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'On the high street' tuition for primary-aged children in London: Critiquing discourses of accessibility, attainment and assistance.

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ABSTRACT

Private tuition, often referred to as 'shadow education', is commercially provided, supplementary education which has been variously constructed to support children in their academic abilities. As growing numbers of children are engaging with tuition, it is receiving greater scrutiny and scholarly attention. This paper explores the growth and role of commercial tuition centres for primary-aged children. Such centres, which operate 'on the high street', are not a new phenomenon, but their expansion and assertive commercialisation is notable. With attention to managers' and tutors' perspectives, we interrogate the positioning of these services and critically analyse the discursive construction of three 'As' of their offer: accessibility of service, promise of enhanced attainment, and assistance with learning. In so doing, tuition centres lead the (re)positioning of private tuition as highly visible private businesses, located within and amongst other commercial enterprises, with an emerging focus on younger children, and are worthy of further research.

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Introduction

Private tuition, sometimes referred to as 'shadow education', is commercially provided, supplementary education which has been variously constructed to help children 'catch up, keep up, or get ahead of their peers' in their academic abilities (Choi and Cho 2016, 600). Such tuition is privately financed by parents/ carers outside of school boundaries and school hours. It has become a widespread phenomenon across diverse countries and increasingly constitutes a part of children's routine learning processes and experiences (Zhang 2023; Holloway and Kirby 2020). In the UK in 2015 it was estimated that 5% of seven-year-olds and 22% of 11-year-olds were receiving extra academic tuition outside of regular school hours (Trodd 2015). More recently, research by the Sutton Trust (Cullinane and Montacute 2023) indicated that 30% of 11–16 year olds had received private tuition.

As increasing numbers of children are engaging with tuition, it is receiving greater public scrutiny and cross-disciplinary scholarly attention. Here we draw on this existing research, but rather than focus on tuition in the round, we give attention to the role of commercial tuition centres in London, England, that provide for primary-aged children (aged 4–11). Such centres are not a new phenomenon, but their expansion, assertive commercialisation and place within the private

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tuition market have noticeably developed in recent years. Moreover, given the private tuition market's growing scale, use and significance, tuition centres have been relatively underexplored (Gupta 2022). Here we use the term 'on the high street' to denote and critically consider the very visible presence of tuition centres in key urban, suburban and consumerist locations. These centres are distinct in offering group and one-to-one academic tuition on accessible community or commercial premises on a privately funded basis.

We begin by situating our research within the literature on 'shadow education' (Zhang 2023; Yung and Hajar 2023), with recognition of tuition in the wider 'scholarisation' of childhood (Mayall 2007; Blundell 2016) and everyday lives of children (Holloway and Pimlot-Wilson 2020). In particular, we note research on the prevalence and geographical divergences of tuition take up, and the changing and expanding patterns of tuition in the UK. Detailing the project and qualitative data we draw on here, we profile the four tuition centres – their differing histories, number, and geographical scale of operation – included in our research. Drawing upon discourse analysis, our findings are then structured around critically considering the perspectives of centre managers and tutors to attend to what we identify as the discursive construction of the three 'As' of tuition centres: *accessibility* of tutoring services, the promise of enhanced student *attainment*, and *assistance* for parents and children with learning. We conclude by arguing that the significant increase in high street tuition centres works through the manoeuvring of these discourses to promulgate ideas of learning potential and responsibility that have brought private tutoring firmly 'out of the shadows' (Mori and Baker 2010; Aurini, Davies, and Dierkes 2013), extending the private tuition landscape in the UK.

Private academic tuition for primary-aged children

Shadow education is a term now commonly used to refer to private tuition (Bray and Hajar 2023; Zhang 2023); a metaphor that depicts how the sector mirrors and mimics the mainstream school system but operates in its shadow. The sector has been described as '[a] hidden form of privatisation beyond the façade of public education systems' (Bray and Kwo 2013, 480) and marks its operation as an often unregulated industry. This creates a particular visual of tuition that operates in the shadow of children's formal education, but that is also hidden and vague, taking place out of sight in private homes and often not openly discussed by those using it, and certainly not commonly accessible, regulated or controlled (Zhang 2023; Holloway and Pimlot-Wilson 2020).

