

Christina Ho makes the case for improved understanding of the complex relationships between ethnicity, class and school achievement...

James Ruse tops the HSC'. NAPLAN: Non-English speaking background students come out tops'.

These are some of the headlines demonstrating the so-called 'ethnic advantage' when it comes to schooling in NSW. Whether it's NAPLAN results, HSC leader boards, or the composition of selective schools, children of migrants seem to enjoy extraordinary educational success. This paper takes a deeper look at the complex relationships between ethnicity, class and schooling in NSW, using data from the My School website. Students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) comprise 30% of all students in NSW public schools. But this LBOTE category includes students who face enormous socio-educational disadvantage, as well as those highlighted in the media as schooling superstars. There is also evidence of self-segregation based on ethnicity and class. How can we use this information to better understand the diverse needs of NSW students?

The 'ethnic advantage'

Every year, images of high achieving Asian-Australian students from selective schools feature in media coverage of HSC results. For example, James Ruse Agricultural High School in north-western Sydney has topped the HSC leader board for 21 years in a row.



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Justin Wu is one of many that landed James Ruse Agricultural High School top of the list for its 2016 HSC results. Pictures: Peter Kelly

Hills Shire

James Ruse Agricultural High School 2016 HSC results places the school first in the state

Jessica Oxford, Hills Shire Times
December 16, 2016 3:49pm

JAMES Ruse Agricultural High School can proudly proclaim its students have topped the HSC for 2016.



Discussion of annual NAPLAN results also typically notes the strong results of students from LBOTE, who are now out-performing non-LBOTE students in many areas of the test (e.g. Tovey 2013; Gleeson 2016).

As the table below demonstrates, most selective schools are heavily dominated by LBOTE students, mostly from Asian backgrounds. They are also extremely socially advantaged.

Top Selective schools in Sydney (by HSC scores): Ethnicity and Socio-educational Advantage

School	% from a Language Background Other Than English	% from top quarter, Socio-Educational Advantage
James Ruse Agricultural High School	97	89
Baulkham Hills High School	94	78
North Sydney Boys High School	92	78
North Sydney Girls High School	93	79
Hornsby Girls High School	87	84
Sydney Boys High School	89	74
Northern Beaches Secondary College Manly	42	87
Conservatorium High School	71	81
Normanhurst Boys High School	87	80
Sydney Girls High School	87	73

Source: ACARA, 2016

These LBOTE figures represent a huge transformation over one generation. In the late 1980s, educational researchers were bemoaning the lack of NESB students in selective schools, which were overwhelmingly Anglo (Kalantzis and Cope 1988: 49).

Given the increase in migration from Asia around this time, it's not surprising that Asian background students have become more numerous in our classrooms. But the growth in their numbers within selective schools in particular has led to the stereotype that Asians always do well in school.

Culturalist explanations are usually put forward: Chinese and other Asian cultures prize hard work and aspiration. Some put it down to Confucianism. Culturalist explanations are proposed by both admirers



(‘they’re a model for the rest of us’) and critics (‘tiger mothers abuse their children by pushing them too hard’) (see Ho 2017).

Culturalist explanations have been around since the 1980s, when education researchers argued the existence of an ‘ethnic advantage’, challenging the previous association of disadvantage with LBOTE students. Birrell (1987) argued that family support and ‘ethnic’ valuing of education and upward mobility allowed LBOTE students to overcome any disadvantage related to migration. Bullivant (1988) explained high achievement in terms of the ‘migrant drive’ and ‘ethnic work ethic’.

The ‘ethnic advantage’ has been conveniently used to justify cuts to funding of ESL programs, which has declined steadily over the last 20 years (Creagh 2016: 279).

But: great variation within LBOTE

The category LBOTE includes any student who speaks – or whose parents speak – a language other than English at home. This means that it includes students from a wide range of English competency, from new arrivals who don’t speak English at all (and refugee children who have very little schooling), to children who are native English speakers, but whose parents speak another language.

LBOTE is a very broad category that is not disaggregated, so we can’t compare outcomes by English language proficiency or by specific ethnic group. In Australian educational data, ethnicity is only identified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Lingard et al 2012: 319).

Researchers have noted that the LBOTE category hides great variation, with some students performing exceptionally well, and others at the opposite end of the spectrum. In fact, NAPLAN results show that variation among LBOTE students is greater than that among non-LBOTE students (Rice 2016; Creagh 2014; Lingard et al 2012). Similar results were found in earlier years with the category of ‘Non-English Speaking Background’ or NESB (Meade 1983).

