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Abstract

The four contributions included in this special issue on effects of private tutoring illuminate different facets of this phenomenon. To join and integrate these different research approaches about private tutoring, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) will be applied. Bronfenbrenner's theory is well suited for this purpose as it allows reconstructing the different ecological systems relevant to private tutoring as well as the relations between these systems. The application of Bronfenbrenner's terminology reveals, which systems and relations deserve greater consideration in further research.

Keywords

Private tutoring; Ecological systems theory; Microsystem; Mesosystem; Macrosystem

Diskussion: Nachhilfeunterricht aus der Perspektive von Bronfenbrenner

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegenden vier Forschungsarbeiten zum Nachhilfeunterricht beleuchten unterschiedliche Facetten dieses Phänomens. In diesem Diskussionsbeitrag wird herausgearbeitet, inwiefern die ökologisch-systemische Perspektive von Bronfenbrenner (1994) als konzeptuelles Rahmenmodell dazu geeignet ist, unterschiedliche Forschungsansätze zur Nachhilfe zusammenzuführen und zu integrieren. Dabei werden die am Phänomen der Nachhilfe beteiligten Systeme und Relationen aufgezeigt. Die ökologisch-systemische Betrachtungsweise ermöglicht es auch, solche Aspekte zu identifizieren, die bislang in der Forschung nur ungenügend berücksichtigt werden.

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Schlagworte
Nachhilfe; Ökologische Systemtheorie; Mikrosystem; Mesosystem; Makrosystem

1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory applied to research on private tutoring

At the *center* of Bronfenbrenner's theory is *the individual* – in case of this discussion: the individual learner with his or her cognitive (e.g., knowledge, pre-concepts), motivational (e.g., goal orientations), emotional and volitional competences. *The microsystem of private tutoring* comprises *the tutor and the learner* as well as, in case of tutoring in groups, other learners. Within this microsystem, interaction processes (e.g., questions, explanations) occur as a result of cooperations between tutor and student(s) which in turn affect future interaction processes and individual processes (e.g., information processing strategies) and cognitive structures of each participant (e.g., the teacher's knowledge about student's concepts and the student's knowledge about the learning domain). The microsystem of private tutoring is not isolated but is considered to supplement the participants' school learning. Learning in the school context is another relevant microsystem, and it is evident that the relation between private tutoring and school learning (as the *mesosystem* of these corresponding microsystems) may affect student learning in each context, i.e., at school and in tutored lessons. This relation may consist, for instance, of ideas shared (more or less) between tutor and teacher about content and goals of learning, beliefs about teaching and learning, the student's transfer of knowledge, strategies or motivation from one context to the other and so forth. The other relevant *microsystem* is the *student's family*, including parents with certain educational goals and beliefs, (more or less) supporting strategies and specific socio-economic and intellectual backgrounds. These parental variables may affect the decision to engage a private tutor, the selection of a specific tutor or institution of tutoring, as well as the degree and the quality of the parents' support of learning processes at home. In turn, it is likely that private tutoring can also have an impact on the student's learning at home (e.g., the completion of homework). Parents and tutors may or may not share the same aims of private tutoring or beliefs about teaching and learning. In other words: The interaction (*mesosystem*) of the two microsystems "private tutoring" and "family" is an important factor which may affect both microsystems and the individual (i.e., the student). These microsystems and their interactions are embedded in the *macrosystem* that comprises the social beliefs about education, about learning, the education policy and so forth. Of course, the relation between the macrosystem on the one hand and the micro- and mesosystems on the other hand is bidirectional, which means that the microsystems and their mesosystems affect social equity and educational justice, social beliefs and practices, and maybe education policy as well. Regarding the relation between the microsystem of tutoring and the macrosystem of educational policy, for

instance, the half-day schooling system (macrosystem) and the (perceived) need for educational success may enhance the formation of institutions for private tutoring and may affect the goals and processes within this microsystem. Conversely, the widespread use of private tutoring may stabilize and increase social inequity and unequal educational opportunities (as an effect of microsystem on macrosystem).