There are varying understandings of how the 'burgeoning educational market' (Holloway and Kirby 2020, 178) of private tuition fits with formal schooling: as parasite on (Dawson, 2010), circumvention of (Gupta 2022), shadow (Aurini, Davies, and Dierkes 2013; Zhan et al. 2013) or complementary to (Mori and Baker 2010) formal education. It is therefore referred to both as supplementary education and shadow education, reflecting the difference in perceived terms of engagement and relationship with mainstream education. Mori and Baker (2010, 40) argue that the growth in private tuition signals its legitimisation. With the continuing massification, or stretching, of the formal the education system, shadow education 'has come to possess its own institutional power', touching and shaping a greater number of children's lives and marking its move from 'outsider to insider' in wider educational culture (Mori and Baker 2010, 146).

Over the past twenty years, the prevalence of private tuition has spread globally and on a significant scale with receipt of private tuition now a widespread global phenomenon across diverse countries (Zhang and Bray 2020). Much of the rich research in recent years and which has led the field, emerged from, and focused on, parts of East Asia where tuition is a major feature of children's lives, and is linked to education systems based on examinations as markers of 'success' (Zhang 2023; Zeng 1999).

In an appraisal of the extent of private tuition in Europe, Bray (2021) identifies that its growth in scale and significance warrants much further attention by policymakers. With a focus on divergences

across four European subregions, he demonstrates that the tradition of tuition ‘on a small scale’ is shifting to challenge the mainstream education system and expose its limitations. In Western Europe, for example, he argues that during the past decade, the volume of tuition has greatly increased, is linked to the wider marketization of education, and has become more ‘socially acceptable’ (Bray 2021, 447).

Focusing down further to the UK level, a report by the Sutton Trust stated that private tuition ‘acts as an extra layer of the education system, serving predominantly to reinforce the advantages of existing privilege’ (Cullinane and Montacute 2023, 7). Early research in England, led by Ireson (2004) and Ireson and Rushforth (2011), indicated that the prevalence of private tutoring was relatively low, with tuition more likely to be used to help make successful transitions in the education system. However, recent research demonstrates that it now increasingly constitutes part of children’s routine learning processes and experiences (Holloway and Kirby 2020). Indeed, tuition holds a critical place in what has been identified as the ‘scholarisation of childhood’ (Mayall 2007 and 2000), that is, an increase in the time children spend doing academic and school related work beyond school hours, and thus a decrease in their leisure time.

Multi-location tuition centres have led the proliferation of tuition products and marketing (Aurini and Davies 2004; Dooley, Liu, and Yin 2020). The growth of tuition centres marks a departure from the traditional one-to-one tuition operation, and as we suggest, is reshaping the landscape of private tuition, making shadow education far more visible, certainly in particular large urban areas of the UK. As such, it is now very much ‘out of the shadows’ and requires further scholarly attention. Gupta (2022) in a recent appraisal of private tuition centres in India explores their temporalities to highlight how they position themselves as working alongside schools as a process of normalising their work. In so doing, she argues ‘shadow education’ has become ‘a socially embedded system within the social institution of education’ (2022, 772). And as Koh (2014) asks in relation to the phenomenon in Hong Kong, ‘What is the ‘magic’ that is driving the popularity of the tutorial centre enterprise?’ This paper, in part, responds to this by critically exploring centre managers’ and tutors’ perspectives in the context of England and specifically the Greater London area.

There are two key gaps in existing research to which this paper contributes. Firstly, one focus of existing research is inclusion, and research on the proliferation of tuition products and marketing, and the prevalence of use is accompanied by a critique of its access along various socio-demographic lines. As Bray and Kwo (2013) note on its implications for social justice, it is becoming obligatory ‘even for low-income families’ due to the demands of the school system and wider societal expectations. Recent research in England and Wales has explored the clear socio-economic and regional disparities that exist in the tuition market. Holloway and Kirby’s (2020) important work here shows the tuition market to be most developed in London and least so in Northern England and works to perpetuate regional and class inequalities. However, there is much less evidence around providers’ views on the ethos of the service and its potential role in supporting inclusion.

