

Selling Success: A Critical Examination of Mathematics Tutoring Advertisements in Australia

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Private mathematics tutoring has expanded rapidly in Australia, yet little research has examined how agencies advertise their services or how promotional claims align with school curriculum and pedagogy. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyses promotional texts from five Australian mathematics tutoring agencies. Cross-case analysis identified discursive themes through which advertisements interact with students, parents, and tutors to legitimise tutoring participation. The paper shows how these discourses shape understandings of mathematics learning and success.

Introduction

The tutoring industry has expanded rapidly across many education systems worldwide (Bray & Kwo, 2014) and has become particularly prominent in Australia over the past decade (Li et al., 2025). Recent estimates suggest that more than 40% of Australian students now participate in some form of private tutoring (Apex Tuition Australia, n.d.). Within Australia's multi-billion-dollar tutoring market (ATA, 2022), mathematics tutoring holds the largest market share. This growth is often linked to stakeholders' heightened emphasis on mathematics achievement, driven by the belief that mathematical performance underpins broader academic success and future opportunities beyond school (Li et al., 2025).

Despite this growth, little attention has been directed towards examining how tutoring services are advertised. Specifically, whether their promotional claims align with or contradict how mathematics is taught in formal schooling. Existing research has documented tensions between teachers and tutors: teachers may criticize tutor's reliance on drilling and sole focus on exam preparation, while tutors may position school teaching as insufficient for producing the results students and parents seek (Guo et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Yet it remains unclear how tutoring advertisements may reinforce or intensify these tensions. In this study, stakeholders are understood as occupying distinct but overlapping instructional roles. Teachers are considered to be curriculum-aligned educators advocating holistic mathematical proficiency development. Tutors are positioned as specialised instructors oriented towards exam performance. Whereas parents and students are seen as evaluators of educational effectiveness whose decision shape tutoring participation. These roles are not neutral, as they actively shape how tutoring is valued, justified, and enacted within the local educational context.

As such, to address this gap and explore how tutoring services' advertisements align with or contradict formal schooling's skill-focused approach in teaching mathematics (ACARA, n.d.), this paper employs CDA to answer the question: How do Australian mathematics tutoring agencies construct tutoring services, stakeholders, and relationships to formal schooling through advertisements? Through systematic analysis of five tutoring agencies' advertisements, the linguistic patterns, recurring themes, advertisements' potential influence on stakeholders in making educational decision, and the broader discursive functions of tutoring advertisements were investigated. From this, we aim to illuminate how particular discourses are utilised to construct and legitimise tutoring services and explore the extent to which these discourses align with the philosophies of teaching and learning mathematics in formal schools in Australia.

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Literature Review

Private tutoring, often conceptualised as ‘shadow education’ (Bray, 2009), refers to fee-paying supplementary learning activities taking place outside school hours, that mirrors formal schooling in content and structure. In this study, tutoring is treated as a form of shadow education, but the term ‘tutoring’ is adopted to reflect its everyday usage in the Australian context. This conceptualisation situates tutoring not as an isolated practice, but as one that evolves in direct relation to formal schooling and its assessment structures.

Although some forms of tutoring emphasise enrichment, confidence building, or remediation for learners who struggle to keep pace with school-based instruction (Bray, 2009), a large proportion of tutoring services are explicitly framed around examination preparation and target performance gains (Bray & Kwo, 2014). The main purpose of tutoring, in many students’ and parents’ views, is to boost grades in exams and to secure access to desirable career pathways (Guo et al., 2020). This purpose is evident across many education systems that have witnessed exponential growth in tutoring (Guill et al., 2022), including Australia (Dhall, 2024).

The Australian education system is strongly meritocratic, with university entrance largely dependent on the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), which represents a student’s academic standing relative to peers across states, based on performance in senior secondary subjects. High-stakes examinations, that contribute to ATAR calculations, therefore carry substantial weight in shaping students’ post-school options (Zheng et al., 2020). These mechanisms contribute significantly to the growth of tutoring, as families seek any perceived advantage in an increasingly competitive educational environment (Bray & Kwo, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). However, several important questions remain insufficiently addressed in the literature: (1) To what extent is tutoring effective in increasing academic performance and longer-term learning outcomes? (2) What impact does tutoring have on formal schooling? (3) How are parents and students persuaded to participate in tutoring, and what messages and representations lead them to place trust in tutoring providers?

