

Cultural and social factors determining the use of private tutoring services in Poland

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Abstract

This article presents the results of are search based on a sample survey, random survey questionnaire, carried out on the overall population of first-year students of the University of Rzeszow following first-cycle and long-cycle programmes. The aim of this article was to identify cultural and social factors determining the use of private tutoring services by the surveyed students. The University of Rzeszow is the largest public institution of higher education in the south-eastern part of Poland and educates students in 13 faculties. This research has provided interesting insights into the discussion on the development of informal education in the form of additional, paid lessons in Central and Eastern Europe and their impact on the formal education system functioning in the countries of this part of Europe.

Keywords: System of education, cultural capital, private tutoring, higher education.

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1. Introduction

The education system draws attention of local authorities and educational institutions, researchers, students, their parents and the media, to name just a few. Its primary attention is focused on educational institutions, its employees' emolument, core curriculum, the age of starting formal education or demographic declines and growths that decide about the number of students at different stages of education. In every society, the formal education system has to fulfil certain functions of social, cultural and economic nature. It must be remembered that the financing of the education system from the preschool level to secondary level education is one of the most important items on the list of expenditure budgets of local government units. Apart from the official education system, there is an informal trend present and it is called 'shadow education system' (Bray, 2012) or 'grey zone of education' (Szewczyk-Jarocka & Nowacka, 2012). In recent years, a lot of myths and controversies have aroused around private tutoring. Tutoring is a complex phenomenon, which proves difficult for unanimous assessment. On the one hand, it allows students to strengthen their skills; on the other hand, it contributes to the deepening of inequalities in the access to education (Putkiewicz, 2005, p.2–3). Some experts dealing with this issue claim that private tutoring has become a new form of segregation (Sadura, 2012, p.22).

During the People's Republic of Poland, private tutoring and all the issues associated with it was a taboo, and the school was presented as the ideal institution that caters to every student's need and does not necessitate any complement in the form of additional extramural classes. Private tutoring was considered illegal and harmful, and the press portrayed it as a relic of a noble and bourgeois past. An increased interest in private tutoring services was recorded in the 1960s of the 20th century. The reasons for this state of affairs should be seen in the state-introduced preferential credits for higher education for working-class and peasant youths (Szewczyk-Jarocka & Nowacka, 2012, p.14). The advent of the free market caused that after 1989 private tutoring became something natural and even desirable in view of inadequacy of mass education of young Poles compared to dynamically emerging needs of a rapidly modernising society. 'Metropolitan Poland' and dynamically enriching families, often characterised by a deficit of cultural capital, wanted to quickly remedy their children's educational deficiencies by means of extra, paid lessons. Since the collapse of the socialist bloc in the early 1990s, there can be seen a clear trend to popularise private education, not only in Poland but also in other countries of Central and South-eastern Europe and Central Asia. Today, in these countries, private tutoring is offered in various forms, as lessons conducted by individuals or as preparatory courses offered by public and private educational institutions. These forms of non-formal education penetrate into different levels of the education system, from kindergartens to secondary schools and universities. A strong interest in private tutoring and preparatory courses made them a major segment of the educational market, offering employment for diverse groups of service providers, such as school teachers, university professors and specialists (Silova, 2010, p.327).

2. Theoretical context of the research

The term private tutoring has many definitions. Private tutoring is defined as paid school subject lessons. Therefore, tutoring includes individual classes, group lessons, classes conducted in tutoring schools (especially popular in the Far East) and preparatory courses for universities (Putkiewicz, 2005, p.2). One of the better-known researchers of this phenomenon, Mark Bray defines it as private lessons given by a teacher to one or more students, as well as lessons, courses and classes conducted in specially established evening schools and even holiday schools (Bray, 1999). An important feature of private tutoring is that it relates to the curriculum content of academic education covered by exam standards for the mother tongue, mathematics, history, science and languages instructed in a school of foreign languages. According to the accepted definition, private tutoring does not refer to knowledge extending classes, complementary to the academic set of subjects (e.g. courses in dance, music, visual arts or sports), unless they are subjects taught at school (e.g. music or ballet school) (Szewczyk-Jarocka & Nowacka, 2012, p.14).