Secondly, there is limited research on tuition among primary-aged children, with much of the focus to date, globally and in the UK, on tuition among secondary-aged children or the transition from primary to secondary schooling (Ireson and Rushforth 2011). For example, the 2023 report by the Sutton Trust focused on children aged 11–16 to give a detailed account of engagement with tuition in England. Research by Hajar (2018 and 2020) focuses on the views of year 6 primary children engaged in tuition in Kent, in the southeast of England, and finds that it is not only used to navigate and boost success in the 11+ exam for grammar school entry, but also to garner confidence and enthusiasm for learning. Through conversations with children engaged in tutoring, he explores ‘the tangible and intangible benefits’ of tuition. Other research has given a quantitative appraisal of participation and expenditure patterns of private tuition for primary children (for example, Jelani and Tan’s 2012 study of Malaysia). Contributing to this focus on primary-aged children, we draw on this wealth of preceding literature to explore what we term ‘on the high street’ tuition for primary-aged children and the stretching of private tuition to include younger children.

Researching high street tuition

This paper is based on research which focused on the role and growth of tuition centres for primary-aged children (4–11) in the Greater London area. Where much research in this area has had a quantitative edge, we were particularly keen to extend qualitative research on how such centres are shaping contemporary educational practices through their location and visible presence on the high street, and their focus on engaging families with primary-aged children. It was funded by Brunel University London and stemmed from a longer-term research interest in the intersections of socio-economic status and geographic location with parental engagement in children's education within the UK. In part, it was also linked to the positionality of the research team; working at the intersection of Education and Geography and located in the Greater London area, and with young children ourselves that made us acutely aware of the visibility of tuition centres and the increasing role that tuition plays in the lives of children as part of their 'out of school' activities.

The project's explicit geographical specificity is borne out through research which has highlighted the changing prevalence of tuition at national scale with very sharp regional disparities (Ireson and Rushforth 2011). As noted above, research by Holloway and Kirby (2020) demonstrates how the private tuition market is clearly socially-spatially differentiated and at its most developed in London where more than 40% of pupils have private tuition at some point in their school career. This geographic specificity is coupled with what we found to be a 'stretching' of tuition to focus on younger children; a market that some tuition centres are seeking to expand and consolidate through an explicit focus on tuition in both the early and primary years of children's lives.

The wider project was based on questionnaires and interviews with parents/ children who access and use tuition centres, along with interviews with centre managers and tutors.¹ This paper focuses on these latter interviews as a means to explore how centres position themselves as providers of education, operating in a competitive educational market. Four centre 'brands', referred to here as Centres A, B, C and D consented to taking part in the research and were approached via email and selected based on their common offering of tuition to primary-aged children and the diversity of their scope and remit. All four were located in suburban centres in the Greater London area and a synopsis of each demonstrates this diversity:

- **Centre A:** opened in 2006 and is an independent single-site tuition centre. It has three staff members all of whom are qualified teachers, and it provides tuition to up to 120 children of primary and secondary age. One staff interview – Centre Manager.
- **Centre B:** founded in 2001 and is part of a large tuition centre chain in the UK with over 100 centres focusing on children aged 4–14. One staff interview – Assistant Centre Director.
- **Centre C:** initially started in 2008 as a tuition agency sending tutors into people's homes before, in the past six years it has opened nine centres across London and the Southeast. Two staff interviews – both Centre Managers for London-based centres.
- **Centre D:** part of a very well established and large tuition centre franchise with over 150 centres in the Greater London area and operates across 50 different countries worldwide. Two staff interviews – Area Manager and Schools Project Manager

Six staff members, in a variety of management and tutoring positions, were interviewed across the four centres to provide insight into their establishment, growth, role and mission, and their growing emphasis on primary-aged children. Interviews were conducted in person within the tuition centre premises, lasted between 45 and 75 min and focused on centre primary-age offer. All were audio recorded and fully transcribed prior to analysis. The project received ethical approval from the University's ethics committee² and adhered to BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines with issues of consent and confidentiality prioritised.

