



# The internal dynamics of privatised public education: Fee-charging supplementary tutoring provided by teachers in Cambodia



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## ABSTRACT

Much literature is available on private schools that operate alongside public schools, and on public schools that are encouraged to operate more like businesses in order to become more efficient and client-oriented. This paper, by contrast, focuses on privatisation by default behind a façade of fee-free education. It concerns supplementary private tutoring provided by government-employed teachers, in many cases to their own students in large classes and on the school premises. Drawing on questionnaire and interview data from secondary school students and teachers in one province of Cambodia, the paper examines interlinked factors that contribute to this process. These factors include low teachers' salaries, lack of instructional time, large classes, and the possibility of different teacher-student relationships in supplementary lessons. The paper is contextualised within the wider literatures on privatisation and shadow education.

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The literature on marketisation and commodification of education has greatly expanded in recent years (see e.g. Ball, 2012; Burch, 2009; Macpherson et al., 2014). Much of it focuses on the development of private schools alongside public ones (e.g. Pugh et al., 2006; Woodhead et al., 2013), but parts, like the present paper, focus on privatisation within public education (e.g. Ball and Youdell, 2008; Silova et al., 2006). Such privatisation may result from deliberate policy but can also occur by default.

Cambodia's education system has long had much internal privatisation behind a façade of fee-free public provision (see e.g. Bray, 1999; Bray and Bunly, 2005; Nguon, 2012; Sophonnara, 1994), and reports by international agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have expressed concern about exclusion of low-income families (e.g. Asian Development Bank, 1996; NGO Education Partnership, 2007; UNDP, 2014). Yet despite over two decades of concern, the issues have remained entrenched because the basic drivers of this privatisation have not sufficiently changed.

This paper adds to understanding by reporting new data and insights on one component of privatisation, namely supplementary tutoring provided by public school teachers on a fee-charging basis mostly to students in their own schools and commonly to students in their own classes. The data were collected from a sample of urban, semi-urban, rural and remote schools in one

province of Cambodia, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The paper analyses the forces that sustain and contribute to the privatisation within public education, and remarks on the policy implications. Patterns in Cambodia are not unique, and indeed exist in many countries (see e.g. Bray, 2009; Jokić, 2013; Kobakhidze, 2014; Majumdar, 2014). However, they are particularly interesting because they are extreme and therefore expose forces that may be less easily detected elsewhere.

This paper commences with the international literature and conceptual framework. It then turns to the Cambodian context and to the methods through which the data were collected. Subsequent sections indicate the scale and nature of private supplementary tutoring, and the factors that underpin it. Analysis of these factors leads to remarks about the levers for policy makers who might decide to intervene.

## 1. International literature and conceptual framework

This paper is especially concerned with the behaviour of teachers in public schools, but also with the behaviour of students and, by extension, their families. Teachers' identities are partly determined by recruitment and retention policies; and their behaviours are shaped by the environments in which they work. Such factors have been identified by sociologists in under the heading of sociological institutionalism (see e.g. Hall and Taylor, 1996; Jepperson, 2002). Salaries are a core factor in teacher recruitment and retention, and in Cambodia are low. Tandon and

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Fukao (2015, p. 19) stated that “[t]he wages of a typical married Cambodian teacher with two children are below the poverty line”, adding (p.24) that teachers earn less than comparable professionals. This problem was longstanding (see e.g. Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 52; Chhinh and Dy 2009, p. 128; Engel, 2011, p. 15; Naren and Collins, 2004, p. 4). Patterns in Cambodia resemble those elsewhere (e.g. Liu and Onwuegbuzie, 2014; Mkumbo, 2012) in which education systems with low salaries are unable to attract the best applicants; and when salaries are very low, teachers have to supplement their incomes through other means. Private tutoring is among the common means to supplement salaries both in Cambodia and elsewhere (Brehm et al., 2012; Jayachandran, 2014; Silova et al., 2006). Such tutoring is commonly called shadow education on the grounds that much of it mimics the content of regular schooling (Aurini et al., 2013; Bray, 2009; Jokić, 2013; Majumdar 2014).

Intermeshing with the teachers are the students and their families. Insofar as students and their families see education as an investment in a competitive environment, anxieties particularly arise around points in education systems at which students are streamed or pushed out. In all education systems, external examinations are a major factor (see e.g. Chang, 2013; Safarzyńska, 2011; Zeng, 1999). If private supplementary tutoring helps students to pass these examinations, then it can be a good household investment. Yet career progression in education systems is not determined only by external examinations. Other important determinants include internal examinations, usually set by teachers with or without some level of school monitoring and moderation. Brehm (2015, p. 62) has described decision-making by a low-income parent in Cambodia who entered a debt relationship with her children’s teacher because of “her desire for a future in which her child would earn a high salary”. This parent clearly saw private tutoring as an investment, though the extent to which it was a reliable investment may have been uncertain. Also important in the decision-making by students and their families are elements of classroom climate shaped by peers and teachers (Jheng, 2015). Peer pressure may play a particularly strong role when the majority of students receive private tutoring; and teachers may have different attitudes to students who do or do not receive tutoring.

