

The Functions of Shadow Education in China: An Exploration beyond Mainstream Education

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Abstract: Private tutoring, also known as shadow education, is an increasingly evident system in a wide range of social environment. Previous scholars have regarded it as a derivative from mainstream education designed to enhance students' academic performance and as an institution creating social inequality. Although the researches on the new area have increased and been valued, this area is still in its infancy, especially at the level of geographic coverage. Therefore, the paper exams the status quo of shadow education in China where few relevant studies have been conducted, mainly discussing the positive functions of emerging private tutoring which includes upward mobility and division of labor. The author further contends that the negative implications are not simply caused by shadow education, but are still embedded in the competitive education system dominated by high-stake examinations and lacking personal service.

Keywords: shadow education, mainstream education, function, social mobility.

1. Introduction

The last decades witness a significant expansion of China's private tutoring, in which the market of primary and secondary schools has exceeded 1143 billion dollars, and the number of participating students reaches 137 million according to The Chinese Society of Education [1]. This phenomenon has led to social issues like class reproduction and social inequality. On 24th July 2021, Chinese authorities moved to rein private tutoring companies like New Oriental and forbid any individual tuition. However, will the crash of shadow education improve social mobility, help to achieve the justice of society, and address the current situation? To answer the question, a more comprehensive understanding of this booming institution needs exploring.

To begin with, according to Stevenson and Baker, shadow education is defined as "a set of educational activities that occur outside formal schooling and are designed to enhance the student's formal school career" [2]. In light of the central characteristics of shadow education including privateness and supplementation with mainstream education, this definition is considered sound and classical, commonly cited by other scholars in the field. It is replaced into private tutoring as a synonym in some contexts, which share the same meaning.

As a new research topic that increasingly appears in the volume and books, shadow education is still under development. "Many gaps remain, however, both in the geographic coverage and in the specific themes addressed by researchers" [3]. When looking through previous reports, the author discovers that sociologists conduct their study mainly in the USA, Japan, Korea, and European

countries whereas China is hard to be found on the list. The research of private tutoring phenomenon could be further conducted in order to better develop the sociological filed. Hopefully, there are still data and theories from the predecessors. Wei and Bray, the founders of the area, have collected samples of student participant rate from rural and urban China, showing the great demand for private tutoring, in particular, English and mathematics [4]. Besides, the major driver of demand for shadow education is closely linked to features of mainstream education, which is to pass *Gaokao*, a national entrance exam.

This leads to a deeper understanding of the rising system: the nature of shadow education. Nowadays it is believed as a derivative of mainstream education, which thus follows the institutional logic of mainstream education and brings negative social implications [5]. Though mainstream education also shapes core values like critical thinking, shadow education obviously weakens the functions and focused on personal achievements instead. To be more specific, from the insights of Pierre Bourdieu, education is an institution to increase personal capital accumulated upon the individuals who come from families which have advantages in economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Therefore, shadow education is also an institution functioning the same as mainstream education does. If the hypothesis is admissible, the question mentioned above will be solved. The restriction of a tool to maintain class reproduction and social inequality can certainly benefit the society.

However, the functions and implications of shadow education in China are diversified. For instance, Zhang and Han hold a different perspective from Wei and Bray, that shadow education can block intergenerational transmission and cultural reproduction [6]. On this occasion, figuring out how the new institution works plays a significant role in the development of the field. Next, the author will try to provide a new vision of shadow education, which also promotes social mobility and social division of labor besides its adverse impact.

2. Methods

The objective of the article is to reevaluate the functions of shadow education by analyzing the data and experience from three major subjects including students, parents, and teachers. During the process, primary data and secondary data are both adopted to demonstrate the implications of private tutoring. Firstly, the author interviewed a group of 15 parents whose children were participating in private tutoring and a group of 15 teachers who worked in mainstream schools or shadow institutions respectively, aiming to understand their views toward shadow education due to the fact that the previous studies based on the perspectives of parents and teachers remain insufficient in comparison with the studies relating to students. The interview was conducted in Shandong Province, China. Secondly, data from CFPS (China Family Panel Studies) and Sina Education is cited to supplement the background and details. The argument is supported by referencing the previous theories established by great sociologists like Wei and Bourdieu.

3. Analysis

The research shows that the rise of shadow education could encourage upward social mobility by equalizing educational resources and promote social division by expanding the road to success. Further, the reason for social inequality through education is put forward, which is the current competition system.

3.1. Equal Educational Resources

The function of Chinese mass schooling is to provide opportunities for low-income families, ensuring education equality and accessibility. In the past, people are struggling to survive, below the

poverty line. But with China's economic growth and greater affluence, the knowledge from compulsory education is no longer enough for the public. Moreover, due to the existence of China's *hukou* system which determines one's permanent resident of an area, rural students are hard to move to more developed cities to access superior education service. Therefore, teaching students in accordance with their aptitude becomes a challenging task, which leads to students crams into off-campus tutoring.

In general, most extracurricular tutoring applies to small classes that can detect students' problems and offer guidance in time. Compared with school education, it provides more special service for each individual and more chances to accommodate various inclinations. What is more, in the post-pandemic life, online class springs up all over the country, breaking the space limit and introducing more educational resources to the public. In particular, students living in a relatively remote area could have the chance to take classes from a teacher in Beijing. In that case, a new model of shadow education with a more affordable price and less family burden could be achieved through the Internet.

