

Learning, Teaching, and Researching in Shadow Education in Hong Kong: An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to illustrate from the author's insider perspective the lived experiences of engaging in private tutoring in Hong Kong as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher and draw implications on several issues arising from the prevalence of shadow education.

Design/Approach/Methods: This article adopted an autobiographical narrative approach. Data were collected through the author's memoir of events, stimulated by the tutorial materials he used when he was a tutee and a tutor, his own video-recorded lessons of tutoring, and reflective journals from his research projects.

Findings: Various issues are discussed based on the narrative of the author playing different roles in the tutoring industry, including (1) the positive and negative washback on mainstream education, (2) the lack of strict regulation of the quality of tutors and advertisements, and (3) how shadow education may exacerbate education inequality and how some tutorial companies and nonprofit organizations are addressing the issue.

Originality/Value: This article, to the best of the author's knowledge, is the only one that discusses the issues of shadow education from an author's own personal experiences as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher. It illustrates how practices and policies of the private tutoring industry are evolving in Hong Kong from an insider perspective.

Keywords

Autobiographical narrative inquiry, Hong Kong, insider perspective, private tutoring, shadow education

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Introduction

There has been significant growth worldwide in the scale and intensity of private supplementary tutoring, also known as shadow education (Bray, 2009; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). Recent research in the field has shown the prevalence of private tutoring in various contexts (see Bray, 2017; Bray & Lykins, 2012), the effect of regulating private tutoring (e.g., Bray & Kwo, 2014; Choi & Choi, 2016), the corruption of teachers as tutors (e.g., Kobakhidze, 2018), how private tutoring exacerbates social inequality (e.g., Dawson, 2010), its impact on parents' and students' lives (e.g., Cayubit et al., 2014; Sriprakash, Proctor, & Hu, 2016), and its washback on mainstream education (e.g., Kwo & Bray, 2014; Wang & Bray, 2016). To illuminate the shadow education phenomenon and students' learning trajectories in depth, some studies have used narratives to capture students' experiences in private tutoring contexts (e.g., Yung, 2019). Narrative inquiry is the study of lived experience as story and a method through which people create meaning in their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and autobiography is a fundamental form of narrative inquiry (Freeman, 2007). In this regard, I adopt an autobiographical narrative inquiry approach in this study to illustrate from an insider's perspective the lived experiences of engaging in private tutoring in Hong Kong as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher.

In this article, I first describe the scales and modes of private tutoring in Hong Kong and some causes of its expansion. Then I briefly introduce the methods of research and narrate my experiences at different stages of engagement in the private tutoring industry. The article concludes with the implications drawn from my experiences and directions for future research.

Shadow education in Hong Kong

Private supplementary tutoring is known as *bou² zaap⁶* (補習) in Cantonese (the daily life language in Hong Kong), where “補” literally means to supplement (either for remedial purpose or enhancement) and “習” means to learn, study, or practice (Yung & Bray, 2017). Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city with a population of over seven million. It ranks high in the scale of private tutoring alongside other East Asian jurisdictions (see Bray & Lykins, 2012). The result of a survey conducted by Bray and colleagues in 2011/2012 on 1,646 Secondary Three and Secondary Six students in 16 secondary schools indicated that 53.8% of Secondary Three and 71.8% of Secondary Six students reported to have received private supplementary tutoring in the previous 12 months (Bray, Zhan, Lykins, Wang, & Kwo, 2014). At the secondary level, the four core examination subjects, namely Chinese, English, mathematics, and Liberal Studies are in the greatest demand in tutoring (Zhan, Bray, Wang, Lykins, & Kwo, 2013). The research also showed that the sampled students spent an average of 2.19 hr/week on English private tutoring, 2.19 hr on mathematics, and 1.88 hr on Chinese during the ordinary season of school and that the intensity increased during examination seasons (see Bray, 2013, p. 22).

