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WHAT IS PRIVATE TUITION REALLY DOING TO – OR FOR – EDUCATION?

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Introduction

Singapore is among the global ‘hotspots’ for what is locally called private tuition, and elsewhere is commonly called private supplementary tutoring, coaching, or shadow education. A 2015 survey commissioned by the *Straits Times* newspaper reported that 80% of Singapore households with primary school children paid for private tuition, while corresponding figures were 60% for secondary education and 40% for pre-primary education (Teng 2015). This picture matched patterns in some other parts of Asia (Bray & Lykins 2012; Manzon & Areepattamannil 2014), and private tuition has also become increasingly visible elsewhere in the world (Bray 2009; Aurini et al. 2013; Jokić 2013). A major question for both policy-makers and families concerns the impact of this private tuition. Is it necessary and/or desirable? What are its implications for children, parents and wider society?

This paper addresses these questions by reference not only to Singapore but also to other countries. Among the most obvious locations for comparison is Hong Kong, which has cultural and economic similarities and also has high rates of private tuition (Bray 2013; Zhan et al. 2013). The paper also makes comparisons with other parts of Asia and beyond.

A starting point must be with definitions. This paper focuses on supplementary tuition in academic subjects received in exchange for a fee. This tuition may be one-on-one, in small groups, and/or in large classes. Tuition is also now increasingly provided over the internet. It is thus diverse in format and mode of delivery. The paper begins with further information on private tuition in Singapore, before making some comparisons with other places. It concludes with observations about the implications of the scale and nature of private tuition for children, families and wider societies.

Private Tuition in Singapore

The *Straits Times* survey was conducted by a research firm named Nexus Link, which polled 501 households with children ranging from pre-school to post-secondary levels. The survey was part of the newspaper’s long tradition of focus on private tuition (see e.g. George 1992; Toh 2008; Basu et al. 2010; Mokhtar 2013; Soh 2014; Tan 2014). Two decades previously the newspaper had reported on a similar survey of 1,052 households which suggested that 49% of families with primary-aged children were investing in tuition and that 30% of families with secondary-aged children were doing so (George 1992). These figures were contrasted with government data from a 1982 household expenditure survey, and showed marked expansion (Table 1). By 2015, private tuition appeared to have become a normal feature of life for most families. Household survey data collected in 2012/13 (Singapore, Department of Statistics 2014, p.15) indicated that average monthly expenditure on educational services had risen to \$310 from \$240 five years earlier, i.e. an annual increase of expenditure of 5.7%. Expenditures on private tuition

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and other educational courses averaged 1.8% of total expenditures across the whole population (i.e. including many families without school-aged children); and they were 3.7% of household budgets remaining after expenditures on housing and food.

Table 1: Expansion of Private Tuition, Singapore, 1982-2015

| | 1982 Household expenditure survey | 1992 <i>Straits Times</i> 4 April 1992 | ... | 2015 <i>Straits Times</i> 4 July 2015 |
|-----------|---|---|-----|--|
| Primary | 27% | 49% | | 80% |
| Secondary | 16% | 30% | | 62% |

Sources: *Straits Times*, 4 April 1992 and 4 July 2015.

Other dimensions of the 2015 *Straits Times* survey shed light on related features of the phenomenon. Table 2 shows the top three subjects in which tuition was reported. Not unexpectedly, English, Mathematics and Chinese – which are keys to learning in other domains as well as being subjects in their own right – topped the lists. Families that do not speak English and/or Chinese at home may feel that supplementary instruction in those languages is necessary to bridge the gap with counterparts who have greater natural fluency.

Table 2: Top Three Subjects for Private Tuition, Singapore, 2015

| Pre-school | | Primary | | Secondary | |
|-------------------|-------|----------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| English | 70.5% | Mathematics | 73.5% | Elementary mathematics | 65.7% |
| Mathematics | 38.6% | English | 72.4% | English | 49.1% |
| Chinese | 34.1% | Chinese | 43.6% | Additional mathematics | 25.9% |

Source: *Straits Times*, 4 July 2015.

