

Research on Private Tutoring in Malaysia: Methodological Insights from a Quantitative Study

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Introduction

In Malaysia, private tutoring is widely perceived as a household necessity. A 2004/05 household expenditure survey recorded that 20.1 per cent of households with at least one child aged seven to 19 indicated expenditures on private tutoring (Kenayathulla 2013, p.634). In a smaller sample of urban students, Tan (2011) surveyed 1,600 Year 7 (lower secondary) students from eight schools in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, and found that 88.0 per cent had received tutoring during their primary schooling.

The marketplace has various forms of tutoring: individualized, small-group, large-group and online tutoring. Fees differ according to the types and places of tutoring. If the tutoring is conducted in the students' homes, the fees are usually higher because they cover the tutors' traveling costs. According to the Ministry of Education, in January 2013 the country had 3,107 registered private tutoring centres, with 3.2 per cent of the total number of primary and secondary students enrolled and 11,967 tutors (Malaysia, Ministry of Education 2013). No data are available on the scale of informally-provided tutoring and online tutoring.

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This chapter presents methodological dimensions of a quantitative study that sought to investigate students' perceptions of tutoring. It includes remarks on challenges that were encountered by the researcher in Malaysia when adapting a questionnaire from Hong Kong.

Mainstream Schooling and Private Tutoring in Malaysia

Formal education in Malaysia follows a 6+3+2+2+4 model, i.e. six years of primary (Standards 1-6), three years of lower secondary (Forms 1-3), two years of middle secondary (Forms 4-5), two years of upper secondary (Lower 6 and Upper 6), and four years for a standard university degree. The medium of instruction in National Schools is Malay, and National-Type Schools use Tamil or Chinese. Malay is the national language, and the use of the other languages reflects the presence of Chinese and Indians alongside Malays in the population (Joseph 2008). At the secondary level, the system only has National Secondary Schools since the government desires to promote loyalty to Malaysia among children of the various cultures and languages.

Each stage of the education system has national examinations. After six years of primary education, students take the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR – Primary School Achievement Test). All children who have completed primary school are eligible to continue to lower secondary education. Since 2014, Form 3 students have been evaluated through school-based assessments and an examination called *Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3* (PT3 – Form 3 Assessment). Different sets of PT3 questions are prepared by the Examinations Syndicate of Ministry of Education but are chosen by the head teachers of each school. The examinations are conducted and marked by the teachers of the respective schools, but scores are moderated and verified by appraisers from the Examinations Syndicate and state Departments of Education.

After completing Form 5, students have to pass the examination for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM – Malaysian Certificate of Education) in order to continue to Form 6 or matriculation centres. At the end of two years of upper secondary, the students sit the examination for the *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia* (STPM – Malaysian Higher School Certificate). In addition, the matriculation programmes have decentralised examinations to meet the admission requirements of universities. Matriculation programs are offered based on an ethnic quota: 90 per cent of spaces are reserved for Bumiputeras, and the other 10 per cent are re-

served for non-Bumiputeras. Thus, much emphasis is given to both centralised and decentralised examinations. Competition among students to gain entry into the best secondary schools and top-ranking universities becomes the main driving force for private tutoring (Arshad 2004).

Much tutoring is provided by active and retired teachers. The Ministry of Education permits school teachers to tutor outside school hours provided they have secured a permit from the Ministry at least two months in advance (Malaysia, Ministry of Education 2006). Teachers are limited to four hours of tutoring per week, but there are no restrictions on the types of students they can tutor. This means that they can tutor students who attend their regular classes, though the policy prohibits teachers from distributing promotional materials to their students in school. Teachers are only permitted to undertake private tutoring if their annual performance scores are 80 per cent or more for the previous year. In addition, they should ensure that tutoring does not interfere with their duties as teachers.

Teachers are also allowed to tutor in private tuition centres, each of which must be registered with the Department of Education of the state in which it is located. The registration procedure requires permits from the Health Department, the Fire Department and the Local Authority. The administrative system allows for government inspections in response to complaints from the public.

Although enrolment rates in private tutoring are high and demand considerable household expenditures (Kenayathulla 2012), evidence on the effectiveness of tutoring is scarce. With that in mind, the researcher designed a quantitative study to examine perceptions of effectiveness and related factors. The following sections focus on the methods employed in the study.

Methodology in an Empirical Study

The author solicited data from a stratified sample of 4,200 secondary students in Selangor State. Questionnaires were distributed to two secondary schools in each of the 10 districts. The research covered three classes of Forms 3 and 5 in each school. The normal class size in Malaysia is about 30-40 students, so an average class size of 35 was used to design the sample. The target sample was 4,200 students (35 students x three classes x two forms x 20 schools). The questions addressed the scale, focus and types of tutoring received, and the reasons for seeking it.

