

“Kindy boot camp” enrolments proliferating in Australia

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Several media sources have recently highlighted the growing phenomenon of pre-school children entering so-called “kindy boot camps,” designed to enable them to become “school ready.” Tutoring programs, such as the Japanese “Kumon” method, are being tailored to kids as young as three, requiring them to learn the alphabet, basic Maths and “how to hold a pencil.”

Part of a worldwide phenomenon, the tutoring industry is expected to grow at a rate of 6.7 percent until 2020, or around \$100 billion worldwide. In Australia, it is booming at around \$2.6 billion per year, with coaching colleges pulling in \$200 million–\$400 million alone—almost a fifth of the non-vocational education sector.

Kumon’s preschool English enrolments in the country have risen by 63 percent since 2011, and in Maths by 38 percent. Other tutoring organisations such as “Begin Bright” also run “school readiness” classes, which cost around \$29 per hour, with individual sessions at \$80 per hour. Average franchises turn over around \$180,000 a year. Kumon, one of the world’s largest, boasts 4.2 million students worldwide, with 42,000 of these enrolled in Australia.

Kumon was developed in Japan in the 1950s to teach students through drills that allegedly prepare them for tests every five weeks. For pre-schoolers, the drilling includes “identifying the alphabet,” testing of “sight words” and “homework tasks” to become “school and assessment ready.”

Kumon knowingly introduces concepts, particularly in Mathematics, that its students cannot understand in any depth. The program consists of a sequential series of 460 steps, where each step comprises a set of 10 worksheets. Students must pass each level before taking an “achievement test.” If they fail a level, they must take it again until they “pass.” This means that the

youngsters complete 4,600 timed worksheets, initially set at their standard, then at progressively higher ones, to be completed more and more quickly, until they can perform all of them at speed.

While the children may retain some of the information contained in each worksheet, they are not required to understand or be able to apply it. This form of “learning,” at such an early age, can do great harm to a child’s natural love of learning and early experience with education. Studies have shown that for early childhood learning to be sustained and developed, it needs to be active, engaging, hands on, meaningful and related to the child’s broader experiences.

Kumon instructors are not required to have a tertiary degree or any teaching qualification; they do not even have to prove any background in education, just a “working with children” qualification. In contrast, teachers trained in the curricula and methodologies associated with early childhood learning are required to be thoroughly versed in nuanced development, pedagogy and specialised early childhood curricula in order to provide educational programs that meet each child’s individual needs.

Since 2009, when the Gillard Labor government introduced the standardised testing regime, NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy), with the support of the teacher unions, rote learning has become increasingly prevalent. Despite opposition from teachers and education professionals, NAPLAN is now compulsory in every school. Its focus on the results of numeracy and literacy tests has effectively led to a narrowing of the curriculum and the sidelining of critical subjects like music and the arts. Schools are constantly placed under immense pressure to improve their NAPLAN results, including by the global ranking organisation PISA (Programme for

International Student Assessment). For their part, the media increasingly highlight school results, exacerbating the problems created by NAPLAN for teachers, parents and students alike.

“Teaching to the test” is part of the ongoing drive by the entire political and corporate establishment to shift education policy towards meeting the interests of industry and cutting costs. This has meant that education for working-class students is increasingly becoming sub-standard due to lack of schools, permanent staff and resources, and focussed on young people acquiring only basic workplace skills rather than an all-rounded education that exposes them to the arts and sciences, history and the development of critical thought.

Parents are under immense pressure to enrol their young children in tutoring programs to ensure they will not “fall behind” or miss the opportunity to enter a university of their choice, particularly under conditions where the competition for decent jobs is becoming ever more fierce. Many see their only hope in preparing their children to win entrance into one of the “selective” high schools, where academic standards are generally significantly higher than in other public secondary schools. Sending a child to a private school is becoming prohibitive for the majority of parents, with costs now up to \$180,000 for six years schooling. There are now 21 public selective high schools in the state of New South Wales (NSW) and four in Victoria. Over 13,900 students applied to gain a place in NSW for the 2017 school year, with only 4,188 being successful.

According to Mohan Dhall from the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA), “There’s a clear indicator that NAPLAN is being used by parents to remediate their child’s results. They are making the decision to use a tutor not just in a reactive way, prior to the test, but after the test, to ameliorate concerns.”

Public education funding cuts have played a major role in creating the crisis in public education. The Australian government has shifted funding from the public system to private schools, providing \$17,604 in 2014, for example, for each private school student, compared with just \$12,779 for each public-school student.

In some parts of the world, tutoring has become a replacement for the absence of professional government-funded teaching staff. In the UK, for instance, where

private tutoring is now worth £6.5 billion a year, many state schools are now being forced to pay for private tutors out of their government funding, in order to educate their underprivileged students.

Several educational studies over the past decades have demonstrated the limitations of rote learning. Dr Shona Bass, author of the Australian Council of Education Research’s *Guide to Play-Based Learning*, explicitly decries the push for pre-school “boot camps.”

“There’s absolutely no advantage to it. It’s wasting parents’ time and money,” she told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last September. It created a “pushdown effect where opportunities are being presented to children earlier and earlier, all in the name of giving them the best start in life.”

Bass continued, “In most instances it’s the polar opposite, because little children need to be little children. We have a very strong view that school readiness is related to a child’s social and emotional maturity ... Social, emotional maturity is like all those other developmental milestones, it has its own pathway for each child. It’s not something that you can hurry up.”

Lev Vygotsky, a leading Soviet psychologist, explained in his book *Play and its role in the mental development of the child*, published in 1933, that “play is the work of childhood, and how young people learn and develop schema about the world.” Learning through play allows children to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts and learn language and self-advocacy skills, while rote learning and testing cut across this vital process.

The world-wide growth in testing and tutoring has proven to increase child anxiety levels, particularly in China and South Korea, where rising levels of suicide, now the leading cause of adolescent death, are related to the extraordinarily stressful and intensive examination-based curriculum and university entry-requirements. Students often spend more than ten hours a day at school, or in after-school tutoring, leaving little or no time for sport, creative pursuits or recreation.



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