In turn, Table 3 shows the top three types of tuition, with the relative places of one-on-one and group work. In Singapore most private tuition is provided by individuals and commercial companies, matching patterns in many other parts of the world. One distinctive feature of Singapore is the tuition provided by welfare groups such as the Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community (MENDAKI), the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC). In addition, tutoring classes are available in nationwide community centers run by the People’s Association. These bodies receive government subsidies, but still usually charge (modest) fees for their services. Tan (2009, p.98) observed that “the Singapore government, by providing financial assistance to these organisations, is directly sanctioning the practice of private tutoring (in contrast with its almost total silence with regard to the existence of other providers of private tutoring”. As Tan remarked, this indirectly encouraged at least some parents and students to seek private tuition.

Table 3: Top Three Types of Private Tuition, Singapore, 2015

| Pre-school | | Primary | | Secondary | |
|----------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|
| Private group tuition | 81.8% | Private group tuition | 58.9% | Private one-on-one tuition | 43.5% |
| Private one-on-one tuition | 11.4% | Private one-on-one tuition | 34.2% | Private group tuition | 38.9% |
| School group tuition | 9.1% | Welfare group tuition | 9.1% | School group tuition | 11.1% |

Source: Straits Times, 4 July 2015.

As might be expected, according to the *Straits Times* survey families with higher incomes invested more in private tuition than families with lower incomes (Table 4). Related government figures from a 2014 household expenditure survey suggested that total annual expenditure on private tuition amounted to S\$1.1 billion (Tan 2014). Lum (2015) compared this figure with the government's entire budget for education – for pre-school to tertiary – which was S\$11.49 billion during the 2014 financial year. In other words, Lum pointed out, the expenditures by Singaporean families on private tuition were equivalent to one tenth of the total expenditure by the government for all levels including universities and polytechnics. These household expenditures may have been significant financial burdens, especially for low-income families with more than one child.

Table 4: Median Monthly Expenditures on Private Tuition (Singapore dollars), 2015

| Monthly household income | Pre-school | Primary | Secondary |
|--------------------------|------------|---------|-----------|
| \$3,000 and below | \$100 | \$125 | \$180 |
| \$3,001 to \$6,000 | \$150 | \$215 | \$290 |
| More than \$6,000 | \$200 | \$300 | \$389 |

Note: One Singapore dollar was equivalent to approximately 0.72 US dollars or 5.57 Hong Kong dollars.

Source: *Straits Times*, 4 July 2015.

Patterns Elsewhere in Asia

Across the globe, South Korea is perhaps best known for its private tuition, much of it provided in institutions called *hagwons*. According to a 2014 survey by the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS 2015), 81.1% of elementary school pupils were receiving private tuition; and respective figures for middle school and general high school were 69.1% and 56.2%. Private tuition has a long history in South Korea, despite government concern (Seth 2002; Lee & Jang 2010). The phenomenon is also longstanding in Japan which is known for its *jukus* (Harnisch 1994; Roesgaard 2006; Watanabe 2013), and in Taiwan where comparable institutions are known as *buxiban* (Liu 2012; Chang 2013). Private tuition is also widespread in Vietnam (Ha & Harpham 2005; Dang 2013), and growing fast in China (Yu & Ding 2011; Zhang 2014).

Among Asian locations, perhaps Hong Kong is the most easily comparable with Singapore as a totally urban and relatively prosperous society, a majority

Chinese population, and a British colonial heritage that has left an impact on the education system. Indicative figures, while perhaps not altogether robust in precision, show expansion of private tuition in Hong Kong comparable to that in Singapore. Lee (1996) made a random telephone survey of 507 households and found that 44.7% with children in primary school were paying for private tuition, while respective proportions for Secondary 1-3, 4-5 and 6-7 were 25.6%, 34.4% and 40.5%. Eight years later, a government expenditure survey of 6,100 households found rates of 36.0% in primary and 28.0%, 33.6% and 48.1% in each of the levels of secondary education (Hong Kong, Census and Statistics Department 2005). Another seven years later a 2011/12 survey of 1,646 students in 16 secondary schools indicated that 53.8% of Secondary 3 (Grade 9) respondents and 71.8% of Secondary 6 (Grade 12) respondents reported having received tuition during the previous 12 months (Bray 2013).

The findings of the 2011/12 survey deserve further comment because they were the most detailed to date and shed much light on the phenomenon. As in Singapore, the top subjects in demand were English, Mathematics and Chinese (Table 5).