The interviews were conducted in the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 and preceded a survey of parents across the 4 centres ($n = 30$). However, the subsequent UK

lockdown curtailed the later family interview stages of the research (with only three interviews conducted). The findings which we explore in this paper are therefore related to a discourse analysis of the management and tutor interviews to give insight on their strategic and operational thinking as they position themselves as providers of academic tuition for primary-aged children.

In a Foucauldian (Foucault 1972) sense, discourse analysis is aimed at looking at relations between statements and groups of statements, and in our case, this focused on those relating to the work and role of tuition centres as they emerged through the interviews. Though discourse analysis is variously implemented and understood in the field of education (Anderson and Holloway 2020), we use it here as a window to view constructions of academic private tuition in the narratives that extend from centre tutors and managers, leading to a coherent pattern of statements to emerge around accessibility, attainment, and assistance. Discourse analysis enables critical insight into the promotion or exclusion of specific educational conceptualisations and practices (Ball 2007), which we apply here in relation to tuition centres. Importantly, these are underpinned and motivated by awareness of current market share and extending from this, the marking out of difference in customer offer and development of new markets in the private tuition sector.

The three As of high street tuition

Accessibility

The promise of accessibility of tuition was a key discursive construction that ran across our interviews. It was discussed in varying terms: as affordability, locational proximity, and ease and visibility.

Shadow education has been critiqued for perpetuating and increasing social inequalities as higher income households are more easily able to afford it. As Bray and Kwo argued (2013), as private tuition has expanded, middle- and low-income families have found themselves forced and pressured to invest in it, but this often comes at a huge financial burden. In our research, tuition centre staff positioned and marketed their services as having a key role in ‘opening up’ private tuition; making it accessible to more families due to its reduced cost compared to more traditional forms of tuition. For example, Centre C noted that in terms of monthly costs: ‘we are looking at about £200 for two sessions a week’, and hence offered a considerably cheaper alternative to traditional one-to-one tuition forms. Further, Centre A emphasized to parents’ alternative routes for payment, suggesting a more inclusive approach to access:

It is an environment where they [parents] would like to send them and make use of their Vouchers or Tax Credits (Centre A)

For those on working tax credits or with childcare vouchers³, tuition becomes accessible to many families for the first time. This explicit support for low-income families marks a strategic customer-base development. However, discourses can work to create a sense of ‘common sense’ obviousness and inevitability that can be deconstructed and contested (Ball 2007). This particular discourse of ‘affordability’ can be critiqued as a naive and oversimplistic marketing slogan. Spending £200 per month on private tuition represents a sizeable proportion of the monthly median household disposable income in the UK (£2683 per month, see ONS 2023).

Accessibility through operational location was identified as a key strength and benefit of tuition centres. Staff often drew upon a discourse of ‘proximity’ to a range of other (if sometimes contradictory) sites. One strand of this ‘proximity’ discourse was the intentional location of tuition centres close to state primary schools, as Centre B explained:

we have three schools within a few minutes’ walk. So, in terms of our positioning, it is obviously thinking about where families are, where schools are (Centre B)

Proximity to primary schools means there is a ready-made catchment of families on which to extend their activities. Again, this is a clear strategic recognition of their customer base; a market where one-

to-one tuition is not financially viable but where cheaper centre-based group tuition becomes a possibility.

