

Mapping and Analyzing Private Supplementary Tutoring: Approaches and Themes

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The focus of this special issue of the journal, *Private Supplementary Tutoring*, has growing importance not only in China but also globally. The research community has arguably been slow to catch up with reality insofar as private supplementary tutoring has for several decades been a major feature in the lives of many students and their families but has only recently become a significant component of the literature. Nevertheless, the observation that it is now a significant component is underlined by the fact that even in the short history of this journal three articles have been devoted to the topic (Liao & Huang, 2018; Liu, 2018; Xue & Fang, 2018). A substantial and growing body of research now addresses all regions of the world (see e.g., Aurini, Davies, & Dierkes, 2013; Bray, 2009, 2011; Jokić, 2013; Park, Buchmann, Choi, & Merry, 2016). Much remains to be done, however, and the articles in this special issue are a further contribution.

Definitions and methods

Among the challenges for analysis of private supplementary tutoring are ones of definition and focus. Many authors use the vocabulary of shadow education, on the grounds that much supplementary tutoring mimics regular schooling: as the curriculum changes in the schools, so it changes in the shadows (Bray, 1999, 2009). However, like many metaphors, this description is imperfect (Bray, Kwo, & Jokić, 2015). Certainly some forms of tutoring mimic those in regular schooling, but other forms deliberately complement and extend those provided in schools. Further, some tutoring provides content in advance of schooling, raising the question which body is the shadow of which.

With such factors in mind, the title for this special issue was set as *Private Supplementary Tutoring*, but each of these words may also vary in meanings according to context and interpretation. The most common definition of private is fee-paying, but some people interpret the word to mean that tutoring is provided outside the public space and not necessarily on a fee-paying basis. Further, even if fees are charged, they may be in goods, services, or favors rather than in cash or WeChat transfers and so on.

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The word “supplementary” may also be problematic insofar as it implies that the tutoring is optional. Paviot (2015, pp. 168–169) observed in the contexts of Kenya and Mauritius that private tutoring appeared “to have evolved in such a way that we can no longer consider it a ‘parallel’ form of practice but instead as a crucial element in most pupils’ daily school life.” This observation certainly applies to some schools and families in China, albeit not universally because much depends on rural/urban location, on social class, and on the attitudes of schools to the supplementary sector.

Then comes the word “tutoring,” which to some people implies provision on a one-to-one or small-group basis but can also be provided in lecture theaters with 100 or more students. Further, while the previous sentence implies that the tutor and tutees are physically in the same room, some classes in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), as explained by Eng, have prerecorded lessons and as such are not live. By contrast, Bai, Tang, Li, and Fan describe classes that are live but are delivered through the Internet, so the tutors and tutees are not in the same location. Technological advances mean that the forms of tutoring are changing over time. Other changes are stimulated by regulatory measures, by entrepreneurs seeking new market niches, and by changing demands from consumers.

With such matters in mind, readers of the individual papers are advised to identify carefully the definitions employed by the authors of those papers, which may not be consistent with the definitions of other authors. Writing about Hong Kong SAR, Yung points out that private supplementary tutoring “is known as *bou² zaap⁶* (补习) in Cantonese (the daily life language in Hong Kong SAR), where ‘补’ literally means to supplement (either for remedial purpose or enhancement) and ‘习’ means to learn, study or practice.” This vocabulary would be widely recognized elsewhere in China, but other terms may also be used. For Macao SAR, Chan highlights the Portuguese-language vocabulary, recognizing that Portuguese is an official language, namely *apoio pedagógico complementar*. This term may be literally translated as *complementary educational support*, but does not contain the word “private.” In contrast, the Chinese terminology 私立补充教学辅助 emphasizes the feature of “private” and “complementary.” Yet a particular feature in Macao SAR is fee-free tutoring provided by schools, and various forms of public–private partnership that blur boundaries.

Concerning Mainland China, Liu stresses that “tutoring in non-academic subjects, such as piano, calligraphy, and chess is also demanded, especially in urban areas.” She adds that many parents invest in nonacademic tutoring to achieve broad goals such as developing children’s interest, cultivating their creativity, and promoting rounded development. Zhang’s paper on regulations is particularly concerned with academic tutoring provided by companies, though again recognizes that categories are blurred. In Macao SAR, Chan includes in her definition “academic-oriented tutoring such as preparation for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and other entrance examinations.”