Private tutoring is a widespread and global phenomenon, compared in its scale to the institutional teaching (Dang & Rogers, 2008). This is largely due to changes in the educational system and changes taking place in the social system. On the one hand, dysfunctions of the educational system, on the other hand, inflation of diplomas, a growing competition for high social positions, increased importance of meritocracy and the pursuit of success create a positive context for private tutoring (Dlugosz, 2012, p. 89–90). According to studies carried by the Open Society Institute, in post-socialist countries, including Poland, there is a new buoyant tutoring market called ‘the third sector of education’ (Madalinska-Michalak, 2014, p.260). All this has its origins in demographic changes that take place in these societies and social changes, which are the consequences of systemic transformation. In Poland, since the beginning of the 21st century, we have seen an increase in the number of students of high schools at the expense of vocational schools and the introduction of external secondary school leaving examinations (Matura exam) in 2005. The advent of the knowledge society and the growing importance of meritocracy made of education a ‘commodity’. Youth and their parents attach great importance to education. They treat it as a tool, cherishing a belief that it can help in finding a good job, achieving a high social status or a high quality of life. A diploma, and especially a diploma of a prestigious field of study at a renowned university, is now becoming a very desirable commodity among the young generation of Poles. Access to the best credentials has those students who achieve the best results in a secondary school-leaving exam (Matura) (Dlugosz, 2012, p. 88). According to the estimates of a journalist from the magazine ‘Puls Biznesu’, private tutoring market in Poland was worth nearly four billion PLN in September 2016. It should be noted, however, that this is an estimated amount, as there is no detailed calculations of the Polish tutoring market value (Zatonski, 2016). The massification of private tutoring was undoubtedly triggered by the reform of the education system introduced in Poland in 1999. The reform changed the ways of assessing students and schools. Middle school tests and secondary school-leaving exams are assessed by external examiners. This has a direct impact on the functioning of a school and implementation of the curriculum. It conduces an increased pressure on teachers and students because the results of middle school and secondary school tests decide about the admission to secondary schools (middle school test) and universities (Matura exam). A resulting impression is that school instruction is in many cases provided in the form of preparation for the best possible test writing (also Matura tests), since the better the results and the greater the number of students accepted to higher levels of education, the greater the reputation and the higher the position of a school (discord, 2011, p. 14). The change is also evident in the ‘market’ competition between schools which – whether they like it or not – take part in school rankings organised by different national and regional institutions. The higher the rank, the more candidates or students will there be. This is one of the indicators of popularisation in our country of a market approach to education (at all levels). Education measured by a certificate or diploma has a market value and it decides about the individual’s life chances. It requires investment, either in the form of tuition fees for education (studies), or a prior investment in additional classes (private tutoring, language courses and other). These expenses out of parents’ pockets keep rising. At the same time, parents assess the level of educational services and make decisions about the choice of one school or another, taking into account the ‘relevance of investment’ (Niezgoda, 2011, p.14). A similar situation to the Polish one took place in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Accumulation of socio-political changes in the region contributed to the growth of interest in non-formal education system, bringing new learning opportunities for many young people and at the same time limiting educational prospects of many others. In particular, it is important to pay attention to several educational changes common for this part of Europe, which were highlighted with particular force at the beginning of the 1990s of the previous centuries. First, there was a reduction in public spending on education, while increasing private spending on education. Second, there was a shift in the status of a teacher; third, there was a change in the quality of education in public schools; and fourth, there was a growing demand for higher education related to the educational boom at this level of academic instruction (Silova, 2010, p.329).

Among the various theoretical approaches proposed by social sciences, an interesting proposition in terms of the changes in the educational system and their subsequent consequences can be Robert Merton’s theory (Dlugosz, 2012, p.90). Merton’s theory of the social structure and anomie assumes

that changes may cause chaos, disorganisation and a state of cultural anomie. Such a change in the existing order was the reform of education in 1999. Its effects can include a change in the examination rules and external evaluation of exams by substituting the entrance exams with the results of secondary school-leaving exam (Putkiewicz, 2005, p.149). Transformation resulted in the emergence of a phenomenon of demand for private tutoring on the part of students and their parents. Anomie of educational system can cause a development of various adaptation strategies. Students benefiting from private tutoring will apply innovative strategies. Their goal is to achieve high school results and a means for this purpose is private tutoring. In this way, secondary school graduates can actively ‘fight’ with the anomie of the educational system. Unfortunately, this favourable situation is reserved for students with high social status. First, they are conscious of a failing education system and the resulting risks. Second, they have adequate financial resources that can be allocated to private tutoring (Dlugosz, 2012, p.90). The reasons for a decision to use private tutoring services can be considered from different perspectives: those of a student, parent, teacher or the entire education system. The main reasons that guide young people to the decision about taking up private tutoring are as follows:

- private tutoring is treated as a ‘cure for all evil,’ rather than providing help in learning in order to overcome difficult issues; it is meant to supersede any own activity of a student. When something is difficult for a student or incomprehensible, it is enough to call a tutor to avoid the effort of creative thinking or working on the problem;
- serious problems with some school subject. Tutoring in this case can reduce or remove any deficits of knowledge, reduce the risk of school failure due to a lack of knowledge or a school backlog;
- private tutoring is meant to deepen the knowledge in a field that is of particular interest for a student;
- striving for education, which concerns mostly secondary school students. Good results are seen as an educational passport to a successful career, prestigious job and high wages. Young people naturally soak up what they hear: you have to climb to the top and acquire skills to earn money afterwards (Mackowiak, 2003, p.54–55);
- building self-esteem. Students benefiting from tutoring ‘feel better’ because they are convinced that, thanks to the extra lessons, their exams scores will be higher. This belief makes them take tests and examinations with more confidence, which according to the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy is likely to be reflected in better results (Bartosz & Bloch, 2009, p.117).

What motivates parents is:

- a subjective belief that their children cannot prepare themselves for exams and fear that their children’s peers have a greater knowledge and obtain better results than their offspring as they benefit from the help of a tutor;
- the advancement of knowledge related to the interests of the child (Siadak, 2009, p.161);
- ensuring a good start for the future. According to parents, thanks to the child’s education, he or she has a chance of a good job and prosperity. This belief is a specific attempt to protect their child against unemployment;
- the lack of time to help your child in homework or inability to clarify the issues that bother him/her. This is due to a conception shared by many Polish parents that being a parent requires providing your child with all possible material goods, including learning support (Mackowiak, 2003, p.56);
- lack or limited confidence in the public education system, which in the opinion of parents incorrectly prepares for external examinations;
- fear of a possible educational failure, defined as a school failure and not obtaining a satisfactory mark or final exam result. Tutors become an excuse to shift responsibility for the academic performance of the child to them (Bartosz & Bloch, 2009, p.117).

The reasons for the use of tutoring assistance should also be seen in the education system that actually produces it. One of the allegations most often made against the Polish school is that: 'the school provides poor education.' Covering the material by the teacher during a school lesson is believed to be more important than making the student understand it. The school does not prepare the student for independent learning, it blind crams definitions and rules, but does not call for their understanding. It implements too broad a curriculum and neither does it give a chance to the teacher to provide a complete transfer of knowledge nor to the student to master it (Bartosz & Bloch, 2009, p.116). An important aspect of this phenomenon from the teacher's point of view is also low wages, which make them engage in additional activities, such as private tutoring (Siadak, 2009, p.161). Teachers make money on the side by giving private lessons, and this state of affairs does not arouse anyone's surprise; after all, such a form of earning money is consistent with their education (Bartosz & Bloch, 2009, p.116).

3. Methods

The study included full-time first-year students, following the first-cycle programme and long-cycle master programme in all fields of study at the University of Rzeszow. The study was conducted in late December 2016 and January 2017 using a sample survey. The data collection was based on the random survey questionnaire technique. The research sample was comprehensive in nature since all students present in the class were covered by the study. A total of 1,404 students were surveyed.

4. Results and discussion

When making observations of social reality and referring to the analysis of literature and theoretical concepts in this article, the following hypotheses were formulated, which are verified in the course of this research:

1. Private tutoring is more frequently used by secondary school graduates from cities or towns rather than those from rural areas. The size of the city/town has an impact on the use of this form of additional education.
2. Tutoring is a form of investment in human capital and, therefore, in this form of education invested primarily are those parents who have a degree of higher education (especially educated mothers) and parents with secondary education.
3. Seeking tutoring assistance involves some family cultural capital. It was often used by students with a higher cultural capital.
4. Private tutoring is more frequently sought by secondary school graduates who plan to study at prestigious faculties, which draw the largest number of applicants.
5. Benefiting from private tutoring is related to financial possibilities of parents.