While there’s lack of data in Australia to answer the first question, international research provides a useful basis for informed postulation. Studies conducted in a range of jurisdictions indicate that tutoring appears to have heterogeneous impacts on students’ achievement depending on prior attainment, socio-economic status, gender, geographic location, tutor qualifications and experience, and the intensity and duration of participation (Ömeroğulları et al., 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2022). In other words, tutoring does not consistently guarantee improved academic outcomes many students and parents expect, in some cases, it may offer negligible or negative returns relative to financial and emotional costs (Zhang & Liu, 2022). One possible explanation is that tutor’s and teachers’ practices often serve different purposes (Sriprakash et al., 2016), shaping how each group conceptualises their role and the kinds of learning outcomes they prioritise (Zhang et al., 2021). These differences make collaboration between schools and tutors inherently challenging.

In Australian mathematics curriculum policy documents, teachers are required to develop students’ overall mathematical proficiency, including conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, problem solving, and reasoning, rather than a narrow focus on procedural fluency (ACARA, n.d.; Li, 2024). Accordingly, school mathematics pedagogy increasingly advocates for inquiry-based learning, problem-solving tasks, formative assessment, and the holistic development of students’ mathematical skills that foster confident, critical and reflective learners of mathematics (Li, 2024). However, the extent to which these aims align with how mathematics is taught by tutoring agencies remains unclear. Given that tutoring participation is often driven by parents and students – whose expectations may centre solely on achieving competitive results in a meritocratic education system (Sriprakash et al., 2016) – tutoring agencies may adopt practices that focus on enhancing students’ procedural fluency, instead of

well-balanced development of mathematical proficiency (Li, 2024). This sits in tension with government-endorsed educational goals and pedagogies embedded in curriculum documents (ACARA, n.d.). Research suggests that in contexts where university entrance and future opportunities are strongly influenced by comparative examination results, tutoring agencies frequently present themselves as efficient, targeted, and results-driven solutions to these pressures (Guo et al., 2020). In doing so, they may focus on rapid content coverage, examination techniques, “shortcut” strategies, and performance guarantees, in ways that contradicts the educational philosophies and classroom practices in formal schooling (Li et al., 2025).

Tensions between school-based teaching and learning, and marketised, output-focused tutoring has been documented in several countries (Guo et al., 2020; Ömeroğulları et al., 2020). Yet, despite growing recognition of these tensions, limited attention has been given to the discursive discourses through which tutoring services are described, legitimised, and made appealing to students and parents, particularly in Australia. Existing research on tutoring has largely focused on patterns of participation, equity implications, or outcome measures, rather than on the language and discourse used to promote tutoring as desirable and necessary. At the same time, broader work on the marketisation of education has shown how schools and universities increasingly adopt commercial marketing strategies, deploying advertisements that emphasise competitiveness, choice, and individualised returns on investment (Sriprakash et al., 2016). However, systematic analyses of how such marketised discourses operate within the tutoring sector, and how they interact with students, parents, and teachers, remain limited.

Given the rapid expansion of the tutoring market and its growing influence on students’ educational trajectories, there is a need to interrogate how tutoring is advertised. Specifically, by understanding how tutoring services are promoted, parents and students can gain an understanding of difference in philosophies of teaching mathematics between schools and tutoring agencies and thus make more informed educational decisions on tutoring participation. Examining the promotional materials of tutoring agencies also allows researchers and teachers to understand how tutoring is framed as an educational solution through the discursive constructions of parents, teachers, and student roles.

Research Design and Methodology

A CDA approach was applied to analyse advertisements of selected mathematics tutoring agencies. By focusing on the linguistic patterns, recurring themes, and discursive functions evident in these promotional texts, the study aims to illuminate how particular discourses are employed to promote tutoring services and to assess the extent to which these discourses align with, or potentially undermine, the way in which mathematics is taught in schools.

