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Private expectations and public schooling: the growth of private tutoring in Australia

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Abstract

The use of private tutoring by school-aged children in Australia is increasing and the Australian government now provides vouchers for private tutoring to students who fall below national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy. This paper analyses private tutoring in Australia and finds that although Australia ranks low on international comparisons in terms of student participation, average household expenditure on private tutoring is increasing. We observe higher levels of expenditure among wealthy households and different patterns of household expenditure on private tutoring between the two largest states. The paper discusses factors that appear to influence participation in private tutoring such as structural features of state education systems, total household income and private school fees. The quality and cost-effectiveness of government funded private tutoring as an educational intervention is also discussed.

Introduction

The use of private tutoring to supplement publicly funded school education is an international education policy issue. In many countries, household expenditure on private tutoring is so pervasive that it is called a 'shadow education system' (Baker *et al.* 2001, Bray 2007, Buchmann 2002, Ireson and Rushforth 2005, Silova, Būdienė and Bray 2006, Stevenson and Baker 1992, Tansel and Bircan 2005). In the past, the extensive use of private tutoring was confined to a few countries but over the past two decades expenditure on private tutoring has expanded rapidly in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe as well as in countries as diverse as South Korea, India, Portugal, South Africa, Brazil, Kenya and Turkey (Buchmann 2002, Foodun 1992, Silova, Būdienė and Bray 2006, Stevenson and Baker 1992). More recently, private tutoring has emerged as a policy issue in several Western countries such as Austria, France, Canada and England (Davies 2004, Ireson and Rushforth 2005).

In Australia, expenditure on private tutoring is increasing yet its role and impact is not well understood. Private tutoring centres now cater for children as young as three years of age (Stateline, 2007). The Australian national government has recently introduced vouchers to fund private tutoring for students who fall behind national achievement benchmarks, thus subsidising the role of private tutors in providing remedial education (Bishop, 2007).

International studies suggest that factors driving the demand for private tutoring might include a cultural emphasis on individual educational effort and economic factors such as high and differentiated rates of return for qualifications. It has also been suggested that institutional characteristics of state education systems, such as high-stakes public examinations, intense competition for limited university places and low levels of public expenditure on schooling, may influence levels of participation in private tutoring (Baker *et al.* 2001, Bray and Silova 2006, Tansel and Bircan 2005). Researchers have suggested that the growth of private tutoring could have an adverse impact on the direction of government education policy, such as fuelling demand for public examinations and supporting the continuation of a narrow school curriculum. Many commentators are also concerned that the extensive use of private tutoring perpetuates socio-economic inequality (Bray 2003, Bray and Silova 2006, Tansel and Bircan 2005).

This paper analyses private tutoring in Australia, drawing on international research and data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We discuss Australia's level of participation in private tutoring and examine Australian data on household expenditure on private tutoring and private education. This analysis aims to explore the scope of private tutoring in Australia and the cost to households of this form of supplementary expenditure. The paper also examines recent policy initiatives by the Australian national government to subsidise private tutoring for remedial education purposes. The implications of these developments for

Australian education policy are discussed, drawing on both Australian and international research.

Household expenditure on private tutoring in Australia

The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts a survey of household expenditure in Australia every five years. This survey collects data on the expenditure and income of almost 7,000 households from a sample that is designed to produce reliable estimates for broad groups of households aggregated for Australia, for each state and territory and for the capital cities in each state and territory. The survey provides detailed information on household expenditure in over 600 categories of goods and services, including expenditure on education. The survey identifies household expenditure on children's education for primary and secondary schools in both the government and non-government sectors, as well as expenditure on fees for private tutoring. Expenditure on private tutoring is specifically related to school level education and does not include fees for recreational courses or extra-curricular pursuits such as music or dancing lessons. As Australia's Consumer Prices Index (CPI) is based on this survey, the data are of high quality and are intended to be representative of baskets of household expenditure (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a).