Private tutoring classes before Matura exams were more often attended by girls (52.0%) than boys (43.1%). This is a factor which has a significant statistical correlation with attending private tutoring classes or free-of-charge additional lessons ($\gamma = 0.077$; $p < 0.005$). The use of private tutoring is also dependant on a place of residence ($\gamma = 0.132$; $p < 0.0001$). Private tutoring services were more often used by persons who lived in a city/town (57.7%) while attending secondary school, than those residing in rural areas (44.4%). It turns out that the size of a city/town differentiated the intensity of tutoring services only to a slight degree (Figure 1).

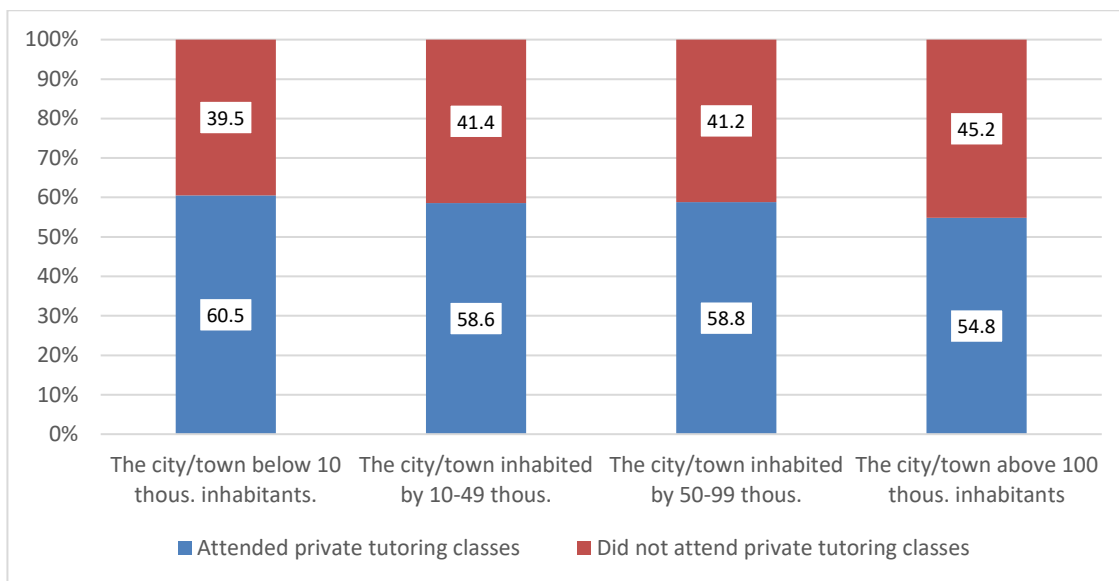


Figure 1. Benefiting from private tutoring and the size of a city/town (%), Source: own calculations (n = 572)

Another factor that determined the use of private tutoring services by first-year students of the University of Rzeszow was their parents’ education. Figure 2 shows a detailed schedule of the analysed dependency.

