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And then there were three: (re-)distributing educational responsibilities in response to the growing use of shadow education in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, as in many countries, the use of private tutoring ('shadow education') has increased substantially in the Netherlands. Educators and policy makers are raising questions regarding the role that shadow education may play in relation to the traditional configuration of the home and school being assigned the responsibility for children's education. In five mixed focus groups ($n = 43$), the authors explored what key players – teachers, parents and tutors – consider to be their own and each other's pedagogical and educational responsibilities. Results show that two related tensions arise during role allocation: first, the normative question of whether a tripartite configuration which includes tutoring should be accepted or defied; and, second, concerns about tutoring not being equally accessible to students from all social classes. The study indicates that stakeholders' explication of mutual perspectives on individual and shared roles may yield new schemes of cooperation that are based on collaborative responsibility, rather than competition about individual responsibilities, for student learning.

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Private tutoring; shadow education; educational responsibilities; the Netherlands

Introduction

Throughout most of the twentieth century, schools, governments and parents were primarily responsible for children's learning and development (Epstein, 1995; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 1997). With the turn of the millennium, a new player has become increasingly visible: private supplementary tutoring, also known as 'shadow education'. To some extent, various forms of tutoring have always been present in students' school careers (Bray, 1999), with varying global prevalence. In East Asia and Southern Europe, for instance, shadow education has long been a regular feature of academic life (Park et al., 2016; Zhang & Bray, 2020). In Western and Northern Europe, it is gradually becoming a more

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common and increasingly institutionalised educational practice (Bray, 2021; Zhang & Bray, 2020). Questions then surface about the roles shadow education does or does not fulfil vis-à-vis families and schools.

Such questions are particularly relevant, since access to shadow education depends on families' financial resources (Park et al., 2016). There are increasing concerns that growing participation in shadow education results in greater educational inequalities between students from high- and low-income families (Choi & Park, 2016). Given that shadow education may grant some students a considerable edge over others, some educators feel ambivalent or uncomfortable with its emergence, stating that 'good' schools would not require students to resort to shadow education (Wang & Bray, 2016).

Such sentiments are increasingly being expressed in the Netherlands (Dutch Education Council, 2009) where, between 1995 and 2019, annual household expenditures on tutoring for primary and secondary education grew from 26 to 320 million euros (Statistics Netherlands, 2021). This considerable increase gained the attention of not only the Dutch national government (Bisschop et al., 2019), but also local unions representing students, teachers and schools, primarily in secondary education (Dutch Parliament, 2017). In response to a recent government-commissioned report, which found that schools value shadow education for relieving teachers' burdens (Bisschop et al., 2019), the Dutch Education Ministry stated that it is unacceptable for schools to refer parents to shadow education (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, 2019). The Dutch case depicts how such ambivalence raises questions about the implications of a tripartite configuration of student learning and development involving parents, schools and shadow education providers.

This paper explores what key players within the new configuration – teachers, parents and tutors – consider to be their mutual pedagogical and educational responsibilities. This includes considerations of shared goals, and of the role that each actor can and cannot play in achieving such goals. Previous studies of individual teachers (Megahed & Ginsburg, 2003; Wang & Bray, 2016), parents (Ireson & Rushforth, 2014) and tutors (Trent, 2016) illuminate the perspectives of key players, but not on mutual role allocation. Therefore, for our study, we brought together parents, teachers and tutors in focus groups, to capture their individual and shared ideas about the (re-)distribution of educational responsibilities in response to the growing role of shadow education in students' school careers.

Overview of the empirical literature

Much international work on shadow education explores how its use is shaped by conditions in a student's school or home (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015; Zhang & Bray, 2020). We build on such work by pointing to shadow education as a new institution in the Dutch educational landscape that may add to, or even alter, the traditional configuration of roles, thereby obtaining a position of its own in students' school careers. In what follows, before reviewing the international literature, we sketch the emergence of shadow education in the Netherlands, followed by a discussion of the international literature to help us understand relationships among parents, teachers and tutors.

Shadow education in the Netherlands

Although shadow education expenditures have been growing since 1995 (Statistics Netherlands, 2021), the practice did not receive formal attention in Dutch public or political debates until 2016, when it was mentioned in the Education Inspectorate's annual report as a potential cause of performance inequality in Dutch education. In January 2017, a roundtable discussion about the causes and consequences of shadow education was organised in the Dutch House of Representatives with various education stakeholders (Elffers & Jansen, 2019). Following the discussion, the Dutch government commissioned two successive studies on shadow education's prevalence in Dutch society (Bisschop et al., 2019; De Geus & Bisschop, 2017).

