



Shadow Education in Hong Kong: the Effects of Backwash on Hong Kong Secondary Students



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Abstract

Shadow education is a widely discussed topic in Asian countries since this is a popular way of learning for students. In Asian society, parents have invested a lot of money into shadow education, and they hope that their children can stay competitive or climb up the social ladder by getting good grades in public exams. Shadow education becomes a method that some people believe can help students to perform well in the exam, but is this true? In this paper, the focus is on the backwash effects of shadow education, and whether shadow education can help students to perform well in the exam. 12 secondary school students in this study expressed that shadow education can help them in their public exams and it has some positive effects on their overall exam grades. However, there are only a few studies focused on the effects of shadow education on students' exam performance, and it seems that this area has not been completely discussed in the field of shadow education. As a result, this study hopes to contribute to backwash in shadow education, and whether it can help students to improve their grades in the public exam.

Keywords: Shadow Education; Secondary School Education; Backwash

Introduction

"Backwash" refers to a student's performance which is often judged by assessments [1]. By using tests and exams, those assessments can show the influence of teaching and learning on students. As in shadow education, students have more opportunities to learn concepts that they are not familiar with at school. In Hong Kong shadow education, most of the learning centres adopt a more exam-oriented approach in their curriculum, since the exam results of the students were often emphasised [2]. Some of the parents believe exam results represent everything in Hong Kong society, so they would encourage their students to take more extra classes after school [3]. In most of the tutoring centres in Hong Kong, exam skills are one of the major focuses, since they help to prepare students for the exams [4]. This is similar to other shadow education in Asian countries. For example, cram schools in Japan, which are known as juku, aim to promote test-taking techniques [5]. However, the link between shadow education and exam results is ambiguous. There is not enough study to show backwash in shadow education.

Although focusing on training students' exam skills may help them to perform better in the exam, it may not help students in

their overall learning. Scholars point out that this type of teaching and learning style may create both positive and negative effects on students [6]. For example, students may tend to pay more attention to shadow education classes rather than mainstream school classes [2], since students think shadow education can help them to perform better in the exam. Yung and Yuan [4] define this as a "negative washback". However, there are examples of "positive washback" among Hong Kong students as well in shadow education. Students reported they know most of the questions in public exams since they had numerous practices at learning centres and schools [7]. As a result, students may have mixed feelings towards shadow education.

In this paper, the focus is on backwash in shadow education. It tries to explore whether shadow education can help students to perform better in their exams and whether students' performances in the exam were affected by shadow education. In other literature, only several research studies focused on backwash in shadow education. For instance, both positive and negative washback, those terms can only be found in Yung's and Bray's studies. Therefore, it is an area that should further develop and investigate.

Shadow Education in Hong Kong

Education in Hong Kong is very important since it can be a ticket for a person to find a decent job [6]. Most Hong Kong parents understand the results of their children in the public examination will change their future. Education is one of the main keys that leads to success in Hong Kong, and many believe that those who performed well in the public examination will have a higher chance to apply to a world-class university or even accept by some big organizations [6]. This kind of concept brings a lot of stress to students in Hong Kong, and it has become one of the reasons why shadow education becomes more demanding throughout the years [8]. Bray's study about Hong Kong secondary students' time spent on shadow education mentioned that the reason students in Hong Kong attended extra classes is to fulfil the "no loser" principle [6]. According to Bray [6], Form Six (Grade 12) students in Hong Kong spend 4.76 hours per week in learning centres during the examination season. Furthermore, there were 71.8% of students in 1,624 participants expressed they had taken tutorial classes during the previous 12 months [6]. The results implied that the demanding number of private tutoring is a result of the high competitiveness nature in Hong Kong society. The education system and reality try to create the winners and losers, and students try not to be the losers in this game [6]. As a result, students and parents in Hong Kong would invest a lot in shadow education.

