

Emerging from the Shadow: A Comparative Qualitative Exploration of Private Tutoring in Eurasia

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Many things in education are either unknown or frequently neglected. Why do some countries spend almost the same amount of money per student and obtain significantly different results? What is the implication of the size of class for educational results? Is it more important to have an adequate curriculum or highly motivated teachers? How can students be motivated to learn so that one day they will be part of a highly competitive and adequately educated labour force? Of the many questions that have no appropriate answers, one at least has been nicely analysed and explained: What is the role of private tutoring in five Eurasian countries: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia and Georgia. These states have more differences and relatively few similarities: they all left the socialism and were parts of bigger states, and now they face many (post)transitional problems, they mostly have weak governments and are often captured in economic, politic and organisational disorientation and bad organisation that are reflected in their educational systems. The answer to the question concerning the importance, functioning, causes and consequences of private tutoring can be found in *Emerging from the Shadow: A Comparative Qualitative Exploration of Private Tutoring in Eurasia*¹, published by Network of Education Policy Centers from Zagreb. The book is prepared by a group of authors from the five mentioned countries: Boris Jokić (also the editor), Tamar Bregvadze, Elmina Kazimzade, Laura Kirss, Zrinka Ristić Dedić and Andrea Soldo.

In many countries, the decision to use private tutoring (PT) services has become almost a norm, rather than an exception. Thus, PT can be considered a world megatrend, quite accepted by all stakeholders in education. By definition PT is *fee-based instruction in academic school subjects that is complementary to the instruction mainstream schools provide free of charge*. The goal of the book is to explore educational stakeholders' perspectives regarding the PT phenomenon in the five mentioned countries; to compare educational social perspectives across the researched backgrounds and to develop, in partnership with participants, policy options for addressing the PT phenomenon. The basis of the book is a comparative qualitative research effort conducted over the course of 18 months in 2009 and 2010 in the mentioned countries where individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups discussions were conducted with selected educational stakeholders. The authors discussed PT factors with many persons from governmental, political, professional, parental, educational, PT provision, teaching and academic fields among others, investigating their personal experiences with and understanding of the PT phenomenon; factors influencing the decisions to use or provide PT services; effects of PT on the individual, educational system, society and economy. One of the crucial recurrent issues is whether PT is a response to the shortcomings of the regular school system or a normal additional service for the particularly talented or alternately for students that have problems with regular

¹ The book is available at: [http://www.edupolicy.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=183The%20&Itemid=104].

curriculum. What is the link between PT and the educational aspirations of students and their parents?

After introductory notes, the next of the ten chapters provides the conceptual framework developed in order to explore the educational stakeholders' perspectives on PT. Placed at the core of the conceptual framework are the conditions influencing the decision to use (or not to use) PT services. According to the literature and survey results, the decision is almost always made by parents and children together, but there are cases where the decision is made only by the pupil, mostly as a part of the preparation for entrance exams for tertiary education. Here an important role is played by pupils' and parents' perspectives on the formal system of education and students' educational aspirations, motivations and working habits. Perspectives include attitudes and beliefs that comprise information about the pupil's educational achievement, pupil and parental views on curricular content and its implementation, views of teacher delivery or the overall teaching and learning process, perceived (non)adequacy of educational and psychological preparation for high stake assessment, beliefs regarding the quality of education provided in the formal education system, behaviour of other pupils or any other element incorporated within the complex system of formal education. The educational aspirations of pupils and parents embody the ambitions and goals they hold regarding immediate and future educational experiences and outcomes. Educational aspirations are often related to educational achievements, but they might also be a link to the curricular content provided within the formal system, pupils' development or various other educational and personal factors.

In the third chapter, the methodological decisions and design behind the present research project are explored and described, positioning the research design in the fields of both PT and comparative education research. The chapter begins with an overview of the research on which the present volume is founded. This is followed by the methodological considerations guiding the research. In order to investigate complex issues like PT appropriately, a variety of methods are needed, in addition to methodological precision. This methodological precision is important due to the qualitative nature of the research and particularly its comparative design. The crucial part of the chapter is an analysis of the different stages and decisions in the research process, starting from the development of the general sampling design, continuing through a detailed description of participant selection and the construction of data collection instruments and procedures, and finally to a consideration of the decisions made in the process of data analyses. The chapter finishes with a discussion on the verification procedures aimed at ensuring quality in the present research. As the aim of the research was to gain insight into the individual perspectives of educational stakeholders regarding the PT phenomenon, verifiability of the research findings was provided by ensuring and examining trustworthiness, transferability, credibility and dependability as qualitative equivalents for the appropriate indicators of reliability and validity in quantitative data.