Unlike the large 'cram schools' popular in East Asia (Zhang & Bray, 2020), the most common forms of shadow education in the Netherlands include one-to-one tutoring in school subjects (Dutch: *bijles*) and homework support classes (Dutch: *huiswerkbegeleiding*). Other common forms of shadow education include exam training and support for specific learning needs such as dyslexia. These services are typically provided in an individual or small-group setting. Some providers also offer online services, such as digital exercise programmes, to provide students with additional exercises during and outside of school hours (Elffers & Jansen, 2019).

Shadow education in the Netherlands is offered both privately and publicly. Families can pay for private services, but there is also free and low-cost public support. In the latter case, shadow education is often provided by non-profit organisations such as community centres, libraries and foundations. In some instances, students qualify based on family income or school performance for free forms of support provided by schools, often in collaboration with private tutoring companies. The emergence of such public-private (i.e. 'hybrid') forms of support is not only occurring in the Dutch educational landscape, but also elsewhere (cf. Bray & Zhang, 2018). In contrast to countries like Cambodia, where tutoring is generally provided by school teachers (Bray et al., 2016), most Dutch tutors do not hold pedagogical degrees. Rather, they are university students employed via institutions, volunteers or employees trained according to a tutoring method.

Home, school and shadow education

Regardless of its specific form or provider, shadow education has often been referred to as resulting from the features and organisation of mainstream schooling (Yamato & Zhang, 2017), as well as from parenting and family practices in contemporary society (Otto & Karbach, 2019). Thus, it can be argued that what shadow education is and does is linked to what schools and families are and do.

Shadow education mimics the content and scope of formal schooling by supporting students' learning processes to enhance their academic performance (Bray, 1999; Liu & Bray, 2017, 2020). Many scholars describe shadow education as an institution with multiple functions (Bray, 1999; Yamato & Zhang, 2017): it can provide additional instruction for students who might otherwise lag behind (i.e. remediation), or it can provide extra training to students striving to excel (i.e. enrichment) (Zhang & Bray, 2020). In addition to these primarily academic functions, it can also fulfil an emotional function. For instance, tutors may help students deal with exam stress (Forsey, 2013), prevent drop out (Yamato & Zhang, 2017) or foster individual development (Otto & Karbach, 2019).

Berdowski et al. (2010) found that some parents in the Netherlands resort to shadow education to 'be on the safe side' (see also Dutch Education Council, 2009) by ensuring that they have done as much as possible to boost their children's school career (see Elffers & Jansen, 2019). In some cases, parents (feel they) lack the knowledge, skills or time to help their children with homework (Ireson & Rushforth, 2014). Shadow education can also fulfil a child-minding function when working parents do not have time to collect their children from school or supervise them afterwards (Bray, 2021; Trent, 2016; Zhang & Bray, 2020). In this way, shadow education can take over parts of family life.

Other previous empirical work on the relationship between shadow education and the home mostly examines parents' individual – and often fluctuating – motivations for employing shadow education. Parents often consider investing in shadow education 'part of their parental role' (Ireson & Rushforth, 2014, p. 12), because they want the best for their children. Some parents perceive the use of shadow education as giving their children a more well-rounded education than teachers can provide (Wang & Bray, 2016). Other parents expect teachers to provide performance boosts, and approach shadow education as a replacement when teachers fail to provide what parents view as an adequate education (Bray, 2021; Ireson & Rushforth, 2014). The desire to boost school performance is fuelled, at least partly, by increasing performance pressures in education (Park et al., 2016). As Ireson and Rushforth (2014) argued, parents may attempt to provide additional support themselves, but find their children resistant. Parents may prevent family conflicts by transferring these responsibilities to shadow education. Although there is a vast amount of literature detailing home–school partnerships (Tett & Macleod, 2020) and school–family relations (Epstein, 1995; Leenders et al., 2019), many questions remain about how parents and tutors collaborate in fostering student learning.

Lastly, schools may not cater to parental demands for individual instruction and support (Megahed & Ginsburg, 2003; Popa & Acedo, 2006). Studying Egyptian teachers, Megahed and Ginsburg (2003) found that individualised instruction in school could reduce the need for (external) tutors. However, they also highlighted that there would always be a demand for shadow education because of limited school resources. Similar findings have been reported in other countries where public investment in schooling is relatively small, such as: Romania (Popa & Acedo, 2006); Cambodia (Bray et al., 2016); and Bangladesh (Mahmud & Kenayathulla, 2018; Nath, 2008). In relatively well-funded education systems, like the Netherlands, educators may instead perceive shadow education as supplementary for those students who still fall behind despite already intensive instruction at school (Bray, 2021).