Table 5: Subjects in which Hong Kong Students Received Private Tuition, 2011/12

| <i>Subjects</i> | <i>All</i> | <i>Grade 9</i> | <i>Grade 12</i> |
|-----------------|------------|----------------|-----------------|
| English | 65.2% | 58.5% | 72.4% |
| Mathematics | 52.7% | 68.5% | 35.7% |
| Chinese | 31.8% | 29.4% | 34.4% |
| Sciences | 25.8% | 19.5% | 32.7% |
| Liberal Studies | 9.2% | 5.6% | 13.2% |
| Business | 8.9% | 4.7% | 13.6% |
| Humanities | 6.1% | 8.3% | 3.6% |
| Number of cases | 991 | 519 | 472 |

Note: Sciences are a combination of biology, chemistry and physics. Business is a combination of economics, accounting and business. Humanities are a combination of humanities subjects other than English and Chinese, including history and geography.

Source: Bray et al. (2014), p.31.

The types of tuition are shown in Table 6, and again resemble Singapore in a mix of one-on-one and small group work. However, Hong Kong had a more pronounced sector of large classes taught either live or by video. These classes are commonly taught by ‘star’ tutors who attract considerable numbers of teenagers, especially in their final year of schooling, and offer tips for examination success (Kwo & Bray 2011; Koh 2014). The proportion of students who reported receiving online tutoring was perhaps surprisingly low given that Hong Kong is a technologically advanced society; and the absence of mention in the *Straits Times* report is also noteworthy. Online tuition may be expected to grow in both locations.

Table 6: Types of Private Tuition Received by Secondary School Students, Hong Kong, 2011/12

| | All | Grade 9 | Grade 12 |
|---------------------------------|-------|---------|----------|
| One-on-one | 38.0% | 44.2% | 31.1% |
| Small group | 41.8% | 53.5% | 29.0% |
| Lecture style by tutor (live) | 37.4% | 22.1% | 54.2% |
| Lecture style (video recording) | 33.5% | 7.9% | 61.7% |
| Online tutoring | 1.2% | 0.8% | 1.7% |
| No. of cases | 992 | 520 | 472 |

Source: Bray et al. (2014), p.31.

A further point of comparison concerns costs. Among Hong Kong students who reported having received private tuition during the previous 12 months, the median reported monthly cost was HK\$1,570. According to government data, the median monthly domestic household income in 2010 was HK\$18,000 (Hong Kong, Information Services Department 2012, p.2). These statistics implied that for average Hong Kong families, private tuition for one secondary student might consume about 8.7% of monthly incomes. As in Singapore, such expenditure would be especially demanding for families with more than one child receiving tuition. Respondents to the

Table 7: Mean of Estimated Monthly Private Tuition Costs by Estimated Level of Household Gross Monthly Incomes, Hong Kong, 2011/12

| Estimated household gross monthly income | Mean of estimated monthly private tutoring cost | Percentage range* | Number of cases |
|--|---|-------------------|-----------------|
| <HK\$4,000 | HK\$1,294 | > 32.4% | 20 |
| HK\$4,000-5,999 | HK\$1,218 | 20.3%~30.5% | 12 |
| HK\$6,000-9,999 | HK\$1,388 | 13.9%~23.1% | 51 |
| HK\$10,000-14,999 | HK\$1,519 | 10.1%~15.2% | 126 |
| HK\$15,000-19,999 | HK\$1,314 | 6.6%~8.8% | 134 |
| HK\$20,000-24,999 | HK\$1,199 | 4.8%~6.0% | 128 |
| HK\$25,000-34,999 | HK\$1,581 | 4.5%~6.3% | 118 |
| HK\$35,000-59,999 | HK\$1,729 | 2.9%~4.9% | 110 |
| HK\$60,000-79,999 | HK\$2,470 | 3.1%~4.1% | 60 |
| HK\$80,000-99,999 | HK\$2,261 | 2.3%~2.8% | 32 |
| >=HK\$100,000 | HK\$2,275 | <2.3% | 40 |
| Overall mean/Total | HK\$1,589 | - | 831 |

* The estimated average range of mean cost of private tutoring within the level of family income. It only refers to families with children taking private tuition, and excludes families with children not taking private tuition.

Note: One Hong Kong dollar was equivalent to approximately 0.13 US dollars or 0.18 Singapore dollars.