In Hong Kong, there are different types of shadow education, such as 1-on-1 based tutoring, group tutoring (8-10 people per group) and mass tutoring which contains more than 30 people in one classroom [9]. Although there are different selections for students, shadow education is seen as only for training exam skills [7,10,11]. Yung [10] mentioned during his experience as a private tutor, he needed to focus on how to train students to perform well in the exam. In his autobiography, he admitted that the teaching and learning atmosphere may not help to develop students' other abilities, such as reading and listening skills in English [10]. Focusing on exam skills can help students to perform well in the exam, and this is very important in Hong Kong society. As Bray [6] mentioned, Hong Kong students try to avoid becoming the "losers" in the education system. Recently, due to the outbreak of Covid-19, video-recorded classes have become popular in the private tutoring industry in Hong Kong [12]. Students would be watching their tutor's teaching video at home, and this may affect students' learning [13,14]. This is because teachers may not be able to immediately respond to student's questions, and students may not be able to learn effectively. Also, discipline is another concern in online classes [15]. Students may not be working or concentrating during the lessons, and as a result, they may not gain anything after they took the lesson [14]. As this further point out that the mode of shadow education can lead to different learning experience for students, and backwash from students may be different as well.

Backwash in Hong Kong shadow education

As backwash is the main idea in this research, it is important to understand the backwash situation in Hong Kong society. Scholars reported that there is a backwash on mainstream schools because of shadow education. According to Bray and Kobakhidze [16], shadow education can affect students' achievement in regular schooling. They used the Third (or Trends in) International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data to analyse the effectiveness of shadow education on students' performance. However, both scholars concluded that it is difficult to see whether shadow education is the only factor that affects students' performance in the exam. Other scholars claimed that the "backwash" of shadow education creates more workloads for students and it may increase the financial pressure on families [17,18]. This can produce educational inequalities [7]. According to Bray [19], the reasons behind all these are that students do not understand the concepts, and they need to apply for more classes. As a result, these activities would increase families' financial pressure and students' workloads.

Another type of "backwash" from shadow education is related to the relationship between students and mainstream school teachers. Studies showed that shadow education made students listen to private tutors more than mainstream school teachers (Aurini & Davies, 2004; Paramita, 2015). Yung and Yuan [4] further explained this phenomenon in Hong Kong. Because students think shadow education can help them to perform better in public exams, they tend to pay more attention to private tutorial classes [4]. As for mainstream schools, teachers focus more on developing students as a whole [11]. Students may not feel the knowledge that they learnt at mainstream school is useful, and that is why students may behave differently.

However, studies related to backwash in shadow education do not have much from scholars. Most of the studies show students may have different feelings towards teachers and private tutors, and some of the scholars point out that backwash may lead to social inequality in Hong Kong. There are still some areas that have not been touched, for example, whether secondary school students' exam performance will be affected by shadow education. According to Gupta [20], the amount of time spent in the tutorial centre can show the backwash effect in shadow education. From a student's perspective, the exercises or materials that they did in tutorial class may or may not help them in an exam. This is something that can fill in the gap in shadow education. By achieving this goal, several questions were the focus of this paper.

- i. What do students think about shadow education? Can those classes help them to do well in exams? (backwash in shadow education)
- ii. Is time spent a factor in shadow education? Will it affect backwash in shadow education?

Methodology

Backwash can be recognized as something students understood from the lessons, and in this study, the focus is on investigating whether shadow education can leave some impressions on students and help them to perform better in the exam. Furthermore, another layer of this research is to find out whether time spent on shadow education would affect backwash in shadow education. This study is qualitative, and students' opinions will be compared and contrasted through thematic analysis.

Participants and settings

The participants of this study were new secondary school graduates, and they have all participated in the 2021/22 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary School Education Examination (HKDSE). 12 students participated in this study, and they shared their opinion about shadow education and their public exam experience. The participants had taken private tutoring courses to prepare for their HKDSE exam, but their time spent on their private tutoring courses was different. The reason for choosing new graduates is due to they may still remember their experience in participating in their DSE exam. They may provide a more accurate opinion on whether private tutoring can help them in their public exam. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study, and they had signed an approved consent form before taking the interview.

The interviews were conducted from September 2022 to December 2022, and interviewees were individually invited to a conference room at one of the private institutions in Hong Kong. A semi-structured interview was used since it allows interviewees to express other thoughts about this topic and come up with new ideas for this study [21]. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese since it is the native language of all the participants in this study. This also allows participants to express themselves freely and they were more willing to share their thoughts during the interviews. All the names were codified, so it can protect the interviewees' privacy. Recorder and field notes were used for the interview sessions to record data and relevant information. There was a notification from the researcher before the interview. If the interviewees refused to be recorded, field notes would be used to mark down the interviewee's opinions and other relevant behaviours.