Teachers who provide tutoring do not simply respond to demand: they can also create or stimulate it. In Cambodia, Dawson (2009) referred to the ‘tricks of the teacher’ to secure demand for their supplementary classes by deliberately slowing down in regular lessons and/or withholding key components. Dawson (p.65) quoted one teacher who had stated:

That’s the way we force the students to study in private tutoring. The teacher says the new math formulas are only introduced in private tutoring.

In more benign settings teachers do not operate in ways that are arguably corrupt; but they may still encourage tutoring – perhaps inadvertently – by favouring the students who receive the tutoring over ones who do not.

Other factors which shape shadow education demand and supply concern the structure and content of education systems. Structure includes class size and duration of the learning day. When school classes are large, students and their families may seek (and teachers may recommend) supplementary lessons in smaller classes in order to gain more individual attention (see e.g. Ireson and Rushforth, 2014); and when school days are shortened, for example by the operation of double-shift systems in which one group of students attends school in the morning and another group attends in the afternoon, then students and families may seek (and again teachers may recommend) extra lessons to make up for the shortfall (see e.g. Tedla, 2003, p. 105). These are factors in

Cambodia, where urban classes in particular are commonly large, and where the school day may be short in part because of double shifts. In such contexts, the official curriculum may be overloaded for the capacity of the system.

Going beyond these factors, this paper considers other variables. One concerns teacher absenteeism, which is a problem in many countries (Abadzi, 2007; Lee et al., 2015; Rogers and Vegas, 2009) including Cambodia (Benveniste et al., 2008, pp. 66–71; Sopha et al., 2015, pp. 29–43), and is related to both low salaries and inadequate mechanisms for supervision and accountability. When teachers are absent, their students suffer; and sometimes teachers are absent from their regular duties *because* they devote time and energy to their market-driven supplementary tutoring. Another variable concerns the pedagogies of private tutoring which may differ even when lessons are delivered by the same teachers to the same students (Brehm et al., 2012, p.24; Brehm 2015, p.67).

Also pertinent is literature on privatisation in education. Ball and Youdell (2008) identified two types of privatisation. One was called ‘endogenous’ (p.14) and involves “the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like businesses and more business-like” through increased parental choice, budget devolution, competition between schools and other mechanisms. The other type was called ‘exogenous’ (p.14) through “the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education”. The patterns described here could perhaps be called endogenous but are very different from the sorts of business-oriented model that Ball and Youdell had in mind.

Pulling these threads together, Fig. 1 shows the principal components addressed by this paper. While it does not show all possible components in interrelationships, it goes further than previous literature and explores components that are relevant to other countries as well as to Cambodia. The concluding section of the paper presents another diagram which to show how patterns may be interpreted within an under-funded education system. Most of the existing literature about neoliberalism is concerned with macro-level forces (e.g. Apple, 2006; Ball and Youdell, 2008; Ward 2013). This paper is chiefly concerned with ways that the wider forces play out at the school level.

## 2. The Cambodian context

Following the devastation of the 1975–79 Pol Pot regime and its aftermath (Chandler, 2008, pp. 255–276), Cambodia has achieved remarkable economic growth. Madhur and Rethy (2015, p.1) describe the country as “on the verge of graduating to lower-middle-income status with a per capita income of about USD1000”, adding that that level was reached by Vietnam in 2010 and by Laos in 2011. Three quarters of the population are rural residents, and agriculture is the mainstay of the economy. Membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has expanded regional flows of capital and labour.

Cambodia has 24 provinces, among which the data on which this paper reports were drawn from Siem Reap. This province has approximately 1.0 million people, representing 6.7% of the national population (Cambodia, Ministry of Planning, 2013). Siem Reap town is Cambodia’s greatest tourist hub, neighbouring Angkor Wat; but incomes beyond the town are below the national average (Asian Development Bank 2014, p. 27).

Cambodia’s education system has a 6+3+3 structure, i.e. six years of primary, three years of lower secondary, and three years of upper secondary schooling. Primary school enrolment rates exceed 90%, but are much lower at the secondary level. Nationally, in 2014/15 respective gross enrolment rates for lower and upper secondary

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