Source: Bray et al. (2014), p.31.

questionnaire were asked to estimate their households' average gross monthly incomes. Secondary school students may not have good knowledge of their parents' incomes, and the responses should therefore be interpreted with care. Nevertheless, Table 7 shows the reported household incomes and the reported costs of tuition by 11 income bands. It suggests that the costs of tuition for students in the lowest income band exceeded 30% of the household incomes. Disaggregation of Grade 9 and Grade 12 students showed that families in the lowest-income band made particularly heavy sacrifices for Grade 12, with estimated expenditures reaching 36.6% of estimated household incomes. By contrast, for the high-income families the estimated expenditures represented less than 3% of the estimated household incomes.

Are the Expenditures Worthwhile?

Noting the investments that families make, not only in money but also in time, an obvious question is whether the returns from the private tuition justify those investments. Asking families why they paid for private tuition, the 2015 survey reported in Singapore's *Straits Times* found that the top two reasons were (i) to improve grades, and (ii) to keep up with others. But when asked whether the private tuition did improve grades significantly, only 30% of respondents replied affirmatively. In other words, as many as 70% of families paid for private tuition but did not feel that it resulted in significant improvement of grades.

Reasons why private tuition might not result in significant improvement could include shortcomings in the orientation and quality of the tuition, competition for time, and problems in the motivation and related behavior of the children. Some empirical work on this theme in Singapore was presented by Cheo and Quah (2005) following investigation of patterns in three premier secondary schools. The authors found (p.280) that "having a private tutor may be counter-productive ... [because] excessive studying in the Singapore context may have resulted in diminishing returns". They added that the potentially positive influence of tuition in one subject may lead to a decline in other subjects because of time taken away. The researchers nevertheless recognized that their sample was small and that patterns were complex.

These facts may again be contrasted with patterns in Hong Kong. Table 8 records the perceptions of the sampled Grade 9 and 12 students in the 2011/12 survey. In general, these students (though not necessarily their families) felt that the tuition did help to improve their grades. The students also reported in interviews on related benefits including improved confidence in examinations, revision skills and learning strategies (Bray 2013, pp.22-23).

Nevertheless, the question remains whether the private tuition really did improve the grades of these Hong Kong students – and whether it would similarly improve the grades of counterparts in other countries. This question, unfortunately, is difficult to answer chiefly because it is too simplistic in a generalized form. Much depends on the qualities of the tutors, the complementarities of in-school and out-of-school work, and the receptiveness of the students. It is easy to find cases in which tuition has really helped students, e.g. because it is personalized in a way that is impossible in regular school classes of 30 to 40 students or because the students were highly motivated and grasped the messages from 'star' tutors even though they

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were in classes of over 100. However, it is also easy to find cases in which students were doing poorly in school, perhaps scolded all day by their teachers, and then given ‘more of the same’ with scolding all evening by their tutors. It is also common to hear of students working late in the evening with their tutors and therefore sleeping during the daytime in school.

Table 8: Secondary School Students’ Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Private Tuition, Hong Kong, 2011/12

| Private tutoring has improved my ... | Percentage % | | | | | Mean* |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|-------|
| | Strongly Disagree (1) | Disagree (2) | Agree (3) | Strongly Agree (4) | No opinion (2.5) | |
| Examination grades | 0.9 | 5.9 | 62.4 | 25.9 | 5.0 | 3.16 |
| Relationship with school teachers | 8.9 | 38.3 | 21.9 | 4.5 | 26.6 | 2.35 |
| Confidence in examinations | 1.7 | 10.5 | 55.4 | 25.8 | 6.6 | 3.09 |
| Revision skills | 1.2 | 11.0 | 56.5 | 24.3 | 7.0 | 3.07 |
| Confidence in school performance | 2.6 | 20.1 | 50.1 | 15.4 | 11.8 | 2.84 |
| Learning strategies | 1.4 | 11.9 | 53.0 | 24.8 | 8.9 | 3.06 |

N=992.

* In the questionnaire, 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree; 4 = strongly disagree; 2.5 = no opinion. Thus, “mean > 2.50” implies that students in general agreed with the statement, and “mean < 2.50” implies that students in general disagreed with the statement.

Source: Bray (2013), p.23.

With this in mind, researchers, parents, policy-makers and others should avoid simplistic questions like: “Does private tuition work?” Instead, they should ask questions like: “What types, qualities and quantities of private tuition, with what durations, intensities and back-up support, work in what types of learning domains for what sorts of students in what sorts of circumstances?” (Bray 2014, p.387). This question may seem disagreeably complex, but it fits reality more meaningfully. In any case, many students and families seek private tuition as a sort of insurance policy, uncertain that they will need it but fearing that they might lose out if they do not take it.