Data analysis

In analyzing interviews, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis can identify patterns and map out the similarities and differences within the data set [22]. Furthermore, it can cover cultural, social and structural contexts in qualitative data [23], so it is a very comprehensive method to analyse interview data. The data were analysed through several steps.

In the first step, data were transcribed and read through to identify themes. This allows researchers to understand briefly the data, and it is a very important step for the coming stage [23].

In the second step, the data was codified and organized for later analysis. It is important that all the codes in the study did not overlap [23]. According to Braun and Clarke [24], codes may have a different interpretation based on researchers, so researchers also find support from the text to support those codes.

Third step, potential themes inside the coded and collected data were identified. At this point, the themes should be closely related [22].

The fourth step, revising the themes to see whether they were appropriate and I checked the coded data was put in the correct theme. The data inside each theme should be coherent and related [22]. At this point, themes or data can be modified, such as combined, added or divided [23], so that the data can be well-organized and placed in the correct theme.

In the fifth step, I defined the themes and named them. This is to check whether there are overlapping themes. This can also help me to understand the data and provide unique insights.

In the sixth step, I was able to write out the final analysis and description of the findings [22]. However, the report should just report the data [25]. The report should provide a clear and logical sense, and researchers need to show the reasons for the selection of the themes [22].

The use of thematic analysis can help researchers to summarize, point out key ideas and interpret the data sets [23].

Ethical considerations

Before the research procedures, participants were notified by email about the research run-down, and they could exit from the research if they felt uncomfortable. This could ensure that all the participants understand the particular research situation and that all their information and opinion were only for academic purposes [26]. Participant's personal information, such as names, and educational background were codified, so that the findings in this research will not leak their personal information. All the ethical procedures had been approved by the ethics committee at Bristol University.

As from previous research studies, names were something that researchers need to pay extra attention to [4]. All the names in this research were pseudonyms, as this can protect the participants' true identity. By doing this, it can also help respect the person's autonomy [27]. Participants did not need to worry about revealing themselves to the general public during the interview.

A consent form was also provided to each participant. In other related research studies, informed consent was used before any research procedures. The consent form is to deal with human

subjects [28]. The form is to confirm whether the participants are willing to participate in this research, and participants should understand all the risks that may have in this research. They had the right to refuse in participating any unwanted procedures, since the form is to protect their rights [27]. In this study, informed consent was used, and all the participants understood the procedures and potential risks in this research.

During each interview, I gave a short briefing to each participant, so that the participant could clearly understand the coming procedures. Then, I asked for my participant's permission whether this interview could be recorded. As recording can be sensitive and may affect the results of the research, this step aims to inform my participants beforehand.

Findings

Starting with the quality of shadow education, most of the participants indicated they have a choice of choosing either a live lesson or a video-recorded lesson in their learning centres (Table 1). The quality of those lessons was quite similar which was not very good. The only difference was someone presented in person while the other one was mainly related to watching recorded lessons. Some participants indicated that at the end of the lesson, students may not have the chance to ask questions or even during the lesson, and they cannot raise any questions. Therefore, most of the participants indicated the lesson quality was not very good. It was more like a TED talk or a stand-up performance.

However, a small number of participants who did not attend those franchise learning centres indicated they had more time to ask questions and worked with their tutors during the lessons. When they had difficulties in their learning, their tutors were willing to help them. As a result, they were quite satisfied with their lesson experience.

As for the time spent in shadow education, all of the participants had taken at least 2 lessons per week. Some of the participants indicated they took 4 lessons per week, so they were fully occupied during weekdays. No matter 2 lessons or 4 lessons, participants indicated the reasons for taking those courses is due to peer pressure, parents' expectation and their self-expectation. However, they all agreed that the quality of shadow education is more important than how much time is spent on tutoring. Some of the participants indicated that "If I can get tips or hints for my public exam, then I don't have to spend a lot of time studying or find another learning centre to do a further study". As a result, time spent on shadow education is not that important for students.

In terms of the Hong Kong education system, all of the participants agreed that the Hong Kong education system is result-oriented. Some indicated that if they failed the DSE exam, they would have been seen as 'losers'. For those who passed DSE and continued to study at university would be recognized as 'winners', since the general public may think undergraduates will

have a higher possibility to find a good job and earn a lot of money. A few of them indicated Hong Kong education focuses too much on memorizing and it cannot help to select elicits.