Sampling, Selection Criteria, and Corpus Building Criteria

Given the scope of this project, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted. The selection criteria used to identify five tutoring agencies for inclusion in the CDA were:

1. **Mathematics Focuses:** Each selected agency was required to specialise in tutoring mathematics for secondary students. While agencies could offer additional subjects, mathematics had to be the primary or clearly dominant area of provision.
2. **Representative Tutoring Models:** The agencies were chosen to exemplify common organisational and delivery models within the Australian tutoring sector. This included, for example, a large, franchised tutoring centre, a provider offering hybrid (online and in-person) modes of attendance, and a specialist mathematics coaching college, thereby capturing variation in how tutoring is structured and delivered.
3. **Accessible Advertising Content:** Agencies were required to have readily accessible advertising materials from which advertisement/promotional texts could be extracted. Agencies were required to have advertisements/promotional texts and associated promotional pages, with

sufficient written content to support detailed discourse analysis, that are listed publicly on a website or equivalent online platform.

4. **Coverage Across Australia:** The selected agencies needed to operate in major regions or cities in Australia, rather than being confined to a single suburb. This criterion was intended to enhance the relevance of the analysis beyond a narrowly localised context.

With the above criteria being used, five agencies that met all 4 criteria were chosen. To maintain the anonymity of individual providers and to keep the focus on discursive patterns, tutoring agencies are referred to by pseudonyms (Agency A, B, C, D & E). A short justification of each agency's alignment with criteria 2 and 4 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1:

Justification of 5 Agencies' Inclusion

Agency	A	B	C	D	E
Criteria 2 Alignment	Small-group classes; Senior maths specialist	Online 1-to-1 tutoring; interactive platform; Australian Curriculum mapped	Exam-focused small-group classes; Senior maths specialist	After-school learning centre franchise; small-group face-to-face tutoring	Large international franchise; centre-based and online small-group/individual tutoring
Criteria 4 Alignment	Metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne	All Australian states and territories	Greater Sydney area	Major cities across Australia	All Australian states and territories

After selecting agencies, the promotional text from their websites was extracted to form the advertisement corpus for CDA. To define what promotional text was included in the CDA, 'promotional' was defined operationally rather than in strictly legal or formal terms. Any text or visual material that communicated the values, legitimacy, or superiority of a tutoring service, with an explicit or implicit aim of influencing enrolment decisions, was considered as promotional text and thus eligible for inclusion in the critical discourse analysis. Conversely, purely administrative content (e.g., timetables, enrolment forms, terms and conditions) and individual testimonial statements in advertisements were excluded, as they do not function as promotional discourse authored by the agency itself.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Comparison across Agencies

Guided by Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework for Critical Discourse Analysis, this study positioned each agency's tutoring advertisements simultaneously as a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice.

At the textual level, each agency's promotional texts (corpus) were analysed to reveal its linguistic features. By examining the frequency and use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, modality, evaluative language, and rhetorical organisation, the analysis sought to identify how students, parents, schools, and mathematics tutoring were linguistically constructed, and how particular representations of teaching, learning, and success were normalised or marginalised within the corpus. At the level of discursive practice, the focus shifted to how the promotional texts were distributed and consumed. The analysis considered what assumptions about intended audiences were embedded in the language and imagery; how different audiences were positioned; and how the advertisements drew intertextually on wider educational, marketing, and policy discourses. At the level of social practice, the study explores how the discourses evident in the advertisements share similarities in contributing to broader social structures and relations within the Australian tutoring industry, which reveals implications for public's understanding of tutoring's promotion and interaction with formal schooling.

The three-dimensional CDA was conducted for all five agencies, after which the findings were brought together in a cross-agency comparison to examine whether a recurring pattern of tutoring portrayal existed. This comparative stage identified recurring themes among agencies, patterns in promotional text corpus, and contrasts in the discourses used to promote tutoring services across agencies. Attention was also given to how promotional texts may influence interactions between students, parents, and teachers. By examining these convergences and divergences, the analysis aimed to identify dominant and competing discourses about mathematics tutoring, and to illuminate their implications for how tutoring is understood in relation to formal schooling, educational equity, and students' learning trajectories.

