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# Corruption in the Classroom: The Dilemma of Public School Teachers in Cambodia Providing Private Tutoring to Their Own Students

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the practice of private supplementary tutoring (also known as ‘shadow education’) by public school teachers in Cambodia, a country with an education system plagued by corruption (Dawson, 2011). The paper begins by introducing the growing phenomenon of private tutoring (PT) in the broader context of Asia. It then turns to an overview of the problems of corruption in Cambodian public services more generally before focusing on corrupt practices specific to the education sector. Within this context the problem of public school teachers providing PT to their own students is introduced, followed by a discussion of the effects of this practice on teachers, students, educational content, and processes of teaching and learning. The paper then shifts to explore potential economic, socio-cultural and organizational factors that may cause teachers to engage in these corrupt practices. Finally, the paper discusses possible solutions, looking at regulatory policies for PT in other Asian countries and attempts at addressing the problem of corrupt PT in Cambodia itself. The paper argues that a combination of advocacy and awareness raising of corruption at the system level, regulation of PT, and reforms to the education sector to increase quality and equity are potential solutions to this challenging problem.

**Keywords:** *Private tutoring, shadow education, corruption, education planning, Cambodia*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The prevalence of private tutoring in Asia

The practice of private tutoring (PT) is commonplace in many Asian societies and has been expanding rapidly both within Asia and beyond in recent years. PT has been defined as “tutoring in academic subjects which is provided ... for financial gain and which is additional to the provision by mainstream schooling” (Bray & Kwok, 2003, p. 612). PT has garnered the term ‘shadow education’ because its content and prevalence in societies tends to mimic patterns in mainstream education systems. As mainstream education changes in content or expands in provision, so too does PT (Bray & Lykins, 2012). Instead of operating alongside the mainstream in symbiosis, however, shadow education has been described by Dawson as a ‘parasitic’ system that “absorbs unmet demand for schooling and feeds off the insecurity of parents and students who lose faith in formal education systems” (2010, p. 15).

Debates abound as to why PT is more common in some parts of the world compared to others. A number of scholars have argued that the influence of Confucianism explains why PT has become so widespread in the cultures of East and Southeast Asia (see Bray & Lykins, 2012, p. 25). Social harmony in Confucian systems is based on the universal acceptance of social and institutional hierarchies, and chances for upward mobility within these hierarchies are frequently mediated by exam competition (Marginson, 2011). High-stakes examinations at key stages of formal schooling thus provide a mechanism for social sorting, with the outcomes of these exams often deciding the life courses of students. As such, many households who can afford it feel compelled to augment their children’s chances for success with PT. According to Mehl (2005), this relationship between PT and exam preparation in East Asia can be

traced back 800 years (cited in Dawson, 2010, p. 15). PT has a long historical legacy in the region, but the practice has dramatically expanded in recent decades. For example, today nearly 90% of South Korean elementary students receive some sort of shadow education. In Hong Kong, about 85% of senior secondary students do. Japan sees only 16% of elementary students take part in PT, but this number steadily rises to 63% by junior secondary school (Bray & Lykins, 2012). Equally striking are the costs of PT incurred by private households. In South Korea, household expenditures are roughly equivalent to 80% of the government's total expenditure on public education (ibid.).

For a number of countries in Asia that fall outside of this 'Confucian zone', the recent prevalence of PT has been attributed to the emergence of democracies and market economies in the post-Soviet era. While instances of PT did exist in the former Soviet Union, these were downplayed by authorities who wished to preserve an image of an egalitarian education system (ibid.). However, with the growth of market capitalism after the fall of the USSR, so too has there been an increase in both supply and demand for PT in the region. South Asian cultures, by contrast, tend to have more in common with societies in East and Southeast Asia, with engrained traditions of PT being passed down for generations (ibid.). Given the magnitude of this phenomenon across Asia, the subject of PT and its social effects warrants attention from policymakers and education researchers.

While traditions and rationales for shadow education are undoubtedly bound up with culture and context, the presence of PT in a given society presents a number of universal dilemmas for education policymakers. The first has to do with the disruption of what are, at least in principle, public education systems intended to provide equal access and opportunity for all members of society. The public good nature of these egalitarian systems thus becomes weakened when PT offers improved chances for social mobility only to those who can afford to pay for it. The ubiquity of PT in many Asian societies also raises questions about the perceived quality of public education systems in these countries. Many who have looked to the successes of East Asian countries in international standardized tests such as PISA and TIMSS have tended to focus on (and borrow from) policies for mainstream schooling while neglecting the reality and potential effects of the PT industry in these countries.