A second aspect of this 'proximity' discourse constructed tuition centres as a convenient, yet educational, form of afterschool club or activity at which children can be dropped off and safely left for a couple of hours. Centre A reiterates this positioning:

I would say it is normally an afterschool alternative (Centre A)

This construction of tuition centres as afterschool care is an important one. With wraparound childcare having become more important for dual-earner families (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2016), tuition centres can form a broader landscape which enables parents to juggle the complex, competing demands of parental employment, childcare, play and education. This is particularly the case for Centre B which trades on the idea of learning as fun and enjoyment. Centre B works with a large UK-wide supermarket chain with many of its tuition centres located on their premises:

having us in [major supermarket chain] is great because you're going to pop to your supermarket about twice a week (Centre B)

This spatial location of children's tuition marks a temporal convenience for parents and a further scholarisation of children's times and spaces and curtailment of 'free' time (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2017). Paradoxically, given most schools are not located in high streets, this also suggests that for many children attending schools, there may be significant accessibility barriers to such tuition centres.

The location of centres within supermarkets and on the high street is also an issue of maximizing visibility, the diametric of one-to-one tuition within private homes. Centre D, part of the chain with the largest number of centres, discussed how they are actively shifting locations to make their centres more conspicuous:

we are converting those ... church halls quite quickly into those sort of high street premises (Centre D)

Their tuition centres were no longer in hidden multi-purpose locations such as church halls, but were being clearly and vibrantly branded with permanent premises in popular settings. This 'high street' discourse is not employed accidentally and is worthy of attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, with a few important exceptions (for example, one-stop shops and other public facilities such as libraries), UK high streets have historically been locations predominantly for commercial activity, including retail, shopping and other leisure activities, rather than places for public services (Swinney and Sivaev 2013). Secondly, high streets have been seen in decline, due to a complex combination of lack of accessibility, parking capacity, high rents and competition from out-of-town centres and online deliveries (Maliene et al. 2022). Thus, the process of tuition centres locating on high streets indicates how this new and rapidly expanding provision within the education service industry is contributing to a re-imagining of distinct landscapes of economy and community (Ball 2007).

Taken together, the high visibility 'on the high street' offer attempts to reposition and normalise tuition centres within broader landscapes of learning and childhood. In line with previous research, as highlighted earlier, this is very much linked to the location of our study in the Greater London area, where density of population, schools, and commercial activities enables visible public locations where tuition centres thrive. Centres actively worked to inculcate this idea of tuition as a normal everyday activity and part of children's lives:

We want it to be part of their lifestyle, something they enjoy doing (Centre B)

I think now in school everyone has tuition almost, it is the norm much more, so people are more open to talking about it, so a child is prepared to say I need some help (Centre A)

However, Centre D, the tuition centre with the most global reach, stressed there was still work to be done. With its international reach and strong ethos of tuition as a normalised part of childhood, accessibility was discussed in terms of changing mindsets:

I think culturally in this country we do still have a bit of a hang-up when it comes to afterschool tuition with academic subjects ... I think it is seen as something you do not really talk about, and you could more show off things like football or music but to talk about extra academic work is still kind of a bit taboo (Centre D)

Accessibility, as openness, therefore requires a wider shift in social attitudes pertinent to England, and which is at odds with many other 'high intensity' parts of the world (Doherty and Dooley 2018), notably parts of Asia, where the extra academic work of tuition is a regular part of childhood. Tuition centres are therefore finding new ways to assert their presence and break this 'taboo' including through the sponsoring of national educational prizes and competitions or working locally with and accessing schools as a means of promoting their brand. This version of accessibility works to expel the 'shamefully hidden' (Doherty and Dooley 2018, 562) dimension of private tuition that centre staff perceived to persist locally.

Attainment

Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson's (2020) appraisal of marketing literature noted the ways in which private tuition simultaneously encourages and seeks to alleviate parental anxieties around children's educational attainment. Our research found that tuition centre staff drew upon discourses around attainment in various ways; in terms of 'falling behind' and 'getting ahead', tests and exams, school as competition, and school as deficit which variously tapped into parental anxieties.

First, were the recurring discourses around children 'falling behind' in their learning at primary school and then 'getting ahead' through tuition. Tuition centre staff are very aware of parental anxieties around attainment at school and comparison with other children's development: 'I think parents live in fear and worry' (Centre A). Centre A manager noted how parents' evenings acted as 'trigger points' and prompted a 'big spate' of enquiries when teachers indicated that children were behind with work. As Centre C explained, 'many students ... tend to catch up by coming to the centre' to aid progress.