The Backwash on Regular Schooling

Private tuition is not just a supplementary activity beyond school. It may have a backwash on schooling, and in some respects may be subtractive as well as supplementary. This is especially obvious when teachers provide supplementary tuition. Teachers do not often provide private tuition in Singapore or Hong Kong (or in South Korea, Japan and various other prosperous countries) since they are well paid and do not feel a need to supplement their earnings. However, the provision of private classes by serving teachers in regular schools is common in such countries as Cambodia (Brehm & Silova 2014), China (Zhang 2014), and Georgia (Kobakhidze 2014). Especially problematic are situations when teachers provide extra classes to

the same students for whom they are responsible in their schools, because the teachers may be tempted deliberately to reduce the content during regular classes in order to promote demand for private lessons (Jayachandran 2014). Yet even when the private students are not in the teachers' existing classes, teachers may still devote more effort to private lessons than to the regular classes for which they are paid regardless of the quality.

Further, private tuition may still have a backwash on regular schooling even when the teachers are not involved. First, when rates of private tuition approach 80% teachers are likely to assume that their students have supplementary help. They may therefore not work as diligently to assist low achievers as when few or no students receive supplementary help. Second, private tuition may increase disparities in the classroom. Some tutors deliberately teach materials *before* the schools, which means that those students may be bored during their schooling and the diversity within the classroom increases; and students who do not receive tuition may lag behind. Third, when students receive supplementary lessons late at night, they are likely to be tired, inattentive and possibly disruptive during the day. And fourth, students may be more respectful of their tutors, to whom they pay money and in whom they have a choice, than of their teachers who are free of charge and over whom the students have no choice. Indeed some tutors deliberately encourage disrespect of regular teachers in order to promote their own market, asserting that they are more knowledgeable and talented than the teachers. Such attitudes inculcated in the students may add to disciplinary problems in schools.

The Hong Kong 2011/12 research mentioned above explored the views of teachers towards private tuition, and particularly that provided by the commercial sector. The study identified three main groups of teachers. One group had not thought much about private tuition, viewing their main roles as being inside the schools. A second group was offended by private tuition, considering it unnecessary or even parasitic. These teachers felt that their work met the students' needs, and that private tuition was to some extent damaging and intrusive. The third group welcomed private tuition, encouraging students to learn both in-school and out-of-school. A few teachers even sought to improve their own lessons by borrowing the notes that the students had received from the private tutors.

These patterns may also be understood from an ecological perspective. Before the rise of private tuition, the main actors in the educational ecosystem were the teachers, students and parents. The arrival of the private tutors has changed balances in the ecosystem. Some teachers viewed the tutors as an invasive species that had upset previous balances and to some extent competed with the authority that the teachers had previously enjoyed (Bray & Kobakhidze 2015). Others were more welcoming of the tutors; but both groups recognized that the ecosystem had changed.

A growing phenomenon in Singapore is the blurring of public-private boundaries. Schools allow for-profit tuition agencies to conduct lessons for subjects such as English language and mathematics on school premises after the official day has ended. Parents enroll their children for such lessons on a voluntary basis and pay extra fees for the service. In effect the school authorities are directly endorsing the

need for private tuition and vouching for the reliability of the companies that are contracted to provide such services.

Intensification of Competition

The expansion of private tuition seems to indicate that families increasingly feel that “schooling is not enough”, i.e. that they need to supplement schooling with additional support of various kinds. Yet Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and many other locations with much private tuition have strong public education systems. The question then is why families feel that schooling is not enough.

The answer to this question chiefly lies in the forces of competition. Singapore has always been conscious of its small size in a challenging environment, requiring diligence and innovation to survive and prosper. To some extent similar remarks apply to Hong Kong, and have become even more pertinent since the 1997 reunification with Mainland China which means that Hong Kong families are competing for jobs and livelihoods not only with each other but also with counterparts in the rest of China. Yet these feelings of competition are not confined to Singapore and Hong Kong. The forces of globalization, with awareness that that factories can move and that services can be outsourced at the click of a computer mouse, make families in all countries mindful of competition. In the education sector, awareness of competition is reinforced by rankings of education systems on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) operated under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Niemann & Martens 2015), by the rankings of universities (Sadlak & Liu 2007; Shin et al. 2011), and in some countries by rankings of schools and even students (e.g. Nunes et al. 2015). Singapore’s education system is more stratified than most, with the high-stakes Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) being used in a very open way to determine students’ secondary education streams and subsequent life chances. For this reason, rates of private tuition in primary education are higher in Singapore than in Hong Kong and most other places.