Private tutoring takes various forms, including one-to-one, small-group, live lectures, video-recorded lectures, and online (Zhan et al., 2013). Among the different modes, the most prominent one in Hong Kong is lectures in cram schools operated by entrepreneurs. These cram schools often advertise their tutors as “stars” or “kings and queens” in public vehicles, promotional leaflets, billboards, and websites (Koh, 2016; Yung & Yuan, 2018). In the tutorial centers, students sit in connected classrooms with glass walls so that over 100 students can attend tutorial lessons together and see the tutors (Lee, 2010; Yung, 2011). Some popular tutors record their live lessons and run video classes with teaching assistants present in the classroom delivering tutorial materials. Informal tutoring by university students or others on a one-to-one basis or in small groups is also common in Hong Kong. Bray and colleagues found that 53.5% of Secondary Three students who reported having received private tutoring within the previous 12 months had done so in small groups and 44.3% had done so on a one-to-one basis (Zhan et al., 2013, p. 500). These kinds of tutoring in less

formal settings often offer more tailor-made instructions and materials to students with different study goals. Some may also provide babysitting services for parents who do not have time to take care of their children.

Private tutoring in Hong Kong has expanded since the handover of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. Yung and Bray (2017) attribute the expansion to several reasons, one of which is the major structural curriculum reform. Shortly after the handover, Hong Kong changed from the British 3+2+2+3 structure (3-year junior secondary, 2-year senior secondary, 2-year matriculation and 3-year undergraduate study) to the 3+3+4 one (3-year junior secondary, 3-year senior secondary and 4-year undergraduate study). The changed structure matches the dominant arrangement in Mainland China. This reform has reduced the two public examinations, namely the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), in the previous system to the one called the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). The survey by Ngai, Chan, and Cheung (2013) showed an overall increase in the participation in private tutoring from 2009 to 2012, the transition to the new senior secondary curriculum. This sole public examination may have increased students' pressure and anxiety because its stake is so high that it determines whether students can secure a place in higher education and to which program they can be admitted (see also Kenway, Fahey, & Koh, 2013).

Another reason for the expansion of private tutoring is the massification of postsecondary education. In the 1980s, only around 10% of secondary school graduates were able to pursue higher education, so the majority of students considered postsecondary education out of reach (Jung & Postiglione, 2015), thus probably not bothering seeking private tutoring. However, the provision of postsecondary education places expanded during the 1990s and 2000s with the increase of self-financed degree and sub-degree programs (Wan, 2011). When postsecondary education becomes within reach, more students seek private tutoring to better equip themselves to compete in the public examination. Moreover, since self-financed degrees and sub-degrees are less positively regarded by employers and the general public (Kember, 2010), students are more motivated to invest their time and energy in private tutoring to maximize their chance to be admitted to prestigious universities (Yung & Bray, 2017).

The expansion of private tutoring has significant impact on the dynamic of learning and teaching in Hong Kong. With a focus on the relationship between mainstream schooling and private tutoring in Bray and colleagues' study in 2011/2012, Kwo and Bray (2014) found out how 101 Grade 9 and Grade 12 students compared the roles of tutors and schoolteachers in individual interviews. They categorize students' comparisons in pedagogic styles and learning orientations, suggesting that schoolteachers mainly focus on content knowledge with holistic attention in schooling, while tutors focus on the teaching of examination skills with selective focus. The findings also reveal the comprehensive coverage of the curriculum and an emphasis on deep learning in schools compared to the remedial and superficial learning in tutoring. On the teaching side, Wang and Bray (2016) interviewed 47 teachers from 12 secondary schools and found their ambivalent views towards private tutoring. While the teachers regarded tutoring as a supplement to teaching, they also criticized tutoring for distorting the purpose of education which is supposed to promote whole-person development. Some studies focusing on individual subjects such as Chinese language (Tse, 2014), English language (Yung, 2015), and Liberal Studies (Chan & Bray, 2014) have also highlighted the influence of private tutoring on students' achievement and learning experiences. These studies have important implications for curriculum development in mainstream education and policy making.