One limitation of the published data from the Household Expenditure Survey is that it does not report expenditure data by type of household. We therefore do not know the level of expenditure on children's education among households with dependent children. As only one-third of Australian households in the survey had dependent children in 2003-04, the average expenditure on children's education among households with dependent children is likely to be significantly higher than the average expenditure across all households. However, it is the average level of expenditure across all households that is reported below.

Table 1 Average household weekly expenditure, Australia, 1998-99 and 2003-04

	1998-99	2003-04
Average expenditure on private tutoring	\$0.29	\$0.48
Average expenditure on school fees	\$7.00	\$9.46
Total av. expenditure on children's education (private tutoring + school fees)	\$7.29	\$9.94
Total average expenditure on goods and services	\$698.97	\$892.83
<i>Private Tutoring as a % of total av. expenditure on children's education</i>	3.98 %	4.88 %

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: Detailed items, 1998-99 and 2003-04. Catalogue No. 65535.0.55.001

Australian families spent a total of 3.6 million dollars on children’s education in 2003-04. Ninety-five per cent of this expenditure was on school fees and five per cent was spent on private tutoring (see Table 1). Although the amount spent by households on private tutoring is a relatively small component of total household expenditure on children’s education in Australia, expenditure on private tutoring has increased. As shown in Table 1, in 1998-99, Australian families spent 3.98 per cent of their expenditure on children’s education on private tutoring. Five years later, in 2003-04, average household expenditure on private tutoring had increased to 4.88 per cent of expenditure on children’s education. Average household expenditure on children’s education also increased from 1.04 per cent of average household expenditure in 1998-99 to 1.1 per cent in 2003-04.

A recent study in Turkey found that the capacity to pay for private tutoring increases in line with household income (Tansel and Bircan 2005). In Australia, expenditure on private tutoring is also higher in households that have higher average weekly income and has increased since 1998-99. As shown in Table 2, the wealthiest households (ie. those in the top 20 per cent of the income distribution), spend almost twice as much on private tutoring as the average household.

Table 2 Average household weekly expenditure for the wealthiest households (top 20%), Australia, 1998-99 and 2003-04

	1998-99	2003-04
Average expenditure on private tutoring	\$0.63	\$0.97
Average expenditure on school fees	\$17.36	\$26.12
Total av. expenditure on children’s education (private tutoring + school fees)	\$17.99	\$27.09
Total average expenditure on goods and services	\$1,171.40	\$1,499.18
<i>Private Tutoring as a % of total av. expenditure on children’s education</i>	<i>3.50 %</i>	<i>3.58 %</i>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: Detailed items, 1998-99 and 2003-04. Catalogue No. 65535.0.55.001

Expenditure on school fees by the wealthiest households is also higher than the average expenditure for all households. Therefore the amount spent on private tutoring by the wealthiest households as a proportion of their expenditure on children’s education is lower than the average for all households. As shown in Table 2, the top 20% of households pay an average of \$27.09 per week on children’s education, of which only 3.58% is spent on private tutoring and the remainder is spent on school fees. However in dollar terms, the wealthiest households spent double the amount on private tutoring in 2003-04 as the average Australian household (Tables 1 and 2).

Bray (2003, 2007) proposes that the structure of state education systems can influence the demand for private tutoring. The existence of “high stakes decision points”, such as public examinations for entrance to selective high schools or universities may contribute to expenditure on private tutoring as a means of improving student performance in high stakes tests. The Australian federation comprises six states and two territories, each of which has its own education system. As the expenditure estimates on private tutoring in smaller jurisdictions may be unreliable, we only present data for the two largest states – New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria in Table 3.

