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Journal for educational research online 6 (2014) 1, S. 94-116



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Brehm, William C.; Silova, Iveta: Hidden privatization of public education in Cambodia: Equity implications of private tutoring - In: Journal for educational research online 6 (2014) 1, S. 94-116 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-88421 - DOI: 10.25656/01:8842

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-88421>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:8842>

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Hidden privatization of public education in Cambodia: Equity implications of private tutoring

Abstract

The international construction of a new political economic order in Cambodia has had contradictory effects on education. The rhetoric of democracy thrives alongside corruption and human rights abuses, the Education for All initiative exists alongside privatization of public education, and many international education development efforts perpetuate (post)colonial legacies. In this context, private tutoring has emerged as an essential part of the public education system. A mastery of the required curriculum is now possible only through a careful combination of public schooling and private tutoring. Only those who can afford private tutoring thus receive access to a complete national education and have greater opportunities to successfully graduate from public school. Drawing on a preliminary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, including 26 classroom observations, six focus groups with a total of 37 participants, grade tracking of 36 students, and informal interviews with 10 participants, this article examines the nature, scope, and equity implications of private tutoring in Cambodia. The article concludes by explaining how a seamless combination of public schooling and private tutoring creates an educational arrangement that continues to stratify Cambodian youth along socioeconomic lines.

Keywords

Cambodia; Private tutoring; Shadow education; Privatization

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Die heimliche Privatisierung öffentlicher Bildung in Kambodscha: Gerechtigkeitspezifische Auswirkungen von Nachhilfeunterricht

Zusammenfassung

Der internationale Aufbau einer neuen politischen Wirtschaftsordnung in Kambodscha hatte gegensätzliche Effekte in Bezug auf Bildung. Die Sprache der Demokratie entwickelt sich neben Korruption und Menschenrechtsverletzungen, die Initiative ‚Education for All‘ besteht neben der Privatisierung öffentlicher Bildung, und zahlreiche internationale Bemühungen zur Bildungsentwicklung tragen zur Aufrechterhaltung (post)kolonialer Verhältnisse bei. In diesem Kontext ist privater Nachhilfeunterricht zu einem wesentlichen Bestandteil des öffentlichen Bildungssystems geworden. Die Beherrschung der vorgesehenen Unterrichtsinhalte ist nur durch eine bedachte Kombination von öffentlicher Beschulung und Privatunterricht möglich. Nur wer sich Nachhilfeunterricht leisten kann, erhält vollständigen Zugang zur nationalen Bildung und hat demnach bessere Möglichkeiten, im öffentlichen Schulsystem erfolgreich einen Abschluss zu erwerben. Auf Basis erster Analysen qualitativer und quantitativer Daten aus 26 Klassenbeobachtungen, sechs Fokusgruppen mit insgesamt 37 Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern, Trackinginformationen von 36 Schülerinnen und Schülern sowie informellen Interviews mit 10 Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern untersucht dieser Artikel die Beschaffenheit und Tragweite des Nachhilfeunterrichts in Kambodscha sowie dessen Auswirkungen auf Bildungsgerechtigkeit. Der Artikel schließt damit, zu erläutern, wie eine nahtlose Kombination aus öffentlicher Bildung und privatem Nachhilfeunterricht zur Schaffung eines Bildungsgefüges beiträgt, das eine Stratifizierung der Kinder und Jugendlichen in Kambodscha nach sozioökonomischen Kriterien fortsetzt.

Schlagworte

Kambodscha; Nachhilfeunterricht; Shadow Education; Privatisierung

1. Introduction

The boundaries between the public and private provision of education in Cambodia have become blurred since the early 1990s. While the number of private schools remains marginal and attendance is generally limited to elite families in urban areas and low-fee private schools are relatively scarce, hidden privatization has entered public schools in the form of private tutoring. Before or after attending the required four or five hours of public school each day, many students receive, and pay for, extra instruction. By channeling private funds directly to teachers in the form of private tutoring fees (among other educational services and materials households pay for), the practice of private tutoring has helped finance the underfund-

ed public education system. At the same time, it remains unregulated (or hidden), perhaps reflecting the government's broader commitment to neoliberal globalization starting in the 1990s and its accompanying policies of privatization: deregulation, decentralization, and marketization of formally public services and goods.

Whether taking place in teachers' homes, public schools, or tutoring centers (primarily in Phnom Penh, the capital), private tutoring serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it allows teachers to supplement their meager salaries with additional income necessary to survive. On the other hand, it offers students adequate time to cover the national curriculum, which is otherwise difficult to complete during the school day in primary and secondary school. Public school thus only partially covers the required national curriculum, enabling teachers to charge students for the remaining content after school hours, often inside public school buildings. Those who can pay for private tutoring receive a more complete education and hence have a greater likelihood of successfully completing secondary education.

In this context, private tutoring has been explicitly linked to teacher corruption (Dawson, 2009) and the "shadow education" market (Bray, 1999a). For example, Walter Dawson (2009, 2010) argues that private tutoring is a part of the broader system of "forced corruption" in Cambodia, which is linked to chronically low salaries of public sector employees. In order to supplement their income, teachers are "forced" to find alternative sources of income such as engaging in private tutoring or charging students informal fees (for example, fees for the monthly photocopying of examination papers and the daily parking of bicycles at school, as well as, in some cases, fees for overlooking student absences, obtaining examination answers, or forcing students to buy lunches from the teacher). Similarly, Mark Bray (1999a) discusses the phenomenon of private tutoring in terms of "shadow education", implying its connection to a "shadow economy". He explains that the reduction of government expenditure on social sector services (including education) has led to the increase in private financing of education to fill the funding gap, thereby passing the costs onto households and extending elements of public education into "shadow" markets.

