In fateful moments: The appeal of parent testimonials when selling private tutoring

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Australia's private tutoring market is expanding in a context where parents' trust in school personnel as educational experts is vulnerable. Simultaneously, a parentocratic logic is nudging parents to infuse the resources at their disposal into their pedagogic work in order to achieve the educational outcomes that they wish for their children. However, little is known about the specific strategies that private tutoring suppliers are using to attract prospective parents. This paper reports on a study of 160 parent testimonials published on the websites of 16 private tutoring suppliers in Australia. Drawing on Giddens' concept of 'fateful moments' and Bauman's work on the persuasion of the peer example, together with tools of critical discourse analysis, we argue that parent testimonials use emotional appeals to construct private tutoring as a resolution to parents' fateful moments. In addition, we speculate that this emotional footing resonates with the pedagogic preferences of the dominant Australian middle classes.

Keywords: parent testimonial, shadow education, supplementary education, private tutoring, parentocracy, fateful moments

Introduction

Private academic tutoring for school-aged students is booming. Around the world, substantial numbers of parents are purchasing extra tuition from for-profit suppliers to improve their children's academic performance. In many countries, this phenomenon can be understood as an 'insurance strategy' of the 'prudential' parental selves of neoliberal conditions (Doherty and Dooley 2017). Private tutoring is a means by which parents, who are compelled to act autonomously in school markets, can assuage the anxiety of responsibility, while maximising outcomes and minimising risks for their children. In this article we look at the discursive work of testimonials on the websites of

suppliers of private tutoring in appealing to, and forming, this parent consumer.

The private tutoring phenomenon, widely known as ‘shadow education’ or ‘private supplementary education’, varies in scale, intensity and mode from region to region. It is also changing (Bray 2009). In Australia as in Western Europe and North America, the scale of the tutoring industry is growing rapidly from a relatively low base as more families purchase services (Bray 2009; Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016). Furthermore, the array of suppliers is diversifying. The Australian market in school-aged tutoring was once primarily remedial in nature and informally organised along the lines of a ‘cottage industry’. However, as in North America, franchises and other corporatised models of tutoring business are mushrooming in suburbs and towns. These businesses are known for vigorous advertising and market-creation activity (Aurini and Davies 2004). With these tactics, suppliers are selling parents a broader sense of who might benefit from private tutoring services.

Advertisements for private tutoring are popping up all over the place. Where an Australian university student seeking a small income might once have pinned a home-made flyer with tear-off tabs to a community noticeboard at the local shops, the branded signage of learning centre franchises is now prominent in shopping strips and malls. In the course of a research project on private literacy tutoring, we are finding such advertisements on billboards and lamp-posts near schools, in school newsletters, on parenting social media sites, in community newspapers, on television—and targeted online advertising is finding us. These advertisements in turn lead to more extensive marketing on websites.

In this article we are particularly interested in the parent testimonials embedded in such advertising. Testimonials are a common marketing trope on supplier websites and supplier premises (Davis 2013), acting as customer endorsements of a product. The

use of testimonial advertising by suppliers of private tutoring in Australia is, in one sense, hardly surprising because the tactic is widely recommended in the popular business literature for marketing not only private tutoring, but also education in general and other services such as health (e.g., Entrepreneur 2012). What is less obvious, however, is the discursive work that parent testimonials are doing as parents and others imagine and re-imagine education for school-aged students.

The testimonials used to market private tutoring in Australia are endorsements by 'typical' parents rather than 'celebrity' parents. The power of aspiration harnessed by this type of testimonial turns on similarity and familiarity between testimonial-giver and prospective customer. The authority of the endorsement rests on the successful experience that 'someone like me' has had with the product. For example, a U.S. study (Rice 2015) has shown how the testimony of typical parents promises potential customers of online schooling products success in solving parenting problems in their children's experience of regular schooling. This form of marketing does more than promise equivalent success, however; it also offers membership in a like-minded community. In addition to influencing the purchasing behaviour of individual consumers, testimonial advertising helps create patterns of consumption and identity for given groups within the population (Martin, Wentzel, and Tomczak 2008; Moskowitz and Schweitzer 2009). It is discursive work of this type which we probe here.