Approval to conduct the survey was obtained from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education, and from the Selangor Department of Education. The EPRD approval required the proposal and questionnaires plus an approval letter from the researcher's university. Applications can be made online, and normally approval is given within five working days provided the research is not related to sensitive issues. Sensitive issues include the implementation of government policies associated with economic development, education and social affairs; research that questions religious freedom, Malay as a national language, citizenship and related matters; and research that questions the power or ability of certain ethnic groups (Malaysia, Ministry of Education 2014). For the research on which his chapter focuses, approval was granted promptly.

The EPRD does not require researchers to secure consent from parents for school-aged children to participate in surveys, but parental consent is required for interview and video-recording of school-aged children (Malaysia, Ministry of Education 2014). This policy differs from that in other countries. For instance in the USA, approval must usually be sought from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research that involves living individuals through interaction, intervention or identifiable private information (see e.g. Indiana University 2014). The process generally requires informed consent, in which researchers should ensure that the research subjects (or their parents in the case of minors) are aware of the purpose of the research and of risks and benefits of participation.

In the research reported in this chapter, questionnaires were handed to the Selangor Department of Education, which then distributed them to the District Education Offices. Two of the government officers who agreed to help the researcher to distribute the questionnaires to principals were doctoral students at the researcher's institution. In this case, relationships helped to get the research done. Even if these officers had not been not doctoral students, the existence of personal connections would probably have assisted the process. In this case the officers were staff of the Ministry of Education, and schools are expected to adhere to instructions given by a higher authority.

The principals were given the questionnaires when they attended meetings at the District Education Offices. These questionnaires had been adapted from the research conducted by Bray and colleagues in Hong Kong (see Chapter 8 in this book; Bray 2013; Zhan et al. 2013). However, some questions had been modified to suit the local context. For instance,

the term 'tutorial king' is not used in Malaysia so 'famous tutor' was used instead. The questions on the subjects in which tutoring was received were also modified to fit Malaysian syllabuses.

In addition, for questions on the comparison between teachers and tutors, the question was rephrased to "To what extent do you agree with the following comparison about your school teachers and your tutors?" [*Sejauh manakah anda bersetuju mengenai perbandingan di antara guru sekolah dan guru tuisyen?*]. However, this question was poorly phrased for the Malaysian setting because teachers are legally allowed to tutor and thus the same school teacher can also be a tutor. This question was suitable in Hong Kong since teachers there do not provide paid supplementary tutoring to their own students, but was not suitable for Malaysia. The adapted questionnaire had been piloted, but the issue was not picked up at that time.

The piloting was undertaken with 30 students in an urban secondary school in Selangor. The questionnaires were distributed through a teacher in that school who was also the researcher's doctoral student. In this case, the researcher used relationships to negotiate access. The teacher distributed questionnaire to students in an average class, and reported that the students had no problem understanding the questions and completing the work in about half an hour. One approach to measure reliability of a questionnaire identifies internal consistency and evaluates the degree to which each item consistently measures the same underlying construct (Santos 1999). Cronbach alpha is the method most commonly used by researchers to measure internal consistency. The value of Cronbach alpha for the questions ranged between 0.771 and 0.849. Thus, the questions were considered to be within the acceptable range of reliability.

Nevertheless, another problem arose from omission of a question. This was about race and ethnicity, which is important in Malaysia but not Hong Kong. The researcher overlooked this matter, and it was not identified during piloting because all students in this urban school were from the Malay community. This experience underlines the need for researchers to select representative samples if possible when conducting pilot studies (Salant & Dillman 1994). In this study, the pilot should have been conducted in two schools with students of multiple ethnicities, preferably one urban and one rural, so that terms such as 'internet tutoring' which might not be common for rural students could be scrutinised.

The researcher only realized that the variable ‘ethnicity’ had been omitted after the questionnaire had been photocopied and was ready for distribution. The researcher then decided to include ethnicity in the instruction sheet prepared for teachers. The sheet requested teachers to ask students to add a question on race in the questionnaires and then to answer the question. However, many students did not do this. It seems likely that many teachers did not ask the students to add the question on race, and 81.3 per cent of the returned questionnaires had missing values on that item. An important methodological lesson is not to add questions when the questionnaire has already been finalised and reproduced.

Procedures for Distribution of Questionnaires

Instructions on the distribution of questionnaires were given to each level in the education system as indicated in Table 2.1. The instructions were

Table 2.1: Instructions for Distributing the Questionnaires

<i>Selangor Department of Education</i>	<i>District Education Offices</i>	<i>Principals</i>	<i>Class Teachers</i>
1. Distribute questionnaires to 10 District Education Offices. 2. Each district will be given three bundles of white questionnaires for Form 3 and three bundles of blue questionnaires for Form 5. 3. All questionnaires will be collected back from the District Education Office. 4. Contact the researcher to return the completed questionnaire.	1.Choose two schools in your district. 2.Distribute the questionnaires to those schools. Each school will receive a bundle of white questionnaires for Form 3 and of blue questionnaires for Form 5. Each bundle has 105 questionnaires (for three classes). 3.Request the principal to distribute the questionnaires to class teachers of Forms 3 and 5. 4.Collect and send the questionnaires to the quality assurance sector of the State Education Department.	1.Distribute the questionnaires to three class teachers of Form 3 (white forms) and three class teachers of Form 5 (blue forms). 2.Collect back the questionnaires from the class teachers. 3.Send the questionnaires back to the District Education Office.	1.Distribute the questionnaires, and ask the students to complete them. 2.Ask the students to add a question on race to the questionnaire. 3.Ask the students to write the race as follows: M = Malay, C = Chinese, I = Indian, O = Other. 4.Collect the questionnaires and hand them to the principal.

pasted on 10 boxes, each of which contained questionnaires for schools in one district. In each box were two small boxes. Each smaller box contained the questionnaires needed for one school.

