

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Private tutoring — also known as “shadow education,” due to its informal nature — is a worldwide phenomenon that has been growing steadily, accounting for close to 3% of Gross Domestic Product in some countries. A recent survey conducted by the Dubai School of Government (DSG) found that more than 65% of Emirati students in Grade 12 attend private tutoring lessons. While there can be benefits to both students and teachers, private tutoring also has serious negative implications, not only for the individuals involved, but also for the education system as a whole.

This brief gives an overview of shadow education, its reach and patterns worldwide. Next, it presents the results of the recent DSG study revealing private tutoring practices among Emiratis. The brief concludes with a discussion of the consequences of private tutoring, and offers policy recommendations to address the issue.



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Private Tutoring Trends in the UAE

By Samar Farah

Introduction

While there are different understandings of what private tutoring encompasses, it is most commonly defined as the “extra coaching in academic and examinable subjects that is given to students outside school hours for remuneration” (Foondun 2002). As such, it does not include extra lessons that students take in music, sports or other extracurricular activities. Private tutoring can take the form of one-on-one tutoring, small groups, large classrooms, virtual classes and more. In many countries around the world, private tutoring has grown up as a parallel system to public education systems, and in recent decades has markedly changed the landscape of formal education systems.

Private tutoring has been termed “shadow education” by Marimuthu et al. (1991) as a metaphor to signify its hidden nature and the way in which it mirrors the formal system in scope, intensity, and size. In his extensive studies on private tutoring, Bray (2007, 2009) has argued that it is difficult to measure and assess because it assumes so many forms. First, it is predominantly conducted in informal settings such as teachers’ or students’ houses, as well as tutoring centers, either after school or on weekends. Second, the relationship between the tutor and tutee can also take a variety of different forms. The tutor may be the pupils’ teacher at school, a teacher from another school, an instructor at a private tutoring institute, or just a person with a passion for teaching. A third factor that makes the identification of private tutoring difficult is the hesitancy of teachers to declare their private tutoring work, as it is typically banned or frowned upon by schools and ministries, or because they are avoiding taxation on income earned through their work.

There are benefits both to individual students and teachers from certain forms of private tutoring. The most obvious of these is the provision of academic assistance to students in need of extra help. For teachers, private tutoring can also provide an additional source of much-needed income to supplement low pay in the formal education system. However, there are serious problems that can be caused by the provision of private tutoring, and it can have a major impact on the quality of education provided in the school system.

First, there is no conclusive evidence that private tutoring increases aggregate student achievement at the national level (Dang 2008, Bray 2007, Mori and Baker 2010). Bray (2007) argues that it can actually lower the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom if teachers focus their efforts on private tutoring rather than on their classes. Second, it can lead to the possibility of corruption, particularly if teachers serve as a private tutors for their own students. Research from Cyprus, Egypt, Indonesia, Niger, Kenya and other countries illustrates that teachers who also tutored their own students often showed preferential

treatment for their tutees, blackmailed other students and, in some cases, provided their tutees with answers to exams (Bray 2007, Hallak and Poisson 2001). Third, because private tutoring comes at a cost, some argue that it poses major problems in regard to access and equity in the mainstream education system. With the significant sums involved in paying for tutoring, students from poorer families lack the means to benefit from private tutoring in the way that wealthier students can (Biswal 1999, Hallak and Poisson 2001). Finally, too many hours spent studying can infringe on the leisure time of children, and this may have negative effects on their mental, social and physical well-being.

Private Tutoring in the UAE

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), there is increasing evidence of the widespread use of private tutoring, as well as of the serious implications it is having on the mainstream education system. Numerous articles have emerged in the country's Arabic-language media illustrating some of the negative consequences of the shadow education system on students and their families. Examples include parents who have reported canceling summer holidays or taking out loans of up to AED 75,000 to fund their children's private tutoring classes. It is reported that private tutoring costs, on average, 100-200 UAE dirhams (AED) per hour, with rates spiking to 1000 dirhams per hour in the weeks leading up to end-of-semester examinations (Ahmed, August 24, 2010). Other reports highlight cases of blackmail, where teachers have omitted certain materials from the curriculum to persuade students to sign up for their classes, or cases where teachers have shown preferential treatment to their tutees, sometimes completing their homework (Awad, February 20, 2011). In the most serious of cases, a number of tutors were reported physically abusing some of their young pupils (Mustafa, January 16, 2011).