In Australia, a growing range of tutoring services is being marketed to parents with children across the school age-span, covering the range of academic achievement (Dooley, Liu and Yin 2018) The remedial market in tutoring services is more or less accepted and non-controversial. While scanning the press regularly in the course of our larger research project on private tutoring, for instance, we have found only positive appraisals of tutoring services and products for children with reading difficulties (e.g.,

Frost 2017). In contrast, the markets in tutoring for high academic achievers and English language learners are a more controversial front of parental action. Struggles over racial and gender identities and educational entitlement have been played out, for instance, in press 'debates' about the performance of 'Asian' or 'Chinese' students in selective schooling for boys in Sydney (Proctor and Sriprakash 2017). Similarly, in 2013 a Senate Inquiry investigated a cluster of concerns with Australia's benchmark testing regimen, the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). When the Inquiry was announced, Senator Penny Wright was quoted in the national press as saying: 'a child's NAPLAN performance should not be dependent on their parents' ability to pay for private tutoring or practice booklets' (in Blake 2013, 7). Some submissions to the Inquiry claimed that tutoring was distorting meritocratic schooling processes, and others, that it was violating dominant idealised scripts for Australian childhood (The Senate 2014).

Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu (2016) have argued that the parenting of the culturally dominant and migrant fractions of the middle classes is less dissimilar than might be supposed from the public discourse. They argue that the pedagogic work of both groups of families is infused with the idea that parents can – indeed, should – use the means at their disposal to secure the education which they wish for their children. This is a logic which has been described as 'parentocratic' (Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton 2016). The claim is that it is parentocracy which is eroding meritocracy in Australian society, not the purchase of tutoring by one fraction of the middle classes (Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016). From a consonant position, we ask how parent testimonials might be making private literacy tutoring more widely thinkable—if controversially so—than it once was in Australian society. Specifically, we probe the

sociological footing of the way that everyday parent testimonials appeal to prospective customers of private literacy tutoring.

The article proceeds in four further sections. In the first of these we present the conceptualisation of the discursive work of testimonials we developed for the study. To probe the appeal of the everyday parent testimonial within parentocratic conditions, we articulated concepts of expert and non-expert knowledge and fateful moments (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1990, 1991) with understandings of emotional and rational advertising pitches (Zhang et al. 2014). In the second section, we provide an introduction to the design and methods of the empirical study. In the third section, we present the findings of analyses that unpacked the testimonials' discursive work in constructing and representing parents and children as consumers of tutoring, tutoring suppliers, and schools. The article concludes with a section discussing the parent testimonial as a mechanism that both legitimates and hails parents to behave according to parentocratic logics.

Conceptualising the parent testimonial as a peer-to-peer recommendation in an expert domain

Researchers have identified parentocratic logic in the tutoring phenomenon around the world. The term 'parentocracy' was used initially to name the socio-political ideology which legitimated the neoliberal education policy rolled out in 1980s UK, USA and New Zealand. By this ideology, educational outcomes are properly distributed according to the means and wishes of parents rather than the ability and effort—the merit—of the child (Brown 1990). The term has since been extended to interventionist practices of parenting (Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton 2016) like the concerted cultivation (with or without tutoring) of the children of the dominant middle classes in

Australia and other settings (Lareau 2002; Wheeler 2018). These understandings have been applied, variously, to private tutoring not only in Australia (Blackmore and Hutchison 2010; Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016), but also in Greece (Katartzi 2017), Canada (Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton 2016), France, Japan and Brazil (Nougeria 2009), and Singapore (Tan 2017; Tan 2018).

In the Australian setting, parentocratic logic has taken root in the context of some distinctive features of the national education sector as well as neoliberal policy settings common across societies internationally. Broadly, there has been erosion of trust in public sector services, including the state's provision of education (Pusey 2003). The propensity for parents to look beyond state-provided education has been encouraged by the marketisation of education (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Savage 2012) which, coupled with extreme privatisation, makes the Australian school market an international outlier (Windle 2015). The exercise of parental agency and choice have become routine, for more privileged families at least, in a school market in which private and selective public institutions enjoy generous government funding (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009; Rowe 2017; Windle 2015). The implementation of the NAPLAN regimen of national standardised testing creates high stakes for students/families who are thereby seeking entry into private and selective institutions (Lingard, Thompson, and Sellar 2016). Meanwhile, outside formal schooling, there has been a sharp rise in the presence of edu-businesses as players in the education sector in general and the tutoring sub-sector in particular, a phenomenon evident internationally (Ball 2012, 2017). Against this complex backdrop, the inclination to act according to a parentocratic logic has been naturalised and legitimated.

Parentocracy bestows both freedom and responsibility on parents. As was noted from Britain at the end of the 1980s, parentocratic logic means that the sovereign

consumer is free to holiday in Spain rather than to invest in schooling, but that they have no-one but themselves to blame for their children's educational outcomes (Brown 1990). In such conditions, some of the concepts developed by Anthony Giddens (1991, 1990) and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) are useful for interrogating the sociological footing of the appeal of the everyday parent testimonial to prospective customers of private tutoring.