2. The four contributions in this issue discussed from Bronfenbrenner's perspective

2.1 Microsystem of private tutoring and mesosystem tutoring – school

The contribution of *Lambert and Spinath* (2014) primarily focuses on the *microsystem* of private tutoring as the authors illuminate that private tutoring is not effective for all students (e.g., not for students with mathematical learning disabilities (MLD)). Instead of "regular" private tutoring, students with MLD reap greater benefit from training specifically designed for these students. This article is concerned with the important question, for whom private tutoring may be effective, irrespective of potential statistical effects of "regression towards the mean", when students with extremely (low) competence scores are investigated, and irrespective of the fact that we do not exactly know the content of the private tutoring in the control group, its didactic approach, aim and quality. In this respect, the contribution highlights the necessary conditions for effective private tutoring on part of the students. As also school grades are taken into account in this study, this approach at least indirectly touches the mesosystem between private tutoring and school learning, as considering school grades in research on private tutoring implies that learning gains which are acquired in tutoring lessons can be transferred to school learning by the students. Such an assumption is the more likely, the more the microsystem of private tutoring (e.g., tutors with their beliefs, aims, the content of private tutoring, the students with their knowledge, beliefs and motivation) and the microsystem school (e.g., teachers' beliefs, aims, content of school learning) closely interact and show at least a partial overlap, which facilitates the students' transfer from tutoring to school learning.

As *Brehm and Silova* (2014) point out in their contribution, there is a large overlap of the microsystem school and the microsystem private tutoring in Cambodia, as tutees are often tutored additionally by their own government teachers inside the school buildings. This study concentrates on the similarities (and dissimilarities) between government schools and the private tutoring sector, showing great similarities between these two sectors in Cambodia. This overlap presumably accounts for the fact that students who receive tutoring show better grades at schools than students without tutoring.

Regarding private tutoring, it does not seem appropriate to refer to "the" private tutoring per se. As is the case for school lessons, there is a great variability of types of tutoring (e.g., one-to-one lessons, group lessons), frequency of tutoring, the tutors' qualifications, beliefs, aims of the tutoring, didactic approaches, learning materials and so on. Besides necessary or conducing conditions on part of the students, *conditions on part of the tutor* and the learning situation (e.g., frequency, quality) should also be considered. Many results and concepts from research on teachers and their competences (e.g., Baumert & Kunter, 2006) may be highly relevant for research on tutors. However, the following questions arise: Which results from research on teachers can be transferred to tutors, and which results cannot? Which are similarities and which are dissimilarities between school learning and private tutoring? Classroom management competences, for example, may not be as important for tutors as for school teachers. In contrast, diagnostic competences regarding individual learning and problem solving processes seem to be of major importance for effective tutors in one-to-one settings (e.g., Wittwer, Nückles, Landmann, & Renkl, 2010).

As private tutoring focuses on certain domains and school subjects, research on private tutoring could benefit from concepts and results of subject-matter didactics (Kansanena, 2009) or research on pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986).

The study of similarities and dissimilarities, as well as of the overlap and interaction between the two microsystems, school and tutoring, seems worth the effort and deserves greater attention in theory-driven empirical research.

