

PRIVATE SUPPLEMENTARY TUTORING CENTERS' PERFORMANCE IN IRAN: STUDENTS, PRINCIPALS AND OFFICERS' OPINIONS

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Abstract

For over three decades, private supplementary tutoring has become a common educational phenomenon in Iran. One of the most common forms of private tutoring in Iran was centers that operated with the permission from the Ministry of Education. The aim of this study was to evaluate the performance of these centers through students, principals and officers' opinions. The sample population of this study was made up of 249 students, 53 principals and 23 officers of education bureau who were selected through a multi-stage cluster sampling method from five different provinces of Iran. The findings revealed that students indicated that private centers have a relatively poor and inappropriate level of facilities. With respect to the objective and goal of these institutes, most of the students found that tutors have a good level of professional knowledge, using appropriate teaching methods and constantly evaluated learners abilities through different exams. In contrast, there was a serious disagreement between principals and officers' opinion about centers' performance with regards to their educational roles and common offenses.

Key words

Private Tutoring, Performance, Officers, Principals, Students, Iran.

0. Introduction

It is well known that students in economically and geographically diverse countries are heavily involved in various kinds of private supplementary tutoring activities (Borja,

2005; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Dang & Rogers, 2008). In this paper, Private Supplementary Tutoring (hereafter known as PST) is defined as a fee-based tutoring that provides supplementary instruction to children in academic subjects that they study in the mainstream education system. Research reports on the impact of PST in various contexts have generated diverse findings. For example, some researchers found that pupils who receive PST as remedial instruction showed significant improvement in their academics compared to pupils without tutoring (See Aslam and Atherton, 2012; Liu, 2012; Tansel and Bircan, 2008). By contrast, the findings of Kuan (2011) revealed a positive but modest effect at best. Although the demand for PST may reflect dimensions of educational progress, especially for students who are willing to participate at national examination, some researchers highlighted the roles of parental perceptions of qualitative shortcomings in regular schools (Assad and El-Badawy, 2004; Bray and Lykins, 2012).

However, previous research has not provided a completed representation of PST activities in different parts of the world. A major area that lacked representation was PST in Middle East countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In some countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Syria, the government has tried to ban PST in general but without effectiveness (Al Hajref, 2013; Jiffry, 2012). For example, Kuwait's Ministry of Education banned PST; he claimed they discouraged students from studying harder to achieve good results and therefore, he forced all publicly employed teachers to sign a pledge not to provide private tuition (Trenwith, 2014). Nevertheless, PST is common in other countries of the Middle East (Ali, 2013; Jiffry, 2012; Naguib, 2006). Literature on PST in Iran is scarce, but it is obvious that the shadow education system has developed. This paper examined the perceptions of officials in the Iran's Ministry of Education (different educational districts), students and head of centers on different aspects of the PST. In the academic domain, the paper contributed to a broader understanding of the phenomenon in the Middle East, which was among the under-represented regions. This paper began with a brief review of the shadow education system in Iran during recent decades. The next section investigated how the data were collected, and the main findings. The last section of this paper offered some conclusions.

1. Shadow Education in Iran

In the early 1970s and with the rise in oil price, the last Shah of Iran planned to modernize the society, a modern Iran, like developed countries at the heart of the Middle East (Najmabadi, 1987). However, at that time, the society had about 48% of the literate population with few private schools and centers in large cities managed mainly by foreign embassies or some of Shah religious opponents who did not like to send their children to public schools (Literacy Movement Organization, 2014). The Shah's dream was never realized because he suddenly lost his kingdom and Iran became a country

with an Islamic revolutionary regime. With the arrival of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran as the leader of the revolution in 1979, he resided in a private school established during previous regime. One of the founders of the school became the chairperson of the Revolutionary Council and the two others were the President and Prime Minister of Iran. However, neither private schools and centers nor these three founders finally found happiness. These Three founders were killed in the political conflicts of the early revolution and private schools and centers were closed because the revolutionists believed that such institutions only served rich people and increased inequality in education and society (Akrami, 2013). Meanwhile, the Islamic Parliament adopted a new constitution and approved a law that education should be compulsory and free to all up to the end of higher secondary education. The law never materialized, but for a decade, it prevented private schools and centers from being re-opened. Many politicians who referred to this law were against private sector investment in education (Mesri, 2008). However, the restrictions were subsequently eased. Apart from the above political decision, two other decisions of the revolutionary government, which had strongly influenced the emersion of shadow education, were population policy and Iran- Iraq war.

