement from School

Another common theme was that attending tutoring caused students to be more disengaged from school. Students prioritised their tutoring work over their schoolwork, telling their teachers that they could not complete school homework because 'I've got tutoring after school' (Elizabeth, high SES school, mainstream class).

Disengagement from school was particularly pronounced during the Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, when all schools were closed for many weeks, meaning that students had to learn at home. Many tutoring companies also pivoted to providing online tutoring. While teachers set work for students to complete at home, some students neglected this work in favour of their tutoring work. As Judy (high SES school, mainstream class) described,

I had some of my top students that surprised me, weren't handing in work. And when I put that question in of, 'What's keeping you from finishing your work?' I reckon 80% said tutoring.

In schools where a large proportion of students received tutoring, the school leaderships often adopted policies of minimising or eliminating homework, in recognition of the time their students spent in tutoring and completing tutoring homework. Schools were afraid of 'overloading' their students, said Josie (high SES school, gifted class). In the words of others:

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

(Denise, Principal, high SES school).

...our kids are so bombarded with tutoring that they don't they don't need the homework

(Judy, high SES school, mainstream class).

If there was homework assigned to students, it was not mandatory, and teachers did not put a great deal of emphasis on checking it. As Emma (low SES school, gifted class) said, she was 'pretty chill' about homework to be 'considerate of what they've already got going on'.

One school had decided to cease homework altogether, which was met with a very vocal protest from parents. The policy was later reversed, but parents from Asian migrant backgrounds in this school were largely silent on the homework issue because they tended to send their children to tutoring. As Georgia (low SES school, mainstream class) explained: '...it didn't make a difference to them, because they were still doing other types of work after school anyway'.<sup>6</sup>

Disengagement from school was also evident in the classroom, when students complained about school work being boring or too simple. Elizabeth (high SES school, mainstream class) said she had students who were very disengaged in class. She attributed this partly to tutoring, as students made comments like, 'Oh, I do tutoring. I already know, this. This is boring'.

Vaani (high SES school, gifted class) said that tutoring 'absolutely' conflicted with schoolwork 'because some of them will say things like', 'Oh, this isn't hard enough to me'. And I have to then be pretty straight with them and say, 'Well, until you can show me when we do assessments... Sorry, this is what we're doing'. Similarly, Keith (high SES school, mainstream class) explained that some of his students had already learnt material 'the year before' in tutoring and felt bored in class, 'even though they still haven't got that skill, or they don't know how to do like 100%'.

Judy (high SES school, mainstream class) explained that some students prioritised tutoring over schoolwork because they were preparing for the admissions test to gain a place in a selective

high school. From the perspective of these students, 'tutoring is going to get you into selective and the school's not'. She added that this made her feel devalued as a school teacher: 'So sometimes you feel like you do a lot and it's not taken seriously'.

Teachers of gifted classes particularly described the disengagement and absenteeism of many students prior to the selective schools test, echoing international research findings (Tansel 2013; Liu and Bray 2020). Although the NSW Government, which administers the selective schools test, states on its website that tutoring is 'not necessary' because the test 'will not need your child to know any new or special knowledge' outside of the NSW curriculum (NSW Government 2025), the consensus among parents whose children received tutoring was that the test was much more difficult than what was included in the standard school curriculum (Ho 2020). And given that schools do not help students prepare for the test, parents often feel it is necessary to engage private tutors, especially when tutoring companies promote themselves as specialists in exam preparation (Ho 2020).

In response to more general student disengagement in class caused by tutoring, as Yung (2020, 8) notes, teachers may need to spend more time explaining the 'rationale behind certain instructional strategies' and ensure that assessment is clearly linked to genuine learning. When students are exposed to pedagogies that may be dramatically different and do not understand why they need to learn in the way schools teach, mainstream education may need to pay more attention to explicitly explaining and justifying the approaches taken in schools as compared to those in tutoring centres.

Greater communication between schools and tutoring centres could assist with this. Many of our teacher participants explained that they were not aware of exactly what happened in tutoring centres and had never spoken with their students' tutors. Their opposition to tutoring led to an approach of complete disengagement. They had little awareness of the types of tutoring their students were receiving, nor who the providers were. Tutors also did not make contact with schools. This lack of engagement can easily foster suspicion, hostility, and working at cross purposes, none of which is useful for the students they are both trying to teach.