In such competitive environments, families are naturally anxious – and are encouraged to be anxious by the tuition companies who then offer ways to alleviate the anxiety. Yet evaluation of whether the tuition really can meet the needs is extremely difficult. The tuition companies may make bold claims about their students scoring highly in public examinations, but a question may remain whether the high scores result mainly from the companies’ work, from the students’ schooling, or from the diligence and abilities of the students themselves. Both mainstream schools and tuition companies claim the credit for students’ examination successes, while the Ministry of Education remains silent on the matter. Because education is a ‘soft’ service with impact dependent on multiple factors, even trained researchers cannot easily evaluate the quality and implications of private tuition, and ordinary families are even less likely to be able to do so. Meanwhile, when rates of tuition become ever higher, the families who do not receive tuition feel nervous and become more likely to join the majority. Gee (2012) has written about the educational “arms race” in Singapore, and his remarks have applicability also to many other countries.

Conclusions

Private tuition has become a major phenomenon not only in Singapore but also in many other locations. This paper has made particular reference to Hong Kong, but private tuition is widespread and growing throughout the world (Bray 2009; Aurini et al. 2013; Manzon & Areepattamannil 2014). Singapore and Hong Kong are prosperous societies, but private tuition is also increasingly evident in low-income and middle-income societies such as Bangladesh, Egypt and Greece (Nath 2008; Hartmann 2013; Kassotakis & Verdis 2013).

The question remains whether the expansion of private tuition is on balance beneficial or harmful to the children, their families and the wider society. On the positive side, private tuition may contribute not only to personal advancement but also to disciplined behavior and human capital for national development. Thus it can be argued for example that investments in education, including shadow education, were a major factor underpinning South Korea's rise from an impoverished country to a prosperous state during the decades following the 1950s Korean War (Seth 2002; Shin et al. 2015). Private tuition may also have a child-minding role for parents of young children who are both working; and even when there are doubts about the effectiveness of private tuition for teenagers, it would not be difficult to think of more problematic ways in which they might choose to spend their out-of-school time.

Nevertheless, the topic does deserve more research attention not only by sociologists and economists but also by psychologists and others. The 2015 *Straits Times* article indicated that even at the pre-school level 40% of households were paying for private tuition (Teng 2015). An earlier *Straits Times* article (Soh 2014) had focused on "tuition for toddlers", highlighting the plight of a three-year-old child who was receiving hour-long tuition lessons three times a week after his nursery classes so that he could 'keep up' when his mother finally enrolled him at the coveted primary school of which she was an alumnus. The journalist added that a quick search of "preschool tuition in Singapore" yielded multiple results on home tutors and tuition centres extolling the virtues of pre-school tuition and its necessity from the age of two.

Again, parallels are evident in Hong Kong where at least one centre offers training to prepare children as young as 18 months for interviews when applying to kindergarten. This centre has advertised with an image of a child in tears, with the slogan "You don't like competition? But competition will find you!" (Zhao 2015). The centre seemed to have a ready market of 'tiger mums' anxious to do the best for their children by giving a head start in life. But whether such training can deliver the results that those parents seek, and whether it is good for the wider society, may remain an open question deserving further investigation and debate.

This does not, however, mean that governments should simply leave matters to market forces. The Singaporean authorities have for decades justified the high-stakes examinations and stratification of the education system with arguments about meritocracy and excellence. More recent times have witnessed growing official acknowledgement and societal concern that the playing field is far from level. Signs are evident of a 'parentocracy' in which parents' financial resources and strategizing are key to students' academic success (Ong 2014; Phua 2012). The burgeoning private tuition industry is one manifestation of this phenomenon. The Ministry of Education responded to societal concern with a decision in 2012 to cease the public

naming of top-scoring students in the PSLE examinations (Ng 2012) and with discussion on whether the PSLE should be abolished altogether. This is arguably a good approach which can help Singapore to move to the next phase of development and reduce the stresses on families. Private tuition will not go away – either in Singapore or in other countries – but all governments may usefully consider the balances between competition and stress and the signals that they overtly or covertly send about desirable family behavior.

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