Second, providers stated that impending tests and exams further propelled families to engage the services of tuition centres. The increased formal and informal school testing of, and reporting on, educational outcomes that now exists through the primary school⁴ is leveraged by tuition centres to entice parents to their services, given the recognised unease that many parents feel about this and concern around how their children will perform in relation to peers (Ireson and Rushforth 2014). As Centre D noted, more rigorous testing is 'driving this unease amongst parents' and there is a 'fear around the immediacy of the SATs and eleven plus' (Centre D). While in the past the emphasis was on the 11+ examination, all the Centres noted the emphasis now put on SATs, the Standardised Assessments Tests: 'we will get a lot of families that want to prepare for the SATS' (Centre B).

The growing emphasis on tests is evident in the marketing material and shop front displays of tuition centres, with only one of the centres (Centre A) steering away from this explicit test-focused emphasis and instead drawing upon a contrasting discourse of assistance as we explore in the next section.

The increasing emphasis on and role of testing in primary schools has created, according to Centre C, a more pressured classroom environment:

I think it is becoming so competitive now with education in general so for example right from year 2 students have got SATs to worry about, come to year 5 they have got the 11 plus which they need to start preparing for right from year 4. Get into year 6 they have got SATs again and then they are preparing for secondary and then it is GCSEs and I think everything is very, is a lot more competitive now the demand is a lot higher because of the competition (Centre C)

This pressure in turn creates a more competitive schooling system, and as centre staff discussed has contributed to a demand for tuition centre offer.

This discourse of attainment is underpinned by a conceptualisation of schools as deficient and lacking in and of themselves (as also found by Holloway and Pimlot-Wilson 2020), and therefore not being able to provide child-centred individually tailored support to children. All the centres relayed either how they felt, or how parents felt, that education within schools was not sufficient. Centre C focused on child–teacher ratios and the individual attention children were not given:

in schools it is a ratio of about 30 children to one tutor so then they might not be working to their highest potential because ... they are not getting that attention ... many parents do not feel that the school is putting enough effort or maybe students are not getting as much attention as they need (Centre C)

Other centres commented on parents' belief that their children were not being academically 'stretched' through their formal schooling, and therefore not reaching their potential:

We will get parents who come in and say ... "I do not think the school are pushing them enough" (Centre A)

This is coupled with a perceived vagueness of information on attainment received from schools. Centre B improvised a 'typical' parent comment:

'school are saying they are doing absolutely fine, but I keep seeing this at home and I am not really sure where they are at' (Centre B)

This is a concern that tuition centres are productively picking up, offering to 'fill the gap', and arguably exploiting, and in so doing enhancing the rhetorical trope of schools as deficit in providing for children's education.

Therefore, as the English education system has become more test orientated, the role of parents in attempting to secure children's success in attainment has increased. Tan's (2017) appraisal of supplementary tutoring in Singapore explores parents' role and use of tutoring as a strategy for children to achieve success in exams. Borrowing the concept of parentocracy from Brown (1990) – the ideology that educational outcomes are determined by the aspirations and socio-economic capital of parents rather than the students' own capabilities and efforts – and employing it to private tuition, she demonstrates that private supplementary tutoring is strategically utilised by parents with the aim of giving their children an equal opportunity to excel in 'terminal exams'. Enhanced attainment as measured by success in testing is the prism through which parents engage their children in tuition and tuition centres offer their services. But rather than just final exams as marked by transitions through the 11+, or 'final' exams of GCSEs and A level's⁵, tuition centre offer is mapped across the school curricula and onto specific points of assessment, and increasingly parents are connecting their children to tuition in advance of these.