Methodology

Previous studies on shadow education have generally relied on surveys and interviews with different stakeholders such as students and teachers (e.g., Kwo & Bray, 2014; Wang & Bray, 2016; Zhan

et al., 2013). Seldom do they unveil the practices in the tutorial industry and offer insights from an insider's perspective. Such a perspective can offer an alternative view on understanding the various issues arising from private tutoring. In this regard, this study adopted an autobiographical approach to narrate my experience of engaging in private tutoring as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher. Autobiographical narrative inquiry studies lives as "an important vehicle for understanding human condition" (Freeman, 2007, p. 120). It offers insights into people's private worlds that are inaccessible to experimental methodologies, and thus it provides the insider's view of phenomena and experiences (Pavlenko, 2007). Such an approach is in line with the growing interest in self-narratives in educational research (Chang, 2008). Creswell (2013) suggested that some autobiography about the researcher's experiences is crucial in understanding the phenomenon of inquiry since the researcher's experiences and intimate connection to the phenomenon necessarily lead to his/her interest in and puzzlement about the topic. Such puzzlement, as Moustakas (1994) observed, "is autobiographical, making memory and history essential dimensions of discovery, in the present and extensions into the future" (p. 59).

A major challenge of autobiographical narrative inquiry is managing subjectivity in collecting and analyzing data which mainly come from the researcher's memory and interpretation (Chang, 2008; Freeman, 2007). In this regard, to recall my lived experiences of engaging in private tutoring more comprehensively, I had in-depth conversations with my parents to co-construct the narrative of my life as a child receiving private tutoring. I also reviewed the learning materials I got from my tutors during my senior secondary school years, the teaching materials I used as a tutor, and my own video-recorded lessons of teaching. Moreover, I revisited the research journals when I engaged in various research projects related to private tutoring. All these became important "data" to stimulate my memory and develop a chronology of my life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Drafts of the narrative were written, and the content was discussed with colleagues interested in shadow education research to further stimulate my recalling of experiences. I revised and polished the narrative and finalized it for analysis. The whole process was iterative and maintained "an ongoing dialogue between collecting data, writing and analysis" (Holliday, 2010, p. 102). The multiple sources of data collected for the stimulation of my memory, the critical discussion with third parties, and the ongoing reflective self-dialogue minimized subjectivity as a methodological limitation and increased the rigor of analysis.

Learning, teaching, and researching: An insider perspective

In this section, I describe my background and how I received education in Hong Kong at different stages, with a focus on my experience of receiving private tutoring in my primary and secondary schooling in different subjects. Then I narrate my experience as a private tutor in English in one-to-one and small group tutoring and a so-called star tutor in a large tutorial company. These cumulative experiences awakened my interest in researching the private tutoring phenomenon, and I reflect on the experiences of research in the last part of this section.

Learning as a tutee

I was born and raised in Hong Kong and speak Cantonese as my first language. Like many other children in Hong Kong, I started my formal education at kindergarten at the age of three. In that generation, there were not many playgroups or pre-nursery classes to prepare preschool children for admission to good kindergartens or primary schools, so I did not participate in any of those. My parents have limited education. My father received formal education in Mainland China until Primary Three and my mother did so in Hong Kong until Primary Six. My father was extremely busy with work, so he did not spend much time helping with my studies. My mother also worked,

but she could afford some time to look after studies like checking my homework and doing revision with me. However, because of their limited education background, they found it gradually hard to handle the content I learned at school, particularly in English language, so they sent me to a small tutorial center when I was in Primary Two.

The small tutorial center was located in a small shopping mall in the neighborhood. Each session lasted for around one and a half hours. There were around 10 to 20 primary school students doing homework or exercises in any academic subjects with the help of two to three tutors. The tutors were adults working full time at the center, although I was not clear about their exact education qualifications. They helped me do revision for school dictations and checked my homework. Whenever I did well in dictations and tests, the tutors awarded me with candies. However, when I failed, they hit me with a stick. It was a practice in that tutorial center, and later they were sued because of the use of corporal punishment. While I did not enjoy attending the tutorial lessons, my school results improved dramatically after I joined private tutoring and I ranked second of the cohort. I attended the tutorial class for around 2 years until it was closed down.

In Primary Four, I joined another tutorial class as required by my parents. The tutorial “center” was an apartment right next to my home. It operated in a domestic setting, but it was probably illegal because the owner used a residential apartment for financial gain. It offered day-time child care and homework guidance to around 20 children. It even prepared lunch for some children whose parents did not have time to take care of their children, usually due to work. I went to the tutorial center every day from Monday to Friday for an hour or two after school until I graduated from primary school. The tutors, of whom I did not know the academic qualifications, helped me with homework, dictations, and examination preparation. Although I was not sure if it was due to my participation in tutoring, I kept performing well in primary school and was admitted to a prestigious secondary school in my district at the age of 12.

