



# The influence of private tutoring on middle-class students' use of in-class time in formal schools in Taiwan



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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses how private tutoring influences middle-class students' use of in-class time in formal schools. Through interviews with five third-year public senior high school students from middle-class families in Taiwan, the research found that with the help of private tutoring those students were able to use the "time-stealing" strategy to steal time from an ongoing class and create a "double-context learning situation" to optimize the efficiency of the use of their in-class time. This behavior not only undermined teachers' teaching in formal schools, but also exposed the inadequacy of formal schooling in satisfying students' need for knowledge.

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## 1. Introduction

For many students around the world, the ring of the school bell after the last class does not necessarily mean the end of learning. Instead, they must rush to tutorial schools for extra learning. Tutorial school refers to for-profit institutions that provide students with extra out-of-school learning activities in certain academic subjects to supplement and/or advance their school learning (Bray and Kwok, 2003; Tansel, 2013a).

Private tutoring is most common in Asia, especially in East Asia (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan). In Japan, for example, tutorial schools in 2007 served 15.9% of first-grade children, and reached 65.2% in ninth grade (Bray, 2009, p. 18). In addition to East Asia, the issue of private tutoring also has been widely discussed in Central Asia (Silova et al., 2006; Silova, 2009), South Asia (Pallegedara, 2011), West Europe (Peters et al., 2009; Smyth, 2009), and the United States (Gordon et al., 2005).

With the discussion of private tutoring worldwide, a growing body of literature has targeted various aspects of the issue. Among the research, certain studies have aimed to reveal how attendance at tutorial schools influences students' academic performance in formal schools. Results, however, are far from consistent because some studies assert that private tutoring can result in positive effects on students' academic performance (Liu, 2012; Tansel and Bircan, 2006), whereas others have found limited effects (Kuan, 2011; Ryu and Kang, 2013), no effects (Lee et al., 2004;

Smyth, 2008), or even a decline in school performance (Cheo and Quah, 2005). Besides discussing the impact on academic achievement, several studies have also drawn attention to how social background determines the opportunity to attend tutorial schools (Safarzyńska, 2013; Stevenson and Baker, 1992).

Yet while contributing to understanding the effects of private tutoring, the studies above primarily rely on quantitative methods to examine the relationships among private tutoring, academic performance, and social background. In this respect, design of the studies presented introduces a critical gap worth noticing. That is, most studies, relying on quantitative technology, make efforts to calculate the number of subjects studied in tutorial schools for a given student and its relation to academic performance. Even though the past research shows that students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) families have more access to out-of-school learning activities and typically attain higher academic performance, the qualitative process with regard to how private tutoring influences their school learning in more specific ways is still unclear. In particular, the quantitative studies presented above seem to assume an underlying "harmony" between tutorial school and formal school. The relationship between the two, however, can also be seen as "conflict," as tutorial school could interfere with the operation of formal school (e.g., teachers' teaching and students' learning) in some way (Dawson, 2010; Tansel, 2013b). If the relationship can be one of conflict, how does a given higher SES student manage his/her learning between the two settings? Despite their relevance to the field, the aforementioned issues have gained little attention in the literature. The study was designed to fill this gap.

In the following sections I first discuss the relevant literature, including the impact of private tutoring on students' academic

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performance, the effects of SES on students' access to tutorial schools, and gaps in the past literature. Then, private tutoring in the Taiwanese context is addressed in an attempt to showcase the representativeness of the case of Taiwan in the field, followed by the research methods, research findings, and discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Effects of private tutoring on students' academic performance

Studying private tutoring is difficult because of the varied range and nature of these types of schools, including some that take place off the official records (Bray, 2010). The effect of private tutoring on students' learning, unsurprisingly, is also inconclusive due to the difference in school subjects; educational levels and grades; locations; cultures or nations; etc. With that in mind, the study tries to generally separate the results of the past studies into three categories as "clear positive," "modest or no effect" and "negative effect" to present a preliminary picture for later discussion.

As to clear positive effect, Liu (2012) in Taiwan, for example, applied the data on 7th-grade students collected by the 2001 Taiwan Education Panel Study (TEPS) to analyze the effectiveness of private tutoring on academic achievement. His findings showed that tutorial schools did help in the academic improvement of school children. Similarly, Bray's (2013) research conducted in 16 secondary schools in Hong Kong, indicated that students who received private tutoring reported that tutoring improved their test grades, confidence in examinations, revision skills, and learning strategies.