Despite the number of newspaper reports on the issue, there has been little systematic study of the issue to date, and there has been little data available on its reach and effect on students, their families, and the schooling system. To better understand this situation, the Dubai School of Government recently commissioned a study of the private tutoring experiences of Emirati students in their final year of

high school. The sample consisted of 180 students — 82 men and 98 women — all enrolled in the foundation year at UAE University (UAEU). Based on a previously validated questionnaire used in a study of private tutoring in nine Eastern European countries conducted by Silova and Bray (2006), the survey asked students about their educational and family background, the private tutoring practices they engaged in during their final year of secondary school, and their general perceptions towards private tutoring (using a four-point Likert scale).

Findings

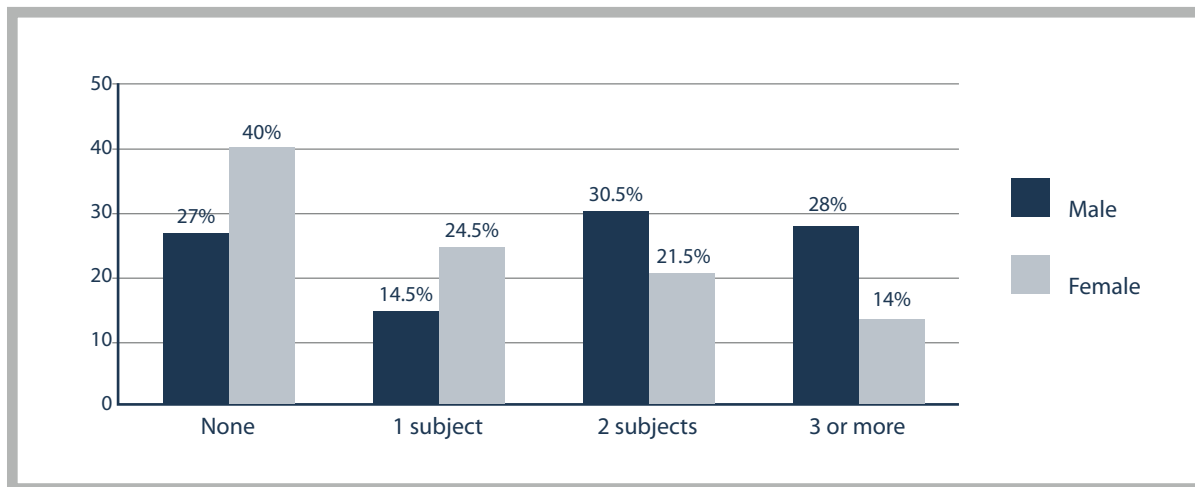
While all the students who completed the survey were based at UAEU, they had completed their high school education in a number of different locations — 113 in Abu Dhabi, 51 in the Northern Emirates (Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, Fujairah and Sharjah), nine in Dubai and five students studied abroad. Two respondents did not answer the question. Of the students surveyed, 87% went to public schools, 2.3% went to Arabic private schools (teaching the Ministry of Education curriculum), 4.5% attended English private schools, while 6.2% attended the Institute of Applied Technology.¹

When asked about their experiences with private tutoring, 66% of students stated that they used the assistance of a tutor in their last year of schooling for one or more subjects. This number is considerably higher than the 51% reported (for Dubai only) in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (KHDA 2009). However, when asked about their participation in private tutoring in earlier grades, only 53% of the surveyed students reported receiving lessons in one or more earlier grades, a figure much closer to the PISA estimates.

There were pronounced gender differences in private tutoring activity among Grade 12 students, with boys significantly more likely to take private tutoring, and in a greater number of subjects, than girls (Figure 1). A similar trend was noted in the PISA results, where 55% of boys and 47% of girls reported using the assistance of a tutor. Of all the subjects in which students were tutored, mathematics and physics were the most popular across genders. Interestingly, boys were more likely than girls to take private tutoring in mathematics. Of the students who reported taking tutoring during their final year

¹ There are two notable limitations to the study. The first is the small sample size, predominantly consisting of Emirati students enrolled in public schools in Abu Dhabi. The second is that the sample consisted of UAEU students who are considered the top performers in the country.