But because *on average*, LBOTE students do not perform worse than Anglo-Australian students, and on some measures, perform better, there is now a stereotype of the high achieving LBOTE student, meaning that there are no equity issues that need to be addressed.

However, Creagh argues that the LBOTE data ‘are in fact hiding some of our most disadvantaged students’ (2014: 1). In particular, she shows that visa category has a dramatic impact on educational performance. Students of refugee background perform at the lower end of the national minimum standard, while those from skilled migrant backgrounds are well above average (Creagh 2014: 11-12).

While ESL (English as a Second Language) learners are included in LBOTE, their specific experience is lost in the focus on the average LBOTE outcomes, which look positive. Creagh argues that the ESL language learner has been ‘invisibilised’ (2016: 279). She summarises: ‘If a group of students who are



not performing well on NAPLAN are rendered statistically invisible, then equity of educational outcome for this group is impossible (Creagh 2016: 285).

The highest LBOTE schools are disadvantaged

In fact, the schools most dominated by LBOTE students are almost invariably in disadvantaged areas. According to MySchool, there are 125 schools in Sydney that are 90%+ LBOTE. More than three quarters (76%) are public schools. Their median ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) score is 992, compared to a median of 1054 for metropolitan Sydney (Author’s calculations based on MySchool data). This shows that these schools are socio-educationally disadvantaged.¹

Most of the highest LBOTE schools in NSW are public schools in Western Sydney. The following postcodes have schools with a median LBOTE of over 90%.

Postcode	Median LBOTE %	Median ICSEA	Median NAP Index	Postcode LBOTE %
2195 (Lakemba/Wiley Park)	97	993	489	81
2144 (Auburn)	97	988	504	84
2166 (Cabramatta/ Canley Vale)	94	931	494	82
2200 (Bankstown)	92	987	481	76
2142 (Granville)	91	962	473	70
2165 (Fairfield)	91	930	485	78

Source: MySchool 2016, Census 2016

All of these high LBOTE schools are socio-educationally disadvantaged, according to their ICSEA scores. In particular, Fairfield and Cabramatta/Canley Vale are in the bottom 10% of ICSEA scores for metropolitan Sydney.

They are all also below average in terms of NAPLAN performance. This is measured by the NAPLAN Index, a composite score that equally combines the results of different cohorts and weights literacy-based domains equally with numeracy results. The overall average for the NAPIndex is 500 (Shepherd & Bonnor 2014). In metropolitan Sydney, NAPLAN Index scores range from 419 to 714, with a median score of 518. Auburn comes closest to this median, but all other areas in the table above are well below average.

¹ The MySchool website reports an ICSEA score for each school in Australia. These scores reflect parental education and occupation, the geographical location of the school and proportion of Indigenous students (ACARA 2017).

'Asians Always Do Well': Getting Behind the Stereotypes of 'Ethnic Success' in NSW

Semester 1 2018



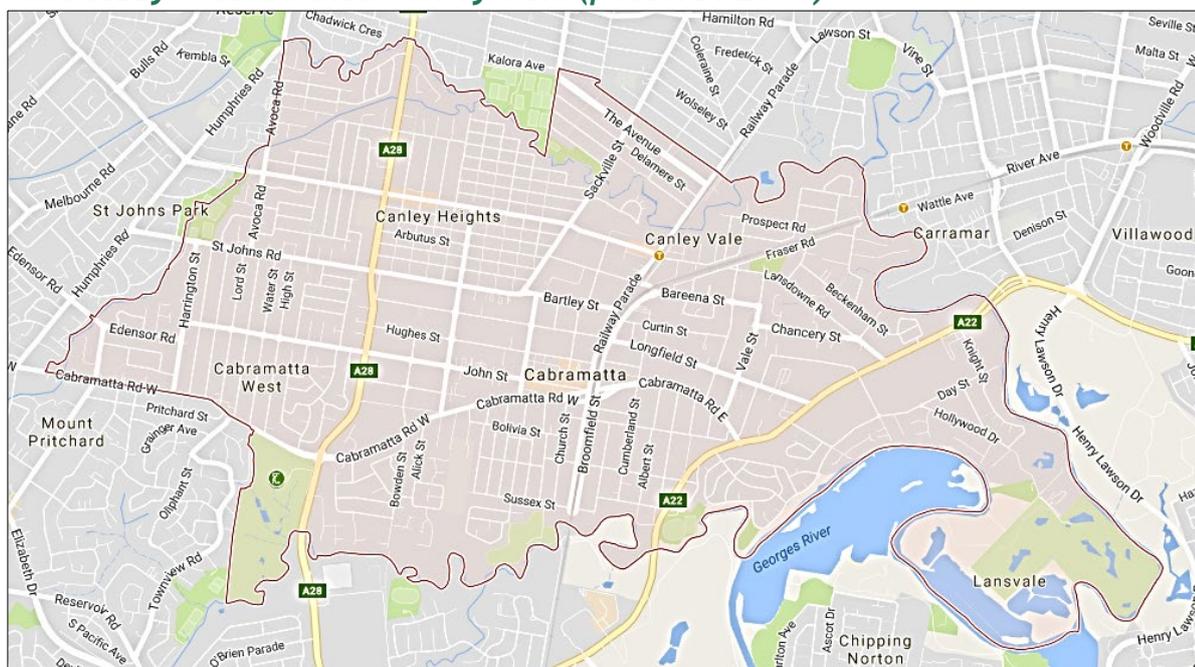
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I've also included the LBOTE figures for the overall postcode, to compare the ethnic profile of the schools with the communities they're located in. In all cases, the schools have a higher LBOTE score than the postcode. This could indicate that Anglo-Australian families in these postcodes tend to be older, so don't have school-aged kids, or if they do, they are avoiding their local schools. This mirrors international research that shows that education systems with school choice 'have schools with higher levels of economic, ethnic, and ability segregation than the levels in the neighbourhoods in which children reside' (Keels et al 2013: 242, see also Burgess et al 2005, Johnston et al 2006, Rangvid 2007).