Table 3 Average household weekly expenditure on private tutoring and school fees, Australia 2003-04

	NSW	Victoria
Average expenditure on private tutoring	\$0.83	\$0.29
Average expenditure on school fees	\$8.52	\$12.34
Total average expenditure on children’s education (private tutoring + school fees)	\$9.35	\$12.63
Total average expenditure on goods and services	\$947.51	\$898.40
<i>Private Tutoring expenditure as a proportion of total average expenditure on children’s education</i>	8.88 %	2.30 %

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: Detailed items, 2003-04. Catalogue No. 65535.0.55.001

There are significant differences in the average level of expenditure on private tutoring between households in New South Wales and households in Victoria. Private tutoring accounted for almost 9 per cent of average household expenditure on children’s education in New South Wales in 2003-4, compared to 2.3 per cent in Victoria (see Table 3). While total average expenditure on children’s education was higher in Victoria, a much higher proportion of this expenditure was spent on school fees than in New South Wales. Victorian households spent an average of \$12.63 per week on school fees compared to \$8.52 per week in New South Wales.

Why do parents pay for private tutoring?

International literature suggests that parents purchase private tutoring for one of two main purposes: first, for *enrichment* purposes by academically able students who are seeking to capitalise on their abilities; and second, for *remedial* assistance to students who are struggling to “keep up” with mainstream academic expectations. Private tutoring is more likely to be used as an enrichment strategy in education systems where there are “clear high-stakes

decision points” like public examinations for selective secondary schools and/or intense competition for limited university places (Bray and Silova 2006, p. 32). However Baker *et al.* (2001) argue that most private tutoring is for *remedial* education purposes, particularly in countries where there is a high level of parental awareness of the economic importance of successfully completing secondary school.

Baker *et al.* (2005) used the TIMMS data to investigate the extent to which private tutoring in mathematics was used for *remedial* or *enrichment* purposes, by examining the relationship between mathematics performance and engagement in private tutoring. They found that in 30 of the 41 countries (including Australia), the majority of students were engaged in private tutoring for remedial purposes (ie. private tutoring was predominantly used by lower performing students compared to high performing students). Bray and Silova (2006) question the applicability of these findings to all levels of schooling, pointing out that the TIMMS data were based on 7th grade students whereas preparation for high stakes examinations for university entrance would usually commence later in schooling.

As the Baker et al (2005) study was based on TIMMS data from the mid-1990s, we cannot conclusively say whether private tutoring in Australia in the 21st Century serves either enrichment or remedial purposes. One could also argue that these terms are subjective as one parent’s view of a child’s need for “remediation” could be different from another parents, depending on the parent’s level of education. But we do know that household wealth clearly influences the level of expenditure on private tutoring in Australia and that average expenditure differs between the two largest states.

Institutional features may explain the difference in levels of expenditure on private tutoring between New South Wales and Victoria. The New South Wales system retains a final year school examination system (the Higher School Certificate, or HSC) which determines entry to university. New South Wales also has 27 academically selective public high schools, to which entry is determined on the basis of public examinations. Thus the system in New South Wales provides two distinctive “high stakes decision points” where students could achieve a competitive advantage through private tutoring. One of the few Australian studies of the effects of private tutoring on primary and secondary school students was conducted in New South Wales and concluded that for some students, coaching could have made the difference as to whether they were awarded entrance to a selective high school (Kenny and Faunce 2004: 125). In contrast, there are fewer “high stakes decision points” in the Victorian education system. University entrance is determined on the basis of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), a two-year program based on a combination of school-based assessment and public examinations. And the Victorian public education system only has two academically selective public high schools compared to 27 in New South Wales.

Expenditure on private tutoring in Australia could also be related to expenditure on private school fees. Given the widespread subsidization and availability of private schools in Australia, it is possible that households make a “trade-off” between expenditure on private tutoring and expenditure on private school fees. In other words, a parent whose expectations of public schooling are not being met has a choice to purchase a private school education or to pay for private tutoring while the student continues to attend a public school.