Figure 1: Private Tutoring among Emiratis in Grade 12



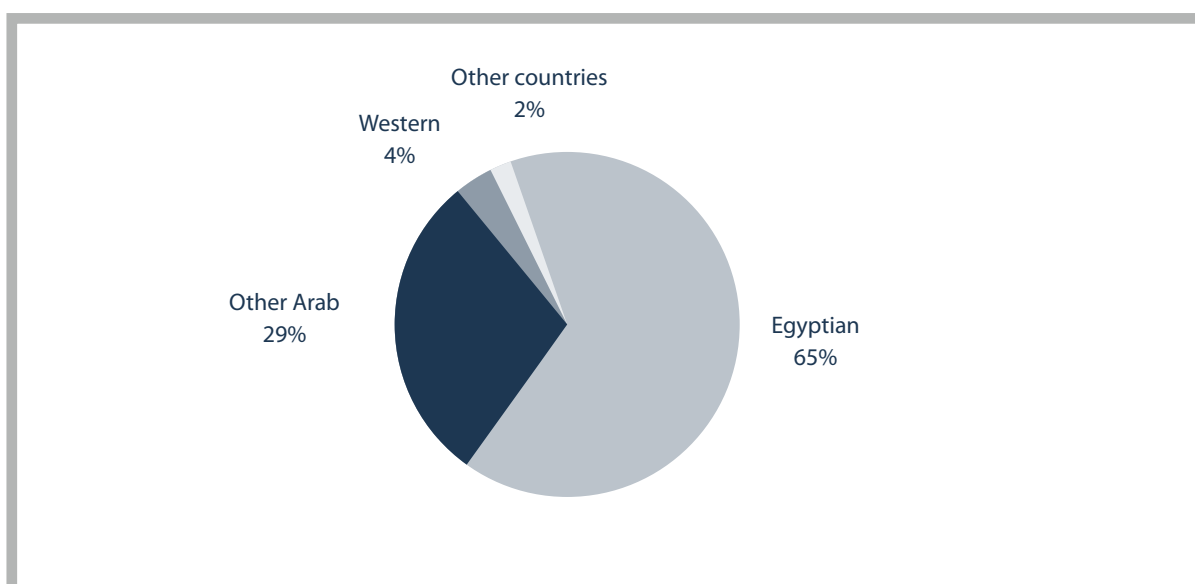
of high school, approximately 75% of boys and 48% of girls took tutoring in mathematics. Similarly, boys were much more likely to be enrolled in private tutoring in biology, but the differences between them were much greater, with 43% of boys and only 10% of girls taking biology tutoring.

There was also a great variety in the format of private tutoring lessons: 73% of students stated that they took private tutoring lessons throughout the whole year (either regularly or occasionally), but only 18% of these students reported that the lessons took the form of individual sessions with a tutor. The majority chose to study in groups of 2-5 students or more. Regardless of the type or frequency of the lessons, over 80% of the students who participated in private tutoring claimed that it had at least some impact

upon their studies. This could mean that students truly felt there was added value to spending more time with a teacher studying certain subjects, or that there were deficiencies in the schooling system, or perhaps they simply did not want to report that private tutoring did not have any impact.

The demographics of the private tutors were also telling: 82.5% of the tutors were men. These results are consistent with general trends in the Middle East, where women typically have family obligations and it is deemed socially inappropriate for them to work in students' homes. Of the male tutors, 65% of them were Egyptian, followed by 29% from other Arab countries, leaving tutors from Western and other countries to make up the remaining 6% (Figure 2). There were no male Emirati tutors.

Figure 2: Nationality of Male Private Tutors



Taking into account the prevalence of private tutoring in the home countries of the Arab expatriate teachers² (Hartmann 2008), as well as the low salaries and uncertain working conditions for these teachers, it is likely that many turn to their most familiar moneymaking activity to maximize their earnings while in the UAE. This is consistent with student responses, in which 70% agreed that “one of the main reasons for private tutoring is so that teachers can receive additional financial income,” and that “class teachers encourage pupils who have problems with the subject matter to take private lessons.”