My secondary school used English as the medium of instruction. At the beginning, I found it difficult to follow the lessons. In Form One, my English result lagged behind that of my classmates. My class teacher contacted my mother and introduced an academically outstanding Form Four student at my school to be my tutor. She charged 70–80 HKD/hr. She came to my home for 1.5 hr one-to-one private tutoring two to three times a week to help me with the content learned at school. For example, in English, she retaught me phrasal verbs, grammar, and vocabulary from textbook passages. She also tutored other subjects and helped me prepare for school examinations. My English as well as other subjects improved gradually, as reflected in my examination results.

When I was in Form Four, my private tutor graduated from secondary school and she could no longer tutor me. I found that merely learning at school was not sufficient in preparing me for HKCEE because my schoolteacher only asked us to do textbook tasks and was not examination-oriented enough. Therefore, following my classmates I joined a star-tutor’s semi-live class in a large tutorial company during Form Five. I had a lot of grammar and past examination paper training, with colorful and well-organized materials. My HKCEE result in English language was not satisfactory, although I was able to pursue matriculation (Form Six and Seven) in another secondary school. I decided to resit for the HKCEE English Language examination because I considered English important for university admission and my future career.

During Form Six, school learning was examination-oriented, so was my learning attitude. I demanded more examination materials for drilling, so I joined an English language class at a medium-sized tutorial center. It was when my English improved drastically. I consolidated my grammar foundation and learned useful test-taking strategies for HKCEE. My learning motivation increased when I noticed my improvement. My school result also became more satisfactory. I got two grades higher in my second attempt of the English Language HKCEE, so I strongly considered private tutoring effective in helping me get good grades in public examinations.

The training in the tutorial center was also useful for me to tackle the HKALE. With the goal of getting a good grade in HKALE Use of English, I was self-motivated and I spent a lot of time writing essays, reading English newspapers, and most importantly, drilling past examination papers and exercises provided by the school and the tutorial center. Apart from English language, I also enrolled in tutorial classes of a star tutor for physics in a large tutorial center, mainly because of peer pressure since almost one third of my class received tutoring from that tutor. I got well-designed materials organized in different topics covered in the syllabus with relevant questions in past examination papers. The tutor also occasionally delivered beautifully designed handbooks and gifts such as stationary, sometimes with words of encouragement, to attract students. At the same time, I received small group tutoring in chemistry by the teacher who taught me in Form Four and Five but had left the school. He rented some office space to offer tutoring for around five to six students. The tutor used the materials he used at school, but made his teaching more examination-oriented. Since I could not afford the tuition fee for various subjects, I did not receive tutoring for Chinese language, but a friend of mine did and we agreed that she tutored me using the materials she got from her tutor and I tutored her English. In the end, I received satisfactory results in HKALE and was admitted to a top university in Hong Kong.

Teaching as a tutor

I had been a tutor offering one-to-one and small group private tutoring to secondary school students since I was in Form Five. I mainly offered homework guidance and prepared tutees for school examinations in all academic subjects. When I was studying my bachelor's degree, I trained senior secondary students for public examinations in English language. I adapted the materials I got from my previous tutors and further analyzed the latest public examination questions, trying to develop patterns and examination skills to help my tutees. I found this kind of examination question analysis interesting and I enjoyed working as a tutor, so after university graduation, I was employed by a star tutor in a large tutorial company.

I joined the private tutoring industry because at that time, I thought being a tutor might be more interesting than being a schoolteacher, and more importantly, I dreamt about becoming a millionaire tutor one day. I started working as a Teaching Assistant. I sat in tutorial classrooms playing my boss's lesson videos for his tutees, and I marked essays and answered students' questions in video classes. I was "trained" to be a tutor by watching my boss's video every day. At that time, I felt that to be a successful tutor, the most important characteristics were presentation skills and charisma in order to attract tutees. I learned his sense of humor and the way he convinced the tutees how useful the tutorial materials were for them to prepare for examinations. I also developed examination-oriented materials. In the second half of the first year, I had the chance to teach my own course. It was a 1-month intensive course for HKCEE students. It was very well-received, and then I had my regular course the second year onward. My boss also started advertising me like a celebrity, with pictures of me in formal suit on billboards of buildings and the back of double-decker buses.