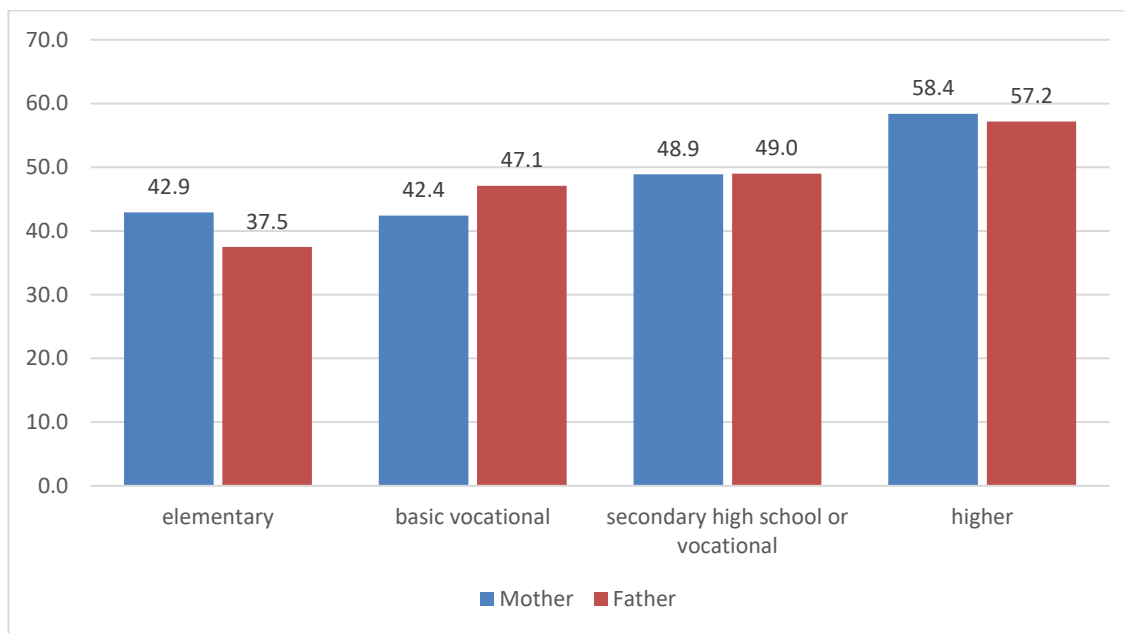


Figure 2. Students benefiting from private tutoring according to their parents’ level of education, Source: own calculations (n = 1,342)

Another’s education was statistically stronger in determining the son or daughter’s attendance, in addition to paid activities like preparing for the Matura exam ($\gamma = 0.122$; $p < 0.0001$) than the father’s education ($\gamma = 0.088$; $p < 0.005$). As the breakdown shows, parents with secondary or higher education more often chose to send their children to private tutoring classes than parents with vocational or elementary education.

The measure of the cultural capital acquired in the family home, which this study bases on, is represented by three factors: parents’ education, the number of books at home and the number of books read over the last year (including e-books), excluding textbooks and academic set books. Based on the answers to these four questions, the author developed a holistic indicator, which consisted of the father’s education (25.0% weight), the mother’s education (25.0% weight), the number of books in the family home (25.0% weight) and the number of read books (25.0% weight). Cultural capital is interrelated with the use of private tutoring. The analysis showed that there is a statistically significant correlation between the level of cultural capital and attending paid extramural classes preparing for the secondary school-leaving exams in subjects included in the school curriculum ($\gamma = 0.119$; $p < 0.0001$). A higher level of cultural capital was related to a greater participation of the respondents in private tutoring.

The analysis covered the relationship between the use of private tutoring and young people’s desire to study in prestigious fields of studies which draw the largest number of candidates. As a result, the author could select the following fields that attracted special interest of candidates for studies. The most popular fields of study at the University of Rzeszow in the academic year 2016–2017 were medicine, food science (first-cycle programme), physiotherapy (first-cycle programme), pedagogics (first-cycle programme), nursing (first-cycle programme), English philology (first-cycle programme), economics (first-cycle programme), law and administration (first-cycle programme) and obstetrics (first-cycle programme) (Kulczycka, 2016). All fields of study which the surveyed first-year students followed were divided into two dichotomous categories. Ten most popular fields of study created one analytical category and the other fields were included into the other category. Studying in one of the ten most popular fields of study has been associated with the use of private tutoring ($\gamma = 0.137$; $p < 0.0001$). The persons who were admitted to one of the most popular fields of study were found to more often benefit from private tutoring (55.6% of the respondents attended private lessons) than those who studied in other fields (41.7% of the respondents attended private lessons). Variations in the level of use of private tutoring services by the respondents were also observed in the breakdown into the fields of studies grouped by the domains of sciences in which they are situated (Table 1).

Table 1. The use of private tutoring and the field or domain of science (%)

Field, domain of science	The use of private tutoring preparing for secondary school-leaving exam
	yes
Humanities	41.6
Social Sciences	51.6
Economics	49.4
Legal Sciences	64.2
Biology Sciences	46.9
Technology and Agriculture Sciences	35.9
Medical and Health Sciences	58.6
Physical Education	50.0
Art	40.0

Own calculations ($n = 1,382$).