Another set of complex problems present themselves when PT is provided by teachers to their own students. In a number of societies (such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) this practice is regarded as a form of corruption and is prohibited, while in others it is subject to varying degrees of regulation. Problems arise in particular when teachers deliberately refrain from teaching key elements of a given curriculum during regular school hours to encourage students to pay to learn the knowledge withheld from them through afterschool PT provision. In countries where this practice does occur it can contribute to a number of detrimental effects on students, teachers, and school systems. This paper looks at the case of Cambodia, a country where this corrupt form of PT is widespread and is embedded within a public-sector system plagued by corruption at all levels.

## **1.2 An overview of corruption in Cambodia**

Corruption is a serious problem in Cambodia. According to the anti-corruption NGO Transparency International,

“Corruption permeates every aspect of the Cambodian social fabric; the elite has monopolised procurement, land concessions and access to resources through the establishment of patron - client networks. A kleptocratic bureaucracy thrives on red tape, while the population is disillusioned with governance institutions” (Transparency International, 2014, p. 1).

In 2016, Cambodia was one of the lowest-ranked countries (156 out of 175) in the Corruption Perceptions Index, and was perceived to be the most corrupt country in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (ibid.). Arguably the most significant arena where corrupt practices occur is in the realm of

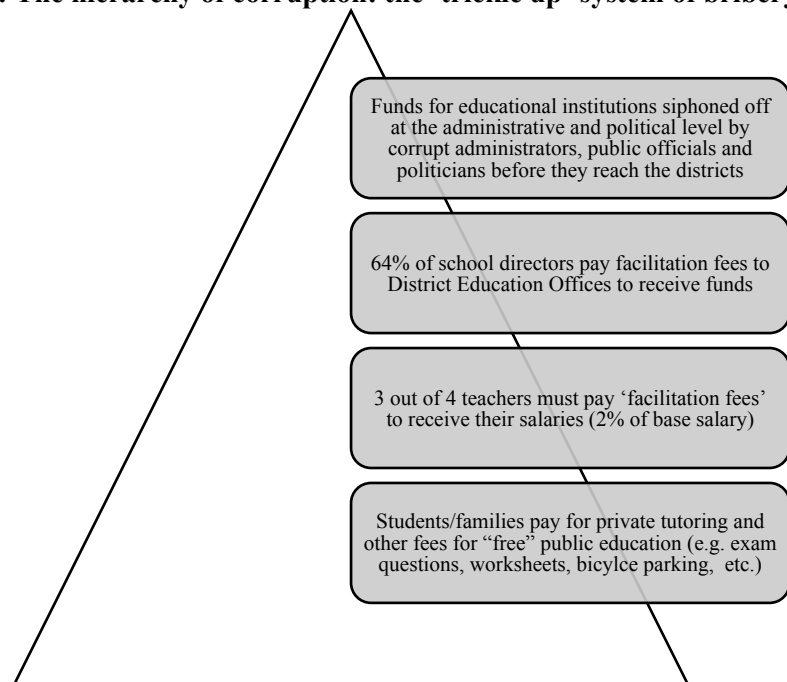
politics, where rigged elections and the abuse of public office for private gain is commonplace. Connected to politics is the government bureaucracy, where corruption is also rife. Paying bribes is often essential to gain access to basic public services such as permits, licenses, health care, academic records, and birth and marriage certificates (ibid, p. 4). The problem extends into the business sector as well, with Cambodia rated as one of the most difficult countries in the world in which to start a business due to the excessive red-tape and bribery that go hand-in-hand with investing in the country (ibid, p. 5). Corruption can also be found in the country's judiciary system, its police force, and natural resource management and public financial management systems (ibid.). In addition to these and other arenas of corruption, a significant segment of the Cambodian public sector plagued by corruption is the education system. According to Dawson (2011), the education sector accounts for 55% of total corruption in Cambodian public services, costing an estimated \$37 million per year.

## 2. The context: the hierarchy of corruption in the Cambodian education system

The education system in Cambodia has been slowly rebuilding itself since its virtual destruction during the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s which saw the execution of 75% of teachers and intellectuals (Dawson, 2011). After a ten-year occupation by the Vietnamese (1979-1989), UN involvement in 1992 set the stage for a number of aid agencies to contribute to sector improvements (Dawson, 2010). As the Cambodian government has yet to establish an adequate system of taxation, the education sector is still highly dependent on foreign aid. Even with these contributions, as of 2010, teacher salaries in Cambodia were approximately US\$44 per month, considered to be 1.8 times the poverty level at that time (ibid.).