What about Asian students in particular? It's not possible to identify the experiences of particular ethnic groups within the LBOTE category. However, the 2011 Census tells us that the areas with the highest concentrations of speakers of Chinese, Vietnamese, Hindi and Tagalog (the most commonly spoken Asian languages in Australia) are: Parramatta, Liverpool, Blacktown, Fairfield and Hurstville. Apart from Hurstville, all are located in Western Sydney; and apart from Parramatta, all areas are below NSW average when it comes to weekly incomes.

While there are wealthier Asian migrant families found throughout Sydney and NSW, the areas with the highest concentration of Asian language speakers tend to be below average income areas. So the popular image of the Asian high achieving selective school student masks the reality that most Asian-Australian students do not attend highly advantaged schools.

Case study: Cabramatta/Canley Vale (postcode 2166)





Postcode 2166 is dominated by Asian migrants. The top three ancestries of residents were Vietnamese, Chinese and Cambodian in the 2016 census, together making up 59% of the residents. 65% of residents were born overseas, and 82% speak a language other than English at home.

It is a low income area. The median weekly personal income for people aged 15 years and over in 2166 was \$408 (NSW average: \$664).

Nine out of the eleven schools are public. One is Catholic and one is Buddhist.

The median LBOTE across the eleven schools is 94%. Interestingly, Pal Buddhist School has the lowest LBOTE (80%) while Sacred Heart Catholic School has the highest (99%). As mentioned, the LBOTE scores for schools are higher than those for the suburbs the schools are located in. Are Anglo-Australian families avoiding local schools in this area?

The median ICSEA is 931, well below the national average of 1000, and the Sydney average of 1054. Sixty percent of families come from the lowest quarter of socio-educational advantage. Only 4% came from the top quarter.

The median NAP Index for Cabramatta/Canley Vale schools is 494, well below the median of 518. However, three schools are above average in NAPLAN: Harrington Street Public School (which has an Opportunity Class), Sacred Heart Catholic School, and Canley Vale High School.

Schools in Canley Vale have attracted some public attention for improvement in NAPLAN results. In 2017, for the third year in a row, Canley Vale High School was included in the list of schools achieving above average NAPLAN results (Smith 2017). Meanwhile Canley Vale Public School won a 2016 Premier's Award for Public Service for improving its students' NAPLAN results (Fairfield City Champion 2016). These are remarkable achievements, given the level of disadvantage that characterises these school communities.

The NSW bigger picture: disadvantage & Indigenous communities

In NSW as a whole, the areas of greatest educational disadvantage are those with concentrations of Indigenous populations. The following table shows the ten most educationally disadvantaged areas in NSW, all of which have relatively large Indigenous communities.