Like shadow education providers, schools might engage in remediation and enrichment projects. In such cases, parents may first discuss their child's progress with the teacher (Hallsén & Karlsson, 2018), engaging in negotiation about whether performance improvement should be handled by the teacher or through shadow education. In this interactive process, parental demand for more individualised instruction, or 'teaching differently to different cognitive groupings of students in order to meet their needs' (Gonzalez et al., 2017, p. 526), might conflict with teachers' ability to provide such instruction (Leenders et al., 2019). Research shows that, in practice, teachers can consider this difficult to execute, or lack the necessary resources to do so (Ball & Youdell, 2008; Popa & Acedo, 2006; Šťastný et al., 2021).

Some exploratory studies focus on the influence of shadow education on regular education, as well as cooperation between the two (Bisschop et al., 2019; Education Inspectorate, 2016, 2021). While many schools in the Netherlands now provide their own tutoring (Bisschop et al., 2019), over a quarter of the school leaders in the Education Inspectorate's 2016 study indicated they collaborate with an external provider (Education Inspectorate, 2016). The increasing entanglement between regular and shadow education is explored in Elffers et al. (2019). We describe how mainstream education can transfer tasks to shadow education, or how both modalities can perform such tasks collaboratively. Initial explorations of teachers' perceptions of their work, considering the increase in tutoring rates (CNV Trade Union, 2017), show that teachers consider the provision of tutoring to be the task of the school. However, the teachers stated that they cannot offer it themselves. Conversely, shadow education can offer students individual support, providing some teachers much-needed breathing room (CNV Trade Union, 2017).

Shadow education providers may also initiate services to support or boost students' performance, regardless of what schools provide. Zhang and Bray (2020) argued that shadow education could function as a laboratory for innovation, experimenting with learning technologies to become a model for schools. In China, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, shadow education providers 'rose to the occasion to serve students with online tutoring of diverse forms' (Zhang & Bray, 2020, p. 330). As a result, schools learned about online services, like virtual reality classrooms and online teaching assistants. In such cases, shadow education informs, rather than supplements or substitutes, regular education.

Some collaborations between tutors and teachers may be seen as less desirable. In the Czech Republic, schools may offer teachers additional pay for providing shadow education, or teachers could leave their jobs to work at tutorial centres (Šťastný et al., 2021). Similarly, in Cambodia (Brehm & Silova, 2014), educators may have dual teacher-tutor roles, resulting in conflicting responsibilities. In South Korea (Lee et al., 2010), and elsewhere (Silova, 2010), government policy initiatives prohibiting teachers from earning money by offering tutoring led to illegal and more expensive forms of such tutoring by teachers, who often competed with private tutors over students. Such cases illustrate that these collaborations between stakeholders in schools and shadow education may enhance but also hinder student learning, in particular for lower-income students.

Indeed, a recurring topic in the shadow education literature is the differential socio-economic access to shadow education, which may exacerbate educational inequalities (Park et al., 2016). In Wang and Bray's (2016) study, teachers expressed ambivalence towards shadow education, recognising it as helpful to some students, but also a vehicle for maintaining and reproducing unequal social structures. Likewise, Ho (2020) found teachers to be concerned about increasing class divisions in education across society, as private tutoring may contribute to the stratification of opportunities. A recent study examining tutors' business manuals shows that tutors identify wealthier families as a niche of 'ideal' clients (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020, p. 213). In doing so, tutors can 'cause, or at least exacerbate, an educational arms race' (Halliday, 2016, p. 151). Shadow education becomes a limited resource that provides those with purchasing power; relative (i.e. positional) advantages over others. Some schools compensate by opting to collaborate with shadow education providers to offer free support to students

from disadvantaged backgrounds, while some tutoring agencies offer affordable services to low-income families (Bisschop et al., 2019; Bray, 2021; Hallsén & Karlsson, 2018; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020).

Research questions

Considering the growing use of shadow education, questions arise about who fulfils which role in students' school careers, especially in the Netherlands, where a tripartite constellation seems to be emerging among tutors, teachers and parents. Although some information exists on the functioning of such triads elsewhere (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015; Wang & Bray, 2016), the Dutch case is interesting because it takes place in a well-funded educational system where attention to shadow education by key stakeholders in education is increasing (Education Inspectorate, 2021), but – unlike in other countries like Hong Kong – research on the topic is still scant. Thus, this paper investigates the (re-) distribution of educational responsibilities between teachers, parents and tutors in the Netherlands, in particular the potential difference between stakeholders' ideal conceptions and the distributions of responsibilities in daily practice. More specifically, two research questions guide this study:

- (1) What distribution of educational responsibilities do teachers, tutors and parents consider ideal?
- (2) What does the distribution of educational responsibilities look like in practice?

