



Comparing the effectiveness of cram school tutors and schoolteachers: A critical analysis of students' perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the teaching effectiveness of cram school tutors and schoolteachers of English based on the perceptions of senior secondary students in Hong Kong. It adopts a sequential mixed-methods approach. The result from the online survey ($N = 477$) indicates that tutors are perceived to be more effective than schoolteachers in all identified aspects of effective teaching. However, the qualitative data from focus group interviews ($n = 64$) reveals a more complex picture. By problematising students' perceptions with reference to the wider social, cultural and educational context, three themes were generated: (1) students' utilitarian learning orientations in an examination-oriented system, (2) the commodification of education in a consumer culture, and (3) students' immediate psychological needs in the process of learning. This study sheds light on the complex relationship between private tutoring and mainstream schooling and offers implications for policymaking and teaching in the private and mainstream sectors.

1. Introduction

Around the globe, a significant number of students receive private tutoring. In many Asian countries such as Bangladesh, China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand, over half of secondary school students receive some type of private tutoring (see Bray and Lykins, 2012). Other non-Asian countries such as those in Africa, Australasia, North America and Europe have also witnessed a rapid growth in students' tutoring participation (see, e.g., Buchmann et al., 2010; Pearce et al., 2018; Silova, 2010; Sriprakash et al., 2016; Šťastný, 2017). Private tutoring can be defined as the fee-paying services students access outside regular school hours to supplement their formal school learning of academic subjects (Bray, 2009; Yung and Bray, 2017). It carries the metaphor of “shadow education” because it mimics and changes its shape according to the mainstream school curriculum (Bray, 2009; Stevenson and Baker, 1992). Private tutoring can be operated via one-to-one, small group and online modes (see Yung and Bray, 2017). The most prominent in many Asian contexts is lecture-type tutoring in so-called cram schools run by large tutorial companies (Chung, 2013; de Castro and de Guzman, 2014; Yung, 2019). Tutors often promote themselves and their courses through advertisements and tutorial websites (Kozar, 2015; Šťastný, 2017; Yung and Yuan, 2018), making private tutoring more visible and widespread.

Private tutoring has attracted a great deal of attention in education research in recent years due to its significant impact on policy making

as well as teaching and learning in mainstream schooling. To date, many studies have investigated its patterns, intensity and scale in various contexts (see, e.g., Bray, 2009; Mahmud and Kenayathulla, 2018; Pearce et al., 2018; Silova, 2009). These studies tend to identify policy implications concerning the privatisation of education and its exacerbation of social inequality (e.g., Bray and Kwo, 2014; Matsuoka, 2018; Sobhy, 2012; Šťastný, 2017). Bray and Lykins (2012, p. 71) suggest that “enough is known about the broad outlines” and “detailed research would reveal the features more clearly.” In this regard, an increasing number of studies have focused on various issues such as the washback effect of private tutoring on mainstream schooling (e.g., Bhorkar and Bray, 2018; Jheng, 2015; Park et al., 2016) and its impact on the lives of various stakeholders such as schoolteachers, tutors, students and parents (e.g., Kobakhidze, 2018; Loyalka and Zakharov, 2016; Matsuoka, 2018; Sriprakash et al., 2016; Trent, 2016). Fewer studies have investigated how students perceive the teaching effectiveness of tutors compared to that of schoolteachers. This is an important aspect for investigation because perceptions drive behaviour and students' learning is essentially influenced by their attendance in tutorial classes which tend to shadow the mainstream. However, students evaluate tutors and schoolteachers with their own criteria, and their perceptions can be framed by the wider educational context in which they are situated. Therefore, students' perceptions need to be analysed critically in order to understand how and why tutors or schoolteachers are considered more effective than the other and to uncover the complex

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relationships between private tutoring and mainstream schooling.

This study compares students' perceived effectiveness of tutors and of schoolteachers from a critical perspective. Specifically, it problematises secondary school students' perceptions of how cram school tutors and schoolteachers help them learn English within an educational structure dominated by high-stakes testing and private tutoring. The paper commences with a critical review of the literature conceptualising teaching effectiveness. It then describes the context of cram schools and mainstream schools in Hong Kong and the research methods used in the study. The findings of this study are then presented and critically discussed before identifying policy and pedagogical implications relevant to Hong Kong and the wider international context.

2. Conceptualising teaching effectiveness: A critical perspective

The specification of teaching effectiveness varies across contexts and cultures, and it is thus difficult to identify a set of objective criteria for evaluation (Farrell, 2015; Stronge, 2018). Ideally, schoolteachers are expected to guide their students to meet the aims of education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) identified the four pillars of education – *learning to know*, *learning to do*, *learning to be* and *learning to live together* (Delors et al., 1996; UNESCO, 2015). When education reforms worldwide move in this direction, schoolteachers play a key role in helping their students become well-balanced individuals and cultivate the personal and intellectual qualities for the twenty-first century such as critical thinking, creativity, independence (e.g., self-regulation) and communication skills (i.e., language competence) (Cheng, 2015). Farrell (2015) argues that effective teachers should also motivate students and inspire their curiosity for learning (see also Muijs and Reynolds, 2018).

