

Facing the shadow education system in Hong Kong

The pressures faced by Hong Kong families have increased in competitive society. The so-called shadow education system of supplementary tutoring has spread in influence and intensity. For both parents and their children, it is difficult to find the right balance.

Ora Kwo and Mark Bray



A RECENT EDITORIAL in Hong Kong's major English-language newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, was entitled 'The lesson that all parents need to learn'.¹ It commenced:

— Children need to know there is life outside the classroom. Playing, exploring, making friends and developing new hobbies should be as important as schoolwork. But in our scholastic-obsessed culture, school study takes up a disproportionate share of a young person's life.

The editorial highlighted a study by the University of Hong Kong which indicated that 58 percent of parents paid for private tutorial classes. The newspaper pointed out that such costs were a financial burden. For many children, it added, "they impose a heavy psychological toll" and that "a byproduct has been a shadow, parasitic tutorial industry that exploits the insecurity of parents and students".

An intensifying issue

Families with adequate incomes have long invested in supplementary tutoring as a way to give their children extra help to keep up with their peers. Some families have also long used tutoring to stretch their children's learning to domains not covered by mainstream schooling. However, during the last decade the shadow has spread and intensified. It has also become more commercialized.

Some indication of the scale may be provided by a pair of studies 14 years apart:

- In 1996, a telephone survey organised by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups estimated that 45 percent of primary school students (Grades 1-6) were receiving tutoring.² At lower secondary school the estimate was 26 percent, in middle secondary it was 34 percent, and in senior secondary it was 40 percent.
- In 2010, a social welfare body estimated that 72 percent of lower secondary students were receiving tutoring.³ In middle secondary the figure was 82 percent, and in senior secondary it was 85 percent.

Neither of these surveys should be considered statistically robust. However, they match the general public perception that the shadow had expanded.

Demand-driven or supply-driven?

Private tutoring is of course a service which would not exist if there were no demand. Among the ingredients shaping demand in Hong Kong are social competition in an urban environment and a Confucian-style work ethic that emphasizes effort.

The growth of demand also reflects new opportunities. Thirty years ago, local university education served only 2 percent of the age group. It was thus out of reach for most families. Now, local universities serve 19 percent of the population, and alongside them are many other post-secondary opportunities. When these opportunities are within reach, families consider ways to access them.

However, tertiary education remains stratified, with some institutions and programmes considered much more prestigious than others. Families compete to get into the best institutions and programmes, with an eye on the job market not only locally but also elsewhere in the region and beyond. To some extent, the growth of shadow education results from both the opening of opportunities through increased access to tertiary education, and the geographic expansion of the labour market.

The growth of the tutoring industry has also been supply-driven. Balances within the sector have shifted significantly as major companies have expanded their operations. They advertise in residential areas and on the back of buses with slogans such as "Lead the Future". Young people with fashionable hairstyles project a 'cool' image to appeal to the intended clients. As noted by the *South China Morning Post*, these companies "advertise so-called tutorial kings and queens who cultivate an aura of stardom". Worse, in the view of the newspaper:

— These hipsters boast about their millionaire status, and perpetuate a youth culture that prides high exam scores over genuine knowledge. Unfortunately, many youngsters look up to them as role models, or at least admire their earning power. What should clearly be unacceptable has become an accepted or even necessary part of schooling in Hong Kong.

Noting another ingredient of demand, the newspaper added that "some teachers in mainstream schools even tell parents to send their children to private tutorials to avoid lagging behind classmates".

Government perspectives

Amidst this growing phenomenon, some parts of the government machinery have operated as if the shadow education sector did not exist. They have devised reform packages to stress whole-person development and have focused only on the school sector.

Other parts of the government machinery do recognise the shadow system. The Education Bureau has issued regulations on tutorial centres, setting ceilings on class size and requiring fire escapes and other basic facilities. The Bureau has also issued a guide to parents on how to select tutorial services. However, in general the government has preferred to pretend that the sector does not exist. "It is not necessary," stated a senior government official to one author of this article, because "our educational provision is already adequate".

Yet clearly a considerable number of parents and pupils do not agree. And at least some families feel that the tutoring centres are more client-oriented than the schools. Yes, good teachers can be found in the schools; but so can mediocre teachers. And yes, poor teachers can be found in the tutoring centres; but so can good ones. And, more importantly, the students can have a choice over who becomes their tutor while they have no choice over who becomes their teacher.

Advertisements for supplementary education. Photos by Mark Bray.

The pressures on families

Returning to the *South China Morning Post*, the newspaper certainly put its finger on an issue of major concern to many families and to wider analysts of social development in Hong Kong. "Schoolwork is important", it declared. "But a child's whole life should not revolve around it, letting it affect even family relationships. It is not worth the sacrifice of a happy childhood."

However, the newspaper also showed that families are to some extent trapped. When the majority of their classmates receive tutoring, students worry that they will be left behind. Teachers to some extent rely on tutoring to reinforce parts of the curriculum and to provide individual attention that they cannot themselves offer. And parents are led to consider tutoring part of a normal form of family support without which they might be neglecting their children's future. The *South China Morning Post* recognised this with the remark that

— Intense competition inside the classroom is driving many parents to pay for tutorials outside school. Most are afraid that their children will fall behind if they don't take extra classes; some wish to give them an edge over others.

Seen from a broader angle, the developments in Hong Kong are part of a global shift from the school as the only significant formal centre for teaching and learning to a situation in which the shadow sector is a major component and an essential support. This changing balance needs much wider awareness, and much greater recognition by schools and governments. The shadow education sector is unlikely to diminish in the near future. The task ahead is to promote dialogue and interaction. Schools need to consider why parents are sending their children to tutorial institutions, and what the pupils gain in those institutions that the schools themselves are not providing.

The *South China Morning Post* described the shadow as a parasitic industry. Yes, it has parasitic elements; but there is more to it than this. And meanwhile, the newspaper should not over-simplify "the lesson that all parents need to learn". This is a complicated domain, and it is not easy to be either a parent or a student in contemporary Hong Kong.

Ora Kwo
The University of Hong Kong, China
wykwo@hku.hk

Mark Bray
The University of Hong Kong, China
mbray@hku.hk

Notes

- 1 *South China Morning Post*, 26 April 2010, page A10.
- 2 Lee, Ching. 1996. *Children and Private Tuition*. Youth Poll Series 34, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.
- 3 Caritas, Community and Higher Education Service. 2010. *Private Supplementary Tutoring of Secondary Students: Investigation Report*. Hong Kong: Caritas [in Chinese]. <http://klnc.org.hk/private/document/644.pdf>.

When the majority of their classmates receive tutoring, students worry that they will be left behind. And parents are led to consider tutoring part of a normal form of family support without which they might be neglecting their children's future.