The Shah insisted that every Iranian family should have two children only (Hoodfar and Assadpour, 2000). After the revolution, people's optimism¹ about the future accompanied with the encouragement of the regime - with slogans like "more child means more population of Islam"- increased the population growth rate from 2.7 before the revolution to 4.3 in an eight-year period (1979 – 1987)) (Aghajanian, 1995). Although, the policy of population growth stopped over the next two decades, the population which was 34 million in 1979 reached over 75 million in 2011 (Statistical Center of Iran, 2011). Because of this policy, schools faced difficulties such as shortage of teachers and lack of space in the subsequent 20 years (Frasatkah, 2001). To solve this problem and with the absence of private schools and centers, public schools were opened in two to three batches and teachers were over worked. Regarding the young composition of the population, most of Iranian families were worried about issues like access to higher education and a barrier of national examination called "Conkur" for their young ones. "Conkur" is an examination that involves over 1 million young people competing with each other every year. In fact, from 1984 to 2006, an average of 20 persons who sort to enter the university had to compete for just one empty seat (Sobhani and Shahidi, 2007). This shortage combined with the fact that the only way many families and young people could achieve higher social and professional situations was just through their educational performance; has caused them to undergo many psychological, social and economic pressures. During all these years, the access to higher education became a perfect social challenge for the government, families and youths. Pressure on the government to build and establish new universities rose, families were forced to pay part of their income for private classes and finally youths were afraid of an examination called "the Conkur giant".

The second political decision that had a great influence on the educational system was Iran-Iraq war. The Iran-Iraq war began in 1980 and continued until 1988 which was the longest war in the 20th century and brought lots of pressure on the Iran's society. From an education perspective, over 36,000 students and 3,700 teachers were killed and the budget of the Ministry of Education declined sharply (MohsaniNeya, 1999). From one hand, the combination of increased population and a drop on budget reduced the quality of education system. Sometimes, teachers received their salaries after two or three month delay (Akrami, 2014). On the other hand, the social demand for education, particularly higher education, rose among Iranian families. The war ended in 1988; the government responded to social demand for higher education quickly as it was faced with the stark reality that it could not increase the quality of education. This fact strongly affected the priority of constructing infrastructures such as houses, bridges and roads in the war-torn areas (Ilias, 2010). In short, the government adopted two new policies to solve this problem: a very tough national university entrance examination and granting permission for re-opening the private schools and tutoring centers (Sobhani and Shahidi, 2007). The long-term government policies were the establishment of governmental, semi-governmental and private universities across the country (Frasatkah, 2001). These policies increased the social demand for private tutoring and expanded shadow education drastically. It should be noted that during the recent 8 years, due to the establishment of various universities, the capacity of admission in most subjects increased. Nevertheless, the competition is currently centered on acceptance in more reputable university and moneymaker courses like medical profession and engineering. The fear of getting a poor grade on the national exam, lack of acceptance in the moneymaker courses, family's blame, friends and relatives' ridicule, and fear of being unable to continue education, prepared a mental ground among young people to register in PST centers.