Government vouchers for private tutoring

Over the past five years, education authorities in the United States of America, South Africa, England and Australia have introduced schemes to support the provision of private tutoring as a supplement to publicly funded school education. In the USA, the *No Child left Behind Act of 2001* required that where schools failed to achieve adequate yearly progress in terms of student performance in their third consecutive year, eligible students must be provided with private tutoring in reading and mathematics out of school hours (Burch, Steinberg and Donovan 2007). In South Africa, concern about achievement levels in mathematics and science among African students has led government and non-government agencies to provide supplementary tuition to increase equity in educational outcomes among high school students (Reddy, Berkowitz and Mji 2006). In June 2007, the Secretary of State for Education in England launched a major new pilot project *Making Good Progress (MGP)* which will support the provision of one-to-one tuition in English and Mathematics to raise the achievement level of low-performing students at age 7 and during the early years of secondary school (Teachernet 2007).

In May 2007, the Australian federal government announced funding of \$457.4 million over four years to provide one-on-one tutorial assistance to children who did not meet national benchmarks in literacy or numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Called *An Even Start*, this National Tuition Program has been approved by the new Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Julia Gillard MP to continue in 2008. The new program will be administered by State and Territory education authorities rather than brokers, and a National Service Coordinator will be contracted to arrange private tutoring for students outside of schools (Australian Government 2008).

An Even Start grew out of a pilot program in 2004 called the *Tutorial Voucher Initiative*, which provided a voucher to the value of \$700 to enable parents to access one-on-one reading tuition for students who had fallen behind expected achievement levels in Year 3 national assessments. Eligible children were those who had not met the national Year 3 reading benchmark in 2003. Nationally consistent assessments of children’s literacy and numeracy skills are conducted during Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7 throughout Australia. The federal government specified that tutors were required to have relevant formal academic qualifications in education, or the partial completion of a teacher training course (Department of Education,

Science and Training 2005:14-15). In 2003, an estimated 19,000 students nationally did not achieve the Year 3 reading benchmark, representing 7.6 per cent of the national Year 3 cohort. In total, the scheme assisted 6,200 students nationally during 2005, one third of the eligible cohort, and of these, 5,443 students completed a full course of tuition.

The pilot scheme was delivered by brokers who won a competitive tender process in each state and territory and who were answerable to the national Department of Education, Science and Training. The brokers were both state education departments and private training providers and were required to employ the tutors to provide the private tuition to eligible students (Department of Education, Science and Training 2005:14-15). Models of private tutorial provision differed between and within jurisdictions, from tutorial centres based in schools, to predominantly home-based instruction, with most instruction provided out of school hours, but some during school time. The take-up rate was higher in areas where local schools were involved in identifying and contacting the families of eligible students (Commonwealth of Australia 2006).

There were several barriers to the commencement of the pilot scheme. As it was a radical policy initiative that required new legislation, the scheme did not commence until 2005, two years after the Year 3 assessment had occurred. This led to some problems in locating the students, as low achieving students tend to be a mobile group, moving more frequently between schools and jurisdictions than other students. Accessing the names and contact details of eligible students was also an issue in some jurisdictions. These details were held by state and territory education authorities who could not legally give student contact details to a third party. Therefore in the three jurisdictions where the broker was not an education Department, brokers had to rely on government education authorities to inform the students' families of their eligibility for assistance. As this was not done in a timely and efficient way, the three states had the lowest rates of participation in the tutoring scheme. In recognition of the implementation difficulties of the pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative in some states during 2005, the Australian national government offered additional reading assistance during 2006 to eligible children in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia who did not receive assistance under the pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative in 2005.

The effectiveness of the *Tutorial Voucher Initiative* is difficult to determine because the monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes was grossly inadequate. An evaluation commissioned by the national government reported that data from pre- and post-tuition assessments of the pilot scheme suggested that the majority of students had made progress during the program, with an average gain of around 12 months in "reading age", in the jurisdictions where this was measured. However the data were not comparable between states and there was no control group to indicate whether the students receiving tutoring had progressed at a faster rate than those who did not receive it. Furthermore, as participation rates were extremely low in some jurisdictions (ie. less than 20 per cent of eligible students), self-

selection effects may also have influenced the results. Among parents and caregivers surveyed by the evaluation team, levels of satisfaction appeared to be high, regardless of the particular model of tuition they experienced, with over 80 per cent attesting that they were satisfied with the program and that their child's reading skills had improved. However, there was no follow-up study to determine if the participants' progress in reading was sustained over the long term. (Commonwealth of Australia 2006).