Another finding that complicates matters even further is that 52.5% of male tutors providing private lessons to boys were found to also be their classroom teachers, while that was only the case with 7% of the female tutors. This difference has serious implications for young Emirati men, who generally fare worse in school than their female counterparts, having much higher dropout rates of up to 14% (Ridge, 2009). In this regard, it should also be noted that 62% of students agreed with the statement that “low quality of teaching in schools is the main reason for the decision to take private tutoring.” Moreover, 77% of respondents agreed that the overloaded school curriculum is a reason for taking private tutoring lessons. While it is difficult to tell whether an improvement in teacher quality and curriculum will help reduce private tutoring or if there are other underlying reasons for students taking the lessons, it is clear that the large majority of students are dissatisfied with these two aspects in the education system.

On a general level, although students stated that private tutoring is not, and should not be, necessary to graduate successfully, most said that they felt obliged to take private tutoring lessons due to weaknesses in the mainstream education system. When asked whether the “education system should be such that no one would need private tutoring,” 84.5% of the students agreed with the statement, and more than half of them disagreed that “taking private tutoring is the only way to graduate from school or to get a good education.”

Finally, the use of private tutoring was found to be correlated with the level of education of the parents ($P < 0.001$). The results showed that parents with higher levels of education were more likely to register their children for private tutoring lessons (and in a greater number of subjects).

Consequences for Mainstream Education in the UAE

One can observe two notable trends from the data on private tutoring in the UAE that have significant implications for mainstream education in the country. First, **male teachers are much more likely to engage in private tutoring than their female counterparts.** Of the male private tutors, 92% are Arab expatriates, a large majority of whom are Egyptian. Approximately half of the tutors are also the school teachers of their pupils, and this may affect teaching quality in boys’ schools by corrupting the relationship between students and their teachers. Teachers involved in private tutoring have been found to have less time to prepare for school, and may therefore be more fatigued. They are also likely to avoid teaching the full curriculum in order to push students to register for their after-school classes, and are more likely to show favoritism toward their tutees and to provide them with extra resources for school examinations (Hartmann 2008, Bray 2007).

In addition, unlike the girls’ schools, which consist predominantly of Emirati female teachers who rarely engage in private tutoring, boys’ schools import a culture of private tutoring with their expatriate teachers. As expatriate teachers earn on average only AED 7,000 a month, approximately half of that earned by their Emirati counterparts (Ridge 2010), an argument is often made that low teacher salaries are the cause for private tutoring. However, in an interview, one expatriate teacher stated that even if the Ministry of Education provided him with a salary of AED 100,000 per month, he would continue private tutoring as it is in his “nature” to do so (Hajra 2011). This illustrates the complexities of the issue and the embedded acceptance of private tutoring among

² A World Bank report on Egypt estimated that total household expenditure on private tutoring alone is equivalent to 1.6% of the GDP and enrollment rates in private tutoring are over 80% of among high school students (World Bank 2002, Hartmann 2008).

³ Currently in UAE public secondary schools, girls are taught by female teachers, the majority of whom are Emirati, while boys are taught by male teachers, approximately 89% of whom are expatriate Arabs (Ridge 2010).

some expatriate Arab teachers. Therefore, policy recommendations such as a ban on the activity or an increase in salaries may not deter some teachers from engaging in the activity; more creative solutions may be needed to tackle this problem.

The second interesting trend that emerged from the survey results is that **there is a clear link between parents' education and enrollment in private tutoring**. While these results may seem counterintuitive, as it would be expected that more educated parents would provide their children with academic support themselves, they are also more likely to be working and not have enough time to help their children with their studies. It may also be that providing private tutoring lessons for children is not just about improving their academic achievement, but also serves as a sign of a "good" parent. In other words, parents who do not offer their children these lessons may be viewed (or view themselves) as not fulfilling their obligations as parents, particularly in the context of a failing or deficient public education system.