During the original process of capital accumulation in which upper class family possesses the advantages of high-quality service in education, the disadvantaged group is difficult to access more standard faculties and excellent facilities. Shadow education could weaken the process of class reproduction by offering them an opportunity to approach more educational resources. In addition, Li's experiment also proves the positive implication of shadow education by contending that private tutoring partially reduces the impact of the variables like family background, parents' educational level, and family economic level on students' academic performance [7].

3.2. Other Roads to Success

In recent years, there is a popular phrase in China named "tiger parenting", which means that parents are highly invested in children's success, treating them as fiercely as a tiger does. It seems to be described in an exaggerated way. In fact, a survey from Sina Education found that 73% of the parents wished their children to take private tutoring [8]. Hence parents' expectation is also an important factor leading to the flourishing of shadow education.

However, through the interview, that author finds a different voice from the mass. When asked why to send students to off-campus teaching organizations, one mother said that she wished her son to discover his interest and to proceed his life with passion, which differs the major purpose of acquiring personalized service and higher education (Guo, personal communication, July 21, 2021, transcript in Appendix). Thus, she followed his son's wish and signed up for the fiddle class. Though it is an individual case, it still provides a possibility of another aim of shadow education besides enhancing academic performance.

That is to say, shadow education accelerates the division of labor. Based on China Family Panel Studies, 67% of the population participate in academic lectures and 25% go to the talent teaching courses which aim to develop their interest while 8% are involved in both sections [9]. To be more specific, this group covers students who pursue more knowledge, who feel tough on basic schoolwork, who skip the high takes examinations and decide to study abroad, who desire to become a master of piano, and so on. Therefore, students could have a wider road to success, pursuing the promising career they feel interested in, creating diversified and efficient division of labor. This may be regarded as a supplement to Bray's definition of shadow education, which is not only designed for the student's formal school career, but for their future development.

3.3. Mainstream Education System

As an institution functioning positively to some extent, shadow education is built on the inadequacy

of mainstream education. Even if we send it to the gallows, problems like class reproduction and scarce personal service will still exist.

Class reproduction, as mentioned above, is one of the major challenges to mainstream education. Although educational resources are distributed unequally, the high-stake examination including *gaokao* and *zhongkao* is inevitable for most of the students. In the winner-take-all competition, it is unfair for those who live in rural areas and suffer a paucity of resources.

Mainstream schools focused on one system to educate students, which lacks service for personal requirement. The inefficiency to meet the need of diversified conditions may be linked with teacher's working attitude and school's arrangements on teaching schedule. Firstly, according to Annual Report on China's Education, the average monthly salary of primary and secondary school teachers is 670 dollars and more than half of teachers work more than 8 hours a day [10]. However, teachers from shadow educations could receive better treatment. One interview from an education corporation in Jinan City said that he could earn 120 dollars for a private course lasting 2 hours (Hou, personal communication, August 11, 2021, transcript in Appendix). On this occasion, some teachers may lose their passion for teaching students at school and choose to work in shadow institutions. Secondly, the class schedule is filled with main courses such as mathematics, English, and Chinese while music, painting, and sports are usually missing, which ignore the students with special talents.

Therefore, the abandonment of shadow education could not deal with the social issues at their root. Instead, shadow education could be considered as an exploration to address the shortcoming of mainstream education. During the process, it promotes social mobility and social division of labor as well as result in negative implications like increasing family burden. All in all, it may be a wiser solution to make up for the deficiencies of mainstream education because in this way, not only can we contribute to social stability, but avoid the trouble of regulating shadow education as there is no need for it to exist.

4. Conclusion

The article argues the positive functions of shadow education, mainly reflected in improving social upward mobility and diversifying social division of labor. To move forward, the complex rising institution requires to be evaluated critically. Meanwhile, it helps to discover the root reason for its negative implications which is not caused by shadow education but by the current education system with fierce competition and scarce individual service. At last, the author hopes not only could this paper provide a new perspective to study education and social inequality, but also could be used as references for education planners and policymakers.

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Appendix

Interview A:

Question: Why send your kid to off-campus teaching organizations?

Response: When my kid was young, I enrolled him in a lot of classes, and asked him to choose, like violin, calligraphy, swimming, and playing guitar. In the end, he showed his interest in playing the fiddle very much, so he enrolled in the fiddle class. There is going to be a grade test right now, he even cannot spare his schedule to finish homework. If my kid can keep up, I mean he can keep up with the progress at present, just keep this grade and I will consider if he can take the art test in the future (*Translated Script*).

Interview B:

Question: May I ask your reward from a lesson? If it is a personal issue and you do not want to talk, you could refuse at any time.

Response: Sure, no problem. I am now an English teacher. What a coincidence. Because I didn't have enough scores in the college entrance examination, I finally went to the English Department of Shanghai Foreign Language School. After I came out, I went visiting all over the country after graduation. Because my English ability is strong enough, many people also come to ask me to teach them English, especially in *gaokao*. One single class can cost more than 1,000 yuan in Jinan, and educational institutions will take some away, but it is also a good income. At the same time, I have freedom. I plan to visit other cities in a while (*Translated Script*).