School reforms, which include the introduction of standardised curricula together with increased assessment procedures, might affect parents' anxiety about their children's educational advancement and therefore results in an increased likelihood that PT services will be used. Furthermore, one could expect that that PT might become more necessary in systems that are teacher-centred rather than pupil-centred and/or are intolerant to slow learners. As curricular and other factors of formal education systems might also contribute to the emergence of the PT phenomenon, in chapter four characteristics of the formal education systems in the selected countries and the decision concerning the use of private tutoring service are described. Various included stakeholders deemed that curriculums in selected countries are overloaded, dense, extensive, prescriptive, overly sophisticated and even irrelevant and boring. Not all the selected countries have modern curriculums that should be challenging, enjoyable and applicable to pupils, be of sufficient breadth and depth according to pupils' abilities and characteristics, be coherent and progress in a logical manner, and include elements of personalisation and choice. There are many adverse factors that impede effective teaching practices, among others the depth and width of a curriculum coupled with a maladjusted number of teaching hours determining the pace and rhythm of classwork and an over-reliance on curriculum and textbooks.

The vital role of teachers in the quality of education and learning processes is analysed in chapter 5. In all five countries, due to the negative selection in educational faculties, there are many persons who are not suitable to be teachers at all. The quality and effectiveness of teaching practices is a function of teacher competence, but it is also influenced by different elements related to the environments in which teachers work, including the amount and quality of available instructional resources, traits of pupils, physical and interpersonal work conditions, staffing, and support from administrators and parents acknowledged. As the authors rightly state these issues become even more important in circumstances when the demands placed upon schools and teachers are becoming increasingly great and complex. It seems quite normal to expect that the discrepancy between familial perspectives on the formal education system and educational aspirations would increase the likelihood of deciding to use PT services. In all participating countries, one of the most frequently reported elements in regular education emerging from the Survey was the inadequate training of many teachers in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, didactics and teaching methods. The stakeholders interviewed believe that teachers do not receive quality education. They usually acquire knowledge in specific areas of expertise, but they are not adequately trained in didactics and teaching methods. Furthermore, many future teachers have serious lack of practical experience, have not experienced realistic classroom situations and have not familiarised themselves with the possible challenges and problems facing them in the everyday work of a teacher. On the other hand, the number of students in the classroom is often too big, so students and teachers state that the PT cures many problems of regular education. It enables students to have better educa-

tional outputs, while teachers are able to provide better services and fulfil some of their ideas and plans for education that they cannot employ in regular schools. In this way, teachers in B&H, Croatia and Estonia – where the salaries in education are higher than or around the national average – often feel a high level of satisfaction from participating in the provision of PT. On the other side, many teachers in Azerbaijan and Georgia – where salaries in education are significantly lower than the national average – are forced to provide PT and would be very happy to desist if the salaries were higher.

While educational systems and programmes are targeted to an imagined *average pupil* or *average class*, in any real given situation, there are 30 and more students in the class with different knowledge levels, motivations, work habits and attitudes towards education. Accordingly, regular education is adjusted and oriented to nobody, is often conservative, boring and outdated, while simultaneously there is not enough care for the individual. The authors in chapter 6 discuss the perspectives of educational stakeholders regarding the relationship between pupils' motivation for learning in school, work habits and aspirations for educational success and decisions concerning a resort to PT. Also the views of educational stakeholders regarding the relationship between individual personality characteristics and the decision to use PT were analysed. Included here are perspectives on the impact of other concepts, such as self-esteem and academic self-confidence as well as the relationship between the variety of individual learning styles and cognitive abilities and the decision whether or not to use PT services. Interviewees from all groups underline the importance of low levels of pupil motivation for learning in school as the crucial factor contributing to the use of PT services. Low motivation leads to lower educational achievement and the inability to fulfil even minimal educational aspirations. Thus, parents and pupils decide to use PT services because this is the only way that the children can pass exams, remain in the education system or advance to the next educational level. Pupils themselves state that they often for many reasons do not really listen during the regular education and are forced to use PT. Very rarely do parents openly admit that their child is lazy and that the low level of educational achievements is his or her fault. Parents mostly blame the formal system for its failure to motivate pupils for learning and for the development of good work habits. On the other hand, one cannot deny the failure of the regular education system to instil positive motivational patterns, its apparent destruction of motivation, ambition and educational aspirations through unrealistic expectations, which directly contribute to the resort to PT services. Finally, if remedial classes are organised in a school, they are primarily seen as a means to meet workload requirements because teachers lack some teaching hours; the classes, accordingly, are not adjusted to the needs of individual pupils.