Although the existing research on private tutoring offers meaningful explanations of the nature, causes, and implications of tutoring in Cambodia, it only tells a part of the story. As we attempt to illustrate in this article, theorizing private tutoring in the Cambodian context requires situating the study in post-colonial, post-conflict histories and their persisting legacies (such as hierarchy, patronage, and bribery), unpacking the contradictions between international influences (such as a rights-based discourses) and national practices (such as political oppression and assassinations), as well as examining the political economy of the country in relation to the global economy. A combination of these factors yields a more nuanced understanding and a more complete explanation of the nature and implications of private tutoring, while revealing an educational arrangement – that is, the public-private financing of education – formulated in the 1990s (see for example, Government of Cambodia, 1994, p. 109) that obscures the boundaries between public schooling and private tutoring in Cambodia.

Drawing on a preliminary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from a yearlong research project funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and gathered in the beginning of 2011 (see Brehm, Silova, & Tuot, 2012), this article examines the nature, scope, and equity implications of private tutoring provided by government schoolteachers to their own students during the school year. Taking into consideration the complexity of Cambodia's historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts, this research study attempts to explain how a seamless combination of public schooling and private tutoring creates an educational arrangement that excludes poor students from receiving a full education. In particular, the study examines (a) the nature of the public-private education arrangement (including differences and similarities in curriculum content and teaching methodologies used during public schooling and private tutoring lessons) and (b) equity implications of private tutoring (including differences in academic achievement among students attending private tutoring lessons and those who do not).

2. Contextualizing private tutoring in Cambodian public education: History and culture

Private tutoring is a complex phenomenon worldwide, which is driven by multiple factors, including economic, social, cultural, and educational ones. In comparative education research, private tutoring has been generally conceptualized as: (a) a cultural phenomenon reflecting the perceived value of effort in education success (for example Rohlen & LeTendre, 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992), (b) an enrichment strategy to cope with high stakes examinations (for example Bray & Kwok, 2003; Tansel & Bircan, 2006; Aurini & Davies, 2004), (c) a remedial strategy to help students keep up with the curriculum requirements (Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Stevenson & Baker, 1992), and/or (d) an economic survival mechanism for underpaid teachers (Dawson, 2009; Silova, 2009; Silova, Budiene, & Bray, 2006). Notwithstanding these different research foci, most studies have conceptualized the phenomenon of private tutoring in terms of social capital – whether cultural, human, or financial – to highlight the relationship between education (including private tutoring) and the attainment of enhanced educational opportunities and social status. On the one hand, studies conceptualized within the human capital framework view private tutoring as an important educational “investment” that may generate pedagogical and curricular innovation and “add to the nation’s human capital stock in both quantity and quality” (Heyneman, 2011, p. 184; see also Coleman, 1998). On the other hand, studies based on critical approaches to social capital – primarily drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) work – focus on socioeconomic inequalities stemming from private tutoring, arguing that students benefit unevenly from the social and cultural capital they have accrued through supplementary tutoring (de Silva et al., 1991; Bray, 1999a; Kwok, 2004; Ball, 2007; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Burch, 2009).

Aiming to examine equity implications of private tutoring in Cambodia through the lens of critical theory, this study makes two specific contributions to the existing body of research. First, we argue that private tutoring should be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is not driven by any single factor (whether high-stakes examinations or low teacher salaries) but rather reflects a complex combination of multiple factors. In the Cambodian context, for example, some students attend tutoring to increase their knowledge, others use it to improve their scores on national examinations, and still others seek tutoring for subjects not taught at school (such as English language at the primary level). In addition, public school teachers benefit from privately tutoring their own students by generating additional income to supplement their salaries and by providing more hours to teach the national curriculum. Furthermore, specific historical legacies contribute to the institutionalization of private tutoring on a mass scale. Therefore, it is important that research on private tutoring includes a simultaneous examination of historical, cultural, economic, and institutional factors, as well as an investigation of how these factors interact with each other to produce social effects.

Second, the Cambodian case of private tutoring is not a phenomenon strictly associated with the domain of *private* education provision, which is commonly assumed in the existing research. In particular, some conceptualizations of private tutoring discuss it in terms of “shadow education”, emphasizing how private tutoring acts as a changing shadow of mainstream schooling in terms of content taught and takes place *in* a shadow of regulation due to its lack of oversight by governments (Bray, 1999a, 2010a, 2010b). Although “shadow education” in the Cambodian case mimics mainstream schooling content and lacks government regulations, it also illustrates how the boundaries between public schooling and private tutoring have become blurred because public school teachers use the space of private tutoring to finish – or provide a higher quality of instruction on – the national curriculum. The complexity of the Cambodian case – both in terms of its multi-dimensional nature and the public-private educational arrangement – becomes particularly visible by taking a more in-depth look at the historical, political, and economic contexts within which the project of mass schooling has arrived in Cambodia. We find that the post-colonial legacies and international norms of the 1990s redefined the public-private education space today.

2.1 Post-colonial legacies and historical continuities

Since Cambodia gained independence from French colonial rule in 1953, it has gone through five distinct political transitions, from royalist (1953–1970) to republicanism (1970–1975) to socialism/Maoism (1975–1979) to communism (1979–1993) and to liberal democracy (1993–present). Notwithstanding the changes in nomenclature during these transitions and the massive disjuncture with the past caused by the Pol Pot regime (generally referred to as the Khmer Rouge;

1975–1979), there are elements of continuity in Cambodia’s politics and policies. Education policy is a clear example.

