The pressures faced by Hong Kong families have increased in competitive society. The so-called shadow education system of supplementary tutoring has spread in influence and intensity. For both parents and their children, it is difficult to find the right balance.

Ora Kwo and Mark Bray

The newsletter

Facing the shadow education system in Hong Kong

The pressures on families
Returning to the South China Morning Post, the newspaper certainly put its finger on an issue of major concern to many families, referring to a wider analysis of social development in Hong Kong. “Schoolwork is important,” it declared. “But a child’s whole life should not revolve around it, letting it affect even family relationships. It is not worth the sacrifice of a happy childhood.”

However, the newspaper also showed that families are to some extent trapped. When the majority of their classmates receive tutoring, students worry that they will be left behind. Teachers to some extent rely on tutoring to reinforce parts of the curriculum and to provide individual attention that they cannot themselves offer. And parents are led to consider tutoring part of a normal form of family support without which they might be neglecting their children’s future. The South China Morning Post recognised this with the remark that “intense competition inside the classroom is driving many parents to pay for tutorials outside school. Most are afraid that their children will fall behind if they don’t take extra classes; some wish to give them an edge over others.”

Seen from a broader angle, the developments in Hong Kong are part of a global shift from the school as the only significant formal centre for teaching and learning to a situation in which the shadow sector is a major component and an essential support. This changing balance needs much wider awareness, and much greater recognition by schools and governments. The shadow education sector is unlikely to diminish in the near future. The task ahead is to promote dialogue and interaction. Schools need to consider why parents are sending their children to tutorial institutions, and what the pupils gain in those institutions that the schools themselves are not providing.

The South China Morning Post described the shadow as a parasitic industry. Yes, it has parasitic elements; but there is more to it than this. And meanwhile, the newspaper should not over-simplify “the lesson that all parents need to learn.” This is a complicated domain, and it is not easy to be either a parent or a student in contemporary Hong Kong.

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Notes
1 South China Morning Post, 26 April 2010, page A10.