‘Asians Always Do Well’: Getting Behind the Stereotypes of ‘Ethnic Success’ in NSW

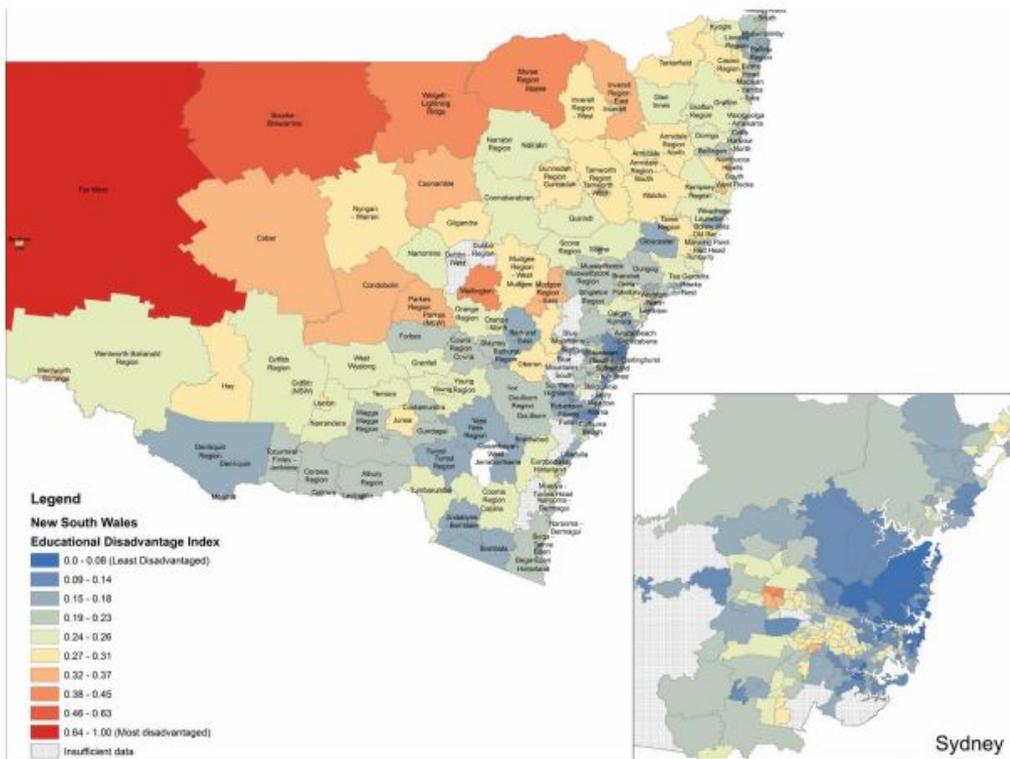
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Area	% Indigenous
1. Far West	30
2. Walgett-Lightning Ridge	30
3. Bourke-Brewarrina	40
4. Wellington	20
5. Moree region	17
6. Coonamble	28
7. Bidwill-Hebersham-Emerton	9
8. Lethbridge Park-Tregear	9
9. Kempsey	16
10. Moree	22

Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre 2017: 75



Note: The Statistical Area level 2 (SA2) classification has been used as the spatial unit to assess educational disadvantage across Australian regions. Data are broken using natural breaks, which classifies the data by maximising the differences between each class.

Source: BANKWEST CURTIN ECONOMICS CENTRE | Authors' calculations from numerous data sources



The 'whitest' schools are highly advantaged

According to My School profiles, the lowest LBOTE schools in Sydney are either private schools on the North Shore or Eastern suburbs, or public schools located on the outer fringe of Sydney. The latter are predictable because these are overwhelmingly Anglo dominated areas, e.g. Windsor, Camden, Heathcote.

However, the schools on the North Shore and Eastern suburbs are located in often very multicultural suburbs, indicating that many Anglo-Australian students are travelling from other areas to attend these private schools, and also that local migrant families may be avoiding these schools.

In metropolitan Sydney there are 99 schools with a LBOTE score of 10% or under. Their median ICSEA score is 1074 (1108 for the private schools). Among the private schools, 44% of families come from the top quarter of socio-educational advantage, and the median NAP Index is 532.

My analysis mirrors that of the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) report, which shows that nine out of the ten most educationally advantaged areas in Australia are located in Sydney's North Shore or Eastern suburbs (in addition to Camberwell in Victoria) (BCEC 2017: 70).

Top 10 advantaged areas in NSW

Area	% LBOTE
1. Paddington-Moore Park	12
2. St Ives	19
3. Wahroonga-Warrawee	17
4. Pymble	21
5. Darlinghurst	9
6. Lindfield-Roseville	22
7. Cremorne-Cammeray	15
8. North Sydney-Lavender Bay	23
9. Crows Nest- Waverton	22
10. Woollahra	11

Source: BCEC 2017: 75

Case study: North Sydney/Kirribilli

North Sydney/Kirribilli is a wealthy harbour-front area housing eight schools, seven of which are private (North Sydney Public School is the only public school).



There is a dramatic contrast in the ethnic profiles of public and private schools in this area. The private schools have a median LBOTE of 11% (the lowest is Wenona at 7%). Meanwhile, North Sydney Public School is 46% LBOTE.

