

# Solving governments' low-level education problems

## Kip McGrath

Shadow education is a name for private supplementary tutoring that is offered outside the mainstream education system. This education is delivered by tutors working alone or, increasingly, by tutoring companies. But shadow education is a poor name for a service that has become more and more mainstream. It is more focused and often delivers better results. Tutoring is, in my view, what the service should be called. Tutoring is not new, but it has become more and more popular over the last few years. In times past, rich families did not send their children to school – they were taught at home by a governess. As time progressed, the wealthy children went to school but their families employed tutors to help them achieve better.

When I started our business in Australia 40 years ago, students were generally middle class or upper-middle class. The students who we saw were either:

- Having difficulty with their lessons at school and sometimes had a learning disability, or
- Under-achieving, and their parents wanted them to perform better – particularly in major exams

Tuition fees were quite high compared to today and the number of children being tutored was relatively low. Over the years there has been a huge increase in the number of students being tutored. There are many reasons why parents seek help for their children. These include:

- Students are having difficulty with school work, particularly with literacy and numeracy. Some of these students have learning difficulties or special needs
- Parents are attempting to get children into specific schools where there is competition for places – selective schools, elite private schools and so on
- Parents want good exams results or improved exam results at all levels. This is no longer confined to major exams
- Migrant parents may want the best for their children and believe the way forward in a new country is a good education
- Parents want their children helped with their homework. These will often be very busy parents who have the money, but not the time to help out themselves

Because tutoring has now become mainstream and so many children are using the services of a tutor, the price has come down to a much lower level than it was 40 years ago, relative to other living costs. Recently we have seen another huge shift in the tutoring market, which is going to gain more and more ground – governments throughout the world have a major problem with education for students who have difficulty with literacy and

numeracy. This issue is relatively new, but will not go away until a solution is found. In fact the problem will continue to get worse unless some decisions are made, and outcomes identified, on how to fix the issue.

The problem is with illiteracy and, to a slightly lesser extent, numeracy. In developed economies, there are practically no very low-skilled jobs. Menial tasks such as digging holes, road work, factory work, etc are largely done by machines – humans are too expensive and inefficient. In order to operate one of these labour-saving machines, certain skills are required. To acquire these skills the operator needs to get a licence or do a course. To complete this requires the person to be literate and sometimes numerate (Hackett, 2012).

## The overlooked lowest achievers

Every year at least 15–20 per cent of school leavers in developed countries, such as the UK, head out of formal education without the basics of literacy and or numeracy (Brookes, 2010 cited in Shepherd, 2010). Education systems are not built to handle this 15–20 per cent who have difficulty. The traditional education system accepted this failure rate, because there were low-skilled jobs for these people – until now. Educational resources to teach these students are not generally available, because until now it has made more sense for a publisher to stick to providing resources for all – not the less lucrative remedial area. These resources need to be specific, well thought out and delivered in a step-by-step approach. They need to target and strengthen the root cause of the problem. Unless they do this they simply won't work.

The system for so many years worked because students who did poorly at school were still employable. This is no longer the case. The illiterate and/or innumerate students cannot be trained to do any of the skilled tasks required for today's world. The government spends enormous amounts on training that doesn't work, because the trainee doesn't have the basic skills. As such, the government spends huge amounts on unemployment and other benefits. There is a very real chance that unskilled people will engage in anti-social behaviour, with prisons and the infrastructure around supporting the criminal justice system being a huge cost to government. When such a person finally retires and has had no opportunity to put anything aside for retirement, he/she needs to be supported financially by taxpayers.

Governments in these more developed countries realise there is a problem, but very few have addressed the issue in a way that works. To continue to do more of the same will continue to produce the same results. Something different needs to be done or the problem will not go away. This is where the suppliers of shadow education or tutoring companies come in. Some tutoring

organisations specialise in helping students with improving their literacy and numeracy. They know how to teach these subjects in a way that works for poor performers. Unlike schools, they understand accountability because they have to be accountable to parents who pay. There will be an increase in partnerships between governments and tutoring companies in developed countries as a way of solving the unemployability of illiterate and innumerate people.

The solution is simple. The task of remediation can be cost effectively outsourced to specialist companies to deliver programmes, as well as ensuring that accountability procedures are in place. The desired results will surely follow.

## Training teachers

In less developed countries, the problem for governments is similar, but on a greater scale. Growing economies have an almost insatiable hunger for skilled people, though under-developed countries lack a workforce with the requisite skills to help build these burgeoning economies. One of the problems is developing enough people with these skills. The training required for these desperately needed skills requires a functional level of literacy and/or numeracy. The shortage stems from the problem that many young people now completing their education do not graduate with adequate literacy and numeracy skills. Added to this are socio-economic factors restricting parents from gaining access to private tutoring.

On top of this, the need for tutoring in literacy, in particular, was so great on a national level that governments would have had trouble paying to address the problem. Another solution was required. This had led to a partnership between governments and tutoring companies, where state school and college teachers are trained by tutoring companies, which then allow access to their educational content to provide resources for the schools' or colleges' students. Teachers are trained in how to use the resources to get the required results. This appears to be the ideal solution for developing countries.

The students who have difficulty can be tutored using the proven materials and methodology of tutoring companies, but the costs can be contained. This containment occurs by using the school's or college's premises to deliver remediation and to train the school's teachers in the use of the new teaching resources. The

methodology and the educational material delivered to the teachers is the same as that already used by the tutoring partner company. The serves to keep costs to manageable levels.

By looking at the history of tutoring the trend becomes obvious. We have moved from tutoring being for the rich, to reaching for the middle class and now being available for everyone. As an educator this really excites me. I like the fact that the best education is now available to everyone. The world becomes better, or fairer, if everyone gets the best education possible. Technology has been the catalyst. The training of tutors can be done remotely. The content can be delivered by the internet. The teachers doing the tutoring can be monitored and made accountable. The computer can develop individual programs for individual students taking this very onerous task away from teachers.

I look forward to seeing more and more governments really doing something about their literacy and numeracy problems by partnering with education companies. Not only does it make great moral sense, it makes huge financial sense to governments.

## References

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