Private Supplementary Tutoring: What Implications for Classroom Learning?

Blog

Private education

Recent decades have brought great expansion of the so-called shadow education system of private supplementary tutoring. The metaphor is used because private tutoring mimics schooling: as the curriculum changes in the schools, so it changes in the shadow; and as the school system expands, so does the shadow.

Shadow education has long been very visible in East Asia but is now global. A new book focuses on Shadow Education in Africa and shows large numbers in some countries. An Egyptian survey, for example, reported that 91% of Grade 12 students received shadow education; and in Mauritius, 81% of Grade 6 students did so. Other countries show smaller numbers but significant growth. In South Africa, for example, whereas in 2007 only 4% of Grade 6 students were estimated to be receiving shadow education by 2013 the proportion was 29%.
Is private tutoring a good thing?

It depends. A major question is who receives it from whom and how. When private tutoring helps low achievers to keep up with their peers, it reduces disparities and helps teaching and learning processes in regular classrooms. However, private tutoring is more likely to be received by children of ambitious parents who are already high achievers; and because the tutoring requires household financing, it increases social inequalities.

Moreover, private tutoring may be delivered in many forms. One-to-one and small-group tutoring should be better tailored to individual needs, but large-class tutoring may merely deliver 'more of the same'. And while online tutoring has become more common – especially as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – it may be even more challenging to deliver in an effective way.

Further, tutoring can be burdensome – consuming children’s out-of-school hours and depriving them of leisure. Teachers sometimes find that children fall asleep during school time because they were receiving tutoring and/or doing homework for tutors late at night.

Who provides the tutoring?

The three main providers are:

- regular teachers, working as tutors on a supplementary basis,
- tutorial centres and similar enterprises, and
- university students and others operating on an informal basis.
In some settings these roles are controversial. University students and personnel in tutorial centres may not have training, and the messages they convey to students may not match those of the schools. Some tutors actively denigrate teachers and schooling in order to promote demand for their services.

Different issues arise when teachers provide tutoring. Teachers can be assumed to have qualifications and to know the school curricula, but sometimes a conflict of interest arises. When teachers provide supplementary tutoring, they may neglect their mainstream duties for which they are paid anyway in order to devote time and energy to their private lessons.

**What other factors shape classroom learning?**

When the majority of students receive tutoring, teachers may assume that all students needing supplementary help are indeed receiving it. Even if the teachers are not themselves providing tutoring, this assumption may cause the teachers to devote less effort than they otherwise would do.

Teachers may also find that the approaches of tutors, e.g. in mathematics, clash with their own. This may cause dissonance in the classroom; and when students have learned the materials in advance from the tutors, they are likely to be bored in school. Students commonly respect their tutors, whom they have actively chosen and to whom they pay fees, more than their teachers.

Further issues arise from diversity in the classroom when some students receive tutoring while others do not. While ideally the tutoring mainly serves low achievers, in reality, it is more likely to be accessed by high achievers.

And issues of ethics arise. Teachers who tutor their existing students may be tempted deliberately to
cut content from their regular lessons in order to expand demand for tutoring; and in the regular classes, these teachers may discriminate against students who do not receive the tutoring.

So, what signals need attention?

Most studies of school-related learning overlook shadow education. One reason is that statistical data and assessments of the balances between negative and positive dimensions are inadequate.

At the government level, policy-makers may devise regulations about who can provide private tutoring, when, where and how. They will of course need partnerships to enact the regulations. Ideally, this should include the teachers’ unions, the business sector and community groups.

But this is not just a matter for governments: much can also be done at the school level. Indeed this level is especially effective since headteachers and others are addressing known individuals and specific circumstances rather than anonymous statistics. Issues are complex, especially because we live in an increasingly globalised and competitive environment in which families want their children to keep up with – and preferably ahead of – others. Here the communications with parents are especially important.

Shadow education is expanding throughout the world. Some people assume that if we can improve schooling, then shadow education will go away. Yet countries such as China, the Republic of Korea and Singapore have strong education systems but still much shadow education. This is chiefly because societies are competitive – and in the increasingly globalised world are becoming more so.

Teaching and learning have never been completely confined to school classrooms, and now the spread of out-of-school instruction is even wider. The scale, nature and implications of private supplementary tutoring need much more attention than they have received to date.