The collection of papers also contains instructive diversity in research approaches. Yung is qualitative and autobiographical, reflecting on his own identities and perspectives as a tutee, a tutor, and a researcher. By contrast, Liu has a highly quantitative approach using a nationally representative data set from 37,114 adults and 8,594 children in 13,946 households in 622 communities. Juxtaposition of this pair of papers indeed shows extremes and also the types of complementary insights that can be obtained from different types of approach. As such, analysis of private supplementary tutoring benefits from the diversity of approaches evident in the broader domain of educational studies (see e.g., Johnson & Christensen, 2012) and the social sciences more widely (e.g., della Porta & Keating, 2008). The paper by Chan lies between the extremes shown by Yung and Liu, with mixed-methods approaches for a limited number of individuals and institutions. Zhang’s paper on regulations is mainly based on interviews.

Voices and emphases

In contrast to the five research articles, a special feature of this issue of the journal is the pair of contributions under the heading “Industry Voices,” providing rarely heard insiders’ considerations

and reflections. The first paper in this section is by a tutoring giant in the Hong Kong marketplace. It is written by the cofounder of Beacon College, which is among the three largest tutorial companies in Hong Kong SAR and in 2018 was listed in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Eng provides his autobiographical perspective first as a student and then on the origins and evolution of the company prior to his retirement. He also makes instructive comments on some of the challenges ahead from an entrepreneurial perspective, highlighting the falling birth rate, parental shifts in curricular preferences toward international schools, and changes in availability and use of technology.

The second paper focuses on how a tutoring institution developed the practice of teaching research. Bai et al. show how the case institution has both led and adapted to changing circumstances as the gigantic Chinese market itself has evolved.

The autobiographical reflections by Yung and Eng bring out personal and human perspectives in a way that is not possible with Liu's large sample and statistical analysis. Nevertheless, from its own angle, Liu's paper is able to present differences in attitudes of urban and rural parents, and thus to complement the perspectives of learners and entrepreneurs in the papers by Eng and by Bai et al.

A further contrast is provided by Chan's paper. At the time of her research, Chan was a teacher of English in one of the two schools that she investigated. As such, she had an insider's perspective, though was careful to be circumspect and to undertake self-checks for biases. She used her social capital to access an English medium-of-instruction (EMI) school to contrast with patterns in her Chinese medium-of-instruction (CMI) school. Thus Chan is able to take schools as units for analysis, and to present institutional perspectives alongside those of the students whom she interviewed and surveyed.

Finally, Zhang's paper about regulations and policy enactment shows the importance of not assuming that policies necessarily become practices. Again the theme of contexts comes to the fore, with different subnational governments responding in different ways to national directives and companies of different sizes and orientations responding in different ways within subnational jurisdictions.

Conclusions

The above remarks have shown the value of these papers both individually and as a group. They are of course only a small advance in the huge agenda, but they are very welcome. Readers are encouraged to build on them for further advance with reference to China as a whole and/or to its component parts. Scholars in the field of comparative education commonly stress the value of intranational as well as international studies (e.g., Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2014). The value of intranational comparisons has been illustrated here with a set of papers from societies having commonality in cultural heritage yet operating with different economic, social, and legal frameworks.

Although in some countries private supplementary tutoring has a history of decades and even centuries (see e.g., Foondun, 2002; Sato, 2012; Tsiloglou, 2005), the research literature only began to emerge in a significant way during the 1990s. Since that time, it has grown and blossomed. Yet arguably the agenda for shadow education is as great as that for the body that it imitates—and, as indicated, many components of the field of private supplementary tutoring go beyond shadow education as narrowly defined. Changing social structures and technologies are among the forces changing the shapes of both schooling and its supplements (Bray, 2017).

The mission of *ECNU Review of Education* is "to publish impactful research related to current educational issues in China and abroad." The journal serves as an interface between China and the world, and will welcome further submissions that build on the themes in this special issue and/or address other themes within the journal's remit.

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