Findings and Discussion

Textual and Discursive Practice Levels

The CDA of advertising and promotional texts from each agency revealed several recurring discursive patterns. At the textual level, agencies drew upon a relatively limited but strategically deployed set of linguistic and rhetorical resources to promote and legitimise their services. These recurring patterns were subsequently organised into four overarching themes that capture the dominant ways tutoring is represented across the dataset. The first theme concerns tutoring goal constructions, which articulate the intended purposes of tutoring, such as examination excellence, confidence development, or academic remediation. The second theme involves personalisation claims, whereby agencies emphasise that instruction is tailored to the needs of individual students. The third theme consists of curriculum alignment statements, which position tutoring as closely connected to, or supportive of, formal school curricula. The fourth theme relates to the mobilisation of quantitative evidence, in which numerical indicators are used to signal effectiveness, credibility, or success. Taken together, these themes contribute to the construction of a distinctive discursive identity for each agency. Depending on how particular themes were emphasised, agencies were represented variously as elite examination academies, technologically enabled personalised learning services, nurturing confidence-builders, or professional providers of academic remediation. A cross-case synthesis of these themes and the corresponding dominant identities is presented in Table 2.

At the level of discursive practice, the analytical focus shifts from what is said in the advertisements to how these texts relate their intended audiences and producers. Across all five agencies, students are consistently represented as learners who are unable to realise their full academic potential through school alone and who therefore require ongoing external support, specialised expertise, and structured guidance. This positioning is evident in recurring promotional claims such as:

“Our proven methodology has helped ... to catch up and keep up in ... maths.”

“... to teach children basic mathematical concepts ... so they can catch up at school.”

“... with insights into exam techniques and an ability to explain concepts clearly.”

“... so they can focus on their studies and reach their full potential.”

Collectively, these statements portray students as learners at risk of falling behind unless supplementary instruction is provided. This deficit- and risk-oriented framing is particularly pronounced in texts that foreground high-stakes examination performance, where success is portrayed as contingent upon specialised preparation beyond the classroom. Within this discourse, tutoring is implicitly positioned as a necessary intervention besides formal schooling.

Parents, in turn, are discursively positioned as responsible decision-makers and active managers of their children's academic trajectories. Promotional texts frequently address parents directly, suggesting that “good” or “attentive” parents closely monitor school performance, interpret assessment outcomes, and strategically select supplementary educational services. This positioning is reinforced through personalisation claims and curriculum-alignment

statements, which reassure parents that tutoring will be tailored to their child's individual needs while remaining closely connected to school requirements. In doing so, the discourse invites parents to view enrolment in tutoring not merely as an optional enhancement, but as a rational example of good parenting, and at times a necessary response to competitive schooling.

Table 2:

Summary of the findings of each agency's advertisement/promotional text

Category	Agency A	Agency B	Agency C	Agency D	Agency E
Tutoring goal construction	Exam excellence, marks	Grades and confidence	High stake exam performance	Confidence, enjoyment, steady progress	Catch-up with personalised teaching
Personalisation claim	Moderate ("small classes")	Very strong (adaptive programs)	Weak (no individualised programs)	Strong ("learning plans tailored to styles")	Strong ("individualised program")
Curriculum alliance statement	Claims relevance; no alignment details	Content matches curriculum; no skills reference	Little or no explicit curriculum link	Alignment claimed; no supporting detail	Explicit reference to state curriculum topics
Use of ATAR statistics	63% of text reference ATAR	47% of text reference ATAR	78% of text reference ATAR	0% of text reference ATAR	0% of text reference ATAR
Dominant discursive identity	High-performance exam academy	Personalised tech-enable tutoring	Elite results-driven institution	Confidence-focused support provider	Teacher-led remediation service

Social Practice Level and Implications of the Promotional Texts

At the level of social practice, the promotional texts reveal several recurring discursive patterns that shape stakeholder's perceptions on tutoring and influence them to engage in participating in tutoring. These shared discourses do more than advertise services; they actively construct social norms surrounding tutoring participation and influence students', parents', and teachers' daily interactions in formal schools.