Predictably, the area's schools are highly advantaged, with a median ICSEA of 1181. The most advantaged school is St Aloysius College, with an ICSEA score of 1234, and 91% of students coming from the most socio-educationally advantaged quartile.

Overall, 80% of students in this area's schools come from the most advantaged quartile, and only 1% come from the lowest quartile of socio-educational advantage.

These schools NAPLAN performance is well above average. The median NAP Index for these schools is 561. Again St Aloysius is highest, at 604.

Given that this is a very wealthy area – with median weekly personal income (\$1,418) more than double the NSW average (\$664) – the levels of advantage within these schools is not surprising.

However, the relatively low LBOTE scores do not match the profile of these suburbs. According to the 2016 Census, 53% of residents in North Sydney and Kirribilli were born overseas, and 28% speak a non-English language at home. Eight percent are of Chinese ancestry. So the schools are much less culturally diverse than the suburbs in which they are located. This suggests that Anglo-Australians from other suburbs are sending their children to private schools in North Sydney in large numbers.

In the next suburb, Crows Nest is home to two selective schools, North Sydney Girls and Boys, which are more than 90% LBOTE. The comprehensive Cammeraygal High School is 44% LBOTE, similar to North Sydney Public School at 46%. These schools are disproportionately LBOTE, considering that the local area is only 28% LBOTE. There is a clear polarisation here, with LBOTE families disproportionately choosing public schools, and Anglo-Australian families disproportionately choosing private schools. In fact, the North Sydney area may well be one of the most ethnically polarised school areas in the country.

The pattern continues for the entire North Shore region. Across the North Shore, public and private schools are remarkably similar – they are all highly advantaged, and all high performing, even scoring identically on the NAP Index (555). The only difference is in terms of LBOTE, with public schools having more than twice as many LBOTE students as private ones, as the table below shows.



North Shore (postcodes 2060-2090)

	Government schools	Non-government schools	Total
School type	68 (55%)	55 (45%)	123
Median LBOTE	34%	16%	26%
Median ICSEA	1150	1165	1158
Median ICSEA quarter 1	1%	1%	1%
Median ICSEA quarter 4	68%	74%	70%
Median NAPINDEX	555	555	555

Given that there are no educational differences between public and private schools on the North Shore, at least according to NAPLAN scores, and there is very little difference in terms of social advantage, one has to wonder why there should be such a difference between Anglo and LBOTE families in choosing private schools.

Conclusion

Despite the stereotype of the successful, over-achieving Asian student, in reality, being non-White in NSW is more likely to mean that you do not go to an advantaged school, and that you live in a below-average income area. Improvements in achievement in suburbs like Canley Vale are all the more impressive when seen in the context of disadvantage in these areas.

Conversely, those schools that are most dominated by Anglo-Australian students are split between schools in very Anglo-dominated suburbs, and schools in wealthy areas like the North Shore and Eastern suburbs. These schools are likely to be highly advantaged private schools, that ultimately act as bubbles of white privilege, despite their location within quite multicultural suburbs.

Selective schools are a conspicuous exception to this pattern. These high achieving, highly advantaged and high LBOTE schools have been largely responsible for the stereotype of the successful Asian student. While they provide a unique opportunity for a minority of high achieving students, they also contribute to the segregation and polarisation of our education system.

For example, if selective schools did not exist, we would arguably see more LBOTE students in elite private schools, helping them become more diverse and reflective of the diversity of the Australian population (but of course, not the socio-economic diversity, given their fees). MySchool figures show that in Melbourne, high performing private schools are much more culturally diverse than they are in Sydney. This is potentially because there are only four selective schools in Melbourne, which has contributed to a different cultural environment associated with elite schools.



And if selective schools did not exist, we wouldn't have the best and brightest from suburbs all over Sydney abandoning their local schools to travel, sometimes across town, to attend selective schools. This would boost the performance of local schools as well as providing the social, financial and educational resources to those schools that come from having highly educated and aspirational families within the community.

So, the next time you see a media story about a successful Asian selective school student topping the state in Maths or Economics, remember that for every one of those types of students there are hundreds of other LBOTE students who are attending a disadvantaged school in a poor neighbourhood, and of course, everyone in between. And ultimately, the face of educational advantage in NSW is most likely to be white, in a wealthy suburb, and wearing a private school uniform.

This kind of polarisation in our education system is bad for kids' education, and unhealthy for our society.

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This paper was prepared for the *Multicultural Education and Social Inclusion Conference*, NSW Teachers Federation, 21 July 2017. To access a recording of Christine’s presentation [click here](#).