We argue that the choice to pursue private tutoring is indicative of fragile trust relations between parents and education as a system of expert knowledge. For Giddens, expert systems are systems of technical knowledge and expertise that organise and underpin the social and material environment. The trust of lay people in these systems is dependent upon faith in the correctness of the system. When an expert system is perceived as coherent and reliable, trust can be established and an emotive sense of security and continuity in one's existence reinforced—what Giddens (1984, 1990, 1991) terms 'ontological security'. Thus, in order for parents to trust their children's schools and teachers (as representatives of the expert system of education) in the specialist, technical knowledge about matters such as pedagogy, learning and curriculum, they must have faith that their children's educative experiences are reliable and grounded in valid technical knowledge. However, middle-class parents in particular are increasingly intervening in their children's education to allay tension and anxiety about schools' capacity to serve their children in a way that will maintain or better their social position (Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009; Pusey 2003). Parents' intervention and management of their children's education may be symptomatic of an erosion of trust in the technical knowledge of education as an expert system.

Trust in expert systems is vulnerable during situations where lay people encounter representatives of the expert systems—called 'access points' (Giddens 1990,

90). For parents, ‘unfortunate experiences’ (91) during interactions with representatives of the education expert system (such as principals or teachers) may influence their propensity to trust. For instance, if a teacher’s description of how they are supporting a child who is experiencing difficulty learning to read is perceived as insufficient by the parent, their trust in the broader education expert system is vulnerable. Repeated unfortunate experiences can result a suspension of trust in the education expert system, and leave parents facing a dilemma about how to resolve the issue at hand. Dilemmas that are perceived by the individual as ‘high consequence’ are what Giddens (1991, 131) calls ‘fateful moments’ and are of particular significance to one’s ontological security. For parents, high consequence matters might include the prospect of their child not receiving the marks they need for entry to a selective school, or inadequate support being provided for a learning disability that impedes the child’s capacity to move through school successfully. Such situations can be profoundly troubling and prompt anxiety and apprehension about how to resolve the dilemma at hand. These fateful moments ‘are highly consequential, [and] the individual feels at a crossroads in terms of overall life-planning’ (142). Indeed, for many parents, academic difficulties challenge their pre-established and often taken-for-granted visions of how their children’s futures will unfold; impediments to learning and unresolved academic difficulties are unlikely to have been a part of such visions.

During fateful moments individuals, as reflexive and knowledgeable agents, can choose to reskill and empower themselves in order to resolve the dilemma: where consequential decisions are concerned, individuals are often stimulated to devote the time and energy necessary to generate increased mastery of the circumstances they confront (Giddens 1991, 143). Such efforts are considered routine in reflexive modernity, where the abundance of information and knowledge available positions

individuals to incessantly revise their actions. Parents are able to inform themselves about their trouble and the various approaches that claim to address such troubles. For instance, there would be a range of perspectives and suggested approaches to resolving the 'problem' of a year 5 child reading at a year 3 level – some might minimise the problem by suggesting that in time the child's ability will develop and the problem will resolve itself. Others might be proponents for the use of proprietary reading workbooks or online reading programs outside of school. Others again might suggest that engaging the services of a private tutor offers a resolution. Edwards et al. (2018) have documented the shift of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from 'parent' to 'expert' by reskilling and empowering themselves, in order to choose which support interventions to implement. Parents must weigh up the information they find and make a choice about the most appropriate way forward, in the absence of any over-arching authority. Similarly, in the highly privatised Australian school market, parents of high performing children may likewise confront fateful moments to which tutoring may be a solution. In the quest for the best educational opportunity for their children, parents may inform themselves about the most well-resourced schools. They may become experts in the processes of competitive entry into such schools, and the potential of certain types of tutoring services to this end.

Importantly, Giddens (1991, 141) argues that the choices made by reflexive and knowledgeable agents contribute to the ongoing coherence of self-identity and the maintenance of one's ontological security: 'all such choices are not simply behavioural options: they tend to refract back upon, and be mobilised to develop, the narrative of self-identity.' In this way, a parent's choice to purchase private tutoring might be viewed as a resolution to a dilemma that threatens their overall self-identity.