Methodology

Design

This study employed focus groups to elicit people's understandings of situations and explore how they are developed, advanced and negotiated in a social context (Vaughn et al., 1996). Focus groups allow participants to express and negotiate their existing beliefs, making it a method well suited to our research aims. To further leverage the benefits of this method, it was ensured that the moderator (the first author of this paper) created an open and inclusive atmosphere where participants felt free to share both positive and negative experiences (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Steps were also taken to try to avoid a group dynamic where consensus would be reached prematurely by asking participants to write down their thoughts on paper first before sharing them with the rest of the group (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Focus group sessions were 75 minutes long and conducted in Dutch. The transcripts were translated into English by the authors and de-identified using pseudonyms.

Institutions and participants

Schools were recruited using convenience sampling, mostly through the research network of the first author. Five out of 84 schools agreed to participate. The low response rate can be attributed to a number of factors, including a lack of time and the scarce tradition of shadow education research in the Netherlands. Three schools were

relatively large (more than 10,000 students) with multiple school tracks (i.e. groups in which students are placed based on some measure of ability). The other two were smaller (less than 10,000 students) with only one track. The number of enrolled students at the schools ranged from 600 to 12,500, all belonging to the age group of 11 to 18 years. One school had no relation to external providers of shadow education, the other four did.

We recruited focus group participants through convenience sampling within the five schools spread across the Netherlands. To avoid self-selection and to ensure a comprehensive view on actors' perspectives within the 'ecosystem' (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 466), representatives within each school were asked to gather a diverse sample of tutors, teachers and parents, differing in age, education experience and other traits. The school representatives presented their choices to the researcher, who was ultimately responsible for ensuring accurate representativeness of the three groups. We defined 'tutors' as local commercial and non-commercial institutions operating in person. Tutors included those who directly guided the students, and the managers, none of whom had a formal pedagogical background, only company training. 'Teachers' included both teachers and school administrators. 'Parents' included those whose children had received private tutoring at least once. In cases where the participating teachers or tutors had children of their own, they were instructed to reflect upon only one role. Focus group size varied from five to 12 individuals. In total, the five focus groups included 43 participants: 19 teachers, 11 tutors and 13 parents.

Data collection and analysis

After ethical approval from the institutional review board, a contact person within each school invited the participants to meet on a mutually agreeable date. A semi-structured interview guide (see online supplement) was developed to provide an overall direction for the discussion. To initiate the discussion, the interview guide asked: (a) participants to reflect on their beliefs about the distribution of educational responsibilities (globally); and (b) for specific examples from daily practice (e.g. student cases). During the conversations, the term *supplementary* rather than *shadow* education was used, because the latter may have broader negative connotations. To avoid confusion about what is included in supplementary education, it was defined at the beginning of each focus group as 'non-school, intentional, organised forms of learning and development'.

To enhance the participatory nature of the focus groups, and as part of the interview guide, a responsibility triangle was developed. This triangle, which can be seen as a tool guiding the group discussion, was used in three ways. First, participants could position and move responsibilities physically with their hands, possibly stimulating further discussion. Second, along the three sides, participants were free to position a responsibility anywhere using gradient values: for instance, in between teachers and tutors, or more towards the tutors. Finally, the triangle provided a visual representation of position, which can facilitate data analysis.

The data analysis followed four steps. First, a coding scheme was developed based on our research questions and the conceptual framework (see online supplement), including codes such as 'educational responsibilities shadow education in relation to schools', 'experienced tensions during the negotiation of educational responsibilities' and 'dealing with experienced tensions'. Second, the coding scheme was refined based on open coding

using constant comparison (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), resulting in the addition of codes such as ‘the added value of being a triad’. Third, keyword-in-context analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) was used to search for words such as ‘should’, ‘could’ or ‘must’ to code for what is considered ideal, as well as how respondents reacted to such statements. Fourth, all codes and associated excerpts were related to the research questions.

Findings

Our analysis revealed diverse responsibilities of varying nature which respondents allocated to, or negotiated with, shadow education. As shown in [Table 1](#), these ranged from providing students with academic support, such as homework assistance, to helping them pack their school bags. Our data also revealed a pattern in the way parents, teachers and tutors talked about these responsibilities. Here, we detail this pattern and provide examples of roles that respondents allocated to, or negotiated with, shadow education.

Schools and families: a traditional configuration

After agreeing on a set of educational responsibilities that belong to schools and families, respondents discussed who should be responsible for identifying and supporting students’ academic development. Merel, a mathematics teacher in upper secondary education in a relatively large school, stated:

When a student needs support, I do not immediately think of supplementary education. If a problem comes up, you usually have had some parent-teacher meetings, and I am not going to think about [a tutoring company]. The first thing I do is talk with the parents because we, together, are responsible for helping the child. (Merel, teacher)

By her usage of the word ‘we’, Merel refers to schools and families as the two institutions responsible for supporting students. Likewise, parents mentioned examples of a school-home distribution of shared responsibility. Parents could, for instance, suspect a learning problem that the teacher can address, or teach their children basic norms (e.g. not shouting), that the teacher can reinforce in the classroom. Sanne and Suus, teachers at another school, reinforced Merel’s position:

We, teachers and parents, have a shared task of monitoring pupils; we support students where needed and teach them learning strategies. Sure, in the first place, that is a task for schools, but I think parents have a responsibility as well, for instance, by proactively maintaining contact with us. (Sanne, teacher)

I think it even goes without saying that many parents do not want to resort to shadow education. Even if they have the money, they refuse. I think that is a good sign because it shows their trust in us as teachers. (Suus, teacher)

Sanne also used ‘we’, followed by an explicit reference to families and schools without mentioning tutors. Suus makes this claim more explicit by stating that some parents, although they could afford it, refrain from relying on shadow education, instead choosing to work with the teacher to find a solution that suits their child.

Table 1. Research questions, discussed responsibilities, and descriptive labels.

Research questions	Responsibilities fulfilled by or negotiated with shadow education	Descriptive labels	Exemplary fragment
1. <i>What distribution of educational responsibilities do teachers, tutors, and parents consider ideal?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supportive responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Subjects (e.g. improving mathematics performance) ○ Exam preparation (e.g. planning towards and studying for an upcoming exam) ○ Homework assistance (e.g. organising a place to complete homework or supervise its completion) ○ Emotional (e.g. encouragement) ○ Other (e.g. packing a school bag) ● Other ad hoc responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Advise schools (e.g. suggest how to address learning problems of specific students) ○ Child-minding function (e.g. supervising students due to parents' busy work schedules) ● Negotiated compensatory roles (e.g. when teachers or parents cannot fulfil certain supportive roles) 	(1) Schools and families: a traditional sense of 'we'	'It would be ideal if all teachers can offer students the support they need, be it in collaboration with other teachers or parents. I think we should be able to do this.' <i>(teacher)</i>
		(2) Balancing parents' ambitions with teachers' capabilities	'Well, if there is more money, then, of course, we can have smaller classes, and then many responsibilities can go to school. However, right now, I already do a lot that is not within my tasks as a teacher.' <i>(teacher)</i>
2. <i>What does the distribution of educational responsibilities look like in practice?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other ad hoc responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Advise schools (e.g. suggest how to address learning problems of specific students) ○ Child-minding function (e.g. supervising students due to parents' busy work schedules) ● Negotiated compensatory roles (e.g. when teachers or parents cannot fulfil certain supportive roles) 	(3) Shadow education when needed: an emerging new	'Sometimes, it just seems as if everyone needs you at the same time, so for some things, tutoring is needed because I cannot do that in class.' <i>(teacher)</i> 'I do not want to be the school or parent.' <i>(tutor)</i>
		(4) Tension between the traditional and the new	'I know that some students cannot afford tutoring, but for my daughter, I just cannot leave it.' <i>(parent)</i> 'I want to keep tutoring inside the school. By referring a student to tutoring, you are chasing them up with costs.' <i>(teacher)</i>
		(5) Schemes of collaborative responsibility	'What I like very much is that you work together with tutoring; for example when I say that something has to happen with a student and then the tutors take it up immediately.' <i>(teacher)</i>

Balancing parents' ambitions with teachers' capabilities

The discussion of an ideal distribution of educational responsibilities often centred around the feasibility of academic goals set by parents. For example, the 'homework assistance' responsibility was often put on the 'school' corner of the responsibilities triangle, to which schools often replied by moving it away from 'schools' and closer towards 'parents'. Willem and Luuk, a parent and teacher, respectively, presented different perspectives:

I prefer homework to be done at school. My kids, the oldest, for instance, he tries to find a place in the library because he just cannot do his homework at home. So, I think: why does that not happen at school? (Willem, parent)

Sometimes I get an e-mail from parents telling me I should do this and that homework. And then I think, come and trade places with me for one day, and after some minutes we will probably be having a different conversation. (Luuk, teacher)

Luuk's use of the phrase 'come and trade places with me' lends credence to the idea that parents' and teachers' views of an ideal distribution of educational responsibilities can be quite different.

Shadow education when needed: an emerging 'new'

As tutors mingled in the discussion, they stated that, for them, shadow education does not replace or assume school or home responsibilities but complements them. The tutors put the home-school dyad in the lead, seeing roles for themselves in supporting problems the dyad encounters. Karlijn and Maartje, both tutors, discussed this idea. Karlijn stated: 'For me, supplementary education is happening next to the school, supporting it. That is the way I would like to see myself, as supportive; I do not want to be the school; the school is the school.' Maartje elaborated on her role:

There are many instances with students where I sometimes ask, 'Did you tell your teacher you want to become better at X?' And then they say 'no'. And I tell them 'Okay, go to your teacher first, and then come back to me.' (Maartje, tutor)