The large-scale study of *Guill and Bos* (2014) follows the question of the effectiveness of private tutoring regarding subjective measures of satisfaction vs. objective measures of mathematics grades and achievement tests. The results show that students and their parents are generally satisfied with the effectiveness of private tutoring, while school grades and test results did not improve as a result of private tutoring. This finding highlights the relevance of the operationalization of the effectiveness of private tutoring. Different operationalizations are not just different measures but imply different assumptions, for instance about transfer from tutoring to school learning (in the case of school grades), about social judgment (in the case of subjective measures), and more general, about the mesosystems, i.e., the interaction between parents (and their beliefs and educational aims), tutors, students, and the school system. As specific operationalizations imply specific assumptions (e.g., about the mesosystems), these assumptions should be theoretically explicated and empirically tested in further research. In addition, it should be considered that different operationalizations of effectiveness answer different questions. While objective measures are essential for studying potential fostering effects of tutoring on school achievement, subjective measures of satisfaction are nevertheless psychologically "real" for the stakeholders and thereby affect educational choices and behaviors of the stakeholders. In addition to subjective measures, school grades and objective achievement scores, the effect of private tutoring on motiva-

tional variables and other cognitive variables, such as self-regulation or metacognitive skills, should also be taken into account.

Helmke's offer-usage model, which Guill and Bos (2014) adapt to the private tutoring, may serve (like Bronfenbrenner's model) as a frame for integrating present research results and as a valuable heuristic for further research questions. However, the offer-usage model cannot function as a substitute for detailed theoretical approaches on individual learning or dyadic and group learning, teaching, or parental involvement.

2.2 Microsystem of family/parents and mesosystem family/ parents – private tutoring

The study of *Ireson and Rushforth* (2014) investigates psychological factors involved in parental decisions about the uptake of private tutoring. Their results, which combine questionnaire data from a of large-scale assessment with interview data from a subgroup of this assessment, show that parental views of self-regulation and achievement as well as the parents' educational levels predict the parental choice to provide private tutoring for their children. The assumption that parents who provide private tutoring show more family support was only partly supported by the data. However, the overall findings of this study give rise to the assumption that parental beliefs about achievement and learning in general (in case of tutoring and in case of homework) can be considered to be one element of the mesosystem which links the family/parental system to private tutoring. This contribution evidences that learning outside school takes place for instance in private tutoring and at home – therefore, the relationships between these two systems should, and can, be taken into account in greater detail.

In addition to considering singular beliefs (measured by belief scales), complex cognition aggregates in the sense of lay epistemics (Kruglanski, Orehek, Dechesne, & Pierro, 2010) or subjective theories (Groeben & Scheele, 2000) of the stakeholders could be assessed. The parents' subjective theories about learning, education, tutoring, school and home learning may provide insights into the argumentative structure of the more complex cognitive systems comprising, e.g., beliefs, educational goals, and goal-means-convictions.

2.3 Macrosystem

Brehm and Silova (2014) point out how political and historical changes in Cambodia affect the education system, and which role private tutoring plays in the continuation of social inequities. The authors illustrate different facets of private tutoring (e.g., historical, cultural, economic, institutional) and thereby contribute to the embedding of private tutoring in the macro context. In contrast to many other countries, the school system and the system of private tutoring in Cambodia

seem to show great overlap (e.g., the identity of government teachers and tutors, materials, and learning settings). Hence, some of these results seem to be specific for the mesosystem relating school and tutoring in Cambodia. The authors' interpretation and description of the social, cultural and political macrosystem of Cambodia is derived from a certain theoretical perspective (i.e., critical theory). It seems congruent that the great "bandwidth" of the focus of this article is at the expense of the precision and "fidelity" of the theoretical descriptions of the individual psychological processes (see already Cronbach & Gleser, 1965).

3. General conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's model (like the adapted offer-usage model by Helmke in the study of Guill and Bos, 2014) may serve as a frame for integrating the present research results and as a heuristic for further research questions. Within and between the systems relevant to private tutoring, theory-based research which applies different methods (e.g., large-scale analyses, experiments, interviews, observations, document analyses, intervention studies) seems promising in order to illuminate the processes, quality, individual and social effects, and necessary preconditions of private tutoring. The four contributions on private tutoring presented in this issue show the variety of research focuses and the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches of current research on private tutoring. These contributions significantly expand our knowledge about private tutoring and induce further research questions regarding the highly relevant phenomenon of private tutoring.

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