The chosen ones

Imagine a world where your child's academic future could be determined as young as five. It's a world in which entrance to kindergarten is by competitige tesiting, and those children who miss out learn the meaning of failure an spend the rest of their childhood at after-hours coaching colleges chasing a precious place in one of the selective schools from which the best universities draw their students.

Already some Asian societies approach this level of competitive tension, which would once have been considered inconceivable in Australia. But for how long?

It is already the fashion in some NSW public schools to stream their smartest students into selective classes at the end of kindergarten. A high proportion of those students then move into Opportunity Classes in year 5 to 6 to mix with their elite peers and prepare themselves for all important selective high school entrance exam.

This sorts the wheat from the chaff - more than 4000 students being guaranteed a high - protein intellectual diet in a challenging and competitive environment. If they can keep up, an excellent HSC results is inevitable - and with it a place in the school of choice at the states top universities.

Recent migrants to Australia, most particularly those from east Asia, have capitalised on the opportunities presented through the selective school system, their children significantly outperforming their English-speaking peers at every level of the system.

Fear and opportunity are transforming the pointy end of the NSW public school system – the fear of being left behind in an increasingly marginalised comprehensive high school system, and the opportunities for success presented to those who win places in an expanding selective stream.

Coaching colleges that train students like academic athletes to achieve outstanding results are flourishing. Students are drilled in the art of mastering the selective high school entrance exam and coached students are greatly over-presented among those winning places in the selective system. Three college chains claim to have coached 2500 of the 3500 successful students in recent years

A huge majority of those being coached are from non-English speaking backgrounds; many Anglo-Australian middle-class families remain deeply suspicious of coaching. “We came across families who saw it either as cheating or as an unreasonable organisation and surveillance of the child,” says Craig Campbell, the co-author of School Choice: How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia.

“Often there was a criticism of Chinese families, that they were making the live of their children a misery, that it was unreasonable to put all that pressure on them.”

Another co-author of School choice, Helen Proctor, says Chinese families think differently. “The question about coaching was not about whether to sign up for it or not but about how much was the right amount and when to start the kids.”

The coaching and pressure has been rewarded. NESB students are gaining more than half of the places in the NSW selective highs school system, which sees them represented at twice the rate in selectives compared with their proportion across the school system. In those schools, such as James Ruse, Baulkam Hills, Fort Street and both Sydney and North Sydney Boys and Girls, which demand the highest entrance test scores, NESB students win the overwhelming majority of places.

In 15 years these elite selective schools, which now dominate the state's HSC results, have been transformed.

The former Liberal MP Ross Cameron says that “Anglo-Australians are either too dumb or too complacent to make the same commitment to their children's future” as Asian parents have made.

Leaving aside the question of whether to coach or not, the value ascribed to a selective education and the consequences of having schools dominated by particular ethnic groups strike sharp nerves in the community. It resonates so strongly because the decisions taken capture essential truths for different groups which are culturally pre-determined. If society is a competitive venture, you better get your kids on the academic treadmill as early as possible; if you see co-operation underpinning societal relationships, then the benefits of team sport on a Saturday will outweigh several hours swotting.

“There's a surface admiration of merit-based entry, but when the social consequences are that a different ethno-national group does a bit better than your group, people start to get worried about it,” Campbell says.

It is not as if Anglo-Australians and longer established migrant communities completely reject coaching. They are happy enough to watch their children spend hours swimming at the crack of dawn or train every day for soccer – they just cringe at the thought of their children spending hours studying over a weekend. Price in academic achievement comes from scoring highly without too much effort; raw ability is highly admired.

But for Asian cultures there is no shame in working hard. Education not only empowers the child of a migrant to succeed in a new country, it is also associated with immeasurably social status. More than money – a measure of success for earlier waves of migrants – Asian migrants tend to see academic achievement as the factor that can raise an individual's status above one's peers.

While many English-speaking families who can afford private schools choose them, Proctor says some Asian families prefer selective high schools even over a scholarship to a private school, in part because they are not supportive of the focus on pastoral care and extracurricular activities.

Could it also be a fact that Asians are smarter? It is the sort of question that sends academics screaming from the room, so widespread is fear of racial theory. But in this case it may be true - at least up to a point - with the act of voluntary migration in effect selecting parents of talent, intelligence and ambition.