Maartje's referral of the student to the teacher supports the idea that some tutors see shadow education as an alternative that has a support function for the home-school dyad. Some teachers mentioned the effort they put into teaching students who repeatedly fail to comprehend, or that some students just 'slip through the cracks' and might need shadow education. One teacher commented: 'As a school, we can say and do many things, but I think we have less time to repeat things or do them more often with individual students. That is just much easier in smaller groups.' Roos and Rosemarijn discussed their thoughts:

If a child does his or her best, but he or she just does not understand it, then attention from someone else in a smaller setting might be excellent to help the lessons click. From my own experience, tutored students are the students who lack a connection with their teacher. (Roos, teacher)

You ask in class if everyone understands what should be studied, and all students nod to say they understand. However, of some, you know they did not understand, but you need to move on. So, some students might still slip through the cracks and need tutoring. (Rosemarijn, teacher)

These comments suggest that from teachers' perspectives, shadow education should only assume a role in students' school careers when a learning problem cannot be addressed in the home-school dyad. Some parents echoed this notion stating that despite their efforts, students might still need shadow education. Dineke, a parent of two tutored students, stated:

My son really needs someone to supervise his homework because he does not do it himself. At some points, my kid protests against everything. He thinks: 'I see my parents every day; I will not listen to them anymore. I am playing my PlayStation and will ignore everything you say.' And if someone, a stranger, comes along and tells him to work; sometimes it just takes a fresh pair of eyes to put things into proper perspective. (Dineke, parent)

Dineke recognised the difficulties in dealing with her son, who, despite her efforts as a parent, needs a stranger to motivate him. Tutors underlined such observations, adding that in many cases, students need help with more practical matters, such as becoming more organised. Karlijn, one of the tutors, said:

For example, if you are very busy inside your own head [...] you experience chaos – you do not even know how to pack your bag. That is also the way I see my role in relation to parents; helping students with what sometimes looks like chaos, such as losing books or keys. (Karlijn, tutor)

As tutors positioned themselves in relation to parents and teachers, they repeatedly referred to the parents' changing lifestyles. According to some tutors, two working parents have little free time to help children with their schoolwork, therefore they are incentivised to resort to shadow education for after-school care. Milou, who runs a large tutoring company in an urban area in the Netherlands, recognised that in many cases, parents come to her company wishing to have a 'nice family life', pointing to shadow education taking up the 'day-care role'.

When we enroll students, the main reason for 90 percent of the parents to come in is that both parents work in most cases. Sometimes there are single-parent families, where there is no supervision and parents want to rest at home. They want to have a nice family life where the homework is finished and [students] are well prepared. (Milou, tutor)

Therefore, as well as supplementing and substituting for underperforming schools or teachers, shadow education may also replace the caretaking role of the parents.

Tensions between traditional and new settings

Across the focus groups, participants were particularly concerned with the fees of shadow education, which may exacerbate educational inequalities related to socio-economic status. One teacher, Joke, who remained silent for most of the conversation, commented:

The paid nature of shadow education is precisely why it has been avoided in school for a long time. I have been here [school] for quite a while now, and I know from experience, that, in principle, you have to be able to provide that yourself as a school because not everyone can afford it, and you might get some sort of inequality. Apparently, it is now accepted that you pay extra for help with your finals. That is why I have not been speaking very much during this conversation because, no matter how good it is, I will always have my objections. (Joke, teacher)

By stating that despite seeing its worth, she will always have objections against shadow education, Joke points to a tension between the traditional and the 'new'. Joop, another teacher, also identified this tension:

How nice it would be if all those people working in shadow education would come to work in the primary process, in education itself. In that way, we could arrange education in smaller groups [and] we would then have tackled the problem reasonably well. (Joop, teacher)

Joop is referring to the problem of teachers having to squeeze large amounts of work into short amounts of time. Other teachers explicitly referred to this situation stating that ideally, they would also like to teach exam skills. However, in practice, tutors end up fulfilling that responsibility.

Schemes of collaborative responsibility

Based on the roles shadow education may or may not fulfil, respondents agreed that a scheme of responsibility should contain an explicit distribution of roles (i.e. ‘You do this, I do that’). Additionally, tutors could join parent–teacher meetings to collectively discuss the possibilities and limitations of enacting certain roles such as following up on students’ learning.