In terms of modest or no effect, Ryu and Kang (2013) used a panel dataset from South Korea, the Korea Education Longitudinal Study (KELS), to analyze the experience of the attendance of private tutoring associated with academic performance. The results showed that the effect of private tutoring remained at most modest. In a similar study, Smyth (2008) examined the relationship between private tutoring and examination performance by using a large-scale survey of upper secondary students in the Republic of Ireland. The results showed that students who had more intensive levels of involvement in private tutoring did not perform significantly higher than nonparticipants.

On the contrary, some studies indicate that private tutoring tends to have a negative effect on students' academic performance. Cheo and Quah's (2005) research in Singapore, for example, suggested that private tutoring may be counterproductive because overload studying may lead to a decline in overall academic performance. They argued against the idea of "the more the better."

### 2.2. Opportunity to attend tutorial schools: role of social background

Along with the discussion of the impact of private tutoring on students' academic performance, plenty of researchers have paid special attention to how students' social backgrounds influence their access to tutorial schools. Plenty of studies worldwide have demonstrated that accessibility of tutorial school is unequal. For example, in East Asia, Stevenson and Baker (1992) analyzed the data from a longitudinal study of high school seniors in Japan, and indicated that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to participate in private tutoring, closely connected to the amount of family resources, and allowed them to be more likely admitted to university. A few studies in Taiwan also found that students from higher SES had more chances to attend tutorial schools, as their parents are able to provide them with higher quality educational resources. Those students

performed better in schools than their low-SES counterparts (Chen and Cheng, 2000; Sun and Huang, 1996).

In line with the results in East Asia, studies in other countries have shown the same trend. Tansel and Bircan (2006), by using the results of the 1994 Household Expenditure Survey conducted by the State Institute of Statistics of Turkey, indicated that households with higher incomes and higher parental educational levels devoted more resources to private tutoring. Safarzyńska (2013) also examined socioeconomic factors underlying the demand for private tutoring by analyzing two samples of students from lower- and upper-level secondary schools in Poland based on the PISA 2006 dataset. The research indicated that students from more affluent families were more likely to use private education and obtain better grades.

On the one hand, students with higher SES are more likely to have more private tutoring than their low-SES counterparts, and the chance of going to tutorial schools could give rise to higher grades (Heyneman, 2011). On the other hand, it also shows that more educated parents tend to emphasize a careful plan of structured activities for children (in this case private tutoring), which can be regarded as an alternative style of parenting, known as "intensive parenting" (Davies, 2004).

### 2.3. Gaps in the literature

In sum, there are obviously mixed findings in different countries on the effect of private tutoring on students' academic performance, ranging from clear positive to even negative effects, indicating that more research is needed to better understand the issue. In addition, while deeply scrutinizing previous studies, it is easy to see an apparent gap that needs attention. That is, while most studies have applied a quantitative approach to examine the association between private tutoring and formal learning, the qualitative process regarding how students' learning in tutorial schools, especially those from higher SES, influences their school learning is still a "black box." Hence, prior to examining the effect of private tutoring on students' academic performance, it is necessary to understand how students manage their learning with respect to the interactions between tutorial schools and formal schools.

The majority of studies presented so far seemingly assume that tutorial school and formal school "get along." Yet, many students around the world are busy rushing between home, formal school and tutorial school. With limited time and energy, they apparently need to come up with a way to prioritize and balance the various aspects of their education. As Tansel (2013b) pointed out, during the approaching of examinations, the importance of tutorial schools, in students' eyes, was higher than that of formal schools as the former was seen as better preparing them for the test. Hence, students would be absent from formal schools in order to attend tutorial schools. In a recent study, Chan and Bray (2014) also proposed that the formal schools in Hong Kong are unable to entirely meet students' needs for exam preparation, which can be seen as a "push" factor; while the tutorial centers, in students' eyes, can meet their needs, which can be regarded as a "pull." Based on this push-and-pull model, they argued that the importance of formal school in students' eyes has been undermined to some extent.

Furthermore, Dawson (2010) scrutinized the relationship between private tutoring and formal education systems by comparing the cases of Japan, South Korea and Cambodia. He found that some private tutors taught the state curriculum before it was addressed in public school lessons. In this regard, he challenged Stevenson and Baker's (1992) idea of "shadow education" which assumes that tutorial schools follow/shadow formal schools, and argued that formal systems ironically end up following or "shadowing" private tutoring systems.

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