In this paper we are interested in understanding how the choice to seek private tutoring constitutes a possible way forward during a fateful moment, a resolution to a dilemma raised in the course of a child's progression through school. In a socio-political context where parents are not only less inclined to trust school and its representatives, but are also organised as responsibilised choice-making citizens, the parentocrat is nudged to embrace the freedom and responsibility of finding a compelling response to their children's academic troubles or potential for high achievement. The testimonial is of particular interest given the late-modern tendency to seek an example rather than purely an authority when faced with a personal trouble; as Bauman (2000, 63) puts it, 'stop telling me; show me!':

> Spectators and listeners trained to rely on their own judgement and effort when seeking enlightenment and guidance will go on looking into the private lives of others 'like them' with the same zeal and hope with which they might have looked towards the lessons, homilies and sermons of visionaries and preachers when they believed that only through 'getting heads together', 'closing ranks' and 'walking in step' could private miseries be alleviated or cured (72).

The authority of a peer is engendered by their example. To a parent whose trust in schools is suspended, the example of a fellow parent in the form of a testimonial on a private tutoring website might be more significant than the authority of a teacher's resolution to a child's academic problem. Here, the discursive power of the parent testimonial may be understood as an elevation of the parent experience as meaningful and empowering to other parents in the throes of a fateful moment. In parentocractic conditions, the perspectives of others akin to themselves might be sufficient to convince parents to mobilise their resources through private tutoring.

Navigation of fateful moments invokes both emotionality and rationality and as such, we seek to understand the work of each logic within the testimonials. Marketing

literature makes a distinction between the use of emotional appeals and rational appeals in advertising. Rational appeals refer to advertising that focuses on the function/utility of a service: 'Examples include messages showing a product's superior quality, economy, value, performance and reliability' (Zhang et al. 2014, 2107). In contrast, emotional appeals refer to the feelings elicited in the recipient in response to the advertisement: 'Emotional appeals attempt to stir up either positive emotions (e.g. love, pride, humor and joy) or negative ones (e.g. fear and guilt) that can motivate a particular purchase' (2107).

While marketing literature provides empirical evidence about the types of services and audiences that might best respond to rational/emotional appeals, there is limited understanding of the sociological mechanisms that elicit particular responses from recipients of the marketing texts. Therefore, our analysis of the testimonials goes beyond classifying the particular appeals as rational or emotional to understand why these particular appeals are presumably thought to be effective in attracting customers of private tutoring. We now turn to the description and analysis of the testimonial data.

The empirical study

During 2016-17 we searched the websites of 19 tutoring suppliers that operate in the suburbs of an Australian city, including a high diversity area with substantial numbers of migrants from societies known for their conventions of high intensity tutoring (for a description of the search process for the websites, see Author [2018]). The websites were re-visited in 2018. While some had been updated, there had been no substantive changes of relevance to our analyses here.

Our analytic intention was to go beyond a denotative understanding of the testimonials; our purpose was to analyse the underpinning assumptions of each text and

the normative ideas about children's education and the work of private tutoring. We therefore approached the texts in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995, 2003) because of its purchase on understanding the cultural, social and political work of the texts. In particular, the tools of CDA allowed us to probe how parents' evaluations of the private tutoring experience might represent their broader understandings and imaginings about the work of private tutoring: 'Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world' (Fairclough 2003, 124).

In aligning with Fairclough's (2003) process of discourse analysis, our analysis progresses in three stages. First, we describe the textual features of the testimonials, with a focus on who is constructed how in parents' accounts of their experiences with tutoring. Second, we focus on an interpretation of the websites and their relationship with social processes. The first and second stages are presented concurrently. Finally, we posit an explanation of the relationship between parents as consumers of tutoring services and the social context of the tutoring market, in relation to the choice to seek private tutoring as a strategy to manage a fateful moment. To protect the anonymity of the suppliers, we have used masking techniques including pseudonyms and have paraphrased common themes in the testimonials (signalled by text in italics).

Others have used CDA to understand the discursive work of schools and university websites in forming particular representations of themselves and appealing to prospective customers (see Lund 2008; Wilson and Carlsen 2016; Zhang and O'Halloran 2013). In understanding private tutoring as one choice among many available to parents as they navigate their children's educational difficulties, we echo Wilson and Carlsen's (2016, 29-30) argument that websites 'do not just describe a field

of choice options; they act to shape the availability, meaning, and nature of those choices.' In this paper, we are particularly interested in how testimonials, as peer-to-peer recommendations, might shape parents' choices in tutoring markets.