In reality, however, schoolteachers are constrained by social norms which are dominated by performance goals. They are increasingly held accountable for students' achievements, and the main criterion for teaching effectiveness depends on students' scores in standardised tests. In the United States, for example, the *No Child Left Behind* policy has changed the dynamic of teaching and learning in mainstream schools and made schoolteachers resort to teaching to the test (Au, 2009; von der Embse et al., 2016). In many Asian countries, particularly those in Confucian-heritage settings such as Hong Kong, many students prefer their schoolteachers to be examination-oriented and to drill them with test-taking strategies (Carless, 2011; Watkins, 2009). If their schoolteachers are not examination-oriented enough, students may consider them ineffective and thus seek help from private tutors (e.g., Dang, 2007; Hamid et al., 2009; Yung, 2015).

Some studies have attempted to examine the effectiveness of private tutoring based on students' school grades and performance on public examinations (e.g., Kuan, 2011; Liu, 2012; Zhang, 2013), but results have been inconclusive. Zhan et al. (2013) argue that research that links tutoring with academic achievement is "not robust" and "there are many ways in which tutoring can be 'effective,' and evaluation criteria might fit the motivations of the consumers" (p. 496). In this regard, they explored Grade 9 and Grade 12 students' perceptions of the effectiveness of private tutoring in Hong Kong. Based on interviews with 101 students, they found that many students complained about the lack of support from schoolteachers in providing examination skills and appreciated tutors' help with solving learning difficulties and examination preparation. Using the same sample, Kwo and Bray (2014) further compared schoolteachers' pedagogical styles with tutors' and students' learning orientations at school with those in tutoring. They found that schoolteachers and tutors are perceived to be effective in different ways; with the former focusing on teaching the content required in the official curriculum, meeting students' deep learning needs and paying holistic attention to students' personal growth; while the latter teaching skills to help pass examinations, thus meeting students' immediate learning needs and focusing narrowly on academic subjects. The findings reveal that teaching effectiveness can be based on

students' diverse expectations and attitudes to learning in different contexts.

A gap in previous studies is that evaluation of the effectiveness of schoolteachers and tutors was mainly provided by students enrolled in a wide range of subjects and modes of tutoring. This can be problematic and complicate the findings because the teaching strategies of tutors in lecture-type tutoring may be different from those in one-to-one or small group tutoring. The learning content required in different subjects also varies, leading to different evaluation criteria. In this regard, the present study focuses on students' learning in one type of tutoring and in a specific subject. Lecture-type tutoring in cram schools was chosen because it is typically the most prominent type of tutoring in many places. Its class size and teaching strategies are also more comparable to those in the mainstream. Zhan et al. (2013) suggest that lecture-type tutoring shows a supply-driven feature and needs "further research concerning its relationship with students' preferred learning styles" (p. 507). English was selected because it is the most heavily enrolled subject in tutoring in many parts of the world (e.g., Dierkes, 2010 in Japan; Ireson and Rushforth, 2011 in England; Kwok, 2010 in China; Mahmud and Kenayathulla, 2018 in Bangladesh; Park et al., 2011 in South Korea; Zhan et al., 2013 in Hong Kong). Moreover, learning a language is different from learning other subjects due to the strong social nature of language. It involves far more than learning skills or a system of rules (Williams and Burden, 1997). Therefore, focusing on English learning in tutoring is likely to yield different findings from tutoring in other subjects.

Considering that effective teaching is a "messy" notion reconfigured within a structure of standardised knowledge and accountability (Mooney Simmie et al., 2019), this study analyses students' perceptions from a critical perspective to unveil how education policies and practices in the larger social context shape human consciousness. Beyer (2001) argues that critical perspectives are valuable in uncovering hidden realities and examining the choices people make and what these are linked to. By problematising students' voices, researchers, educators and policymakers can understand how various factors within social contexts affect students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. The study thus aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do secondary school students compare the effectiveness of cram school tutors and schoolteachers in helping them learn English?
- (2) What factors lie behind secondary school students' perceptions when they compare the teaching effectiveness of cram school tutors and schoolteachers?

3. The study

This study is part of a larger-scale, year-long mixed-methods study exploring Hong Kong senior secondary students' experiences in cram schools (see Yung, 2016, 2019). It adopted an explanatory sequential approach with a two-phase procedure (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Data were collected through an online survey and focus group interviews with the students. Other data collected throughout the year in the larger study (e.g., interviews with tutors and schoolteachers, classroom observations in the cram schools) facilitated more in-depth, multifaceted and critical understanding of the students' responses for this paper.

3.1. The research context

The study was situated in Hong Kong, a context which has experienced structural education reform emphasising learning through experience and promoting a culture of "learning to learn" in recent years (Education Commission, 2000). The new curriculum has shifted from transmission of knowledge and an over-emphasis on academic studies to learning how to learn and focusing on students' whole-person

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