Therefore, rather than holding schools accountable for the quality of education provided, it seems that more educated parents normalize private tutoring. In essence, this leaves those who cannot afford the service behind, with serious equity implications for the UAE. Already, over 50% of Emirati students in Dubai (and a slightly lower percentage in Abu Dhabi) attend private schools, an issue that has previously raised equity concerns. The private tutoring market has the potential to further widen the gap between Emiratis of different socioeconomic backgrounds, both within and between the seven emirates.

Policy Recommendations

Although shadow education is a somewhat recent phenomenon, countries across the world have introduced a variety of interventions in order to address the issue. In the context of the UAE, there are a number of policy-level and school-based measures which, if implemented concurrently, could help regulate private tutoring to ensure that it serves all segments of the population and does not, in the process, undermine the formal education system. It is critical when addressing private tutoring that policy makers consider the context in which the measures are

being introduced. In other words, more serious interventions may be required for mainstream teachers who also engage in private tutoring (especially with their own students) than for full-time private tutors.

1. Government intervention

Bray (2003) has identified four possible government interventions to address private tutoring — banning, regulating, ignoring, or supporting the activity. While a complete ban on private tutoring of all kinds is the most appealing step for many governments to take, it has been found to be ineffective in halting the activity, although it should be implemented for teachers tutoring their own students. Some countries have chosen to ignore or embrace private tutoring, arguing that it contributes to human capital development. Other countries have chosen yet another approach — regulation. This is the most difficult to enforce, but is an effective option. In Turkey and Hong Kong, for example, private tutoring lessons are permitted only through centers that are registered and supervised by the Ministry of Education (Tansel and Bircan 2006, Bray 2007). While the UAE Ministry of Education currently forbids teachers from providing private tutoring to their own students, no formal law has yet been implemented (Mustafa, January 16, 2011) and no other established policies are in place to manage private tutoring.

2. Teachers' code of ethics

Schools and school leaders should also play a more active role in regulating the industry. This could be achieved by drafting a code of ethics to guide teachers on ethical standards and the implications of engaging in private tutoring with their own students. This process should be coupled with a greater monitoring of teachers by their heads of departments, principals, and Ministry supervisors to ensure that teachers are fair and are not tutoring their own students.

3. Provision of school-sanctioned remedial classes

A number of private (and in a few cases, public) schools in the UAE have successfully implemented after-school tutoring programs, funded by the schools (and to a smaller extent by parents) at a lower cost than private tutoring. Internationally, such programs overall have been cost-effective. They provide the same service as private tuition,

in a regulated fashion, while raising the academic achievement of students and providing teachers with additional, albeit lower, income for their extra work (Dang and Rogers 2008, Hock et al. 2001).

4. Revisiting employment mechanisms and teacher incentives

With the education system being a central mechanism for national development, it is important to revisit employment structures and incentives for expatriate teachers. The Ministry of Education should reconsider the consequences of employing over 80% of its male teachers from countries where private tutoring is rife, and who are likely to import the teaching culture prevalent in their home countries. According to Hokal and Shaw (1999), schools also must address the “attitudes, morale, beliefs and commitment of teachers to the schools,” in addition to their teaching skills, to ensure that the teachers are engaged in school activities and are provided with rewards and incentives for using innovative teaching approaches and improving student achievement.

5. Engaging parents and raising awareness

Parents want to provide the best possible education for their children. In an effort to do so,

some look to private tutoring when they do not have sufficient time, are unable to provide their children with the necessary academic support, or — as illustrated in this study — want to prove that they are “good” parents. However, the Ministry and schools must work closely with parents to make them aware of some of the negative consequences of private tutoring by organizing awareness campaigns and establishing better communication mechanisms.

6. Further research

While this brief provides some data on the shadow education system in the UAE, more research is necessary to provide a more representative picture of the extent of its use among Emirati and expatriate populations. Another topic that could be further examined is the peer effect among students engaged in private tutoring, as more than 80% of the students took part in group, rather than individual, tutoring sessions. Finally, as this was an exploratory study, it did not address the complexities of teacher-student relations in the context of private tutoring. According to local newspaper reports and international studies, favoritism and other forms of corruption are pervasive problems that deserve further exploration in the UAE.

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