Why do parents take such different approaches to their kids' education?

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While some children spend the school holidays studying in tutoring centres, enrolled in sports camps or other structured activities, others are left to do their own thing.

So why is it that parents take such different approaches to education and how their children spend their time?

Families in New South Wales, for example, are increasingly paying for supplementary education such as private tutors. Commercial tutoring centres in particular are popular among parents hoping to get their children into the state's competitive Opportunity Classes – an accelerated learning program in Years 5 and 6 in some primary schools – and selective high schools.

This means that more children are spending time outside of school in formal learning environments, though this is still an under-researched area.

Parenting styles

The "helicopter parent" and "tiger mum" stereotypes conjure images of over-scheduled and closely-monitored children. Such terms are always value-laden and are highly classed, racialised and gendered.

For example, negative media coverage of "tiger parents" has scrutinised the educational achievements of Asian-Australian students and the practices of their parents (usually women).

As academics have argued, this feeds into a politics of racial hostility against migrants.

It also approves certain skills and experiences among Anglo-Australian parents, but does not value different pedagogical practices.

In reality, parents' different experiences and backgrounds, including a combination of class, ethnicity, gender, history and place, will all play a role in how they approach their children's education – as well as how

they view an appropriate use of time. So will their social and cultural construction of childhood.

What we need is a greater understanding of the social, economic and global conditions shaping parents' different approaches to their kids' education.

Education outcomes are less secure

Over the last four decades we have seen decreased funding for public education relative to private schooling; an increased focus on academic results rather than equity and equality; and the rise of "school choice" which benefits families with higher levels of education and income.

At the centre of these changes has been a growth of school examinations, standardised measurement, and the rise of private tutoring.

We have also seen a dramatic divergence in the funding outcomes between schools.

Some schools are well equipped and attended by students from predominately affluent backgrounds. Others lack the resources needed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There has been a decline in jobs available for youth and a rise in employment insecurity, as well as uncertainty about what the future of work will look like.

Credit: The Conversation

Australia is also host to new middle classes, including those from Asian migrant backgrounds, in search of economic and educational mobility.

All of this impacts on the decisions that parents make about their

children's education and time use, and the future they envisage for them.

Conflicting values

In our research with inner-Sydney, public primary schools, we found that while some parents are investing in tutoring and preparing for examinations from an early age, others are strongly rejecting this approach.

These parents, whom we call "community-minded", were typically white and employed in the public sector or creative industries.

We defined them as part of an older middle class who wanted to distinguish themselves from the new middle classes in their approach to schooling.

Community-minded parents rejected what they saw to be "over-schooling" during primary school. They opted not to compete for places in selective schools and classes, or not to prepare for the exams. Instead, they valued an education experience that provided what they called "real world" exposure that nurtured the "whole child".

This included, among other things, developing students' social and civic skills, attending a school composed of "cultural diversity", and "empowering the children to make up their own minds".

As one parent explained:

I want a school where my child is going to be happy and thrive, not one where they're going to be in a sort of academic hothouse.

They also spoke of schools as communities to develop their children's sense of social responsibility. Another parent we interviewed appreciated

her school's commitment to community justice and to "alerting kids to when something's not right, and [saying] 'this is our collective responsibility'."

These parents did not seek social mobility through schooling in ways often pursued by migrants and others who may not have high levels of social and cultural capital.

Some also expected academic success to come naturally to their children without pursuing these strategies. This meant they had a level of familiarity with, and trust in, the academic system - an idea that is more common among established middle-class families in Australian schooling.

Their comments showed how "intelligence" is a socially constructed term, as tutoring and "cramming" were criticised for producing educational success in "the wrong way".

A growing source of tension

Taking a moral stance against tutoring and examination preparation is not new. Certainly not all our community-minded parents expressed disapproval of the approaches of other middle-class families.

But our research shows that with Australia's education system becoming ever more competitive, the conflicting values in this area are a growing source of tension within some school communities. This needs to be better understood.

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