Although private tutoring is currently a known and common phenomenon in Iran, but there is little information about its nature, scale and intensity. Considering the quality and reliability, recent research revealed the prevalence of PST activities among Iranian students. In Tehran, Aryan (2011) found that 35% of sampled Grade 5 students and 38% of sampled Grade 12 students received some sort of supplementary help. Also, while in the Sannadaj city (West Iran), 61% of upper secondary students received some type of private tutoring (Shirbagi, 2011), meanwhile in Ahwaz (Southwest Iran), 48 % (NajadMosavi, 2012) was recorded. Just like many other countries, the demand for PST in Iran is partly driven by negative perceptions of traditional schooling and the belief that extra lessons are essential for academic success. Social competition for access to high-quality education provided grounds for the attraction of private-sector investors. During the final years of high school, these centers helped students to achieve high scores in examinations and particularly to be prepared for Conkur. In fact, the poor quality of schooling in public schools partly reflected poor facilities, outdated curricula

and/or unmotivated teachers (TalebZadeh et al, 2009). Therefore, the probability of parents to send their children to PST classes after school hours steadily increased.

Hence, it is necessary to pay more attention on the growth of shadow education in Iran as well as some social and cultural aspects, which may make it different from other societies. The first point was that, contrary to the initial opposition of government during the first decade of the revolution on private tutoring, there was no action among politicians against growth of a shadowy system of education in the country. Therefore, there was no law to prevent, control and supervise private tutoring activities by tutors, students or anyone else at the individual level – for example, conducting class in the teacher or student’s home. Although, the establishment of a private tutoring institute needs permission from the Ministry of Education, the government’s supervision on issues such as teaching methods, teachers’ professional competency, and tax are very poor. This has led to an increased rate of private tutoring centers from 2,200 in 2001 to more than 11,000 in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014). According to the law approved by the Ministry of Education, all tutoring centers were required to be registered. The tuition of these centers & companies based on parameters like the inflation rate, center’s geographical place, type & subject of the courses, company & teacher’s reputation and number of students in each class. For example, to attract and register more students, private tutoring centers and companies made use of different types of propaganda. In fact, the extensive advertisements of these centers and their slogans were very effective in attracting students and their families. As stated by one member of Iran’s parliament, the yearly benefit of these centers was about 400 billion Rials (more than US\$133 million) (Norbaksh, 2012).

During the last two decades, Iran witnessed the spread of shadow education in all its forms. One of the most common forms of setting up private tutoring centers by individuals or legal people was by obtaining a license from the Ministry of Education. Iran’s Ministry of Education entitles this type of center as “Open Scientific Center” (herein referred to as center) to be distinguished from the “Non- Governmental Schools” and “Open Vocational-Professional Centers”. As far as the social demand for private tutoring had undergone an upward trend, the demand for private centers has also experienced a precipitous process. As a result of this, the Ministry of Education approved different regulations during the last 20years. In fact, as the authorities in the ministry became more familiar with the different dimensions of private tutoring, the amount of regulation also increased. An obvious characteristic of this continuous change was the percentage increase of regulations. The content of the present paper was based on the last legislation, which was approved in 2005 by the Ministry of Education. According to the rules of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an open scientific school is a center established by individuals or legal people, for the training of all subjects from primary to pre-university levels without the permission to issue any type of educational certificate. Statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education showed that at present, there are 11,130

licensed private tutoring centers with more than 1,000,000 students in the whole country. Although there were no accurate data on the number of employees, a report of the Ministry of Education indicated that there were more than 50,000 people employed in these centers. According to the rules approved by the Ministry of Education, the main functions and tasks of centers were as stated below:

- The establishment of oral, written and virtual classes
- Conducting oral, written and virtual examinations
- The preparation of educational books, booklets and software according to the rules
- Offering schooling consultations
- Holding scientific and educational tours and camps (Ministry of Education, 2014: 4)

