

The dark side of education

By James ChunHan Loi

AFTER four years of studies, in 1991 a group of Malaysian academicians from University of Malaya's Faculty of Education published a report titled 'Extra-school instruction, social equity and educational quality'. In that report, the academicians examined what they coined as "shadow education" in Malaysia.

What is shadow education? Professor Mark Bray of Hong Kong University, who published widely on the topic, defined shadow education as tutoring in academic subjects provided by tutors for financial gains in addition to mainstream schooling. In other words, shadow education refers to what is commonly termed as tuition in Malaysia. It is so named as private supplementary tuition only exists when there is a mainstream education system. It changes and evolves in accordance to the evolution of the mainstream system; yet while it is a prevalent practice, very little focus is given to it and its features are far less distinct than that of the mainstream education system. In other words, it is a shadow to mainstream schooling.

Here in Asia, families give a lot of devotion to education. To many, achieving good results in major examinations is seen as the passport to a good university education, and subsequently, a good career. As such, it becomes the aim of parents to have their children excel in school. This in turn leads to the demand and need for private tuition, for it is seen as a tool for the children to acquire more knowledge so as to prepare them for public examinations.

This basic economics of supply and demand created a fee-paying shadow education system, evidenced with the ever-increasing number of private tutorial centres, more commonly referred to as 'tuition schools'. While many students and parents swear by the positive effect of engaging in shadow education, the real cost and benefits to students and parents alike have never been thoroughly studied in Malaysia. While students who engaged in such private tutoring do show improvement in their examination performance, the question that is the elephant in the room is this: does the tutoring really help the students to learn and understand their syllabus better, or are they merely learning how to pass examinations through rote-learning? In that sense, tuition may undermine the purpose of schooling. The aim of schooling is to give students a firm understanding of their respective subjects, while the private tutors' aim is to improve examination results. Students may become inattentive in school as they may feel that they can catch up with their studies in tuition, while the truth may be that they only master the ability to excel in examinations with little or no learning done.

Furthermore, there is the question of what the implications might be for our children. In Sri Lanka, for example,



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private tuition has become an inescapable part of childhood; driven by parental obsession with examinations, and the desire for their children to secure a place in coveted schools. Children of all ages – toddlers through to adolescents – are rushed to tuition classes as soon as they step out of their mainstream schools. At Sri Lankan tuition classes, the skills and abilities of students are relentlessly pitted against those of their peers. As a result the students are caught in an endless competition where everyone strives to be the top scorer. Age appropriate developmental tasks such as team work building, development of conscience, values, and morality are left on the sidelines, if not completely ignored.

Over reliance on private tutors can create further social issues as well. In Cambodia, as school teachers seek to supplement their income, it is common practice for school teachers to teach only a portion of the prescribed syllabus during normal school hours, while conducting extra fee-paying lessons after school hours to complete the syllabus for those who can afford it.

In India, the engagement of private supplementary tutoring is so prevalent that it fosters the common belief and sentiment among parents and students alike that merely attending mainstream schooling does not bear any positive results. In both these countries, most students from low income families who cannot afford supplementary lessons would eventually drop out of school, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of the poor getting poorer as they are unable to secure good jobs due to the lack of education.

What about Malaysia? The fact is, in major cities throughout the country, attending tuition has become a part of life for school-going children; and it is not unusual for their tutors in private tuition schools to be none other than their teachers from their mainstream schools. In order to ensure that the situation does not get out of hand, it would be necessary for us to take a long hard look at ourselves and the system we have helped to create. As parents, are we putting too much emphasis on examinations? As students, are we overly-dependent upon tuition teachers to manage our studies? And most importantly, as educators, are we doing our best to educate our students in and out of our classrooms? We must reflect and act, lest we push our education system to the dark side.

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