Low salaries were a frequently cited reason teachers gave for 'forcing' their own public school students to pay for PT (ibid, p. 20). However, these corrupt practices are situated in a broader hierarchy of corruption. Students and families paying their own teachers for supplementary lessons constitutes the lowest level of the hierarchy. In addition to PT, families often must pay extra fees for arbitrary expenses like bicycle parking, exam fees and worksheets. Above this level, however, teachers themselves are often forced to pay 'facilitation fees' to their schools in order to receive their salaries. A similar practice occurs at the next level, where 64% of school directors must pay fees to district offices to receive funding to operate their schools (ibid.). At the top of the pyramid are a range of administrative and political officials who siphon funds for education off before they even reach the districts. Figure 1 below depicts this hierarchy.

**Figure 1: The hierarchy of corruption: the 'trickle up' system of bribery**



Source: Dawson, 2011.

## **2.1 Corrupt practices in Cambodian schools**

Many schools in Cambodia operate in patterns of two-shift or three-shift teaching, in which different groups of students receive schooling at different times during the day. As a result, 50% of teachers in Dawson's 2010 study indicated they did not have enough time to cover the entirety of the curriculum required by the Ministry of Education (Dawson, 2010). Both teachers and parents surveyed in the study described how low teacher salaries and inadequate classroom time were the two main reasons for the provision of PT. According to Dawson (2010):

“Teachers and parents practiced a de facto taxation system whereby many teachers described charging students according to income level and parents negotiating the private tutoring fees. The practices indicated the degree to which lack of institutionalization of government and education were forcing civil servants and private citizens to create their own forms of rent-seeking which included a myriad of other “unofficial school fees” created by teachers and school directors to pad their paltry salaries” (p. 20).

Within this ‘de facto taxation system’ a number of corrupt practices can be found. While teachers reported insufficient time to cover the curriculum, studies have shown that some teachers consciously slow down the pace of delivery of curricula in order to ensure they have a market for PT (Chapman & Bray, 1999). Remuneration for PT provision by students as young as 6 years old tended to take the form of a daily ritual of small payments to teachers. In addition to forcing students to pay for education that should be provided within the framework of the public system, a number of other fees and bribes were often required of students. These include payments to receive attendance booklets, purchasing passing or higher grades, buying exams in advance, buying the right to cheat on an exam, or even skipping a grade (Dawson, 2011). Some teachers explained they do not require these payments of all students, however. According to teachers in Dawson's survey, the poorest students are often exempt from making many payments and some are even allowed to take part in PT free of charge (ibid.). Here the notion of a de facto taxation system becomes evident. Some quotes from teachers interviewed in Dawson's study puts a more human face on the experiences of teachers engaging in corrupt PT provision:

- “We do not charge them (the poorer students) in private tutoring class because we understand their poor situation and we are also poor.”
- “I have private tutoring because I am poor and the salary provided by the government is too low to support my family” (Dawson, 2011, p. 19)

Despite these claims from teachers, Brehm and Silova argue that poor students in Cambodia are in fact largely excluded from access to PT and therefore are unable to receive the entirety of the national curriculum needed to progress to secondary school (2014). Based on the findings from their 2014 study (discussed in more detail below), they conclude that the melding of public education and PT creates an educational arrangement that disadvantages the poor and stratifies Cambodian society along socio-economic lines (ibid.).

## **3. The effects of corrupt private tutoring**

In addition to these broader societal impacts, the practice of corrupt PT can have a range of detrimental effects at the micro-level on all actors involved in the education system. For young students, daily exposure to corrupt practices can negatively impact on the formation of values during an impressionistic stage of their lives. PT can also lead to lack of interest in school, increased absenteeism and a ‘culture of dependency’ on PT (Ehrmann, Margontier-Haynes, Pier, & Hammond, 2015). For teachers, the existence of the PT system impacts their approach and the amount of effort put in to teaching in public school classrooms. In order to create the demand for PT necessary to supplement their incomes, they may make less effort to cover required curriculum and ensure every student is adequately prepared. The financial need to work after regular school hours can also lead to fatigue from overwork (ibid.).

Educational contents and processes of teaching and learning in public school classrooms also can suffer in this system. The PT-style of teaching may tend towards a cramming-style curriculum and a focus on passing exams (ibid.). Classroom dynamics can be affected when PT becomes more important than creating a synergistic classroom experience, and the separation of those who can afford PT from those who can't furthers the reification of social inequalities and disparities in classrooms (ibid.).