Concerning the explicit distribution of roles, teacher participants appreciated the way tutors bring another perspective to a student’s development, which is sometimes presented as a ‘collective puzzle’ in which they search for the best approach for students from less affluent families or those with fear of failure. Thus, respondents often discussed ways to arrange support around a student’s needs. As one tutor noted: ‘I want to look at the triangle’s diagonal lines and keep the school informed. The reality is that students spend much of their time at school; therefore, schools have a total view of a student’s development.’ Jolien, a teacher, agreed:

Much of what we discussed today should go in tandem, and that is why we, indeed, might be a triangle. The most important thing for us, as teachers and parents, is to know what is going on and that we receive feedback, so we form a group to support who does what to ensure students learn independently. (Jolien, teacher)

Some tutor participants operate inside the school, interacting with schoolteachers about specific students, for instance, during parent–teacher meetings. In some cases, online planning systems onto which parents can also log in enabled student information to be shared, thereby keeping them updated and preventing redundancy between shadow education and the school. In such cases, there seemed to be an explicit distribution of roles: the school does the basics, and shadow education supplements, which some teachers called ‘an idea subject to change’. Karlijn offered her perspective:

I do not have the feeling that I do not belong. Teachers even ask me if I want to practice with their students. We know how to find each other and are happy to work in conjunction. I am external, but now internal, and I feel very much a part of the school. (Karlijn, tutor)

Another teacher reinforced Karlijn’s thoughts, stating that ‘it is useful that supplementary education is within this building. That makes it an extension to schools.’ In response, Marieke, also a teacher, expressed her changing views on shadow education:

Well, in all honesty, at first, I thought: ‘What is a commercial company doing in my school?’ However, now we have had some contact, and I see the added value for some students, whereas we could not have done that alone. Now I am much more positive about supplementary education myself, and the students appear positive also. Of course, the cost is always going to be an issue. (Marieke, teacher)

Despite her initial scepticism, the words ‘we could not have done that alone’ illustrate Marieke’s view on the complementary role shadow education can play in schools. Changing views were also expressed by other teachers, like Lieve, who learned that tutors also follow up on students’ learning:

It was quite an eye-opener for me to talk to you [looks at tutor]. I was surprised when you stated that you contacted the parents after tutoring. I was also unaware that you communicate with mentors and instruct the teachers on dealing with tutored students. (Lieve, teacher)

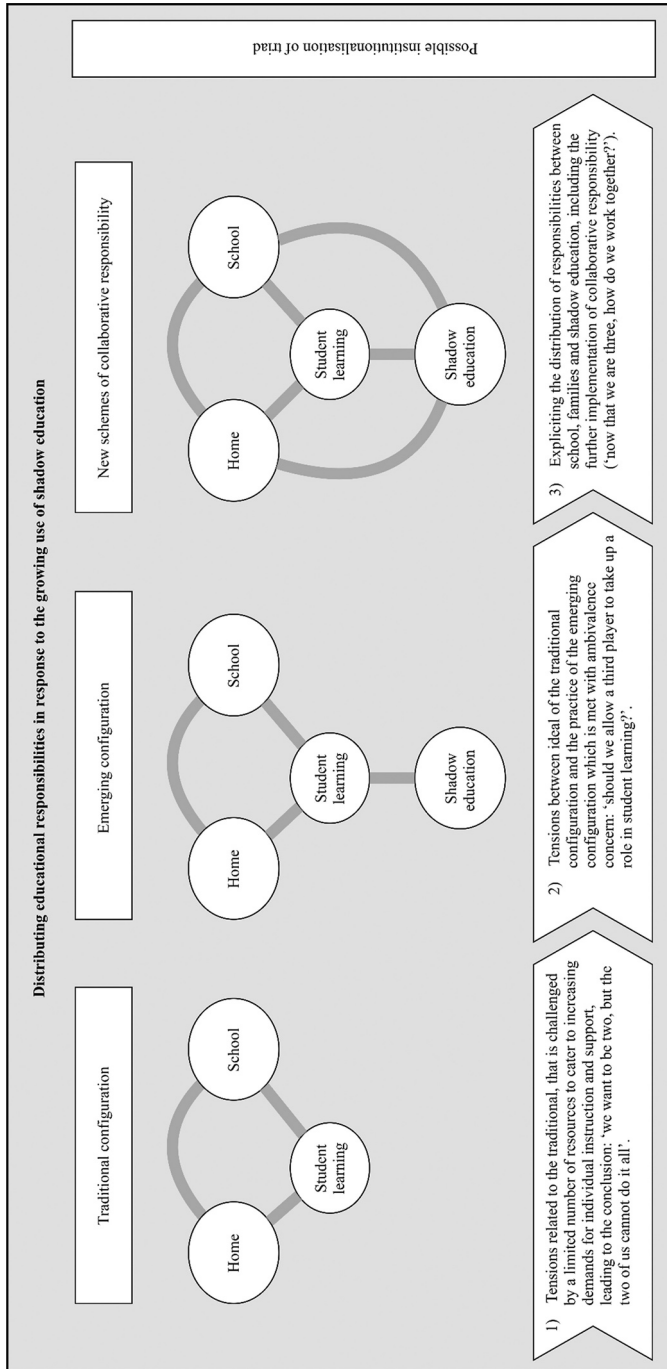


Figure 1. A visual summary of our findings.

