

After-school tuition: Is it worth the cost and time?

By James ChunHan Loi

IN my previous piece, 'The dark side of education', published in this column last year, I highlighted that the tutoring in academic subjects provided by tutors for financial gain in addition to mainstream schooling, more commonly referred to locally as 'tuition', is a far bigger industry than meets the eye.

The engagement of private supplementary tutoring is a prevalent practice in many parts of the world, and it is definitely so in Malaysia as well. A nationwide study in 1991 found that 59 per cent of urban students and 28.5 per cent of rural students in Malaysia received supplementary out-of-school tutoring (tuition).

Fast forward to 2011, 88 per cent of school students surveyed in the Klang Valley indicated that they received supplementary tutoring. Another survey in the same year found that nearly 64 per cent of primary school students in Penang spent an average of 24 hours each week attending tuition classes.

That would mean that on any given day in the five-day school week, a primary school pupil spent about six hours in school, then another four to five hours in tuition classes – more than the average daily work hours of a working adult.

In addition to the time spent, attending tuition classes is not a cheap affair. Even back in 1991, the survey found that an average household spent RM50 a month per child on tuition classes, with some households spending up to RM600 a month per child in fees for tuition classes.

This was in spite of the fact that 23.5 per cent of the households surveyed professed that they had difficulties coming up with the money to pay their children's tuition fees. It was further found that payment of tuition fees account for up to 20 per cent of expenditures in some Malaysian households in 2004/2005.

All in all, the shadow education industry in Malaysia is massive, with a considerably large chunk of school students' lives being spent engaging it, and an equally large amount of household expenditure being dedicated to it.

Most Malaysian parents feel the need to provide their children with a 'head-start' to achieving good examination results for better social and occupational opportunities, which is a major selling point used by tutors to convince parents (and students) to engage supplementary tutoring. With all that money and time spent, the elephant in the room is: is it all worth it?

Supplementary tutoring is costly, thus it is only natural that it is more easily afforded by the rich rather than by the poor. A case study in South Korea revealed that the richest 10 per cent of the households in the country spent 12 times the amount spent by the poorest 10 per cent of the households on procuring supplementary tutoring for their children.

Furthermore, richer families



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can more easily afford better quality tutoring services such as one-to-one tutoring, which is tailored more to the needs of individual students; while the poorer families would need to settle for the mass-produced forms of tutoring, which may not be as effective or convenient.

Thus, while we hope to provide our children with a 'head-start' to move ahead and achieve better socioeconomic status in their lives, our current socioeconomic status may have already dealt them a handicap. The unfortunate fact is that instead of being a resource to achieving social equality, the engagement of supplementary tutoring by students across all socioeconomic statuses not just maintains, but may even widen the social gap between classes.

Nonetheless, the question remains, does supplementary tutoring benefit students? Studies conducted in Mauritius, Greece, Germany and Kenya indicated a positive impact of supplementary tutoring upon students' academic achievements.

A study done in Taipei in 2012 found significant positive effects from supplementary tutoring on students' performance in mathematics, but noted that the positive effects decreased with the lengthening of tutoring hours.

In Egypt, researchers could find no correlations between students' participation in supplementary tutoring and their academic achievements. Similar findings were made in England, where researchers opined that supplementary tutoring does little to benefit the students receiving the tutoring.

Closer to home, in our neighbouring country of Singapore, researchers reported diminishing returns in the overloading of students with supplementary tutoring, and they concluded that having supplementary tutoring may actually be counter-productive to the students.

Coming back to the elephant in the room, the unfortunate fact is that there will never be a one-size-fit-all solution. Every student is unique in some ways, each student has his or her own strengths and weaknesses, and at times, supplementary tutoring would be of help to address some but not all of those weaknesses. At the end of the day, each student and his or her parents would need to weigh it out, and decide what the best is for him or her.

James ChunHan Loi is a lecturer of law and the program coordinator for foundation studies with the Faculty of Business and Design at Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus. His research looks at the policy considerations in the field of shadow education.