Since 2005, the private tutoring voucher initiative has developed into a major national program addressing both literacy and numeracy. This program, called *An Even Start* will commence in 2008 with funding of \$457.4 million over four years. The program will provide \$700 vouchers for one-on-one tutorial assistance to children who did not meet the national benchmarks in literacy or numeracy in Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7 in 2007. As national literacy and numeracy benchmark assessments will include Year 9 students in 2008, students who do not meet the Year 9 benchmark this year will also be eligible for assistance from 2009.

The future of Private Tutoring Programs

The provision of government funded private tutoring programs builds on a community acceptance of expenditure on supplementary education, evidenced by the increasing level of household expenditure on private tutoring in Australia. The provision of finance for private tutoring is also an expedient way for national governments in federal systems, such as the USA and Australia, to circumvent state education authorities. In the Australian federal system, state and territory governments are responsible for the delivery of education and the role of the federal government is limited to the provision of grants to the states and territories for specific purposes. The pilot voucher scheme for private tutoring enabled the federal government to provide a form of direct educational assistance to school-aged children independently of the schools they attended, in the same way that the scheme had been implemented in the United States of America. However, from 2008, the new Australian program will be administered by State and Territory education authorities rather than brokers, and a National Service Coordinator will be contracted to arrange private tutoring for students outside of schools (Australian Government 2008).

Although private tutoring programs have been introduced by governments in several countries, there is scant research demonstrating their effectiveness. Studies of the implementation of the *Supplemental Education Services* program in various states of the USA have concluded that the program is compromised by inadequate funding (ie. insufficient funds for eligible students), low take-up rates (less than 15-20 %) among eligible students, high attrition rates, and lack of accountability for outcomes by the private agencies providing the services (Burch 2007, Rickles and Barhart 2007, Sunderman 2007). In Australia, the pilot *Tutorial Voucher Initiative* experienced similar limitations, such as variable take-up rates and lack of evidence about sustainable gains in student achievement.

These limitations will be addressed to some extent in *An Even Start* in that the federal government intends to collect data on student gains through the provision of pre-tuition and post-tuition assessment tools. Tutors will be required to enter the results of these assessments into a National Tuition Management System (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007). However while these data will be useful for monitoring program outcomes in the short term, in the absence of a controlled trial and long-term monitoring of student outcomes, these data will not be sufficient to demonstrate program effectiveness. Nor have any studies demonstrated the superiority of private tutoring over other educational interventions. Some types of one-on-one reading programs, such as *Reading Recovery* have been proven to make a difference to children's literacy outcomes, but this program, provided by trained and accredited tutors, costs considerably more than \$700 per student.

In Australia, the inadequate supply of tutors proved a significant obstacle to delivering the 2005 pilot program in rural and remote areas – yet students in these regions consistently perform below the national average in standardized educational tests. Almost 30 per cent of students not achieving the Year 3 reading benchmark in 2003 were resident in the Northern Territory, which has a highly dispersed population. These supply problems may be alleviated by the decision to support school-based delivery of tutoring under the new program. The draft guidelines for *An Even Start – National Tuition Program* permit teachers to be engaged as tutors to provide tuition either individually or in small groups of up to five students (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007)¹.

The fact that the percentage of students who do not meet the national literacy benchmarks increases as children grow up will also confound the implementation of *An Even Start*. In 2005, for example, the percentage of children not meeting the national numeracy benchmark in Year 3 was 6 per cent, but by Year 5 it had increased to 9 per cent. By Year 7, some 18 per cent of students do not meet the benchmark. This will provide significant challenges to the supply of tutors as the voucher scheme is extended to Years 5, 7 and 9 in 2008-9. In addition, the North American experience indicates that students' willingness to participate in private tutoring declines during adolescence (Burch 2007, Rickles and Barhart 2007, Zimmer et al 2006).