Our analyses showed that the 19 suppliers websites constituted two distinct groups. The first group consisted of 16 one-to-one tutors, small learning centres or larger (trans)national learning centres which catered for school-aged children across a range of academic areas, but most often literacy and numeracy (and English and mathematics more broadly). These suppliers appeared to target a broad range of parents who are primarily concerned with helping their children to 'catch up' with school work and supporting their emotional wellbeing. These suppliers tended to offer homework help or their own proprietary materials that mirror the Australian school curriculum. We found parent testimonials on 13 of the 16 supplier websites, and a total of 160 parent testimonials on those 13 supplier websites. The number of testimonials on each website varied from two or three to ten or more. The testimonials from each website were saved to create a data set for analysis.

The second group consisted of three academic coaching colleges. This group of suppliers appeared to have a narrow target market, generally focused on parents whose concern is with their children's academic excellence and high performance in selective school entry examination and NAPLAN tests. Parent testimonials were not found on the websites of these suppliers; instead these websites provided factual information about the content of the services and academic outcomes of past students (although there were some student testimonials expressing joy about their high achievements). That is, their appeal was more rational rather than emotional.

The testimonials were first person reports of parents' and children's experiences of a tutoring supplier and were dotted throughout many pages in the websites. They

ranged in length from just a sentence or two through to longer blocks of text of around 200 words. Understandably, all testimonials were written in support or praise of the particular tutoring service; there were no critiques of the various services. Some testimonials were presented as solicited, presumably for the purpose of customer satisfaction or quality control and monitoring (we asked our clients to share their feedback with us) while others were presented as unsolicited, where the parent appeared to contact the tutoring supplier of their own accord (we wanted to share our successes with you!). The solicited testimonials may demonstrate that the supplier follows up on student progress and is concerned with parent feedback while unsolicited testimonials could present as more authentic than those that were invited by the supplier. We now turn to our analysis of the testimonials.

Findings

Who features how in the testimonials? The testimonials referred to four groups of participants either directly or by implication: the parents, the children, the tutors (the service itself, and its outcomes for children) and the school. The parents, children and tutors were described positively, while there were more ambivalent judgments invoked in the descriptions of school personnel.

Parents. Parents were constructed as overwhelmingly satisfied with the tutoring service, most commonly describing feelings of happiness and gratitude. Firstly, parents were happy with the outcomes of tutoring for their children (*we are thrilled that Samantha's report card is her best ever!*). Secondly, parents were grateful to the tutor for their role in their children's apparent improvements (*Adam wouldn't be progressing as well as he is without you*). For many parent testimonial-givers in the data set, there was an effusive attribution of causality; other factors that may have contributed to a child's

improvements (such as continued schooling and maturation) were not mentioned and any improvements for the child were without exception attributed to the tutor. Grammatical intensifiers such as ‘very’ and ‘really’ were commonly used by parents in recounting their experiences (31 uses of ‘very’ and 58 uses of ‘really’ attached to parents’ and children’s positive attitudes in the 160 sampled texts). Other intensifiers included ‘highly’ (*we highly recommend your tutors to our friends*); ‘especially’ (*we are especially grateful for…*); and ‘so’ (*we’re so happy with his results*). Such positive language constructs parents, unsurprisingly, as satisfied customers and may be appealing to testimonial-takers (the seeking reader) who are seeking evidence that tutoring can be a positive and worthwhile choice.

Children. The children who were represented as recipients of tutoring were construed in terms of lack and deficit, usually in relation to their academic ability or self-confidence. Parents’ descriptions of their children’s deficits often featured as the ‘complication’ of a narrative in which tutoring was the ultimate resolution. For instance, across a selection of testimonials, students were commonly described as ‘lagging behind,’ ‘being reluctant’ and ‘struggling’. The use of a tutoring service was then described, which by these accounts resolved the complication for parents and students, evidenced by their elated reports of great improvements for the child, and again, their attribution of this success to the tutoring experience (*Phillip’s confidence was suffering because he couldn’t keep up with the rest. Thanks to you, now he’s getting better grades and loving school again*). The word ‘improvement’ was commonly chosen by parents to frame their reports. Improvements in self-confidence, academic results and specific academic abilities were most commonly described. The word ‘now’ was commonly used, suggesting that ‘before’ tutoring there was a problem and that tutoring has gone some

way to solving it (*before she couldn't understand what the teacher was talking about in math but now she can keep up with the work*).