Despite the political differences and geopolitical maneuvering by different rulers over the decades and the abolition of schooling under the Khmer Rouge, a recurring education policy after French colonialism (and then again after the Khmer Rouge rule) has been the focus on increasing access to education by building more schools and enrolling more students in public education as a way to teach citizenship to children along various political visions for the future (Ayres, 2000a). Following nearly a century of French colonial rule (1863–1953), the goal of expanding educational access and making public education compulsory became a national priority and was first introduced by head of state Prince Sihanouk in 1955. The goal was at odds with a report commissioned by UNESCO, which emphasized the need to ensure education quality and teacher training by building on the system of education created by the French (Bilodeau, Pathammavong, & Lê, 1955). In particular, the report argued that “it is the moral duty of the state, before making education compulsory, to offer the pupils proper schools with hygienic conditions, qualified teachers, and a suitable curriculum” (Bilodeau et al., 1955, p. 31). By focusing on “qualified teachers” and “suitable curriculum”, the aim to achieve compulsory education was to be a deliberately slow process that “set its seal on an already existing situation [implemented by the French]” and “aimed at only a small number of recalcitrants” (p. 31). In other words, the report suggested that rather than focus on increasing access to education as the state’s main educational priority, the Cambodian government should also focus on creating a robust system of quality education both in terms of teaching force and meaningful curriculum.

Notwithstanding international pressures for a deliberate and adequately funded expansion of a quality education system, the Cambodian government focused instead on a rapid construction of schools to increase educational access for the large number of children remaining out of school. The focus on increasing access to education occurred between 1953 and 1975 and then again between 1979 and present.¹ The conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference in 1991, which authorized the United Nations (UN) to supervise a ceasefire between the three factions vying for power after the fall of the Khmer Rouge and to oversee free and fair elections to take place in 1993, billions of dollars were pledged to develop Cambodia, including the (re)modernization of its education system and a call for Education for All (EFA). Although aid stalled in the early 1990s,² the new educational rhetoric of EFA re-

1 During the Khmer Rouge, the system of schooling established during French colonialism was more or less eliminated. Khmer Rouge soldiers targeted teachers and the educated class because they were – or were thought to be – symbols of colonialism and modernism, which Pol Pot was trying to eradicate (Haas, 1991). This is not to suggest, however, that the Khmer Rouge did not provide some sort of education during its rule. Ideological training may be considered a form of education between 1975–1979 (Clayton, 2000, p. 71).

2 Fighting continued in the northern part of the country controlled by the Khmer Rouge and effectively postponed aid. Donors were nervous to give money to a country that was thought could easily slip back into civil war.

confirmed and gave new life to Cambodia's long history of focusing on educational access, despite the initiative's call for quality education. As a result, the number of schools more than doubled between the final years of French colonialism and the turn of the century. In 1951, there were 2,234 primary schools (including elementary, complementary and *wat* schools³) and 242 secondary schools (Bilodeau et al., 1955). By 2000, there were a total of 5,741 primary schools and 697 secondary schools (MoEYS, 2001).

While the construction of more schools over the decade has allowed additional children to enter school, a rapid increase in the number of schools has had serious implications for staff, curriculum, and financing of education. One of the outcomes was a severe shortage of qualified teachers to fill positions in the newly built schools. One way the government addressed the problem of teacher shortage was by maximizing the student to teacher ratio, with the average Cambodian classroom accommodating over 40 students at the primary school level. Another strategy has included the introduction of double-shift schooling, whereby one group of students attend four to five hours of instruction in the morning and a second group receives instruction in the afternoon. In 2005, approximately 81% of primary and 41% of lower secondary schools held two shifts (Benveniste, Marshall, & Araujo, 2008). While these measures undoubtedly address the urgent issue of teacher shortages, they could simultaneously contribute to the deterioration of education quality in mainstream schools and the potential need for private tutoring to compensate for the reduced classroom time (Bray, 2008).

A chronic underfunding of the education system in Cambodia has further compounded problems. Ratcliffe (2009) pointed out that education spending as a percent of GDP continued to hover between 1 and 2%, and on average the government spends \$50 per student per year. Despite the increases in education spending as a proportion of total government spending since the 1990s,⁴ the percent of recurrent expenditures devoted to teacher salaries decreased between 1997 and 2005 from 78 to 60%. As the report commissioned by the World Bank points out, "this is low in comparison with both developed and developing economies where the wage share ranges between 70 and 80%" (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 74). In 2007, a primary teacher's base salary was \$44 per month, which made it difficult (if not impossible) for many teachers, especially new teachers who are lowest on the pay scale, to afford the basic necessities of food, housing, and health care, as well as supporting

3 *Wat* schools are traditional schools located in pagodas, and in which children are taught by monks.

4 Government recurrent budget on education increased from approximately 10% in the 1990s to nearly 18.5% in 2003 (UNICEF & World Bank, 2006). Between 2003 and 2007, the overall budget for education increased 29.5% in real terms, leading to an increased educational recurrent expenditure as a percentage of total government spending (from 11% in 1999 to 19.2% in 2007 back to 16.4% in 2009; as cited in Engel, 2011).

any children or elderly family members (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 59).⁵ In other words, teachers receive an unlivable salary and therefore were forced to seek a second occupation. According to Benveniste et al. (2008), the majority of teachers (nearly 70%) had second jobs and thus supplemented their incomes by giving private lessons, driving motorbike taxis, working at the markets, farming, or in other ways (p. 38).

In these circumstances, households are left to contribute to educational expenditures through the payment of informal fees (Bray, 1999b; Bray & Bunly, 2005; NEP, 2007; Benveniste et al., 2008). These informal fees include “education fees” for private tutoring, examination papers, and other school materials; “start-up fees” for school uniforms and registration; “daily fees” for food and parking a bicycle; and “miscellaneous costs” for teacher gifts and various fundraising ceremonies (NEP, 2007). The various school fees account for 10 to 19% of total average household income, and private tutoring fees commonly make up the largest share (NEP, 2007, p. 25).⁶ In the context of an underfunded public education system that relies on private fees to supplement teacher salaries and pay for classroom resources like examination papers, the constitutionally guaranteed system of compulsory schooling designed to equalize society instead excludes children who cannot pay the fee to attend private tutoring and thus receive a full education, re-enforcing dimensions of the system of hierarchies and power found throughout Cambodia’s past (Chandler, 2008; Ayres 2000a, 2000b).