Assistance

The growth of tuition centres in the UK is intricately linked to broader social expectations of parenting and home-school engagement that have pervaded educational policy and practice (Marandet and Wainwright 2016). Doherty and Dooley (2018) suggest 'moral' agendas are projected onto parents to mobilise them to supplement school education with private tutoring as part of the 'nudging' of parents towards educational services and products. With a focus on Australia, they discuss the explicit 'responsibilising of parents' to take ownership of their children's learning, and the normalising and legitimising of tutoring that follows (see also Liu and Bray 2022). In our research, the offer of assistance by way of the support tuition centres offered to both parents and children beyond mere academic attainment was a means through which a broader responsibilising of learning was embraced. The different centres varied in emphasis in terms of fostering confidence, discipline, and independence; the more intangible benefits of tuition (Hajar 2020).

Centre A, the small independent centre, put focus on ensuring children felt well supported and grew in confidence with their learning; so not in terms of attainment and success in tests per se, but in terms of encouraging broader self-efficacy: ‘it comes down to I want them to feel confident ... to go away happy’ (Centre A). Centre A openly asserted they were less interested in tests and exams, and more interested in supporting the broader processes of learning and development, and therefore chose not to advertise their services in relation to staged school testing.

Other centres drew on ideas of assistance that supported children and families in broader ways. Centre B, spoke about prioritising parents *and* children together:

making parents feel confident supporting their children ... we have families where English isn’t their first language. And they will come to us and say, “how do I support them with this or that, with this homework, what does it actually ask me to do?” (Centre B)

In the way that family learning programmes in England have worked to reproduce normative versions of family and ‘good’ parenting (Wainwright and Marandet 2017), tuition centres are similarly keen to impress what parents can do to support their children’s learning and help them understand the formal education system.

Centres C and D additionally considered assistance in terms of support tuition gives in creating disciplined learners; that is, a learner that can focus and concentrate: ‘becoming a more self-regulated learner’ (Centre D):

the students who are really energetic and maybe not as well behaved so for them also may be discipline too in a way because they are forced to actually sit down and work for an hour or so (Centre C)

With small group attention, centres positioned themselves as instilling ‘good’ study behaviours through the focus and concentration tuition requires. This replicates notions of the ‘ideal student’ as passive, receptive and settled (Hempel-Jorgensen 2009) and places the problem of poor behaviour and ‘indiscipline’ on the student themselves. Discipline and self-regulation are considered key skills or outcomes to be achieved through tuition programmes.

This idea of the self-regulated learner – even at primary school age – was aimed at engendering independence in learning, and for Centre D this was directly linked to their approach of mastering fluency in English and Maths through a daily programme of homework running alongside their tuition centre sessions:

instilling the independence and confidence from the beginning (Centre D)

In discussing their emphasis on discipline and independence, Centre D offered a critical appraisal of a competitor centre for emphasising ‘fun’ rather than ‘fluency’ in number bonds and comprehension skills.

Furthermore, Centre C described how tuition could help prepare even pre-school children for moving into school:

why not prepare him [*sic*] for school, get him to work on his pencil controls? (Centre C)

Linked to this, Centre D explained how their centres in Asia had recently launched a ‘baby version’ of tuition based on ‘flashcards, visuals, sounds and songs’ for children younger than two. This discourse of scholarly preparation – of what children can and cannot do prior to formal schooling – signals concerted market development through the targeting and intensification of the scholarisation of educational development with even younger children (Ball 2007) and the strengthening and measurement of skills in these early years. These various aspects of assistance work as a reminder of the conflicting and crowded pedagogical terrain within which these centres operate and how this is critical in their fight for market share and customer numbers.

Conclusions

This paper highlights the significance of private tuition, in particular the growth in tuition centres, which offer group and one-to-one academic tutoring on accessible community or commercial

premises on a privately funded basis. Whilst much evidence discusses the impact of this new strand of the education services industry (see Ball 2007; Holloway and Kirby 2020) here we have pivoted our discussion around three discursive constructions – of accessibility, attainment, and assistance – that emerged from our interviews with tuition centre staff and that are mobilised to give tuition a normalising presence on the high street and in the routine lives of children. Our focus specifically on tuition centres which cater for primary-aged children and how staff position these services, is important for three reasons:

First, it empirically extends our understandings of the extent and reach of private tuition, with a focus on London. By identifying the ‘three As’ of high street tuition, this paper has explored the different ways in which tuition centres tap into parents’ engagements and insecurities around their children’s education, whether through recourse to openness and accessibility or concerns over attainment outcomes and desires for additional support.