Regarding the usefulness of mainstream school lessons, all the participants mentioned mainstream school lessons are essential because they can teach them new knowledge. They also mentioned that they can learn different skills, such as communication skills and other practical skills through mainstream school lessons. In tutorial centres, they tended to do past papers and exercises, and they had little chance to learn new knowledge from these centres.

Some of the participants believe there is social inequality in Hong Kong's shadow education. One of the participants mentioned if you have more money, you could choose to attend live tutoring sessions and you can find more resources to help to improve your grades. This is a sign of unfairness in society. Furthermore, tutors also provide different services according to money. One of the participants provided an example, and that is related to tutors opening another session for those who are willing to pay extra. That class was for students to ask questions, but it is not open to everyone.

Peer pressure was mentioned in this study. Participants expressed that their decision in taking extra classes after school was also affected by their peers. Some participants mentioned when they saw their friends taking more classes, they can feel the pressure. As a result, they would go out and find more classes to take. Some of them even mentioned they often compared their exam results, and they do not want to lose the competition. That is why they tend to take more classes so that they can remain their competitiveness.

Finally, the last theme inside the data is parents' expectations. Participants mentioned parents often mention their expectations of them, such as "I want you to study in university" or "It would be great if you could study at Hong Kong U[university]". These expectations made students not want to upset their parents, so they want to take more classes to improve their grades in the public exam. Some parents would even take the initiative to help their children to apply for more tutoring classes. They believe this can help them to get into the university or to be successful in the public exam.

Discussion

The impressions of shadow education

The findings from the interviews show that shadow education aims to train students for exams. Being the "winner" and getting good grades is equivalent in Hong Kong [4], and in this study, students still have this impression of shadow education. Most of the activities in tutorial centres are working on past papers and tutors only focus on exam skills. Although Curriculum Development Council [29] promoted "learning to learn" in education, it does

not change the fact that exam result is important for students. Students in this study expressed that the tutorial centre is the place for them to improve their grades, and tutors should only focus on teaching them how to perform well in the public exam. This can help to increase the chance for them to go to university and do well in public exams [14,30]. Therefore, the main function of shadow education in Hong Kong is still assisting students in taking their exams [11]. The impressions from students in this study match with previous literature in this field.

However, some participants mentioned shadow education in Hong Kong is more related to making money rather than helping students to improve their academic results. A lot of big brands or franchise learning centres in Hong Kong spent millions of dollars on advertisements and commercials because they want to promote private tutors like “Kings” or “Gods” in their subject area [9,10]. By using exaggerated advertisements, learning centres were able to attract more students to join their schools. Those “Kings” or “Gods” use slang and sometimes vulgar language during their lessons, so students would be more interested. Students in this study mentioned they think those private tutors are like pop stars and it is difficult to reach them or talk to them during the lessons. Furthermore, the learning centre would charge differently for the lesson price. For live lessons, it may cost HKD 1000 per lesson whereas a recorded lecture may only cost HKD 800. Even if you paid HKD 1000, you could not talk to your tutor. Moreover, since there are 50 to 100 people in a room, you may not have the chance to ask questions during the lesson. Students expressed those tutors may just give a presentation to inspire students, and the real teaching and marking assignments were given to their teaching assistants. Therefore, students who paid all those money may not learn anything at all. Shadow education in Hong Kong is often mentioned by scholars as a company rather than an institution [10,15], since earning money may be the top priority for most of the learning centres in Hong Kong. This further proves the quality of Hong Kong shadow education is not standardized. Instead, Learning centres are willing to put more resources into advertisements rather than maintaining teaching quality, so this can promote their brand and company image to students. Tutors, on the other hand, focus more on exam practices and tips to help students to pass their public exams. After the public exam result release day, tutorial centres will include those who got an “A” in the exam in their advertisements to promote their learning centres. As a result, students may have an impression that shadow education in Hong Kong is more focused on how to earn money rather than how to help students to learn better or effectively.