Our team of tutors collaborated with some secondary schools and offered outsourced tutorial services for them. During the summer breaks, we went to the collaborating schools to teach English to their students, who were mostly low achievers and needed to improve their examination results. The teachers usually asked us to focus on grammar drilling and examination preparation. We regarded it as a service we provided for schools to ease their teachers' burdens and help those slow learners to catch up with their studies.

My tutoring career lasted for 4 years. As the number of my tutees kept rising, I had more sense of satisfaction. I found myself like a performer onstage, making prepared jokes in class to entertain the tutees. Students were like customers whom I needed to keep. I was not really teaching English as a language per se, but the so-called examination skills. Following my boss's advice, I even asked the

students not to waste time reading newspapers or storybooks because they were not related to examinations and told them that only the materials I provided were useful. Sometimes I even criticized schoolteachers for not being able to help them perform well in examinations. I gradually found it inappropriate, particularly in the fourth year of my tutoring career when I was studying part-time the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics, in which I learned more about the values of language education. Moreover, the tutorial industry was so competitive that some tutors maliciously slandered each other. Despite a satisfactory profit, tutoring did not match my education philosophy. I eventually quit and started pursuing my doctoral studies after obtaining my Master's degree.

Researching private tutoring

I started researching private tutoring when I was doing my Master's degree. The first project was a small one comparing live and video classes in a large tutorial company from tutees' perspective. The participants were tutees enrolling in my boss's video classes. I found that the tutees did not find live and video classes very different and that they chose video classes mainly for pragmatic reasons such as flexible time and convenient location of the classes. The project was expanded to become my dissertation topic, in which I investigated 14 first-year undergraduates' learning experiences and motivation in English private tutoring. The findings from the qualitative study suggest that the students had ambivalent and paradoxical attitudes toward private tutoring. While they considered English private tutoring helpful for them to learn examination skills, they did not regard it as an effective means to increase their English proficiency for authentic communication (see Yung, 2011, 2015).

Building on these experiences of research and my work experience in the tutorial industry, I was motivated to pursue a doctoral degree and keep researching the private tutoring phenomenon. In the journey of my doctoral studies, I was actively engaged in the Shadow Education Special Interest Group, a learning community at the university in which academics and students shared and stimulated one another with ideas related to private tutoring around the world. My research ideas evolved through critical discussions in the community. What struck me most was the role of private tutoring in education systems in Hong Kong and elsewhere. I often heard secondary students lament that they felt obliged to enroll in private tutoring courses in order to get the entrance ticket to university and thus have a better future. I felt that private tutoring made learners' attitudes pragmatic and distorted the meaning of education. Although I had grown up with a similar background to the current Hong Kong secondary school students, looking back, I did not think learning should be about drilling and acquiring examination skills as promoted in shadow education. However, the way out was still unclear to me, and that is why I remained passionate about continuously engaging in research in private tutoring.

Recently, I engaged in collaboration with a "tutorial world" which offers free tutorial services to underprivileged children lagging behind at school in Hong Kong. The tutorial world was established by a former school principal in 2011 and is registered as a nonprofit organization recognized by the Hong Kong Government. With the mission of giving poor and underprivileged children a fair chance of learning, it offers one-to-one tutorial services, playgroups and preschool courses, small group learning classes, talent development classes, extracurricular activities, and creative learning opportunities in the community free of charge. It provides a platform for voluntary tutors to register and match them with students with various learning needs. These tutors include university students, working people, and retirees. So far, they have matched over 12,000 students with suitable tutors. The next step to which the Principal would like to move forward is to establish a more systematic and well-developed mechanism to select voluntary tutors and offer appropriate training for them in order to assure the quality of tutoring. This requires collaboration with academics who can offer advice and further research to understand the needs of underprivileged children and the quality of the voluntary tutors.

Discussion and implications

In this section, I discuss various issues emerging from the narrative of myself as an insider of the private tutoring industry who has played the roles of tutee, tutor, and researcher.