Second, the paper explores the limitations of conceptualising this strand of the education services industry as ‘shadow education’ which, in part, denotes its operation as hidden, vague and unclear. In contrast, tuition centres are described as highly visible, and often located in the public space of high streets. Therefore, high street tuition centres are reshaping the tuition landscape, deploying themselves as an accessible means to support children’s learning, creating and responding to demand. The focus of commercial tuition centres ‘on the high street’ is an example of how the textures of education, and broader landscapes of economy and community – in particular the spatiality, rhythm and economy of education – are being reconfigured. The paper contributes to existing debates, highlighting that the mobilisation of the high street and its consumerist discourse is not accidental and the high street focus of tuition centres represents another example of the growth of privatised, education services industry, although the full impacts of these are not yet clear. Despite some naïve nods to inclusion from staff, these tuition centres remain physically and conceptually part of the privatised market-based economy, situated within commercial centres of town, rather than being a public service accessible to all.

Third, one significant aspect of this developing, expanding and competitive market of commercial tuition centres is the focus on ever younger age groups. As well as shadowing the formal, public education system, this paper flags the first forays of tuition centres into providing services for pre-school children in the UK, complementing (and perhaps therefore again, ‘shadowing’) the existing mixed economy of the Early Years Education and Care sector. Reflecting how commercial businesses constantly strive for new markets, tuition centres position younger, pre-school children as a potential and burgeoning market for private tuition centres, and the discourses employed by tuition centre staff reflect as well as seek to shape changing attitudes to academic tuition among parents and children.

There are limitations to this study. It was based on a small number of interviews with four tuition centres within the Greater London area. There is a clear geographical specificity to the localised demographics and education market that exists in London. However, as a reflection on the area of England where private tuition is most developed, as noted by Holloway and Kirby (2020), it offers valuable insight to future directions and development of the privatised education market in the form of private academic tuition. The study was conducted just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which, at the time, halted the final stage of data collection. The pandemic and ensuing periods of lockdown led to the temporary closure of centres with their activities moving online, again replicating formal schooling. While tuition centres are now back to their normal in person sessions, many now have a hybrid offer continuing with online access. As Pimlott-Wilson and Holloway (2021, 71) note, the ‘coronavirus pandemic is rewriting processes across the education system’, including the practices of private tuition, which for tuition centres has a particular inflection that requires further study.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this paper highlights the growing significance of tuition centres in urban centres such as London. That tuition centres lead the (re)positioning of private

tuition as highly visible, high street private businesses, positioned within and amongst other commercial enterprises, with an emerging focus on a younger age range (complementing Early Years Education and Care) are developments worthy of further consideration as they emerge and develop, and reconfigure and reshape notions of childhood, learning, and parenting.

Notes

1. The wider project was comprised of three stages. First, centre staff interviews, as discussed in this paper. Second, a questionnaire disseminated by centres to parents of children accessing their tuition offer, with a total of 30 completions. Third, six families were identified for family interviews from the questionnaire stage. However, only three interviews were conducted prior to the national lockdown in March 2020.
2. Ethics approval: 15789-MHR-Mar/2019-18571-1
3. Working tax credits are for people who are in work, either for an employer or self-employed, but earn a low income. The childcare vouchers scheme, which was closed to new members in 2018, allows employees to sacrifice part of the earnings for tax-free childcare vouchers to cover childcare costs.
4. SATs were introduced into English primary schools in 1991 and are now undertaken in years 3 (at age 7-8) and 6 (at age 10-11). Further assessments include phonics testing (year 1 at age 5-6), the multiplication tables check (MTC) (year 4 at age 8-9), and other school ad hoc testing.
5. The 11+ examination is a standardised examination taken by students wishing to enter academically selective schools. GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations are typically taken at age 15-16, at the end of Year 11. A Level examinations are typically taken at age 17-18, at the end of year 13.

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