Nevertheless, while this experience shows the importance of the researcher administering the questionnaires herself, in Malaysian schools it would be an unusual arrangement. The common practice is to pass questionnaires to the school office, from which the researcher collects back the questionnaires after one or two weeks. If the researcher knows a principal personally, it might be easier for the researcher to enter the school to distribute the questionnaires. In rural areas, it is commonly easier for researchers to negotiate access since permission to enter the school in rural areas will be given as long as approval letters are obtained from the EPDR of the Ministry of Education and from the state Department of Education. However, principals in urban schools do not always permit distribution of the questionnaires since these schools are approached by many researchers from different institutions and the research can disrupt teaching and learning processes.

A further question in research design for this particular study was whether the government involvement would affect the results of the study. Certainly this issue must be recognised, but the researcher stated clearly that all the information would be kept confidential and that the identities of students would not be revealed. Further, the questionnaires address students' perceptions on tutoring and were about their daily activities. If the questionnaires had been about teachers' perceptions, then the distribution through the government might have led to more bias since teachers who were not paying tax on their tutoring incomes might have concealed their tutoring work.

Although the distribution of questionnaires through government personnel has advantages, the approach has several drawbacks. First, the researcher was not there to clarify any ambiguities that students might have regarding the questionnaires. For instance, lecture style by tutors (video) might not be something familiar to students in Malaysia. In addition, the researcher was not there to assure respondents on the confidentiality of the information that they provided in the questionnaire. In this context, if the researcher had been present clear instructions would have been given to those who did not attend private tutoring, and proper guidance would have been given on answering questions related to reasons for not taking tutoring. Thus, students would have understood that

the questionnaires need to be filled up by those who were taking and not taking tutoring classes.

Findings

The survey responses indicated that 58.7 per cent were female students and 41.3 per cent were male. Among them, 47.7 per cent were in Form 3 and 52.3 per cent were in Form 5. Most students reported that they had received small-group tutoring during the previous 12 months, but 17.1 per cent indicated that they had received one-to-one and 17.8 per cent received lecture-style tutoring. Additionally, 8.4 per cent of the students reported that they received online tutoring. Such tutoring is increasingly popular, and the Malaysian Government approves programmes such as Score A (Kenayathulla et al. 2013). Lecture-style tutoring through video recording is not common in Malaysia.

Just over half of the students described themselves as good or excellent performers compared with all students of their grade in their schools. In addition, 40.8 per cent of the students described their performance as fair. Only 6.8 per cent of the students described their performance as weak. However, in this analysis, reporting of percentages does not take into consideration the number of unfilled questionnaires. Thus, no conclusion can be reached on whether tutoring is mostly taken by both high performing and weak students or dominated by high achievers.

Students were also asked about the subjects in which they received tutoring. Most students received tutoring in Malay, English, Mathematics, Science and History. International literature commonly shows that English and Mathematics are popular subjects, but Malaysian students need to pass both Malay and History to be eligible for a high school certificate.

Conclusions

International comparisons involving large numbers of countries have commonly been undertaken to analyse educational spending, educational achievement and other aspects. While these international comparisons are useful, they always face challenges in obtaining systematically comparable and equivalent data due to diversities across and within countries (Manzon 2014). Such challenges may be especially evident in

the domain of shadow education, which is not easy to define and measure (Bray 2010; Bray & Kobakhidze 2014).

International comparisons are typically derived from common administration of instruments devised externally. Such instruments may require adaptation, which creates further challenges. This chapter has provided an example of the challenges that researchers might encounter when adapting questionnaires from a previous study in another context. Socio-cultural factors that shape norms and practices in one country might be different from those in another country, and context-specific variables may need to be incorporated when adapting questionnaires. For instance, ethnicity is an important variable in Malaysia since it is a multi-ethnic society and perceptions about tutoring might differ by ethnicity.

In this research, some of the questions in the Hong Kong questionnaire were deemed unsuitable for respondents in Malaysia. For instance, 'tutorial king' is not a common term in Malaysia. Additionally, Malaysia has an overlap in the identity of teachers and tutors because teachers can tutor their own students. Another methodological challenge encountered in this research is when questionnaires were routed through government personnel. Since the researcher was not directly involved in questionnaire administration and distribution, it is unclear whether the students who did not fill up the questionnaires were not taking tutoring or were reluctant to participate in the survey. In addition, the researcher was not present to address ambiguities and clarify terms.

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