Paid extra lessons preparing for the Matura exam were usually sought by students of legal sciences, medical and health sciences and social sciences. The least likely to extend their knowledge at additional, paid lessons were students of technical and agricultural sciences and the students of humanities.

The factor that determined the use of private tutoring by the first-year students of the University of Rzeszow was the financial situation of the family ($\gamma = 0.154$; $p < 0.0001$). The better the financial situation, the higher the level of using tutoring assistance by students. The financial situation is a clear

barrier to the use of additional paid lessons. This is also visible in the case of choice of studies. There is a statistically significant association between the financial situation of the family and the student's field of studies. The fields of studies considered the most popular (and attended) were chosen by persons with good financial situation ($\gamma = 0.111$; $p < 0.001$). In the sub-population of students who studied in the fields which the largest number of applicants want to be enrolled in, there was a correlation between the financial situation and attending private tutoring classes ($\gamma = 0.138$; $p < 0.005$). People with a good financial situation more often declared the use of private tutoring services than people with an average or poor financial situation. In the sub-population of respondents studying in less popular fields, the level of using private tutoring remained at a similar level. Overall, in this sub-population, the number of respondents benefiting from tutoring assistance amounted to 42.3%.

These data may indicate a disturbing fact that access to prestigious fields of study requires the knowledge acquired during school lessons to be extended with additional paid classes. Those whose financial situation does not allow the use of private tutoring have a lesser chance of applying for the fields of study most desired by secondary school graduates. The chances of being enrolled in these fields of study have only the most talented persons whose financial situation does not allow the use of tutoring. Less talented individuals from less economically advantaged families have limited chances.

5. Conclusion and implications

The surveys carried out among the first-year students of the University of Rzeszow have shown that there are sociocultural conditions of using private tutoring. The number of students who benefited from private tutoring in preparation for the Matura exams and those who did not attend them was practically identical. Slightly more than half the respondents declared that they did not attend any additional paid lessons in curriculum subjects, which were included in the thematic scope of the secondary school-leaving exams (50.1%). This result shows that private tutoring for the secondary school-leaving exams is a common phenomenon and keeps a permanent – shadow – place in the Polish education system.

The research allowed for verification of the preliminary assumptions. The hypothesis that private tutoring lessons are more often used by urban secondary school graduates than those from rural areas has been confirmed. The place of residence is a factor that clearly impacts benefiting from additional paid lessons. The analysis of the research material shows that living in rural areas limits the use of private tutoring assistance. An interesting correlation was found when analysing the relationship between the size of a city/town and attendance in additional paid lessons. This form of complementing their knowledge was more often sought by the students who in the period of their secondary school attendance lived in the smallest towns. The size of the city gets larger, while the percentage of those benefiting from private tutoring gets smaller. This can be explained by the fact that secondary school students residing in major urban centres can count on a better quality school education, and therefore there is no need for them to complement their education with additional paid lessons. The factor that strongly determines the use of private tutoring is the parents' education. It is clear that for parents who are holders of at least secondary education degrees, private tutoring is a form of investment in the human capital of their children. This relationship can be seen particularly clearly in the case of mothers who have a university degree. Using private tutoring services involves the family's cultural capital. There is a relationship between the level of the cultural capital and attending additional paid classes. They were more often chosen by students with higher cultural capital. This research has also shown that private tutoring services are more often used by secondary school graduates who plan to study in prestigious fields which the largest number of applicants seek to be enrolled in. Winning the student logbook in the most popular fields of study is largely associated with attending additional paid activities. A good result obtained at the school-leaving exams is a kind of admission ticket to the prestigious fields of study. The research also confirmed the hypothesis that the use of private tutoring services is associated with the financial possibilities of parents. Students,

whose family financial situation allows it, benefit from additional paid classes. This research revealed the fact signalled in the article that the access to prestigious fields of study requires the knowledge acquired during school lesson to be complemented by additional paid classes. Those whose financial situation does not allow the use of private tutoring services have lower chances in applying to the fields of study that are most desired by secondary school graduates.

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