Chapter 7 analyses the crucial role of parents in making the decision to seek PT services and examines the sentiment of parents towards the formal educational system and its services. Parents influence their child's work habits and learning

strategies, as well as attitudes towards and motivation for learning in school. It should be the responsibility of parents, with help from teachers and schools, to guide their children's education path. Parents exercise the most influence on the educational aspirations for and of their children, transmitting and developing ideas about the value and importance of education and often monitoring and determining these aspirations. This situation derives from a basic understanding that education is necessary for children's success in life and future work, and parents want to aid their children in achieving this success. Parents are those who have to be capable of financing PT services if they deem that such services are necessary. This study describes PT as one of the means through which parents exercise their personal responsibility for their children's educational achievements. Nearly all stakeholders suggested that parents were inclined to make a decision concerning PT services as a result of the inability of the formal education system to fulfil the educational aspirations and expectations held for their children. The decision to use PT is regarded as an intervention the goal of which is to control and influence pupils' educational outcomes as well as the teaching and learning processes within the formal education system. In these circumstances, PT serves as an effective way to both influence the educational opportunities of an individual pupil and to deal with some of the observed deficiencies of the formal system. The results of the study demonstrate that parental dissatisfaction with formal systems of education is a relevant influence on the decision to seek PT services. Furthermore, the authors try to find out the reasons for parents' decision to use PT as a means to address this dissatisfaction with the formal system of education. Moreover they examine why parents are not more active in helping their children and why they believe that PT is a reasonable alternative to other options for supporting the educational needs of children. Briefly, parents are often tired with the many reforms and changes within the formal education system and due to lack of time, knowledge and/or patience as well as for the sake of their own convenience are willing to pay for PT services so that they do not have any direct obligation to help their children. Some of them admit that they are hypocritical in blaming the teachers and schools, but do not want to confess own unrealistic parental expectations and aspirations.

The influences of various elements from the wider societal sphere on the decision to resort to private tutoring services are examined in the chapter 8. Such socially-derived factors influence the perspectives of both pupils and parents regarding the formal system of education and also have an impact on their educational aspirations. Empirical evidence from different countries has confirmed that the levels of competitiveness within a society and within an educational system, the value placed on education and the importance of educational achievements for future life and social mobility, contribute to a decision as to whether to use PT services. In many former socialist countries people view education as a way to escape the hardships of the deteriorating economies of the transitional period and see PT as a long-term investment intended to ensure that their children obtain tertiary educa-

tion and have better opportunities on the labour market. There is also a changed attitude towards PT in these countries: while in previous system PT was perceived as a stigmatising educational endeavour intended mostly for less able pupils that have difficulties in fulfilling even the minimal educational requirements, now it has become a widely socially accepted practice and a necessity that is required for better educational output. Many interviewed persons expressed the view of PT as a “normal” or even “necessary” educational service because the level of teaching at school is not adequate, so parents have no choice.

An analysis of the relation between PT services and equity in education is provided in chapter 9. At first glance, one could believe that the PT undermines equity, but it seems that members from almost all social strata can pay for some kind of PT, although of course the quantity and particular quality of the received service greatly differ. In this way PT might seriously endanger the principles of equity in education and, in extreme circumstances, could also be a threat to overall social stability. Probably there is no problem with accessibility and affordability of PT because nowadays a very large proportion of students are employing PT services, but the participants from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds use more and higher quality instruction. In the survey, there were two different approaches to the PT equity issue. Participants that had direct and closer contact with pupils and teaching and learning processes, like teachers, were more aware of the inability of poor families to afford PT services and they believed that private tutoring was some kind of a privilege. On the other hand, interviewed persons who did not have daily or direct contact with actual teaching or PT practices showed a tendency to minimise the effect of differing socio-economic backgrounds on PT use. People believe that the best tutors are those teachers and professors who are directly involved in preparing the examinations for external assessment, and they are highly valued and sought, which of course opens up an ethically controversial issue. In some cases, interviewed persons were not always ready and willing to speak openly about equity issues related to PT and, in that respect, ignored the problem of the inequality inherent in the PT phenomenon.

In the short chapter 10, the editor, Boris Jokić, provides a conclusion. In all the countries included, the analyses revealed the mostly non-existent or largely ineffective remedial support strategies in the formal systems of education for development of pupils’ motivation and work habits. In such cases, it seems rational that private tutor services will be almost the only possibility for receiving adequate support for difficulties in learning. The Project has shown that the professional competences of teachers and teaching practices are also related to the parental and pupil decision concerning PT use. Stakeholders from all countries believe that pre-service and in-service teacher training was not adequate for preparing teachers for the challenges they face in everyday practice. Due to these shortcomings, teaching practices may be perceived as inappropriate and inefficient and, consequently, negatively influence parental and pupil perspectives on the formal system

of education. Most of the persons interviewed are not very positive about the ability of formal educational systems to accommodate the diversity of pupils' individual characteristics and needs. Particularly emphasised is the existing discrepancy between the inherent diversity of individual pupil characteristics and needs and the "one size fits all" approach of the formal educational system.

This excellent book provides the research findings and an analytical discussion of the various elements related to the causes and consequences of private tutoring in the five observed countries. In addition to it having extensive relevant theoretical and empirical readings incorporated into each analytical chapter with the goal of establishing an enhanced comparative basis for the topics under observation, it is very rich in statements from various stakeholders regarding their attitude towards PT. The concluding chapter contains an overview of the findings and offers a discussion of them that is really valuable for future research into the PT phenomenon and the development of possible policy options. One should only congratulate the editor and his team for a really valuable product, while looking forward to their future researches and books.