

Breaking taboos on Selective Schools

1. Summary of the impact

In an effort to put ethnic and socio-economic inequality in selective schools on the government's policy agenda, UTS Senior Lecturer Dr Christina Ho has taken her academic research to the public.

By opening the media debate on controversial issues such as parenting and segregation in educational institutions, Dr Ho has contributed to a wave of pressure for the government to respond.

This has led to a public statement from the NSW Department of Education which announced changes to the selective schools admissions test in order to combat over-reliance on coaching colleges.

2. Problem

Selective schools are operated by the NSW Department of Education and are supposed to accept students based upon their academic merit. In theory, these schools support gifted and talented students with superior academic ability and exceptionally high classroom performance, regardless of their family background or resources.

However, enrolment data suggests that selective schools are increasingly fostering ethnic and socio-economic inequality, which is the result of a series of developments in this sector.

Firstly, the schools are dominated by students who fall within the top quarter of socio-educational advantage, indicating that family background is a key factor in getting accepted. The key reason for this is the competitive entry test which has created a billion-dollar industry for tutoring services which specifically train students for this exam.

Not only does this exclude students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who cannot afford tutoring, but it has also caused a clear ethnic imbalance in these schools. The vast majority of students come from an Asian background as migrant families tend to be more anxious about their children's education as they fear disadvantage and discrimination. As such, selective schools no longer reflect the ethnic diversity that exists in NSW.

3. Beneficiaries

Addressing the issues surrounding selective schools is particularly important to re-establish an equitable selection process and widen participation of students from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition, reviewing the selection criteria is vital to ensure that students are not made to participate in tutoring that serves no purpose other than passing a specific exam.

4. Approach to impact

While the issues surrounding NSW selective schools are well-known, few people speak out publicly to debate the injustice and inequality, especially because it involves speaking about taboo topics such as parenting approaches in different cultures.

However, UTS Senior Lecturer Dr Christina Ho has been determined to put these matters on the public agenda and has shared her research on selective schools with the Australian mainstream media. Coming from a migrant background and having graduated from a selective school herself, she has broached some of these seemingly off-limits topics to spark a public debate and put pressure on the government to review policy.

In her study, she interviewed students and families in selective schools in NSW. Her findings show that instead of providing a place for high achievers to thrive, the selective school system has created a culture in which students are unlikely to pass the entry test unless they spend years in tutoring and training courses. According to Dr Ho, these findings are particularly concerning as students are encouraged to focus on a very narrow way of studying, and are not necessarily improving their knowledge in specific subjects.

Her research also revealed that parents who migrated from Asian countries are more likely to worry about their children's education because they may not have access to the same

opportunities as Australian-born students. As many migrant families have no social networks, they see education as the only way to secure a good future for their children. Not surprisingly, these parents are most likely to aim for selective schools, and enrol their students in tutoring courses specifically designed at passing the entry exam.

Due to these tactics to get into selective schools, there is a clear cultural imbalance in the classes. Her research shows that 80 to 90 per cent of students in selective schools are from a language background other than English, which has resulted in much resentment especially among Anglo-Australian parents who feel their children are excluded from these prestigious schools.

Additional figures drawn from the government's MySchool website show that selective schools are among the most socio-educationally advantaged in NSW, even surpassing prestigious private schools. This could be directly linked to the costly investment in tutoring which raises questions about equal access to education.

In an effort to make her research meaningful for the public, Dr Ho rewrote her academic papers into 'plain English', and used platforms such as 'The Conversation' to share her work with the general public. Through her work with the media, she has become a public spokesperson on diversity and selective schools. She also uses social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to spread the word. In addition, she continues to work with schools, parents and students to discuss these issues.

Dr Ho has chosen these platforms to drive social change as she is a former journalist herself and feels that academic research should not merely be locked in an ivory tower – it should be shared, explained and distributed widely to make a real change.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

Thanks to her courage in taking this sensitive issue to the public, Dr Ho's work has opened room for a more open discussion on selective schools.

In an effort to critically analyse the 'Tiger Mother' stereotypes and change the tone of the very racialised debate, her research has been able to explain the underlying issues and

fears of migrant families. In particular, she has been able to debunk myths that Asian families are always driven by some deep-seated Confucian culture, and has been able to shift the focus to the migration journey, and the struggle of migrants to succeed in a new society.

Dr Ho's work has been discussed in more than 80 mainstream media pieces in the last five years. Her work and interviews have been featured nationwide, including news.com.au, all major Fairfax outlets, and ABC radio and TV. Each article has created a wave of online discussion from readers, demonstrating that her work is timely and on the minds of Australian parents and students.

5.2. Impact

While it is difficult to measure impact in this realm and prove direct causation of events, Dr Ho's media liaison and subsequent public pressure seem to have prompted government action in this area.

In July 2017, NSW Department of Education secretary Mark Scott announced that selective school policies would be reviewed to provide more equitable access to a selective school. In his speech, he made direct reference to the issues raised in Dr Ho's research.

For instance, he attributed many of the challenges in the selective school system to the tutoring industry, worth more than \$1 billion, which gives wealthier families an advantage as they can afford to send their child to exam training courses.

Although no concrete steps have been taken yet, Mr Scott has announced that a review would take place to develop new methods of student selection, including IQ tests that assess cognitive skills, student work portfolios and problem-solving tasks.

Despite this win, Dr Ho remains cautious. According to her, unless the system is designed in a way that cannot be tutored for, there will continue to be an imbalance.

She also warns that the concept of having selective schools creates a hierarchy and exacerbates inequality in our education system. More than improving that particular scheme, she would like to see a public school system in which both gifted students, as well as those with special needs, can all access the support they need in their local public school.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

As a Senior Lecturer and Discipline Coordinator in Social and Political Sciences, Dr Ho has extensive experience in researching migration, diversity, multiculturalism and education in Australia. Her success with media outreach can also be credited to her former years as a journalist and the important media relationships she has fostered over the years.

Most importantly, Dr Ho has a passion to tackle issues around migration, gender and cultural diversity through her work. Her passion can be traced back to her own story as a migrant who grew up in Australia, and a story that continues to be inspired by the diverse Sydney community.

6.2. External enabling factors

When it comes to influencing policy change and government direction, timing is of the utmost importance. According to Dr Ho, the media debates were raised at a time of political change and much dissatisfaction among parents.

She argues that for academic research to take effect in the public sphere, it has to match the political cycle and directly address current public concerns.

7. Challenges

There are two key challenges of publishing academic research in the media, especially if it addresses such sensitive topics.

The first challenge is trusting the media landscape and understanding how journalists work. While it is not the norm, it is not uncommon to see words being twisted and headlines being biased to promote a specific agenda. Dr Ho maintains that this is a risk worth taking for the greater good, and that through years of experience she has managed to identify trustworthy news outlets and journalists who became allies in the pursuit of change.

The second challenge is dealing with criticism. Speaking out on topics of race, parenting and education inevitably means differing opinions will emerge, and especially on social media, readers are quick to respond and criticise. Having had her work critiqued for many years, Dr Ho is resilient and has not been discouraged from continuing her important work.

8. Associated research

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