A dominant pattern across all five agencies is the discursive construction of mathematics tutoring as an essential, rather than optional, component of contemporary schooling. Despite substantial variation in business models, target markets, and declared pedagogical philosophies, each agency positioned tutoring as necessary. This shared framing normalises tutoring as part of the expected educational trajectory, transforming what was once considered supplementary support into an assumed requirement for academic success. Collectively, the promotional texts across five agencies promoted a form of educational dependency, encouraging parents and students to enrol in mathematics tutoring as a precautionary or default response rather than through careful consideration of their actual learning needs. A second recurring pattern is the pervasive claim of personalised learning, presented as a distinguishing feature across agencies. All agencies asserted that their programs respond to the individual learner (e.g., "... the content ... is structured according to your skill level and individual needs"; "Individual plans are tailored to meet the learning needs..."). However, these claims were rarely accompanied by detailed pedagogical explanations. Personalisation therefore functioned largely as a marketable discourse rather than a clearly articulated instructional approach, reflecting parental expectations on tailored support for effective mathematics learning. A third pattern concerns the instrumentalisation of emotional outcomes. While some agencies foregrounded enjoyment and confidence-building, others mobilised exam-related anxiety or urgency to justify

participation. These emotional discourses framed mathematics tutoring as both a psychological remedy and a performance-enhancing intervention, appealing simultaneously to parental hopes and concerns (e.g., "... the right help to support your ATAR goals"; "... will determine how your child is really doing in class."). In doing so, tutoring was positioned not merely as an academic service but also as a form of emotional and motivational management within increasingly competitive schooling environments. Another recurring pattern was the widespread invocation of curriculum alignment (e.g., "... covers all curriculum topics ..."). However, these references tended to be symbolic rather than substantive. None of the agencies examined offered explicit evidence of how their instructional content mapped onto syllabus outcomes or how their pedagogical approaches fostered students mathematical proficiency as outlined in curriculum documents. Curriculum alignment therefore operated primarily as a discursive legitimacy device, reassuring parents that tutoring remains connected to formal schooling even when such alignment is not transparently demonstrated. Finally, across agencies there is a consistent emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, including ATAR statistics, parental satisfaction percentages, and diagnostic assessment scores. These numerical indicators reinforced a broader neoliberal logic in which learning is framed as measurable, optimisable, and comparable. Notably, agencies that emphasise personalised learning often provided the least transparent evidence of instructional impact, highlighting tensions between marketing narratives and pedagogical substantiation.

Taken together, these recurring patterns demonstrate that tutoring advertisements do more than promote commercial services; they reproduce and legitimise broader social expectations surrounding academic competition, individual optimisation, and the perceived necessity of supplementary education. In this sense, the findings illuminate several important implications for key stakeholders. For students and parents, the analysis suggests that tutoring advertisements may overstate claims of individualised learning, curriculum alignment, and academic effectiveness, while offering limited transparency about pedagogy. This highlights the need for more critical engagement with promotional claims so that participation decisions are based on informed educational judgement rather than marketing appeal alone. For teachers whose pedagogical aims and educational philosophies may differ from those promoted by tutoring agencies, these discourses may further complicate relationships with students and families by reinforcing the perception that formal schooling is insufficient on its own. This raises important questions about how teachers might communicate the purposes of school mathematics more clearly and, where appropriate, engage more constructively with tutoring as part of students' wider learning ecology. For policymakers and researchers, the findings point to a broader systemic issue: if tutoring industries gain influence by appealing to perceived gaps between curriculum ideals and competitive educational realities, then greater attention is needed not only to tutoring advertisements, but also to the wider policy and admission structures that sustain demand for such services.

Conclusion and Future Research Implications

This study examined how five tutoring agencies discursively construct their services, stakeholders, and relationships to formal schooling through promotional texts. Using Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework, the analysis showed that agencies draw on a shared set of discourses that normalise mathematics tutoring as an essential rather than supplementary component of schooling. Across providers, tutoring is framed as necessary for coping with school demands and succeeding in high-stakes examinations. Within this discourse, students are positioned as learners at risk without external support, parents as responsible managers of academic trajectories, and tutors as expert or nurturing agents capable of delivering improved outcomes. Such constructions risk narrowing understandings of successful mathematics learning to measurable outcomes such as grades and examination performance and may contribute to tensions between tutoring providers and schoolteachers by implying that

formal schooling alone is insufficient. While based on a small purposive sample and not intended to represent the entire sector, the study highlights the importance of examining how tutoring is marketed and how such discourses shape educational expectations and decision-making. Future research could extend this work through larger samples, multimodal promotional materials, and direct engagement with stakeholder perspectives.

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