#### **4. Potential causes of corrupt private tutoring**

As mentioned above, the two primary reasons given for the existence of the PT system in Cambodia was low teacher salaries and insufficient time during the regular school day to cover the entirety of the national curriculum. However, examination of the practice of corrupt PT within its broader historical, cultural and socio-economic contexts reveals a more complex picture. According to Brehm and Silova,

“theorizing private tutoring in the Cambodian context requires situating the study in post-colonial, post-conflict histories and their persisting legacies (such as hierarchy, patronage, and bribery), unpacking the contradictions between international influences (such as a rights-based discourses) and national practices (such as political oppression and assassinations), as well as examining the political economy of the country in relation to the global economy. A combination of these factors yields a more nuanced understanding and a more complete explanation of the nature and implications of private tutoring, while revealing an educational arrangement – that is, the public-private financing of education – formulated in the 1990s (see for example, Government of Cambodia, 1994, p. 109) that obscures the boundaries between public schooling and private tutoring in Cambodia” (Brehm & Silova, 2014, p. 96).

Brehm and Silova argue that the Cambodian case of widespread PT provision is not a form a ‘shadow education’ that exists alongside the public education system in a supplementary fashion, but has in fact become so engrained and intermixed with public education that the distinction between the two has blurred.

In the past, inadequate, irregular or delayed salaries for teachers have been a major problem and an impetus for engaging in PT. These economic concerns were the most vocalized in studies conducted with Cambodian teachers (Dawson 2010; 2011). At the time of Dawson’s study the average teacher salary stood at \$44 per month (Dawson, 2010). Teachers reported that on average they could make \$61 per month doing PT (ibid.). In recent years, however, the Cambodian government has been trying to address the problem of low pay by raising teachers’ salaries. In 2015, the government increased salaries on average to approximately \$162 per month, with the intended goal of raising it to \$250 by 2018 (Oudom, 2015). These improvements in pay may serve to reduce the economic need for teachers to engage in PT in addition to their regular jobs.

In addition to economic factors, however, a number of societal and cultural factors may serve as causal mechanisms that prompt teachers to engage in PT. A number of parents and teachers in Dawson’s study argued that considerations about the children’s safety justified paying teachers to teach and take care of their children as opposed to leaving them unsupervised for part of the day. These concerns are warranted, as in many cases both parents must work and because Cambodia remains a country in which child prostitution and industrial exploitation are serious problems (Dawson, 2011). In addition to physical and sexual violence, there is also a high incidence of traffic deaths in the larger cities (ibid.). In part due to these concerns, many parents would prefer to leave their children with their own teacher, and do not mind paying to do so. Thus, simply raising teacher salaries may not be enough to completely halt current practices. From a cultural perspective, traditions of gift giving, the persistence of patron-client relationships, weak norms of meritocracy and a general sense of solidarity with teachers may be other factors that contribute to the persistence of PT (Ehrmann et al., 2015).

Organizational factors that constitute the Cambodian education system may also make it difficult to monitor and prevent the occurrence of corruption in schools. Lack of transparent regulations and criteria regarding what constitutes corrupt practices is one such factor. As of 2014, regulation of PT in Cambodia was limited to a policy of ‘discouragement’ (Bray & Kwo, 2014). Discouragement entails the practice of PT is governed by codes of ethics rather than official regulations, with signals that teachers should not engage in PT (ibid., p. 45). The government’s adoption of the normative position that PT is inappropriate rather than prohibited may in part be due to the tacit understanding that government salaries for teachers were far too low.

Other organizational considerations include lack of infrastructure, which makes accessing many rural schools to monitor them difficult, and thus less outside control (such as school inspections) is possible. According to the World Bank’s 2011 Systems Approach For Better Education Results (SABER) Report on Cambodian education, a number of areas for improvements to the education system were identified. While many metrics that were assessed were awarded with scores such as ‘emerging’ or ‘established’, others were described as ‘latent’. Those in the latent category included a lack of useful guidance on the use of teacher’s working time, working conditions not deemed ‘appealing’ for talented applicants, an inadequate system of teacher preparation and training, and a lack of systems to hold teachers accountable for poor performance (World Bank, 2011).

## **5. Regulatory policies in other Asian countries**

While education policy borrowing is rarely a simple and straightforward process due to the complexities of context and influences of culture, looking to countries that have implemented successful policies to curb corrupt practices of PT may be constructive. The following section takes a brief look at a number of approaches found in different Asian countries.