Private centers, therefore, had the permission to conduct all types of classes and exams for all school curricula from pre-primary to the end of secondary education. In addition, introducing extra books to students, providing notebooks and working on exam questions was common functions of these centers, although most of them were unwilling to undertake the compilation of books because of the complex process of production. In addition, one of the main focuses of private tutoring centers was educational consultation through different methods such as regular phone calls to the students' homes, continuous assessment meetings with the parents and students as a widespread method of customers' attraction. General regulations for the establishment of private tutoring centers included issues like centers' buildings and characteristics, duration of activity, and the methods of attracting students. Content study of the Ministry of Education's rule and regulation showed that the founder has to open her/his center within six months after receiving the basic agreement from the Ministry of Education. The building of the center could be rented in residential apartments (with separate doors) or in public schools (after school time). In addition, the Ministry's law has not determined other center's characteristics like type of class facilities. Also, the founders have to send center advertising material before publication to the Ministry of Education for approval. In addition, the founder has no authority to increase tuition fees or earn extra funds from students. In reality, most centers disregard these two articles and an unreal propaganda was more prevalent. With regards to the mentioned points, the purpose of this research paper was to understand better the Iranian shadow education through the perspectives and experiences of three groups of students, principals of centers and educational officers, in five provinces of Iran.

2. Methodology

The present study was a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive and analytical research. The survey was carried out in 2014-15 school year in five provinces of Ilam, Khorasan Shomali, Khozestan, Guilan and Tehran. The data were derived from a multi-stage stratified sampling. In the first stage, from among 30 provinces of Iran, five

provinces were selected randomly. In the second stage, 12 private tutoring centers were selected in each province. In the third stage and after visiting all selected centers, data collection tools (questionnaires) were distributed among 5 students, principals of each center and officers of the same educational district (300 students, 60 principals and 25 officers). Two questionnaires prepared by the researchers were the main forms of data collection; they consisted of a few questions about personal information (15) and research questions (8). To determine the validity of the questionnaires, in the first phase, 15 students, three principals and three officers answered all the questions asked. In the second phase, two professors in the field of education analyzed the content of both questionnaires. At the end, the necessary reforms in the questionnaires were applied. The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients revealed that scales were moderately reliable ($\alpha = 0.68$ for student questionnaire and $\alpha = 0.65$ for principals' questionnaire).

3. Findings

3.1. Personal Information

Personal information from the questionnaires showed that 73 percent of the centers had classes for upper secondary education and 27 percent for all grades from primary to end of secondary schools. After the elimination of incomplete questionnaires, 249 questionnaires of students, 53 questionnaires of principals and 23 questionnaires of officers were analyzed. In terms of gender, 117 students, 25 principals and 8 officers were female. While more than 80% of the students indicated that they have participated in private tutoring classes in previous years; more than 50 percent of principals and officer said that they have more than 10 years experiences working in private education. Since, according to the Iran's Ministry of Education rule and regulation, principal of the center should be married, only four of them announced that they were single. Information from both questionnaires showed that the largest number of classes was for teaching English, mathematics, Arabic, chemistry, and physics respectively.

3.2. Students' Evaluation

Information on students' evaluation about the performance of private tutoring centers was presented in Table 1. This table showed that in some cases like physical situation of centers, educational tours, as well as tuition fees for classes, students generally were dissatisfied. For example, more than 50 % of students were dissatisfied with the situation of centers' space (location, age of building, safety, facilities) and environment of classes (capacity, light, air, etc.). In addition, 60% of the students disagreed with centers' performance about educational tours and tuition rates. Information from the table also showed that the highest degree of students' satisfaction related to educational performance of tutors. For example, most of the students believed that tutors have a good level of professional knowledge, using appropriate teaching methods and constantly evaluated

student progress through different exams (more than 70%). In addition, students agreed that tutors usually use educational technologies and group activities as two common methods of teaching. In overall, it seems that the level of students' satisfaction about private tutoring centers was high.

Table 1: Students' opinions about private tutoring centers' effectiveness (No.249)