Washback on mainstream education

Private tutoring has caused both positive and negative washback on teaching and learning in regular schooling. On the positive side, it serves both the enhancement and the remedial purposes of learning. Tutors, particularly those offering tutoring on a one-to-one or small group basis, can cater for their tutees' individual needs such as reteaching what they do not understand in regular schooling and prepare them for school dictations and examinations. Some tutors may also teach what schools will cover in advance. Private tutoring not only helps high achievers to stay at the top of the class (e.g., when I was in primary school) but also helps learners who lag behind their peers to catch up (e.g., the time when I transitioned from primary to secondary school having to adapt to the English medium of instruction). Private tutoring is particularly beneficial for primary school pupils whose parents do not have the education level or time to look after their children's studies (Ho, 2010). On the other hand, private tutoring may increase disparities within the classroom because when the slow learners are trying to catch up, the high-flyers may progress even faster through attending tutorial classes (Bray & Lykins, 2012, p. 38).

Schoolteachers are perceived as those who focus more on counseling students and instilling values and knowledge but are less professional or knowledgeable in teaching examination strategies (Kwo & Bray, 2014; Yung, 2015). Some tutors, like myself when I was a tutor, even criticize schoolteachers for not being competent enough in helping their students to thrive in public examinations. Students therefore may find tutors more helpful than their schoolteachers in fulfilling their pragmatic needs of preparing for examinations. Their preference for tutors may also be strengthened because they can choose their tutors but not their schoolteachers, particularly when star tutors are advertising themselves as examination experts who have helped thousands of students to attain outstanding examination results (Yung & Yuan, 2018). The fact that students or their families are paying money to their tutors while school education is free of charge may also lead to students to pay more attention to their tutors and less to their schoolteachers (Fung, 2003).

The exclusive focus on examination preparation in private tutoring, especially that offered by star tutors in cram schools, may distort the ideal of education. While education reforms worldwide including Hong Kong are promoting student-centeredness, all-round education, and whole-person development (e.g., the "Learning to learn" initiative in the latest curriculum reform in Hong Kong, see Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000); the shadow education sector is encouraging tutor dependent, passive learning, and learning for assessment (e.g., my examination-oriented attitude during senior secondary and matriculation). This may erode students' creativity and undermine their self-regulated learning. The extra time and effort in attending private tutoring courses after school also mean that students can spend less time on whole-person development including socializing with their friends, pursuing their hobbies, and participating in extracurricular activities such as sports and arts. However, there is still controversy about whether private tutoring should go beyond improving students' examination results and focus on students' personal growth, such as the intangible, soft benefits suggested by Maylor et al. (2013). This dimension warrants further investigation.

Regulation of private tutoring

Regulations of tutorial centers are mainly limited to registration and some managerial procedures and are relatively flexible in other aspects. According to the Hong Kong Education Ordinance

(Chapter 279), classes with eight or more persons or an organization providing educational courses for 20 or more persons are officially classified as Private Schools Offering Non-Formal Curriculum and require registration from the Education Bureau as schools with certain regulatory exemptions (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2012). The Ordinance also stipulates that the maximum class size is 45. That is why large tutorial schools have connected classrooms which are separated by glass walls so that more than 45 tutees can see the tutors' live teaching. Sometimes, for over-enrolled classes when the tutorial schools do not have extra classrooms, staff need to add extra desks and chairs to the classroom and this breaks the Education Ordinance. Some tutorial centers with over eight students even do not register (like those in domestic settings to which I went for homework guidance in primary school), and they risk being sued.

Registered tutorial schools are required to make information such as class size and price available to clients, but the requirements do not cover curriculum, teaching materials, or the modes of teaching (Bray & Kwo, 2014). Tutors tend to create their own materials, which are mostly adapted from past examination papers (Chan & Bray, 2014). These materials are usually well designed and colorful. Tutors also use their own teaching methods that are appealing to their clients, which usually involve the use of prepared jokes and a sense of humor (Yung, 2015). However, for most tutors and their companies, what matters most is student enrollment which is taken as the core indicator whether a tutor is of high quality. The actual teaching and their materials are not under any quality control from the government. It is also unclear how tutors professionally develop themselves to enhance their quality of teaching.