In countries like Japan, South Korea, Bhutan, parts of China and parts of India, teachers are prohibited by law from providing PT to their own students. These laws exist elsewhere as well, such as in Myanmar, but overall the law is ignored (Bray & Lykins, 2012). In these instances, it depends not only on whether a law is in place but whether or not it can be enforced. As such, infrastructure and systems of monitoring and prosecution must also be in place. In other parts of China, as with Cambodia, the practice of teachers providing PT is simply discouraged. Other countries practice a ‘permission if approved’ model where authorization to provide PT may be granted by wider authorities pending a range of conditions. These countries include Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Vietnam (ibid.).

Options for regulation of PT in Cambodia thus include prohibition, discouragement, and “permission if approved”. Discouragement has clearly not worked in the Cambodian case and prohibition may be difficult to enforce, especially without access to remote schools and adequate systems for monitoring. The “permission if approved” approach seems like a dangerous route considering the overall culture of corruption in Cambodian public services, and one that would be conducive to bribes being paid to authorities who could ‘permit’ the practice of PT. In addition to regulatory policies, then, it is important to look to other potential solutions to curb corrupt practices.

## **6. Conclusion: Possible solutions to ending corrupt practices in Cambodian education**

One approach that can be taken alongside regulatory reform is government and civil society advocacy and the provision of information to the Cambodian public. Some activities in this realm are already being implemented in Cambodia, including the participation in advocacy campaigns taking place at the global level. For example, December 9<sup>th</sup> has been designated International Anti-Corruption Day, and October 5<sup>th</sup> World Teacher’s Day (Ehrmann, et al., 2015). PR campaigns on these types of days can be utilized by various groups to raise public awareness of issues facing teachers and to help rally support to end corruption. In addition to these campaigns, Cambodia has worked to strengthen its own stance in opposition to corruption. Cambodia ratified the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) in September 2007 and instituted its own national law on anti-corruption in April 2010 (ibid.).

In addition to raising awareness of the specific issue of corruption, government actors, NGOs and other advocacy groups can pressure policymakers to increase education budgets so to help thwart the economic demand for PT. As mentioned above, the government's decision to substantially raise teacher salaries should help reduce this demand. In addition, in June 2014 there has been a push to switch to transition to the payment of salaries to a banking system to reduce the problem of "facilitation fees" that many teachers have been forced to pay (ibid.).

International aid agencies can contribute to solving the problem as well. While global initiatives such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the United Nations' Millennium Declaration have helped fund the expansion of access to schooling in the developing world, this has often occurred at the expense of quality (UNESCO, 2004). In the Cambodian case this expansion coupled with a lack of quality assurance has helped create a demand for PT. The Education for All (EFA) initiative has an emphasis on improving quality and well as quantity (access), which is described in UNESCO's EFA Global Monitoring Report as including "establishing dialogue with teachers, strengthening accountability and combating corruption" (ibid., p. 23). Key laws and policies targeting education quality and equity, focusing on pedagogy and curriculum interventions as well as teacher management and development may be beneficial in improving the overall efficacy of the public school system, thus further reducing the need for PT.

In addition to these approaches, a number of managerial and institutional strategies that could be implemented at the school level may prove useful. These include establishing clear procedures and responsibilities for school staff, maintaining proper records, implementing policies for effective supervision, training to detect warning signals of corrupt practices, providing channels for enquiries and complaints, and publicizing a system of penalties for non-compliance (Hallak & Poisson, 2007, p 275).

While problematic, the presence of PT in societies operating on the principles of market capitalism are unlikely to disappear. According to Bray and Lykins, "once shadow education structures and habits become entrenched, they are very difficult to change" (2012, p. 72). The challenge then may not be to completely eradicate PT from societies but to find ways to emphasize the positive aspects of PT while limiting the negative ones (ibid.). A number of countries have thus sought to regulate the PT sector in various ways or prohibit corrupt forms of the practice. The case of Cambodia presents a complex set of challenges that include economic, socio-cultural, and historical factors that may make resolving the issue of corruption in public services and the education system especially difficult. However, a number of reforms have been taking place in recent years that should have positive effects. Raising public awareness through advocacy and information, instituting more strict regulations and improving teacher salaries are a few of the approaches that have been tried. As awareness of the problems caused by corruption increases, public perceptions may slowly shift and people may become less tolerant of these practices in the broader system of Cambodian public institutions. As improvements to the quality and equity of public schools increase, the demand for corrupt forms of PT should steadily decline.

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