Backwash on shadow education

Backwash on students’ studies can be found in this study. Backwash refers to whether students could use the learnt materials in their exams. In past studies, scholars focused backwash on students’ and mainstream school teachers’ relationships or students’ and private tutors’ relationships [4,7,20]. However, in

this study, some of the participants expressed some of the exam questions in DSE were similar to their practice materials at their learning centres. Because of this, they were able to know the answers and felt confident about their test results. One of the main functions of private tutorial centres in Hong Kong is to improve students’ exam skills. Some of the tutorial centres would provide a lot of mock exams for students to practice and students may benefit from them. For example, students would be very familiar with the exam format. This is a sense of backwash that can be found in the public exam of students. Some of the participants in this study mentioned some of the exam questions this year are similar to previous exam papers. As a result, because of taking classes in the learning centre, students can do better in their public exams. This is a sign of backwash in shadow education.

As for the backwash on shadow education between private tutors and students relationship, the participants expressed their relationship with their tutors is distant. This is because students feel those tutors in big brand learning centres are like “Kings” and “Gods”, they feel those people are “untouchable”. This result contradicts Yung’s studies in 2019, as those studies point out students feel closer to their tutors. The reason behind this is because of the teaching mode at a big brand learning centre in Hong Kong. Most of the lessons in those centres were like lecture settings, and the interaction between teachers and students was not that much. Furthermore, those companies promote tutors like “Kings” and “Gods”, so students may feel they are not able to reach their tutors. As in Yung’s studies [2,10], some of the participants may come from smaller learning centres, and they may have different experiences with their tutors. Those lesson settings were like 8 people at one table, and this may increase the chance for students to interact with their tutors. As a result, some of them may feel closer to their tutors. In this study, students expressed that when they saw tutors after the lessons, they were not willing to talk to them or ask them questions relating to the subject. They felt they were not close and they were afraid their tutors may feel disgusted. I think this has a big part in learning centre promotion techniques since it makes students feel distant from their tutors at the learning centre.

As for students’ and mainstream school teachers’ relationship, they felt they are closer to them. Interestingly, participants in this research expressed they have been studying and working with the teachers at school for 6 years, so they can easily approach most of the teachers at school. In this research, mainstream school teachers’ roles are like academic role models for participants, and they provide knowledge and a sense of stability for students in secondary school. This contradicts the research in previous studies from Yung and Yuan in 2018. An example provided by a participant in research shows how close students and mainstream school teachers can be in real life. After the DSE exam, the whole class would invite their class teacher and other subjects’ teachers to join them for lunch or dinner. As for private tutors, it is more like a business relationship. After the exam, participants may not

want to contact them. This is something that contradicts previous research by other scholars.

Time spent in shadow education

In this study, participants said they spent at least two days a week in tutorial centres, and they hope this can help them with their public exam results. However, they raised several problems regarding the time spent in shadow education. Tiredness and money are the major concerns, and they feel that time spent in shadow education has nothing to do with the final results of public exams. First, participants indicated some students attended four days a week in shadow education, and the exam results were more or less the same compared to those who spent two to three days in shadow education. Furthermore, participants expressed that due to the demanding mainstream school lessons, students may already use up most of their energy. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to stay focused in the tutorial class. More importantly, students may not absorb anything during extra classes.

Second, every class that they took needs to pay. Money is an issue for students since they did not have a lot to spend. For those mentioned in this research, they need to spend at least HKD 3000 every month on tutoring, and this has given them a lot of pressure. Therefore, they cannot spend a lot of time on shadow education because of money issues. In summing up the idea about the relationship between time spent in shadow education and student's academic result, participants expressed this is about the "quality of shadow education" not the "quantity of shadow education".

Conclusion and limitation

In this research, the focus was on newly graduated secondary school students, and the reason for choosing this group of participants is to recall their memories of the public exam. The focus of this research is to find out whether backwash exists in shadow education. By looking at the participants' data, they expressed backwash does exist in shadow education, since some of the participants mentioned the questions were similar to those they had seen in tutorial schools. Furthermore, this research was able to confirm the backwash effect on students, tutors and teachers' relationships [4]. Although the results contradict previous research studies, they were able to explain different kinds of shadow education students may have their preference for teachers. This can help to suggest an area for further shadow education studies, which is related to the type of shadow education that may affect students' and tutors' relationships. Furthermore, in this research, social inequality can also be found, and this has been widely discussed by many other scholars [20,30,31].

A limitation of this study is the number of participants. There were only 12 participants in this study, so the results may not be enough to cover all the opinions of other students in Hong Kong. However, the data in this research suggested backwash exists in shadow education. This can contribute to the area of this field. In

the future, researchers may consider expanding the sample size and investigating a boarder picture of this topic [32,33].

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