2.2 Hierarchy and power

The ideas of hierarchy and power have traditionally been associated with Cambodian culture since the 9th century rule of God-King Jayavarman II (Mannikka, 1996) and bolstered under French colonialism (see Chandler, 2008). Even modern Khmer language uses the historical phrases of “people who have” (*neak mean*) and “people who do not” (*neak kro*) as a way to distinguish between groups. Ayres (2000a, pp. 9–10) suggests that traditional Cambodian culture stems from the time when India increased trade in the Indian Ocean, settling along areas of the Mekong River Delta. Although Cambodia did not develop an official caste system like that of India, Ayres (2000b) suggests that what emerged in the 8th century was “a social system based on reciprocities and dependencies and a complex social hierarchy that encompassed individuals, their families, villagers, and religious and government officials” (p. 456). Moreover, “a web of patronage and clientship” along with the absence of “mutual obligation” defined society (see

5 According to the World Bank report (Benveniste et al., 2008), salaries increased after 16 years of experience by around 20% and after 28 years they increased by about 30% of the initial base salary. Salary levels also depend on grade/subject taught and location of school. For example, senior teachers in the 6th grade can earn between \$80–100 per month (personal communication, March 31, 2011).

6 In real terms, in 2007 families spent on average \$137.85 per year on education for one child, with \$52.38 going to education fees, mainly private tutoring.

also Toomer, Teng, Cerecina, & Liu, 2011, p. 19). Similar social systems of patronage/clientship were uncovered in 2007 within the Extraordinary Criminal Court of Cambodia, the tribunal set up to try senior members of the Khmer Rouge (Hall, 2007).

These traditional values of a rigid hierarchy and exercise of absolute power were not dismantled when the modernity project entered Cambodia with French colonialism in 1863. During the 90 years of being a French protectorate, traditional tenets of Cambodian society were reinforced under the French rationale of *mission civilisatrice*. For example, the French did not create a vast system of modern education in Cambodia like in its other South East Asian colonies but instead modernized the traditional *wat* schools by training the monk teachers in French teacher training schools. Clayton (2000) suggests that these “reforms intended to broaden the base of the educational pyramid, to increase the pool of candidates brought to the *sorting machine* [emphasis added], and ultimately to improve the preparedness and the quantity of Cambodians promoted through education to positions in the colonial administration” (p. 56). As a result, notions of hierarchy, perhaps first established during the Angkor period (9th–15th century), were reinforced under French colonial rule by elevating the royal family to a similar status of the God-Kings of Angkor and creating a government bourgeois of French educated Cambodians through a “sorting machine.” In this system, those children who excelled in *wat* school then attended a French language secondary school and perhaps even an institution of higher education in France.

As Cambodia entered a tumultuous period with the withdrawal of the French in 1953, traditional elements of Cambodian society persisted. During 40 years of political transition to the system of liberal democracy set up by the UN in 1993, there has been more continuity than discontinuity in the country’s politics and policies (excluding, but also noting the significance of, the Khmer Rouge years) that are a reflection of (pre)colonial times. Serge Thion commented in 1993,

It might seem paradoxical to consider the evolution of modern Cambodian politics as a continuous and at times repetitive process, because it appears mainly as a succession of brutal changes, involving merciless replacement of ruling elites. Successive regimes abhorred the preceding ones and tried to stamp out any leftover influence. But these total and abrupt changes, sometimes labeled revolutions, occurred in a distinctly Khmer way that calls for some reflection on what Cambodian politics is really about. (quoted in Ayres, 2000b, p. 455)

2.3 International norms

With these historical legacies of the “Khmer way” persisting into the present, there has been a complicated injection of democratic and liberal economic reforms since the 1990s. Established in 1992, the United Nations Transitional Authority in

Cambodia (UNTAC) had “all powers necessary” over the government to promote free elections, human rights, and political neutrality (UNTAC, 1992), and to transform the economy into a “market economy system” as stipulated in article 56 of the Cambodian Constitution. Not only was Cambodia the only country in the world to experience such a sweeping mandate by the United Nations, but it also entered the global economy at a time of contentious debates within the very international financial institutions (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.) that were to develop the country. As Springer (2010) pointed out, Cambodian development was wrapped up in the 1990s refashioning of the international financial institutions language from “the productive efforts of the free market” to the “more easily digested emphasis on poverty reduction, transparent governance, and (...) the slightly more problematic notions of human rights and democracy” (p. 935). These discursive changes provide a more nuanced understanding of an institutionalized hierarchy, which is shaped, as Springer (2011) suggested albeit using a straw man argument, as much by the neoliberal market forces as it is by “the Khmer way”:

... the suggestion that Cambodia’s increasing gap between the rich and the poor is exclusively [*sic*] the result of corruption – rather than, to at least some degree, a feature of market forces – is misguided if not disingenuous. Capitalism positions hierarchy as the natural order of human existence, so in an insidious perpetuation of social Darwinism, neoliberalism actively promotes inequality through the discursive production of an individualist binary between ‘hard work’ and ‘laziness’. (p. 944)

The complex and contradictory influences in Cambodia in the 1990s create the space for the government to promote human rights, on the one hand, while undertaking a system of political assassinations and violence, on the other; a system of centrally controlled ministries was coupled with a call for decentralization in areas of management and financing social services (see, for example, Curtis, 1993). A senior parliamentarian of the main opposition party claimed, “In Cambodia, the pillars of democracy are all there, but you have to look at the quality, the functions. It’s really just a facade” (Mu Sochua cited in Brinkley, 2011, p. 301). In 2010, the government built the first “democracy square” to provide space for organized protests and symbolize freedom of expression, but memories persisted of the assassinations of union leaders without ever bringing the culprits to justice (see, for example, Bangkok Post, 2010). In education, the contradiction between government rhetoric and reality comes in the form of supporting the 1990 EFA initiative through building more schools to increase access while not closing the financing gap to achieve EFA (Thomas, 2002). Household expenditures on education have reduced, albeit in an exclusionary way, the financing gap within the public education system.