Thus, children were consistently reported to have benefited from use of the tutoring services. Parents, as the testimonial-givers, are construed as concerned and engaged with the progress of their children at school, and attribute improvements to the tutoring service alone. This narrative may resonate with testimonial-takers who may perceive that their children are experiencing similar difficulties at school and could imagine their children's problems being similarly resolved if they choose to have their child work with a tutor. The testimonials are predictable in the way that they describe a handful of similar deficits (diagnosis) and a handful of similar outcomes for their children (cure). Thus, the tutoring companies appear to use such problem-solving narratives to target parents seeking remedial intervention for their children.

The emotion-loaded testimonials stood alone; there were no substantiating statistics or other rational claims about student outcomes to substantiate such effusive claims of efficacy. Indeed, the testimonials are necessarily partial so that the testimonial-taker is invited to recognise aspects of their individual child or parental concerns in the individual narratives offered. The individual narratives serve to offer hooks of relevance for different kinds of clients. These emotional appeals to 'people like us' without reference to external measure of quality are common in the marketing of services to parents (Johns and English 2016). Further, the appeal of reading about the experiences of 'people like us' supports the late-modern propensity to seek and collect guidance from parallel others (Bauman 2000).

The tutoring service. The tutoring service was described by testimonial-givers along two dimensions: the people at the tutoring services, and the pedagogies used by tutors.

As expected, the testimonials were in favour of the tutoring service and the tutors were described positively without exception (*Martha has been the most wonderful, caring and patient tutor; her students are always happy and smiling*). The relationship between the tutor and child was the focus of many testimonial accounts (*the tutor built terrific rapport with our daughter*). While parents' evaluations of the tutors' qualities were uniform, what appealed pedagogically varied. For instance, some celebrated 'tailored' and 'creative' pedagogies; others were pleased by the independence apparently fostered by the tutoring program. Moreover, where one parent praised the supplier's 'modern' approach, another praised the supplier's emphasis on rote learning. What is consistent across the evaluations is that for these parents tutoring should have an element of fun and positively engage their children.

It seems that the testimonial-givers in this data set valued a tutoring service that is warm, friendly and fun. Any grievances that the children may have had were absent and there was no indication that students were being unreasonably pressured to perform. The hyperbolic evaluations of the tutors indicate that for some parents and students, the individualised relationship between the child and the tutor was important. This emphasis perhaps serves as a tacit critique of schooling, where teachers' capacity to teach in an individualised manner is constrained by factors that include much larger class sizes, the behaviours of other children, 'paperwork' and other non-teaching duties. The elated reports of the testimonial-giver may attract the seeking parent, prompting them to turn to a tutoring service to address the perceived deficits of their child's school. It may be these appeals have been crafted to attract the wavering consumer to try the service, rather than those whose decision-making may be dependent on other information sources.

Schools. Parents made a few incidental references to schools; across the data set there were traces of more or less explicit critique. Again, tutoring was constructed as the 'cure,' in this case to the apparent deficits of schools. For instance, one parent noted that the tutoring program was useful because it gave homework where the school did not. Another parent reported a perceived deficit in the school's offerings, saying that their struggling child was receiving minimal additional support. Consistent with other reports, these parents appeared to use tutoring as a supplement to the school's incomplete offering and as 'cure' for the child. One parent re-voiced the school teacher's response to concerns about their child's progress and evaluated the response as inattentive and insufficient. The parent reported that following a period of tuition, the child had made improvements academically. This critique projects a judgment of authority, specifically that 'parent knows best' to testimonial readers. In a similar vein, another parent explained that they had sent their child to a tutor without the knowledge of the school teacher, who had subsequently observed a positive shift in the student's learning. The teacher noticing a change in the student's ability offers a more 'objective' account of the student's progress and moves beyond the parent's own opinion of the effectiveness of tutoring on their child. Here, the legitimacy of the teacher's observation may act as a hook for the testimonial-taker who is looking for evidence that tutoring 'works'.

By choosing to include testimonials that present indirect critiques of schools, tutoring suppliers appear to be constructing themselves as the trusted expert in education and customer service. Where the testimonials might represent schools as potentially complacent, the caring, patient and engaging tutor is foregrounded; where schools are represented as dismissive of parent concerns, tutoring companies are represented in antithesis - as attentive and responsive allies for parents. This binary

perhaps stokes the fire for parents seeking to explain their child's difficulties at school and seeking evidence that private tutoring will act as a solution to these concerns. It may be that criticisms of school treatment represent an opportunity to differentiate the tutoring service from the educational provisions of schooling while developing a distinct brand identity, meaning and image for private tutoring.