Dianna Kenny, an academic researcher at the University of Sydney, says: "The Australian demographic is spread right across what's possible in a democracy - from very high achievers to people on welfare and drug users - whereas the Asian cohort are very highly self-selected, and they've come to Australia for a very particular reason. There's very few garbage collectors, hairdressers or unemployed people among their parents."

The schools themselves - with the explicit and complicit help of many parents - have an intense focus on academic results. Kenny says some Asian children "are kind of automatons; some of them don't have a rounded education, some of them have not had sufficient socialisation experience".

In a letter to new parents at North Sydney Boys, the principal, Robyn Hughes, stressed her "school is far more than a mere 'academic factory' - indeed, a student who participated only in the academic program would be missing out very sadly". Yet the fact remains that many do.

The principal of James Ruse, Larissa Treskin, is keen to point out the school's production of the musical Crazy For You and student involvement in sport and social activities. But Joanne McMillan, a head teacher of creative arts, admits to a relatively low participation rate in art classes for the HSC, despite much talent, and some parents are concerned if their children spend time on artwork at the expense of other study.

Annetta St Louis, a year 7 teacher and head of English, says most of her students prefer maths.

"With maths you get it right or wrong. Some of our students don't think they are good at English [in fact they are outstanding], and they are very frightened to make a decision on their own unless they have the exact pattern."

A former James Ruse student, Helen Stasa, who did her HSC in 1998, says she felt it was "almost shameful' when she enrolled in an arts degree, such was the level of expectation.

"Some people might do well in a competitive atmosphere. But I felt that as much as I did, I would never be good enough. For me it was depressing and I always felt inferior," she recalls. "To be exposed to that from age of 12 or 13 is toxic. Selective schools make you see yourself as someone defined by academic success."

Normanhurst Boys High was turned into a selective school in 1994 in response to falling enrolments. Ross Storey, a social sciences teacher since 1984, has watched the school community change away from its Anglo-Saxon base yet retain a passion for sport.

"The expectation and approach to doing well academically is stronger. [But] they are still adolescent boys maturing into young men, and they are still very keen on their sport."

The shift into the selective system had changed the focus of teaching. "In many respects it is harder because the students are a lot more capable. In the pre-selective days we were dealing with discipline issues more often, [but] to say these kids are pressure cooked academically is not true, because they embrace a lot of things. They enjoy all the things in life most young men enjoy ... They obviously have high expectations about their career."

Louise Robert-Smith, a former principal of North Sydney Girls High School before she was poached by the exclusive private girls school Ascham, says selective schools are vibrant places to teach because of their concentration of talent and ambition. But in two decades in the selective system until 1998 she believes the schools' charter was compromised by "expectation and demand".

"It wasn't coached for [initially]. It attracted a quirky mix of kids, some of whom never hit their stride in formal examinations. It was like a haven for the nerdy kid who would have been bullied or overlooked in the comprehensive school. It was a place where it was OK to be obsessed by quantum physics."

But by the time she left, getting into a selective school had become "big business".

"It is a very cost-efficient to get your kids in with a bright cohort. You are buying a sure thing with the HSC results. I think that is regrettable. There are probably a lot of young people who would not get into a selective school, who don't have the coaching to get there."

Coached or not, those who do get in are as smart as tacks and many flourish in an environment in which excellence is expected rather than scorned. Michael Quinlan, a former principal of James Ruse, says: "In a selective high school the tall poppy syndrome doesn't exist, academic achievement is heralded and recognised."

Modern migrants are better educated, better off financially and better able to take full advantage of the education system. Some even come especially for it. The principal of Ray White Carlingford, Joe Josephs, says James Ruse and Carlingford West Public, which hosts an Opportunity Class, are major selling points, and Felton Road, on which both sit, is the No. 1 draw.

"My Asian and my Indian buyers absolutely love it there [near Carlingford] while James Ruse is always very, very popular with my Asian clients."

Quinlan argues that migrant communities have raised the achievement bar for Australians first in the work force and now in schools and universities. "In the post-war years, we had a large influx of Greek and Italian migrants. They would work their backsides off. The Aussies said ho-hum. The Aussies then decided they had to compete in the workforce." A new generation of migrants is throwing down a new challenge.

"The No. 1 thing they value is the family. The second, third and fourth thing is education. They realise they can't get anywhere without education."

Anna Patty and Andrew Stevenson
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