This mixture of structural issues forcing teachers to seek alternative means to supplement their salaries, the historical legacies of hierarchy and power described loosely as the “Khmer Way”, and the international construction of a new political economic order that has privatized the financing of previously state sponsored so-

cial services, has created a system of private tutoring that is economically beneficial to teachers, school administrators, and government officials. As the government faces international pressure to liberalize its economy while at the same time increasing access to education for all students, private tutoring serves as a mechanism to provide both supplementary salaries to teachers and additional hours of instructional time to adequately meet the demands of the national curriculum. At the same time, it maintains a system of hierarchy where private tutoring (hiding in the “shadows” of governance) serves as a “sorting machine” separating those who have (*neak mean*) from those who do not (*neak kro*).

3. Methods

This study is based on data collected from document analysis, classroom observations, comparison of academic achievement and attendance among students attending private tutoring and public school, focus groups with parents and students, and informal interviews with teachers, students, and their parents.

The observation rubrics were developed using instruments from a World Bank report (Benveniste et al., 2008, pp. 89–91), which focused on teaching methodology (from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) grade 3 assessment, 2006, p. 84), classroom characteristics (from the MoEYS grade 3 assessment, 2006, p. 73), and class time use (from Cambodian Education Sector Support Project (CESSP), 2006). The questions within each of these categories were then compiled into an observation checklist adapted for the last year of primary and secondary school, Grades 6 and 9 respectively, and used for observations of teaching/learning processes in both public school classes and private tutoring lessons.⁷ The sample included six schools in one district in Cambodia, including three schools in an urban location and three schools in a rural area. The sample was deliberately chosen to reflect a range of private tutoring costs in different schools depending on their geographical location.

After collecting data on the cost of private tutoring for one session within all lower secondary schools (13) in the district, we selected the lower secondary school with the highest (1000 Riel, or approximately \$0.25, per session) and lowest (500 Riel, or approximately \$0.13, per session) private tutoring costs, which also corresponded to urban and rural areas respectively. We then worked backwards to find two primary schools that fed into each lower secondary school. In each location,

7 In particular, rubrics for teaching methodology included such categories as the frequency of high-ability students working with weak students, students exchanging work, students working in groups, as well as teacher calling on weakest students in class, assigning multiple choice questions, showing examples of mistakes, using teacher aids, and solving example problem. Rubrics for classroom characteristics included the frequency of a teacher getting impatient with students, checking students' work, returning graded homework, and assigning homework. Rubrics for class time included such categories as teacher arrival to school, a review of written lesson plan, a frequency of a teacher answering his or her cell phone in class, and the time spent on going over homework.

observations were conducted of Khmer, Math, Physics, and Chemistry classes in one 9th grade at the lower secondary level (following the private tutoring teacher to his or her government class) and two 6th grade classes (a total of four teachers) at the primary school level. A total of 26 classroom observations were conducted, including 14 observations of lessons conducted in public schools and 12 observations of private tutoring lessons.

Data on academic achievement and attendance came from the tracking of 36 students in an urban 6th grade classroom over one month (only 14 total school days due to Khmer New Year). Comparative data on academic achievement of students in all six schools within our sample were not available, but a careful examination of the subset of the data revealed interesting dynamics. The teacher of this class recorded student attendance in her private tutoring classes (not a government mandated procedure) using an attendance sheet specifically designed for this study. The principal of the school provided us the government attendance sheet and monthly grades for the tracked class (a government mandated procedure). These data allowed for a comparison of academic achievement and private tutoring attendance among students who attend private tutoring and those who do not.

The study focused on the academic subjects of math, Khmer dictation, Khmer writing, and Khmer reading – the only subjects where the teacher offered private tutoring after school hours inside school buildings. However, we also looked at the overall grade of the students, which is an average of all of the subjects tested during the month. During the month of data collection, students were tested on 11 subjects (math, Khmer dictation, Khmer writing, Khmer reading, biology, morals, geography, history, home economics, handwriting skills, and drawing). Although the sample is small, covers a short time, and does not take into consideration external factors affecting student achievement (parental education, past educational experience of the student, provision of tutoring other than that provided by the teacher, etc.), our purpose here was not to draw a correlation between private tutoring and student achievement, but rather to highlight a disparity between students who go and do not go to private tutoring that, we suggest, is part of the “sorting machine” of education.

Furthermore, focus groups and interviews were conducted with students, parents, and teachers. Participants were selected by consulting the principal or teacher of each school or class, who then helped arrange interviews and focus groups with community members and students. Although the principal or teacher could have purposefully selected participants, this strategy was the only politically feasible option we had because research on private tutoring caused some difficulty in obtaining permission at the district and provincial ministry levels; however, we did find all participants willing to talk openly about private tutoring and its exclusionary features. For the purposes of this study, six focus groups were conducted with a total of 37 participants between two lower secondary schools and two primary schools (one urban and one rural), including one focus group with parents whose children attend private tutoring lessons (four people), one focus group with parents whose children do not attend tutoring (nine people), as well as three focus

groups with students attending private tutoring (seven, five, and five people respectively) and one focus group with students not enrolled in private tutoring (seven people). Lasting on average an hour and a half, the semi-structured focus groups provided space for participants to explore reasons for attending private tutoring, issues of quality of education, and the impact of private tutoring on education equity. In addition, informal interviews were conducted with 10 participants, including 6th grade teachers, students, parents, and principals. These informal interviews focused on the experiences of individuals with private tutoring and, as England pointed out (cited in Sin, 2010, p. 986), helped us by “engaging in real or constructed dialogues in order to understand the people studied in their own terms (sometimes described as the insider’s view)”.