The policy impact of Private Tutoring in Australia

Private tutoring programs in the USA and Australia are being supported by governments in the context of increased accountability imposed on publicly funded schools. Through standardized

¹ The role of teachers in delivering private tutoring is a factor contributing to high levels of participation in private tutoring in many countries. For example, in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the significant decline in the relative value of teachers' salaries has fuelled the provision of private tutoring out of school hours as a means for teachers to generate additional income (Silova and Bray 2006)

testing, governments are holding schools to account for the production of educational outcomes. Burch (2007) notes the inconsistency between the high-stakes accountability imposed on schools through standardized national testing and the absence of accountability for private providers to deliver improved educational outcomes through private tutoring. A disturbing feature of the present policy context is the willingness of governments to blame schools for poor student learning outcomes yet deny schools the resources to improve those students' learning outcomes. While there are many intervention programs that have been shown to improve students' learning outcomes through intensive one-on-one tuition, they cannot be provided for the limited amount of money allocated under the private tutoring schemes. Moreover, in the USA, the specification that Title One funding should be spent on private tutoring is diverting resources away from school-based programs that would address the needs of disadvantaged students.

The provision of private tutoring will always be of limited usefulness in addressing educational inequity, due to the lack of tutors available to serve disadvantaged students, the relatively low level of resources allocated, and the low take-up rate of private tutoring among the eligible population. Yet Government funding for private tutoring may well continue as a low-cost response to meeting the needs of a small proportion of the students who fall below expected norms of achievement on national assessments. But in the absence of high quality monitoring and evaluation, we will never be able to determine the cost-effectiveness of expenditure on private tutoring schemes. Private tutoring initiatives have not been implemented on the basis of research demonstrating the effectiveness of private tutoring as a remedial intervention.

The rise in expenditure on private tutoring in Australia, by both the Federal government and through the private contributions of parents is occurring in the context of a worldwide economic and political discourse that advocates market solutions to education policy problems. Increasing expenditure on private tutoring is consistent with neo-conservative market values in support of out-sourcing, limited government intervention, individualism, competition and choice in school education. The general community acceptance of the Australian government's provision of supplementary tutoring services for low-achieving students reflects the extent to which neo-conservative market values permeate contemporary education discourse, regardless of the extent to which they are supported by evidence. While this paper adds to the international literature by documenting the private tutoring phenomenon in Australian schooling, further research is needed to understand the role and influence of international trends and to explore the relationship between private tutoring and the market-based ideologies that now permeate education policy. Such research is necessary to explore the critical question of why governments appear increasingly unable to meet community expectations for education in the globalised 21st Century.

Conclusion

Expenditure on private tutoring is increasing in Australia in the context of increased levels of household expenditure on children's education. While expenditure on private school fees is increasing, expenditure on private tutoring is also increasing as a proportion of total household expenditure on children's education. The wealthiest households (those in the top 20 per cent of the income distribution) spend double the amount of an average household on private tutoring.

The data indicate that expenditure on private tutoring is higher in New South Wales than in Victoria, which may be in response to structural features of state education systems. In New South Wales, which has a relatively high level of household expenditure on private tutoring, there is a public examination system for university entrance and 27 selective state high schools. Participation in private tutoring is lower in Victoria which has a largely school-based assessment system for university entrance and only two selective state high schools.

The Australian national government's policy initiative to provide vouchers for private tutoring to students who fall below national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy remains controversial. There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of the scheme compared to other forms of educational intervention. As the program expands its coverage in 2008, it may be difficult to obtain sufficient numbers of tutors with the appropriate skills to meet demand, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The experience of other countries suggests that private tutoring programs should be closely monitored and evaluated for their cost-effectiveness as there is no conclusive evidence to date that they improve student learning outcomes over the longer term. Supplementary private tutoring is now a worldwide phenomenon and further research is needed to understand the role and influence of international trends and market-based ideologies on Australian education policy.

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