In sum, the testimonials illustrate parents' satisfaction with the work of private tutors in servicing their children's educational difficulties while also constructing schools as unable or unwilling to do this individualised work. We now move to explaining the social and institutional conditions that bear on this discursive work of the parent testimonial.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to probe the sociological footing of the parent testimonial on private tutoring supplier websites. Our analysis of the testimonials suggests that private tutoring is being marketed as a resolution for parents dissatisfied with their children's school progress. As we argued earlier, the trust between parents and schools is increasingly vulnerable, and these testimonials serve to stoke the fire for parents seeking an alternative. In this section we seek to explain how parent testimonials seek to engender trust in the fellow parent and in private tutoring suppliers.

The testimonials are selective and crafted representations of the parents' narratives associated with their children's schooling difficulties. In our discussion we focus on the broader context around parents' elated and affirming reports of private tutoring. We argue that for these parents (whether authentic or fictional), tutoring has been a response to their own 'unfortunate experiences' with representatives of the education expert system, usually schools and teachers. The nature of these unfortunate experiences is sometimes explicit (such as where the parent describes a teacher's

apparently poor response to their child's learning difficulty). Sometimes, the details of the catalyst for tutoring are left unsaid, however the occurrence or avoidance of unfortunate experiences is implied. In any case, the choice to use tutoring in some way indicates reduced trust in the school's ability to satisfactorily address parents' concerns. For these parents, their trust in the expertise of schools is vulnerable and they have faced a dilemma about how to proceed in addressing the child's difficulties.

For parents, the dilemmas of trust may be judged to be highly consequential, and thus constitute fateful moments in which 'the individual is likely to recognize that she is faced with an altered set of risks and possibilities' (Giddens 1991, 131). A child's learning difficulties or achievements that are 'behind the rest' may provoke anxiety and apprehension over what the difficulty means for their future. Will the child improve without intervention? Will the teacher address the problem? How will this difficulty affect their options in the future? Similarly, a child's apparent potential for high achievement may induce anxiety. Is the school program adequate to realise that potential? What extra learning opportunities should the family provide? In short, a myriad of concerns, fears and imagined outcomes result—from high as well as low achievement. Parents' choices in response to a fateful moment may be considered acutely significant in the context of a moralisation of parenting. Neoliberal logics endorse aspiring and active parenting (Ball 2017) such that parents are nudged to take responsibility for the choices they make for their children and for the consequences of those choices. Parenting according to such calculative work means that 'parenting itself is made into a set of skills and dispositions' (198); the consequences of being incorrectly or inadequately oriented to navigating a fateful moment are imagined to be grim.

We also understand such heightened sensitivity to the risks and possibilities of educational outcomes in the context of a globalised world, in which increased economic and political interdependence has transformed the perceived significance of the credentials bestowed upon children by the education system. A large body of literature has mapped the inequitable distribution of the effects of globalisation; as Hallak (2000, 25) puts it, there are 'those who globalize, those who are globalized and those who are left out'. Competitive global market forces have meant that individuals' social and economic prospects are tied to their ability to be skilled and flexible workers (Lingard 2013). Parents fear that children who are unable to succeed academically may indeed be left out and will join the 'legions of discarded, devalued people [who] form the growing planet of the irrelevant' (Castells 2000, 12). In sum, the significance of education credentials to a child's future 'has increased anxiety among middle-class parents regarding their ability to maintain their place (socioeconomic status) in society and secure educational advantage for their children' (Power et al. 2003, 91).

The choice to pursue private tutoring represents the result of parents' efforts to reskill and master the troubling circumstances they face or imagine. The testimonial-giver has looked beyond the gaze of the school for solutions to their problem and has settled on private tutoring as a strategy of resolution and report its supposedly tremendous success. Similarly, testimonial-takers are presumably immersed in the process of reskilling and empowering themselves to resolve their own child's lived or imagined educational troubles. The parent testimonial acts as but one source of information available to the reskilling parent. In a space of competing claims to expertise, the testimonials work discursively to problematise whose expertise counts. For seeking parents, whose trust in schools may be damaged following their own unfortunate experiences, peer-to-peer recommendations such as those in our data set

may be persuasive. The corpus of testimonials on supplier websites, and the testimonials' work of foregrounding aspects of the tutoring experience create a deliberately constructed version of reality that may offer a compelling option for the seeking parent.