Opinions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No opinion	Mean*
Public space of center (location, age of building, safety, facilities)	41	27.3	18.1	8	5.6	2.3
Class environment (capacity, light, air, etc.)	11.6	41	22.1	21.3	4.0	2.4
General behavior of principal (continuous presence, appropriate communication with parents and students, etc.)	5.0	26.0	28.7	35.6	4.9	3.7
School staff (discipline, commitment, human relationships, etc.)	7.0	22.1	30.9	29.0	11.0	2.8
Organizing classes according to the plan	2.8	15.3	32.1	47.8	2	3.4
Professional Knowledge of tutors	4	51	29	61.9	0	3.6
Use of appropriate teaching methods by tutors	3.2	17.6	38.8	40.4	0	3.8
Use of educational technologies in teaching by tutors	11.6	26.4	25.2	28.5	8.3	3.0
Tutor's friendly relations with students	2.8	8.2	31.6	57.4	0	3.5
Teaching new methods of reading	6.7	20.6	29.4	39.5	3.8	2.6
Participation in learning tour	47.1	27.6	9	5.4	10.9	2.4
Group activities (group work, discussion, group learning, etc.)	5.7	5.3	28.4	17.3	3.3	3.3
Conducting continuous tests and exams by tutors	7.2	21.7	30.1	41.0	0.0	3.7
Tuition rates	39.1	22.0	17.0	13.8	8.1	2.2

* In the questionnaire, 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, 4= strongly agree and 2.5 = No opinion. Thus, "mean \geq 2.50" implies that students in general agreed with the statement, and "mean \leq 2.50" implies that students in general disagreed with the statement.

3.3. Principals and Officers' Evaluations

While it seems that asking questions from principals of centers about their performance was an unusual method, in this research, they were asked to answer 8 questions (Table 2 & 3). In addition, for better evaluation of the centers' performance, officers who were working in the same district of the Bureau of Education answered the same questions. In the first question, both groups were asked to indicate ways in which private tutoring centers were able to help students to overcome the shortfalls of the formal education system (Table 2). While over 80% of principals believed that private tutoring centers helped students to overcome mainstream system deficiencies, only 40% of educational officers accepted it. On the second question, the similarities between the two respondents was more; finding that private education institutions have increased share of education in household income. On the third question, 70% of principals believed that the private sector has made more income for teachers, whilst more than 60% of educational officers rejected this idea. Informal conversation of researchers with officers showed that they believed only a small number of more than 1 million Iranian teachers were working as a private tutor. The last question of table 2 also indicated the differences between the two groups, such that more than 50% of educational officers believed revenue of the Ministry of Education from private centers was very low, because some centers were not duly registered while many of the registered centers do not pay their taxes. For this reason, 40% of principals have preferred not to answer this question.

Table 2: Principals and educational officers' opinions about private tutoring centers' performance

Opinions	Responders	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	strongly agree	No opinion
Help to overcome shortages of formal education system	Principals*	1.0	7.9	33.0	50.1	8.0
	Officers **	15.6	23.8	30.0	11.7	18.9
Increasing proportion of household income in education	Principals	5.7	11.5	55.0	7.0	20.8
	Officers	3.0	7.0	66.7	23.3	0.0
Help to improve teachers economic situation	Principals	5.5	14.2	59.2	17.7	3.4
	Officers	23.6	41.0	11.6	10.4	13.4
Create job opportunities for tutors	Principals	0.0	1.1	45.9	53.0	0.0
	Officers	5.3	11.6	41.8	24.0	17.3
Create revenue for Ministry of Education through tax	Principals	0.0	0.0	40.2	19.8	40
	Officers	25	27	19	10.4	18.6

* Number of principals = 53; ** Number of officers= 23

The other important issue related to private tutoring centers was their main and routine offenses. Four common offenses were asked from both groups of respondents (Table 3). Two of the most common offense of private tutoring centers was unrealistic advertisements about the rate of university admission by their students and high competences of tutors. A significant difference between the two respondents showed that more than 60% of educational officers believed private tutoring centers use false advertising strategies to attract more customers (in contrast to 26% of principals). The other difference between the opinions of the two groups was on the tuition fees, which seemed centers earn extra money from parents. Nevertheless, both research participants agreed that the closure of classes rarely occurs.