Femke, a parent, elaborated, ‘students learn structure because tutors and teachers are aligned in telling the student what they should do’. Janneke, a tutor, validated this view:

I think there is often a misconception about what we actually do. I think our work is vague to the outside world. Sometimes the dominant thought is that students are forever stuck with tutoring. That is not what we do, and our goal is to let students go. To give them that quiet place that they might not have elsewhere. (Janneke, tutor)

Some schools that previously perceived tutoring as a practice ‘over there’, found common ground through understanding the shared goal that all students can become self-regulated and competent learners, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Summary of findings

In response to the growing use of shadow education, this study investigated what Dutch teachers, parents and tutors consider ideal regarding the distribution of responsibilities, and what the distribution looks like in practice. In terms of the ideal (*Research Question 1*), our findings show that educational responsibilities are unambiguously assigned to either school or home, suggesting a dyadic configuration with no role for shadow education. However, in practice (*Research Question 2*), teachers and parents identified – albeit with some reservations – educational responsibilities for which they found referral to or collaboration with shadow education to be useful or necessary. Responsibilities were mainly allocated to shadow education when schools and families were unable to address specific problems, such as students repeatedly failing to comprehend teachers’ instructions, or students lacking homework support due to parents’ busy schedules. Thus, as [Figure 1](#) shows, when discussing the limitations of schools and families in dealing with such problems, the ideal frame of ‘we are two’ collides with the experience that, in practice ‘we are three now’. Yet in this triad of shared responsibilities for student learning which includes a privately paid partner, questions remained about how this triad contributes to educational inequality. Although such issues remained unresolved during the focus groups, most respondents were able to explicate their distribution of responsibilities and find ways to work together under a tripartite configuration.

Discussion

Depending on how families and schools enact their responsibilities for student learning, shadow education may be assigned a more or less explicit role in students’ school careers. Whether shadow education should have an explicit role is a normative question, as a previous study has pointed out (Wang & Bray, 2016). Our findings echo the complex moral deliberations related to the allocation of responsibilities to shadow education. In our study, teachers were often concerned about the increasingly prominent role of shadow education in students’ school careers. Yet this study also found that educators move beyond such inner conflicts while seeking collaboration with shadow education providers, communicating about students’ academic progress, and discussing the best approaches to boost or sustain students’ progress. Our data speaks to Giddens’ (1984) observation that the ‘ongoing flow of social life’ (p. 3) produces a sense of what feels natural and is tacitly accepted by those involved (‘practical consciousness’); in this case, a distribution of

responsibilities between family and school. As routines appeared increasingly limited or problematic (e.g. when deciding upon the form of support a student needs), the act of expressing limitations verbally ('discourse consciousness') provides more room for redistributing responsibilities, allowing shadow education to claim a role in fostering student learning.

As our respondents' comments make evident, many questions and concerns remain about the repercussions of the growing use of shadow education for inequalities in educational opportunity. Such questions and concerns are not unique to the Netherlands; they are widely described in the international shadow education literature (Zhang & Bray, 2020), particularly in those studies focusing on how schools and families can address social inequalities in educational outcomes (Gorard, 2010). However, if shadow education is free and of relatively high quality, it could help compensate for the economic and social obstacles that students may experience at school and home, as seen in Japan (Yamato & Zhang, 2017) and Australia (Forsey, 2013). Regarding the Dutch case, the hybrid and often free forms of shadow education show attempts of schools and tutors to prevent obstacles some students or parents experience in not being able to participate in paid forms of shadow education.;

Our data sheds light on relationships among tutors, teachers and parents in the Netherlands, where we show that respondents considered their relations to be symbiotic rather than competitive. In other cases, competition might be more prevalent. Bray and Kobakhidze (2015), for instance, spotlighted teachers' limited control over what students access through shadow education, and 'aggressive' (p. 475) marketing tactics by tutoring companies, who as 'invasive species' (p. 478) can frame themselves as superior to classical schooling. As our study shows, in some contexts, the triad may come with different dynamics than the ones currently known, making the further global study of relations among tutors, teachers and parents relevant and necessary.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in a country with a relatively well-funded educational system, where schools, families and shadow education were brought together to discuss their roles and responsibilities. In doing so, light was shed on the dynamics between schools, families and shadow education in a country where the use of shadow education is on the rise and in its early stages. We identify dilemmas that come with the emergence of a third player in a field that was long dominated by two. Given the considerable differences in the prevalence, supply and organisation of shadow education across countries (cf. Kim & Jung, 2019; Park et al., 2016; Zhang & Bray, 2020), these findings can enhance and deepen the study of the institutionalisation of shadow education as it is currently taking place in various countries across the globe.

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