## 7 | Catering for Large Range of Levels

Another difficulty that tutoring posed for classroom teaching related to having to cater for a larger than normal range of levels and capabilities. As noted, teachers told us that students attending mathematics tutoring were sometimes a year or more ahead of the school curriculum. Given that our teacher participants were generally teaching Year 5 classes, this meant that some of their students were working at a high-school level in maths, which was beyond what teachers had been trained to teach. Bianca (low SES school, mainstream class) said that it was challenging to have to familiarize herself with the high-school maths curriculum in order to extend her students.

Elizabeth (high SES school, mainstream class) said it was 'disruptive' to have to cater for students working at that level:

My perspective is... I shouldn't be teaching high school maths. I'm only K-6 trained. So, I don't think it's right for me to accelerate them above because then when they get to Year 7 and 8, they've probably already learnt it... And I just feel, I feel like I'm letting them down if whatever work I'm setting is not up to their level.

Even students in Keith's (high SES school, mainstream class) Year 4 class were completing Year 7 maths. As he commented, it was 'beyond my level of mathematics... just the speed and pace that they're able to do a lot of it'.

The above comments were from teachers of mainstream classes, suggesting that this kind of acceleration provided by tutors is being taken up by a wider range of students than just those enrolled in gifted classes, and also extends to students attending disadvantaged schools who are typically from low-income families. This speaks to the unprecedented normalisation of private tutoring for purposes of acceleration rather than just remediation.

The challenges of catering for a large range of abilities cited here relate exclusively to mathematics. The structured and sequential manner of mathematics teaching means that it is perhaps more conducive to acceleration than other subjects are. If there is a consensus that it is disruptive to have such a large range of abilities in one classroom, this could be an argument for reforming the mathematics curriculum to make it less susceptible to extreme acceleration. Alternatively, if significant numbers of students are working far beyond their expected level, or would like to be, one may question whether strong students are sufficiently challenged in mainstream classrooms, particularly when teacher training is so sharply divided between primary (elementary) and secondary education.

## 8 | Exhaustion in Class

Some teachers expressed concern about their students being over-worked by long hours of tutoring and study at home. Bianca (low SES school, mainstream class) said that some of her students did not reach home until 8.30 at night: 'That's a big day... to be in the classroom all day, then to leave school and then go to tutoring... I don't think that's healthy. I think that maybe burns them out somewhat'. Similarly, Carol (Principal, high SES school) knew of a young student in her school who 'goes three nights a week into the city, and it's about eight o'clock at night for dinner, and he's exhausted'.

Sarika (low SES school, mainstream class) said she supported students attending tutoring as long as it did not 'take away the importance of what happens in the classroom'. Ultimately, she said, 'it comes down to if the child is able to still concentrate, they're not overwhelmed, you know, with cognitive overload because there have been to so many tutoring sessions to be able to do it at, at school'.

Students were particularly exhausted and anxious when there was conflict within their families about study workloads. While

many students were willing to attend tutoring, this was not always the case, and being 'forced' to go to tutoring could become a source of conflict with parents. Georgia (low SES school, mainstream class) told us about a boy in her class who did a 'huge' amount of tutoring:

And it is a massive stress factor for him. And it causes a lot of problems for us in the classroom as well, because he has had a very big night, staying up late arguing with his mum about the work that he was expected to do. And then he's exhausted, and he's sad, the next day, and it causes all these issues.

Josie (high SES school, gifted class) also mentioned a boy in her class whose mother regularly set him Maths and English tasks to complete at home, while also sending him to tutoring on weekends and holidays. Josie explained that the student sometimes appeared exhausted and emotional in class, not only because of his workload but because of the tensions with his parents about their expectations and pressure.

Exhaustion in class due to tutoring was not a theme that arose in our teacher interviews as often as some of the other criticisms outlined above. However, many teachers spoke more generally about what they saw as the negative impact of tutoring on students' wellbeing. These comments were often rhetorical and based on their assumptions about impacts, as opposed to impacts they witnessed directly. The impact of tutoring on student wellbeing is contested in the literature. Some studies show positive impacts on emotional wellbeing, self-confidence and child-parent relationships (Zheng et al. 2020; Liang et al. 2022). Others find that tutoring over-burdens students' lives and negatively affects their relationships with teachers, peers and family (Alam and Zhu 2024), and is associated with depression and sleep disorders (Zhang and Liu 2025). In our study, we have evidence that some teachers certainly associate tutoring with student exhaustion serious enough to impact on the classroom.