Finally, document analysis included a review of government policies and laws related to education funding and teacher salaries. In addition, we analyzed various reports on education quality and equity in Cambodia published by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies (such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO). Combined, data gained through document analysis, classroom observations, academic achievement and attendance, as well as focus groups and interviews were triangulated to facilitate validation of data through cross verification from multiple sources and data collection techniques.

4. A public-private system of education: Findings and discussion

The preliminary findings are organized around two central themes: (a) the nature of private tutoring (including differences and similarities of the academic instruction in public schools and private tutoring) and (b) equity implications of private tutoring. In particular, the findings highlight that academic instruction in public schools and private tutoring are strikingly similar, with the private tutoring serving as an extension of public school and thus blurring the boundaries between the public and private provision of education. At the same time, the costs of private tutoring outlined elsewhere (NEP, 2007) are perceived to be the main reason why poor students do not attend the extra classes and result in an academic achievement gap that helps stratify Cambodian youth along socioeconomic lines, or between the contemporary *neak mean* and *neak kro*.

4.1 Blurring the boundaries: The emergence of a public-private education system

Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews reveal that private tutoring is commonly perceived to be an extension of public schooling, which is used to compensate for limited instructional time in government schools by allowing teachers

to cover the national curriculum. In particular, students and parents perceive private tutoring as a mechanism enabling teachers to properly teach the subjects included in the national curriculum. For example, one student recounted a story told by her teacher who explained, “we cannot finish the curriculum by only attending government school ... this is why students need to have private tutoring.” Similarly, some parents believe that there is simply not enough time in the school day to cover all curriculum, making specific references to the reduction of the school day following the introduction of double-shift schooling. Despite the few reported cases of teachers purposefully “slowing down” content delivery to create a market for private tutoring (Bray, 1999a, p. 55), the perceived lack of time nonetheless leads to a perceived need for more instructional time simply to provide requisite coverage of the national curriculum.

Classroom observations reveal striking similarities between government school classes and private tutoring lessons in terms of instructional methods, classroom characteristics, and class time use. Not only do private tutoring classes occur inside government school buildings (and often in the same classrooms where students receive official government school instruction) and are taught by government teachers (usually by their own teachers), but also each class operates and functions in surprisingly similar ways. Data from the observations reveal that the use of teaching aids, group work, exchanging student work, mixing high and low ability students together, and even homework assignments occur in more or less the same frequency in government school as private tutoring classes (see Table 1). One student commented that even the teaching/learning materials are frequently the same. In other words, private tutoring seems to be simply a continuation of government school classes.

Table 1: Similarities between government school and private tutoring classes

Teacher pedagogy	Government school <i>N</i> = 14		Private tutoring <i>N</i> = 12	
	% of classes observed	Number of classes observed	% of classes observed	Number of classes observed
High ability students work with low ability students	28.6	4	16.7	2
High ability students help teach whole class	71.4	10	50.0	6
Call of weak students to answer questions	50.0	7	50.0	6
Students answer multiple choice questions	14.3	2	16.7	2
Students answer questions at board	100.0	14	75.0	9
Assigns homework	64.3	9	41.7	5
Teacher presents new material	78.6	11	41.7	5
Provides whole class instruction	100.0	14	91.7	11
Students answer in chorus	71.4	10	66.7	8
Teacher gives example to whole class	78.6	11	83.3	10

Importantly, the participating students noted that curriculum content is often strategically split between lessons in government schools and private tutoring. When asked about the differences, students repeatedly explained that public school classes were primarily reserved for learning theory, whereas private tutoring allows for practical application of theoretical concepts. One student who received private tutoring elaborated on her experience by noting the use of different teaching/learning materials: “In government classes teachers follow school textbooks, whereas in private tutoring teachers find lessons and exercises from many different sources.” In students’ experiences, teachers used both more and better quality examples in private tutoring than in government school. The major distinction, however, revolved around the idea of splitting curriculum into theory, which is typically taught during public school hours, and practical application, which is available during private tutoring lessons. One student gave a detailed description of how some teachers split curriculum content between public schools and private tutoring:

Government class is mostly about giving introductions, theories, and a little bit of practice, while private tutoring has a lot of problem solving and practice However, having private tutoring alone is difficult too ..., because practice alone is not enough. Learning theoretical introductions during school hours and practicing applications during private tutoring lessons is better.

While classroom observations did not necessarily confirm the existence of a curriculum divided between theory (in government schools) and practice (in private tutoring), they revealed that students do receive more individualized instruction in private tutoring lessons because the class size is generally smaller. In particular, government school classes are on average 35–40 students, whereas private tutoring lessons would have on average 15–20 students. Furthermore, private tutoring lessons provide more opportunities for students to work independently (working on solving their own problems with the help of the teacher), whereas government school classes tend to group students by mixed ability to solve problems together more frequently. Similarly, high ability students are less likely to help the teacher during whole class instruction in private tutoring lessons, thus allowing more time for their own learning. Commenting on the class size, several students stated that private tutoring lessons also encourage more active student participation in the learning process:

Attending private tutoring makes me brave and able to ask questions and learn better. (student)

Private tutoring classes are smaller and it is easier to ask questions. (student)

With so many students in government school classes, I sometimes feel shy to ask questions. This is not the case in private tutoring lessons. (student)