The appeal and authority of the peer-to-peer recommendation is bolstered by a late-modern desire to know how ordinary others navigate parallel troubles (Bauman 2000). The example and views of a peer are alluring. Our analysis demonstrates how the peer-to-peer testimonial can accrue the power to engender trust in the potential of private tutoring and shape parents' choice to pursue private tutoring. The mediated voices of the testimonials, where parents describe a somewhat narrow and consistent set of troubles relating to their children's education, allow testimonial-takers to imagine themselves as the testimonial-giver, experiencing the same successes with the use of private tutoring. Similarly, Jeacle and Carter (2011, 293) analysed the trust engendered through the ranking system of online travel website TripAdvisor, contending that users' rankings of travel service suppliers constructed 'internet mediated expert systems'. In their case, it was the calculative practices associated with the star-ranking system combined with travellers' commentaries on their experiences of suppliers that created trust (rather than the trust traditionally assigned to travel agents).

Moreover, Jeacle and Carter (2011) note that internet mediated expert systems prompt skepticism towards more official forms of expertise, instead favouring the views of other users. Our findings are parallel, in particular where parents' testimonials critique teachers and schools. In this way, the parent testimonial, broadcast by tutoring suppliers in the private market, contribute to a 'commercialization of trust' (303). It is no longer the case that traditional education experts function without question or

competition; parents are exposed to a myriad of competing voices and can carefully scrutinise their options before settling on where to place their trust.

We note the testimonial-givers' overwhelming use of emotional claims, rather than rational. While some parents mentioned the function of tutoring in redressing their child's difficulties, the testimonials were overwhelmingly focused on the positive feelings associated with tutoring – the happiness of the cured child and their parent; the warmth and friendliness of the tutor; the fun of the tutoring sessions. In the context of ethnically charged contention over the use tutoring in Australian society, it is notable that this emphasis on the nurturing learning environments and children's positive feelings towards tutoring reflect what has been identified as the established parenting discourse of the dominant social group. This is a form of parenting produced by 'contemporary progressive parenting discourses [that] sponsor weaker framings of parent–child relationships through tacit modes of disciplining, an emphasis on play, the "nurturing" of the "whole child" and a resistance to overt competition' (Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016, 437). The appeal here would seem to be to the dominant cultural fractions of the Australian middle classes rather than the Asian migrant fractions of those classes known for their preference for stronger pedagogic framings and their dispositions to educational competition (Kim and Bang 2017; Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016).

Further, the specialised character of knowledge and the multiplicity of available knowledge claims creates a dilemma of competing expertise (Giddens 1991). Most parents would have neither knowledge of tutoring suppliers' programs and pedagogies, nor the requisite expertise to adequately evaluate these. Parents' choice to use private tutoring is thereby typically based on the information made available by the tutoring suppliers and thus it may be difficult for seeking parents to choose with confidence. In

this context, reflexivity guides individuals to choose whose/which knowledge to trust. According to Holmes (2010, 149), reflexivity is inextricably linked to emotion such that individuals rely heavily on 'feelings of trust or liking or pleasure, or their opposites'. Thus, testimonial-givers' emphasis on emotional reactions to tutoring offer some reassurance that the choice will be the right one. For testimonial-takers, reading peers' emotionally-charged reports of tutoring may provide hope and optimism in their own fateful moments, and help engender trust in tutoring suppliers as knowledge experts capable of resolving their children's dilemmas.

The present study complements a growing body of empirical research which has described the ways that private tutoring suppliers appeal to other groups of consumers internationally. Research in Hong Kong has shown how suppliers appeal to adolescents with images of god-tutors or star tutors who know all there is to know about succeeding in high stakes exams (Koh 2014; Yung and Yuan 2018). Research on tutoring websites for Russian adults has identified the attributes of high-ranking or highly sought after tutors of English (Kozar 2015). To this body of empirical understandings of the appeal of tutoring products, the present study adds insights into the ways that suppliers of tutoring for school-aged children in an Australian setting are making emotional appeals to parents through peer testimonials. We have suggested that the tactic might be understood in the social context of eroding trust in institutionalised schooling; whether these tactics work on potential customers is another question, though their frequent use in this market would suggest so.

The findings of the present research, are also cause for consideration about the extent to which the peer testimonial does not simply respond to parents' anxieties but also precipitates them. This is a point of interest in the larger conversation around the discursive formation of the responsibilised parental self in late modern or neoliberal

conditions, through practices of confession, for instance (e.g., Aarsand, 2011, 2014; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). With respect to private tutoring, corporatisation of this form of education and the attendant proliferation of advertising would seem to be the marks of a powerful new player in the public imagination behind the realities of the empirical world of schooling.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no financial interest in this research and will receive no financial benefit from the research.

Acknowlegements

The authors thank the three anonymous reviewers from *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* for their helpful suggestions.

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