## 9 | Discussion: The Role of Social Class and Ethnicity

Our research was designed to compare experiences in high and low SES schools, and in gifted and mainstream classes. However, our interviews with teachers indicated that the impacts of tutoring in school were being felt in all the above settings. It was particularly surprising to observe how often comments about tutoring's impact came from teachers of mainstream classes in low SES schools. Their students came from disadvantaged families who had opted to spend money on private tutoring, including for purposes of acceleration. This speaks to the increasing normalisation of tutoring in a large range of school settings.

Although our target schools were varied in terms of SES, they were similar in that they all hosted large concentrations of students from Asian migrant backgrounds, particularly from Chinese and South Asian cultural backgrounds. Given the long history and ubiquity of private tutoring in much of East and South Asia (Bray 2025a), it is not surprising that migrants from these areas engage tutors for their children, even though

tutoring has not been as commonplace in Australia historically. Previous research (Ho 2020; Watkins et al. 2017) has explained Asian migrants' focus on children's education as the key strategy for advancement in a new country. They enrol their children in tutoring to compensate for their own perceived weaknesses as newcomers unfamiliar with the local language and education system, and as a means for securing a place in a high achieving school.

For Asian migrants, this strategic approach to education is a cross-class phenomenon (Lee and Zhou 2017), partly due to the dominant role played by middle-class migrants within Asian diasporas in western countries. These highly educated professionals understand how to be successful in education, and they establish an education culture that is also embraced by their lower-class compatriots. This explains why our teachers in low SES schools observed similar patterns to those in high SES schools. The large numbers of students from Asian migrant backgrounds in both settings are likely to have created a culture of private tutoring that may not be as prominent in other schools. However, to the extent that tutoring has now become more common in Australia, the competitive pressures associated with the marketisation of education outlined above are likely to see tutoring expand beyond just Asian migrant cohorts.

## 10 | Conclusion

With the dramatic growth of private academic tutoring around the world, we need a greater understanding of how tutoring is impacting on school education. This paper has outlined the perspectives of primary school teachers who feel these impacts in their classroom teaching. While some mention the benefits of having students in their classes who have more developed skills in some areas through tutoring, teachers were mostly critical of the impact of tutoring in their classrooms, particularly for Mathematics. They reported that their students tended to participate in tutoring that followed superficial approaches to pedagogy, which created an overly instrumental approach to learning and undermined creative and critical thinking and deep understanding. They also observed that students who received tutoring could become more disengaged in school because they prioritised their tutoring work over their school work. This meant that they did not complete school homework and were not as attentive in class, especially when their tutoring had accelerated them far ahead of the school curriculum. Teachers found it more difficult to engage and cater for these students and the resulting large range of levels and capabilities in their classes. Finally, teachers were worried about some of their students being over-worked and exhausted, which could impact on classroom engagement.

While these teachers were highly critical of private tutoring, they generally did not acknowledge or understand the reasons for students' participation in tutoring. They were especially critical of tutoring for acceleration and test preparation, particularly the selective schools placement test and did not acknowledge or understand why families believed that tutoring was necessary to succeed in this test. They defended their pedagogical approaches, for example by explaining that they did not 'teach to the test'. Some also expressed personal antipathy towards

selective schools and the competitive pressure associated with them. As such, they were troubled by their students' participation in tutoring for this purpose. Therefore, their opposition to tutoring was in part grounded in a fundamental difference in values relative to the families of the students in their classes. These concerns were particularly prominent among our sample of Year 5 teachers, given that Year 5 is when many students escalate their efforts to prepare for the selective schools test. Their teachers' criticisms of private tutoring reflect their concerns about the intensity of this pressure point in the schooling journey.

In relation to more general tutoring (not for the selective schools test specifically), there was little acknowledgement from teachers that families may have been motivated by perceived gaps in school learning or support. While not reported here, our interviews with parents indicated that many opted for tutoring because they felt their children were insufficiently challenged by school work, as seen, for example, in the lack of homework set by schools. Other parents stated that there was insufficient information coming from schools about their children's performance, leading them to seek tutoring to better monitor progress. These concerns align with international literature on parents' dissatisfaction with schools as a motivation for engaging private tutoring, as noted above (Ghosh and Bray 2020; Sriprakash et al. 2016; Liu and Bray 2022).

