



Policy Brief

Supplementary Tuition and the Roles of Teachers in Myanmar

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Issues associated with private tuition are complex and have implications for students' learning, teachers' incomes, schools' reputations, and social inequalities. Under the aegis of UNESCO, a team from the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) has undertaken a study with support from the Yangon University of Education (YUOE). This document summarises the full report (see References on page 4), and presents some recommendations for schools and government.

Myanmar's Ministry of Education has prioritized quality of education as the focus for reform initiatives. However, some aspects of reform can be undermined by the relationship between public schooling and the parallel force of private tuition. This Policy Brief reviews findings and implications from the first study of its type in Myanmar. It only focused on Yangon and on secondary schooling, but has relevance to other places and levels.

Background

Private tuition has long been a significant phenomenon in Myanmar (see e.g. Saw Gibson, 1992), and has expanded over the years. Myanmar's Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR, 2015, p.26) recognised a "need to address private tuition as a critical policy issue". The CESR observed that households make considerable payments for basic education even in the school system that officially is free of charge. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi often mentions private tuition in her speeches (e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi, 2017). She feels that Myanmar should find ways to stop private tuition and ensure that teachers are fully committed to public education. Other stakeholders have similar views. However, the issues are complex.

Methods and approaches

Data were collected from eight schools in Yangon, among which five schools were urban and three were peri-urban. The study focused on Standards 8 and 10, chosen because Standard 8 is a transition point to upper-secondary level, and Standard 10 is the final year of schooling leading to tertiary education or to the labour force through the matriculation examination.

The team collected questionnaire responses from 1,639 students and 331 teachers, and interviewed 107 students, teachers, principals, parents and other stakeholders.



Findings

Scale

Overall, 84.9% of students indicated that they had received tuition within the previous 12 months, with little variation between genders, grades, and locations. When asked how many of their peers were receiving tuition, students commonly responded: “almost all”, “most”, and “almost the whole class”. Some students had commenced receiving tuition in primary school, or even kindergarten.



Subjects

English, Mathematics and Myanmar were the subjects in greatest demand. For Standard 8 students, the main additional subjects were Geography, Science and History. For Standard 10 students, major additional subjects were Physics and Chemistry, followed by Biology and Economics.

Types and places

The most common types were “small group” (40.4%) and “large group” (51.6%). Only a few students indicated receipt of individual or boarding tuition. Individual tuition was the most expensive type. Among the teachers who provided tuition, 39.9% indicated that they offered one-to-one individual instruction, 36.1% small-group tuition, and 29.1% large-group tuition.

Much tuition (75.9%) took place in the homes of students. Other places included private schools (14.6%) and teachers’ own homes (9.5%). Although on limited scale, some students reported receipt of tuition in schools.

Providers

Providers included school teachers, retired school teachers, university teachers and professional tutors. NGOs and faith-based organizations also provided tuition to students either free of charge or for discounted prices.

Among students receiving tuition, 11.3% did so from their own teachers, and 3.5% from other teachers in their schools. Just over 10% received tuition from teachers in different schools. Nearly one third received tuition from external teachers, described as “retired, freelance, etc.”.

Finances

Some teachers more than doubled their incomes through private tuition. The sampled teachers reported monthly salaries ranging from 154,000 to 250,000 Kyats with an average of 178,829 Kyats. Among the 158 teachers providing tuition, 146 reported their incomes from their tuition practices. Amounts varied from 10,000 to 900,000 Kyats per month, with an average of 127,524 Kyats. Over half of the students considered the expenditures on tuition to be a moderate financial burden, while 31.9% said they were not at all a burden and 8.0% said they were a heavy burden.

Reasons

Students

Almost all students felt that tuition helped them to improve examination scores. Some students added that their confidence increased. Others noted that tuition helped to prepare for university examinations and in the long run fulfil career aspirations.

Among students who did not receive tuition, the most important reasons were financial constraint (39.4%) and that they were already doing well enough at school (41.5%). In addition, 15.7% of respondents indicated “no time” for tuition.

Teachers

All respondents named economic benefit as a major motive for teachers to provide tuition. Teachers with families experience particular pressure. Among the sampled teachers, 157 (47.7%) provided private tuition. Apart from financial considerations, all of these teachers indicated that did so “to

help students learn better”, especially with examinations in mind. Most of them stated that they offered tuition “to satisfy demands from parents” (92.5%), “to have more teaching experience” (92.5%), and “to supplement income” (91.1%).