Overall, the participating students and parents unanimously agreed that private tutoring was a “good” and “necessary” part of the education system. None of the participants discussed private tutoring in negative terms; instead, the multiple benefits of private tutoring were repeatedly discussed in terms of immediate academic success, future studies, or employment opportunities. As some students argued, attending private tutoring would help them “reach [their] goal in life,” “get to high school,” or “open up job opportunities”. In other words, the vast majority of the respondents believed that private tutoring was a necessary component of the education system without which complete (quality) education would be unattainable. The focus group participants explained:

My teachers want students to get more knowledge. (students)

Teachers want their students to have a better understanding of the lessons taught in government school. (students)

My parents want me to get good education by attending more private tutoring lessons. (students)

In other words, students and parents perceived private tutoring as a necessary continuation of public school classes for a financial cost. As one parent observed, “you learn 50% in a government school and 50% in private tutoring.” Others agreed that “private tutoring helps the children a lot, because government school is not enough” and that “there are many subjects in government school and teachers do not have time to teach them all”. This was a common theme during focus group discussions irrespective of whether students were enrolled in private tutoring or not. Interestingly, some parents and students observed that private tutoring is not voluntary, but rather a compulsory continuation of schooling in private tutoring lessons. The majority of students emphasized that it is through private tutoring that they can acquire “all knowledge”.

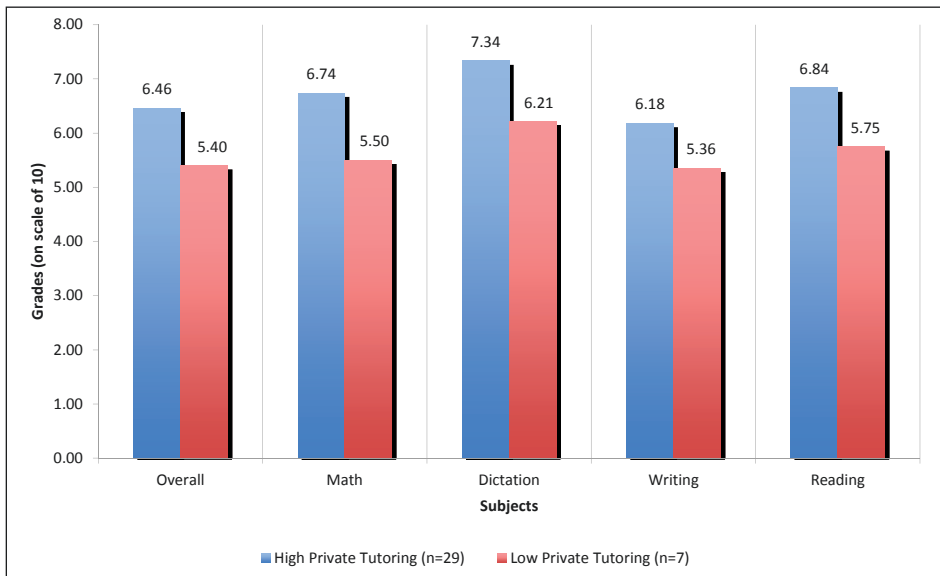
4.2 Equity implications and differences in student achievement

Given that private tutoring is an extension of public schooling in terms of teaching methodology, classroom characteristics, and curricular content, the attendance of private tutoring lessons is likely to impact student achievement and act as another way to differentiate between students, regardless of whether some grades depended on corrupt teacher behavior or not. To examine this, we tracked academic achievement of 36 students attending an urban school over one month (14 school days) to get a snapshot of whether their grades and examination results differ by the amount of private tutoring received. Of the 36 students involved in the study, 29 attended the majority (over 50%) of available private tutoring lessons per month (categorized as “high” attendance) and seven students attended fewer than two sessions per month (categorized as “low” attendance). Interestingly, there were

no students attending between three and six private tutoring sessions during the month, suggesting that students in this urban school either attended a majority of private tutoring lessons or barely attended at all; there was no middle in our sample.

The difference in the overall monthly score between students with high and low attendance of private tutoring was approximately 11 percentage points, constituting approximately 1 grade point on a 10-point grading scale.⁸ Students with low attendance of private tutoring barely exceeded the passing 5-point grade, while students with high attendance of private tutoring lessons scored 6 points or higher (see Figure 1). The difference in academic achievement among students with high/low attendance of private tutoring varied by school subject, with students attending private tutoring lessons in mathematics gaining greater advantage compared to students attending private tutoring lessons in the Khmer language: 12.4 percentage points in math, 11.3 percentage points in dictation, 8.2 percentage points in writing, and 10.9 percentage points in reading (see Figure 1). Although we do not know to what extent these differences are because of private tutoring, they reveal disparities between students who have the means to attend private tutoring and those who do not. As one parent stated, “If you don’t come to private tutoring, you will fail”.

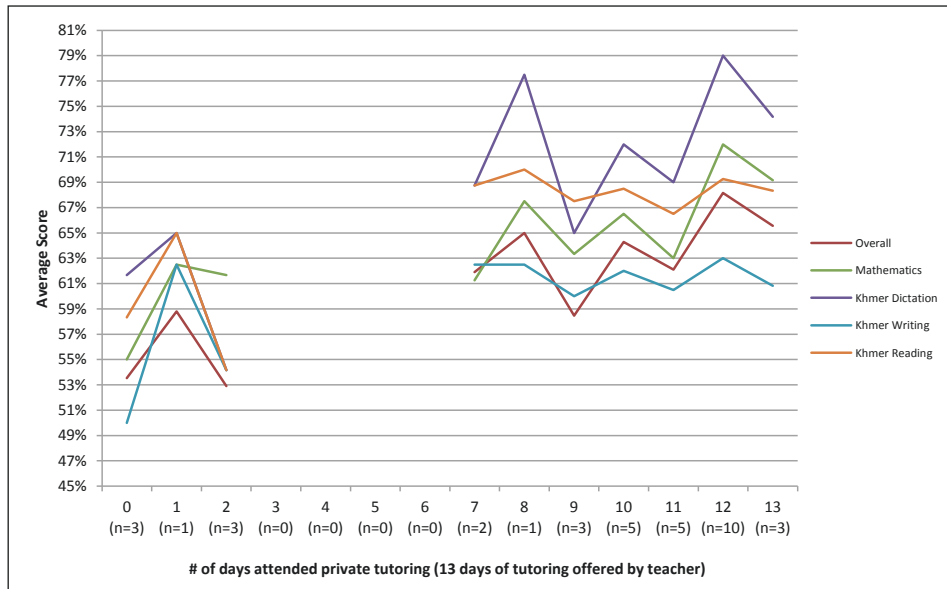
Figure 1: Score differences between high and low student attendance at private tutoring (N = 36)