Teachers also seemed reluctant to acknowledge that their schools and classrooms may have benefited from the tutoring their students received. Particularly in the high achieving schools with large numbers of students in tutoring, it could be argued that the successes and reputations of these schools were partly attributable to private tutoring providers and not solely the product of school-based teaching. This blurring of the lines between formal and informal learning is emblematic of the challenge posed to the education system by the rise of the tutoring industry.

The expansion of private tutoring in Australia is associated with the combination of two key factors: the increasing marketisation of education that has intensified a culture of competition in relation to schooling, and concurrently the influx of skilled Asian migrants who see tutoring as a normal aspect of education. These two factors have contributed to the normalisation of tutoring in urban centres like Sydney, particularly for high achieving students. Although education policies have directly contributed to the intensification of a competitive education culture by expanding high stakes testing and selectivity in schooling, mainstream education has not adapted well to the new climate created by these policies, especially in relation to the proliferation of private tutoring. As a result, classroom teaching in some contexts is facing increasing challenges as increasing numbers of students feel compelled to participate in private tutoring.

As noted above, this research focused on schools with large numbers of students from Asian migrant backgrounds. Further research is needed to investigate the extent to which these issues are also present in other contexts, including those with different ethnic profiles and in areas other than urban centres such as Sydney. Middle-class white students, for example, may prefer more individualised tailored tutoring rather than group-based tutoring using centralised programming. They may also place

less emphasis on certain tests, including the selective schools test. We need to understand whether the impacts on schooling are different in these contexts. Nevertheless, this paper's focus on contexts featuring more intensive use of tutoring provides a glimpse into an important part of the Australian education environment.

This research has significant implications for policy and practice. Firstly, education authorities and school-based educators need to expand their knowledge of the tutoring industry, investigating the prevalence and types of tutoring being used within their jurisdictions and communities. They also need a greater understanding of why families are opting for private tutoring, and what their students are learning and how they are being taught. As mentioned above, there needs to be greater communication between mainstream educators and private tutors, to enable greater coordination and mutual understanding. Given that families often turn to tutoring to compensate for perceived gaps in school provision, school-based educators need to review their own practices and better cater for their students' needs, and communicate better with parents and students about why schools take the approaches they do, for example, regarding their policies on homework and test preparation. Policy makers also need to investigate the possibilities for more thorough regulation of the tutoring industry, as argued by Dhall (2025) and Zunica et al. (2025). These are some of the changes that will enable private tutoring and mainstream education to operate better together.

#### Author Contributions

While Christina Ho is the sole author of this paper, as outlined above, the research was conducted as part of a larger project and included contributions by Megan Watkins, Greg Noble, and Alexandra Wong in its design, fieldwork, and data analysis.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I refer to Opportunity Classes as 'gifted classes' in this paper to better align with international nomenclature.

<sup>2</sup> This was an Australian Research Council-funded project that also involved researchers Megan Watkins, Greg Noble and Alexandra Wong. The larger project examined approaches to education taken by Asian- and Anglo-Australian families with children in primary school, and

included a parent survey, interviews with teachers, parents, students and tutoring centre managers, as well as observations within homes and classrooms. Fieldwork took place between 2020 and 2022. Interview participants were recruited through the targeted schools, after the New South Wales Department of Education and the respective principals endorsed the participation of their staff members and parent community. We first recruited parents and students, and then approached the teachers of these students. All teachers approached agreed to participate.

<sup>3</sup> The SES of the schools was determined based on their score on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). All schools in Australia have an ICSEA score, based on their geographic location and data on parental occupation and education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015).

<sup>4</sup> We grouped respondents into these broad ethnic categories based on their self-reported 'cultural identity', country of birth, and language spoken at home. This was for purposes of general comparison, and we acknowledge that these categories do not capture multi-ethnic origins or the strength of subjective identification with abstract classifications.

<sup>5</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> Although this paper does not examine parents' perspectives, as part of the larger project we did interview parents in each school. As the above discussion indicates, most parents tended to be more supportive of homework and sometimes complained that schools did not assign enough homework to their children, or did not monitor its completion. For some parents, their perception of schools' relaxed approach to homework was part of their motivation for enrolling their children in private tutoring. This is a paradoxical situation where teachers and parents seem to be operating at cross purposes, each fuelling the increased emphasis on tutoring rather than school work.

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