Tutorial advertisements are prevalent in Hong Kong, and they are not strictly regulated. They are mainly governed by the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (Chapter 362, Laws of Hong Kong), which aims to protect consumers by prohibiting false trade descriptions, misleading or incomplete information, and misstatements. Therefore, when tutors show the number of students attaining high grades in public examinations in their advertisements, they need to add footnotes showing the source of data. Still, tutors project images of celebrities and examination experts through the way they are dressed and pose and through the textual descriptions of their qualifications and work experience in their biographies (Yung & Yuan, 2018). The repetitive exposure to tutorial advertisements can lead to what Koh (2014) describes as "spellbinding subliminal effects" (p. 806), subconsciously influencing students and their parents as well as the general public.

Education inequality

Private tutoring may contribute to education inequality and exacerbate social stratification. With the expansion of shadow education, many tutorial services, particularly those offered by large tutorial companies, are at a relatively modest price which middle class and low-income families can generally afford (see, e.g., Yung, 2015, p. 715). However, rich families still can afford more and higher quality tutoring than low-income ones. I consider myself fortunate that my family was able to afford the tuition fee, but some of my schoolmates were not able to do so. Also, enrolling in tutorial classes of various subjects increased my family's burden. As a result, my friend and I shared learning materials from different tutorial courses.

The fact that shadow education causes financial burden on families conflicts with the notion of fee-free education supported by the United Nations and the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declarations of the 2015 World Education Forum led by UNESCO, education should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages (UNESCO, 2015; United Nations, 1948, Article 26). In Hong Kong, education in the government and aided sector was free of charge in primary school and junior secondary school from 1978 to 2007, and the provision was extended to senior secondary in 2008. Nevertheless, alongside the free education is the fee-paying shadow

education which is a form of hidden privatization of education. When private tutoring is so prevalent that the majority of students are receiving it, it may be perceived as a necessity and those who do not do so may feel disadvantaged. My participation in tutoring of some subjects was also influenced by peer pressure. The perceived need to pay for private tutoring may cause financial burden on families (see Bray, 2013).

To address the issue of education inequality, some tutorial companies and nonprofit organizations offer fee-free tutorial services for students from low-income families. From my interviews with some star tutors in my research projects (e.g., Yung, 2019), I learned that some tutorial companies allow students whose families are supported by the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme to attend their tutorial courses free of charge. They regard this service as a kind of corporate social responsibility. The “tutorial world” I collaborated with also recruited volunteers to tutor underprivileged children on a one-to-one basis. The founder, however, expressed challenges in securing funding to rent venues to run workshops for their tutors and pay for his staff who operate the tutorial center. Indeed, this kind of nonprofit organization needs funding support and resources, but the Education Bureau does not seem to be willing to support them. This is probably because of political reasons since funding these organizations to a certain extent means that the government is legitimizing the shadow education sector and admits the limitation of mainstream schools.

Conclusion and directions for further research

In this article, I have illustrated my narrative experiences as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher and have discussed issues of washback on mainstream schooling, regulation, and education inequality arising from the prevalence of private tutoring in Hong Kong. To my knowledge, there is no study that discusses the issues of shadow education from the personal experience of the author playing all three roles in the tutoring industry. This article illustrates how practices and policies of private tutoring are evolving from an insider perspective. It also calls for research that unveils the lived experiences of different stakeholders in shadow education in other contexts.

Research on shadow education has expanded from describing its scale and intensity in various contexts (see e.g. Bray, 2009) to its impact on teaching and learning (Kwo & Bray, 2014; Wang & Bray, 2016), education policies (Bray & Kwo, 2014), and social inequalities (Dawson, 2010). Further research may focus on these issues in greater depth, such as how tutors engage in professional development to ensure their teaching quality even when there is no official quality assurance mechanism. It may also explore the extent to which tutors’ teaching quality should be regulated through policy, for example, registering for a tutoring certificate or license. Regarding education inequalities, since tutorial companies and nonprofit organizations are taking initiatives to help underprivileged children to attend free tutoring, future research may focus on the experiences of these students and voluntary tutors and how such initiatives may lead to the betterment of education.

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