8 The passing grade is a 5.0 out of 10. The grading scale is as follows: 4.99 and below is “failing”; 5.0–6.49/10 is “medium”; 6.5–7.99/10 is “fairly good”; 8–9.99/10 is “good” and 10/10 is “very good” (personal communication, provincial teacher training college professor, May 31, 2011).

Breaking this data down further by the number of days students attended private tutoring with the average score in individual subjects, it becomes evident that the more days a student attends private tutoring the more likely he or she will receive a higher grade on the monthly exam. Although no statistical tests were performed on this small subset of data, it reveals interesting dynamics in terms of differences in academic achievement among students depending on the frequency of their attendance of private tutoring. In particular, students who regularly attend private tutoring score approximately in the 70th percentile, whereas students with minimal private tutoring attendance scored in the 50th percentile, barely passing the minimum requirements (see Figure 2). As one student put it, and many others echoed, “I have to attend private tutoring. If I don’t, then I get a low score”. For students who cannot afford private tutoring classes, the consequences are real and understood. One student who cannot afford private tutoring classes explained, “I am very jealous of those who attend private tutoring”, signaling a clear understanding of the benefits – perhaps beyond academic – associated with private tutoring.

Figure 2: Graph of the average score by total number of days student attended private tutoring (N = 36)



Focus groups revealed that the main obstacle preventing students from attending private tutoring lessons is cost. When asked to describe their living situation, students who do not attend private tutoring shared similar stories. They generally come from families who cannot afford clothes or school uniforms, provide enough food for their children, or cover unexpected hospital costs. They have small houses, limited farming land, few cows and buffaloes, yet many members in their family. Life is a struggle for these families and private tutoring fees are but one of the many luxuries like health care and land ownership they cannot afford. One student described his hardship as follows: “My family’s life is difficult [because we have] low income but high expenses. My house is made from wood with an old cement roof. It is very old now. We have one motorbike but it is old, and we have small land to do farming”. In this case, informal fees (including private tutoring) have very real ramifications for the social reproduction and socialization of students (Dawson, 2009). Inevitably, poor families excluded from the private tutoring system are becoming – or already are – the contemporary version of *neak kro* (those who do not have) as in former times. Because of their socioeconomic status, these families receive less education and lower grades than students – the contemporary *neak mean* – who can complete the full public-private education system.

5. Conclusions

Stemming from a complex combination of (post)colonial legacies and contradictory international norms in the context of severe economic austerity, the development of the contemporary education system since the 1990s has resulted in the emergence of an educational arrangement that obscures the boundaries between public schooling and private tutoring. To receive full access to the (presumably entire) 6th and 9th grade required national curriculum, students need to regularly attend not only public school classes, but also private tutoring lessons. In this context, private tutoring provides a continuation of public schooling in terms of curriculum content, while also assuming the same classroom characteristics and pedagogy as the public education system. Furthermore, most students receive private tutoring from their government schoolteachers inside government school buildings. As this research study illustrated, private tutoring has become a (compulsory) part of public schooling, without which access to the complete national curriculum is unavailable.

The emergence of this educational arrangement – whereby public schooling and private tutoring are seamlessly merged into one system – has serious implications for education equity. Only those who can afford the private tutoring fees receive a full education and therefore have a greater likelihood of doing well on monthly, semester, and annual examinations. Since access to private tutoring is determined by whether or not one can afford the fee, private tutoring becomes a mechanism by which the stratification of society along socioeconomic lines occurs inside a public space. Families who are poor are therefore unable to receive the same education

as children from families in middle and high socioeconomic classes, which may in turn limit their academic success, social mobility, and future job opportunities. Paradoxically, the rhetoric of Education for All on which the contemporary system of education was built, has morphed into a public-private educational arrangement displaying a set of exclusionary features that (re)order the Cambodian society along traditional lines of power and hierarchy. It is the education system (with its essential component of private tutoring) that functions as a “sorting machine” by separating those who have (*neak mean*) from those who do not (*neak kro*).

The blurred lines between the public and private provision of education reflects a complex system that allows for modern education structures to thrive alongside international norms, traditional tenets, post-colonial legacies, and post-conflict pathologies at the same time. Such a system does not necessarily fit the existing conceptualizations of private tutoring as “shadow education”. Private tutoring in Cambodia is not (only) remedial, not (only) high stakes, and not (only) elective, although it may at times reflect all of these features and more. It is an essential part of the educational system that provides national curricular content and a space for the economic, structural, and political transformations of the “new world order” (and its accompanying policies of economic liberalization, privatization, and marketization) to play out. It is precisely within this blurred public-private education system where teachers and students are able to construct a Cambodian educational space, far removed from – yet paradoxically much closer to – the (inter)national rhetoric of a quality education, but at the expense of access.

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by the Open Society Institute – with contribution of the Education Support Program of OSI Budapest.

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