Over 60% of the teachers felt that the school day was long enough for instruction of the school curriculum. However, 64.8% felt that the curriculum was overcrowded and that students had to “learn too much too fast”. Overcrowded curriculum created unrealistic demands on students, and consequently increased stress which parents and students felt could be mitigated through tuition.

The 173 teachers (52.3%) who did not provide tuition observed that the regulations discouraged teachers from doing so (68.3%) and/or identified ethical considerations (64.5%). Others indicated that they were busy with families and workload from schools.

Differences between school and tuition classes

Most tuition classes followed the school curriculum using the same textbooks. Students reported that teachers put more effort into tuition classes than into school lessons. Sometimes tutors provided supplementary materials such as handouts and practice questions.

Awareness and attitudes towards regulations

Few respondents had clear knowledge about regulations. Some of them talked about private education law rather than regulations on private tuition. Some schools in Myanmar initiated school-level policies, which include verbal discouragement of tuition by school principals at the beginning of a school year and signing of statements that they would not provide tuition. Few respondents were aware of any cases of punishment of teachers who provided tuition.

Conclusions and Implications

Myanmar authorities can use these findings to generate policy discussions at all levels. Private tuition plays important roles in the lives of teachers, students and families. Some dimensions of its impact are less visible or even hidden, while others are more explicit.

Private tuition provides additional educational opportunities to students, and can increase confidence for better academic performance. Yet it also creates a gap between tutored and non-tutored students, since it provides opportunities only to those who can afford tuition.

Ambivalent attitudes were found towards private tuition among stakeholders. For example, the study found that cultural practices and widely-accepted views favour the existence of tuition without questioning its negative aspects. Therefore, extra care is needed to develop culturally sensitive policies that can address root-causes. Effective policies should include changed attitudes on the part of teachers and school administration.

Implications and Recommendations

The following recommendations focus first on the school level and then on the government level (national, regional and township). Much can be achieved by schools, with tailoring to local circumstances. Changes at grassroots level are commonly more effective than top-down approaches when educators share understanding and ownership of problems.

Schools

- *Professional and public discussion.* Much can be achieved by taking the topic “out of the shadows” to discuss it with teachers, parents and community members. Issues are complex, and are best handled by finding appropriate balances. For example, if parents press teachers to give extra tuition to the students for whom those teachers are already responsible, the principals can identify problematic dimensions for open discussion.
- *School-level policies.* Principals can work with teachers on school-level policies. For example, teachers might be instructed not to provide private tuition to their own students. The next question would be whether they would be permitted to provide it to other students in their schools. And then the third question would be whether they would be permitted to provide it

to students from other schools. School-level policies could also consider the locations of private tuition (on school premises or not?), and codes of conduct concerning fees, content, discipline and other matters.

- *Community initiatives.* Local communities and parental groups can share experiences and raise critical issues about problems arising from the existence of private tuition parallel to regular schooling. They should encourage a dialogue towards ownership of the complex problems rather than blaming each other.

Government (at different levels)

- *Regulations.* Current regulations are widely ignored, which undermines their meaningfulness and credibility. Reasons why they are widely ignored include (a) teachers and families do not understand and/or accept the rationales for the regulations, and (b) parts of the regulations, including penalties for non-compliance, are unrealistic. The regulations should be revisited, and then accompanied by public relations campaigns using the media and other ways to reach parents, teachers and the general public.
- *Codes of conduct.* Bodies representing teachers may consider national-level codes of conduct for teachers in the domain of tutoring. The codes should include focus on such themes as favouritism of students who receive tutoring.
- *Educational quality.* In ideal circumstances, private tuition would not be necessary because the quality of schooling meets parental needs and expectations. Yet because competitive parents will always desire an edge over others, private tuition will never disappear. The government should anticipate ongoing demand for tuition while nevertheless stressing the quality of schooling and promoting understanding and critical thinking rather than rote learning.
- *Teachers' salaries.* Teachers will have less incentive to provide tuition if they receive adequate salaries.
- *Monitoring and data collection.* This study has provided data to substantiate (and in some respects contradict) general impressions. The Myanmar government, like counterparts elsewhere, can collect statistics on a regular basis on the scale, nature and intensity of private tuition. The present study may be replicated in other parts of the country and at other levels.

This Policy Brief commenced by acknowledging that private tuition is a complex phenomenon. International experience shows that it cannot be addressed through a single and simple solution. Perhaps the most important starting point is wide discussion between and among stakeholders – parents, students, teachers, government personnel and others to share concerns about the unexamined negative impact of the phenomenon. Desirable changes can be made incrementally and will require time; but commitment to seeking appropriate practices will result in positive long-run changes.

References:

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