Table 3: Principals and educational officers' opinions about main private tutoring centers' offense

Offense		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No opinion
Unrealistic propaganda about their students' success for university admission	Principals*	33.6	28.8	16.0	11.6	10.0
	Officers**	9.9	8.7	34.5	31.1	15.8
Unrealistic Advertisement about tutors' competencies	Principals	22.0	30.7	15.1	9.2	23.0
	Officers	6.6	8.3	40.1	29.5	15.5
Additional tuition fee	Principals	41.0	45.5	2.3	1.4	9.8
	Officers	22.7	17.0	23.3	11.7	25.3
Unjustified closure of class or school	Principals	49.0	38.9	12.1	0.0	0.0
	Officers	21.4	37.0	26.9	8.8	5.9

* Number of principals = 53; ** Number of officers= 23

4. Conclusion

Although in some developed societies with strong educational system, private tutoring is common and prevalent, but in the case of Iran, it seems that the low quality of education, examination-based learning, and inadequate teachers' salary were the major forces driving the expansion of shadow education (Bageri and Najafi, 2008; MashhadIRIB, 2011; Mohammadi, 2013). The present research paper among the few attempted to explain private tutoring centers' performance from the perspectives of students, principals and officers of bureau of education.

The result revealed that most of the students received private supplementary tutoring in previous years, thus, showing the prevalence of the shadow education phenomenon among Iranian learners. In addition, the findings of this research revealed that most attractive subjects for private tutoring were foreign languages, which matched the findings of various studies in Iran and other countries (Aryan, 2011; Bray, 2011; NajadMosavi, 2012; Shirbagi, 2011; Zhan et al, 2013). Iran is the only Non- Arab country in the globe that the Arabic language was a compulsory subject from Grade 7 up to the end of upper secondary school showing the political aspiration and interest. However, as this subject has no more effect and role in national examination for university entrance, most of its tutors were schoolteachers, in contrast to English, which had different tutors especially young university graduated women.

The other finding of this research indicated that more than half of the students were dissatisfied with the physical situation of centers. In fact, the buildings of many centers were houses and apartments, which mostly were not suitable places for educational purposes. From this aspect, there were similarities between Iran and other developing countries (Al-Akhbar, 2014; Hartmann, 2008; Tansel and Bircan, 2004). Also, findings of the present research revealed that while most of the principals believed private tutoring centers helped students to overcome mainstream system deficiencies, only less than half of educational officers accepted it. Informal conversation with officers showed that they believed the mainstream education system's shortage was not the main reason for students' participation in private tutoring classes. From their perspective, the main factor was from Iran's political and economic situations. In fact, from the last 15 years and because of western sanction against Iran's nuclear program, the rate of unemployment became very high among university graduate except for some moneymakers subjects like Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Engineering, Accounting and Law; but their university admission were very low and competition among candidates was high.

Findings of this research indicated that more than half of the educational officers believed revenue of the Ministry of Education from private centers was very low. In fact, despite a quantitative expansion of the private tutoring sector over the past two decades in Iran, there was still no comprehensive data and information about their activities, especially from economic dimension. One of the main reasons was that there were various ministries, which made decision regarding the establishment of private tutoring center. In addition, there were no clear criteria for determining tuition fees as everything depended on the parent- center agreement. The closure of an illegal private tutoring center requires a judge's ruling, which is often a very long process (at least 7 months), while the owner of the center can rent a new building in another street and re-opened it immediately. Due to these reasons, the Ministry of Education could not collect tax from the centers properly.

Another significant difference between two groups of respondent was over the misuse of private tutoring centers resulting from public advertisements to attract more customers.

Although, this was a common belief among many people about private tutoring centers in Iran, but there is a need for more and deep research on it. However, it seems this is one of the prevailing feature of private tutoring centers in other countries too (Chan, 2013; Ripley, 2013; Sharma, 2013). Finally, we admitted that there was an information gap - especially about the influence of private tutoring on social, cultural and political life in Iran, which calls for more research. In addition, there is a need for a more vigorous examination of the characteristics of those who participated or not in private tutoring activities in different parts of the country; what the socio-demographic characteristics associated with participation likelihoods are and the levels of expenditures/involvement and so on.

Σημείωση

1. Free access to social services such as water, electricity, housing and health as Ayatollah Khomeini has promised it in one of the his speeches.

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