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Foondun, Abdool R.. 2019. "Effects of Poor Sanitation on Private-tuition Children". figshare.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/29300>.



Effects of poor sanitation on private-tuition children

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THE SYSTEM OF education in Mauritius, both at the primary and secondary levels, has become so competitive that almost all students feel compelled to take private tuition, if they are to secure a place in the best secondary schools or in a university. Parents, too, conscious of the value of education, are increasingly using private tutoring as a means of retaining a relative advantage for their children in the education race. At the same time, private tutoring has become a welcome opportunity to increase the income of formal school teachers, whose salaries have been seriously eroded over recent decades. Demand and supply factors are thus reinforcing each other, creating a real market for student coaching.

Private tuition, if given in small groups and clean classrooms and, if accompanied by the appropriate sanitary measures, certainly has a positive impact on the teaching - learning process. Nevertheless, if tutoring is provided in crowded groups or in unsuitable premises where sanitation services and hygiene do not always meet ideal standards, then it is bound to have negative effects on the growth, education and cleanliness of pupils, especially adolescent girls.

However, before analysing such effects, it is important first of all to discuss the extent of private tuition, to see its duration as well as the time when it is given and to examine the venue and size of tuition classes.

Extent of private tuition

Private tuition flourishes not only in Mauritius but also in such countries as Singapore, Hong Kong, Myanmar, South Korea, Kenya, Japan, Jamaica, Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Research shows that in Mauritius almost all students in primary schools (usually between the ages of 5 and 11) and secondary schools (generally above the age of 11 but less than 20) take tuition, with some even having recourse to a second tuition in the same subject by a different tutor. (Foondun, 1992, p.21).

Time and duration of private tuition classes

Private tuition occupies a fairly large amount of students' time, whether it is in Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Japan or Mauritius. In Mauritius, a study showed that in 1988 an average of 5.7 hours at the primary level and 5 hours at the secondary level was spent by students on tuition, (Joynathsing, 1988, p. 39 & 52) but tuition time in 1998 seems to have risen to at least 10 and 12 hours per week respectively. Such tuition usually takes place before or after school hours, in the afternoon or early

mornings, with the result that the school day is considerably lengthened.

Venue of tuition classes

The place where tuition is given varies by country and by tutor. Tuition is held either in the regular classroom, the back verandah, a garage, a rented room or a shed specially constructed for the purpose for tutoring.

Size of tuition classes

The size of tuition classes differs from country to country and from tutor to tutor. It can vary from as many as 80 in Cambodia (Bray, 1995, p. 15) to as few as 2 or even 100 in Japan (White, 1987, p. 77). In Mauritius, most tuition-groups at the primary level have about 40 students whereas secondary school students attend tuition in groups of between 5 and 50.

Implications of lack of sanitation and private tuition combined on school children

The phenomenon of private tuition lengthens the school day and many students attend classes in large groups and often in insanitary surroundings, with the result that many problems crop up.

Lack of water and toilet facilities in tuition premises

Whether private tutoring takes place before or after school hours, the daily healthful regimen for pupils is considerably affected. While certain norms have been prescribed with regard to the number of flush toilets and taps in schools, the level of sanitary facilities falls dramatically outside school buildings. In such places which have not been designed to cater for a large number of students, sanitation services are often woefully inadequate with only one toilet or one tap. The students can consider themselves lucky if there is running water or if the toilet is in good working condition. This is because the water supply is often interrupted or the flushing system is malfunctioning or the toilet pans are blocked. Added to this unhygienic state is the fact that the time available between regular and tuition classes - usually 10 to 15 minutes - is not always enough for all students to answer their natural calls or to wash their hands. The result is that most students do not or cannot satisfy their call of nature and have to wait for long hours to do it at their place.

Insanitary surroundings

The premises in which any teaching-learning process operates are extremely important in providing a healthful school day for pupils. Thus, clean and attractive surroundings contribute a lot to a social schedule of work and play. Unfortunately many tuition classes have unsuitable surroundings where sanitation is not always satisfactory. At times the decomposing refuse near the rented room used for tuition may not have been collected for days and becomes a successful breeding place for houseflies and rodents. The floor of the class may not be disinfected regularly and the yard may be muddy or dusty. Moreover, the garage or shed which was not originally meant for teaching may not have the right degree of illumination required in different school situations. The walls, with no attempt to avoid glare and sharp contrast between bright and dark surfaces, may not have the appropriate colours for a classroom. The seating arrangements too may be inappropriate and children may have to stretch their neck to see the board or the teacher. But worst of all, the place may not be properly ventilated and there may not be enough openings to allow fresh air inside the room. In such situations the children are exposed to all sorts of diseases and inconveniences so that studying becomes very difficult.

Crowded classrooms

Crowded classrooms where students scarcely have space to sit or breathe can hardly be conducive to learning. For example, in Sri Lanka a researcher of private tuition saw a class, of about 25 to 35 boys and girls crowding round the table; some were even standing. (Pararajasingham, 1980, p.77). In Mauritius too it is not rare to see a large number of students crammed in a small room. How can the teaching-learning process take place in such an atmosphere where there is no fresh air and where only one student suffering from a contagious disease can contaminate everybody, including the teacher? While Mauritius can pride itself that it is free from tuberculosis and several other communicable diseases common in third world countries, unfortunately flu, conjunctivitis, and measles are quite common. Thus, while it is comforting that at school a student suffering from a contagious disease is sent home and advised to be absent until he is well again, in private tuition such a practice may not work as the student who does not attend tutoring classes is under no obligation to pay the fees. Consequently, it often happens that even students who follow closely standards and habits of personal cleanliness catch a disease from their friends and in turn infect their brothers or sisters at home.

Food at tuition

It is generally agreed that food at school contributes to a healthy school day and protects the child from diseases. In this connection, some health-conscious parents prepare their own food or drinks for their children. At school too the principal or headteacher makes sure that the school

canteen or even the food vendors at the gate sell food which is at least free from bacteria. Health inspectors also often visit the premises: Unfortunately, once school is over, the canteen is closed and no control can be exercised on the quality of food sold or on street vendors. The latter may not always cover their food and often handle the cakes with their fingers which may not always be clean. The most popular snacks bought after school hours are usually junk foods, local burgers, fried cakes or noodles or preserved foods, all of which may have been prepared many hours ago and kept unrefrigerated. Such foods are never accompanied by napkins, are of dubious quality, may be contaminated by bacteria and in any case have little nutritional value. The pupils may even be drinking water which is not clean. In such cases, it is not rare to see students suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting .

Backaches

Long hours of schooling, interruption of water supply and unavailability of clean food at school or tuition classes often mean that some children carry their own food or bottles of water. Unfortunately, the pupils are already carrying a large number of books and exercise books with the result that the additional load now becomes a health hazard to children who have a heavy bag on their shoulders and cannot walk straight. This can give rise to a number of ill-defined ailments, such as backaches, and doctors have predicted that "the practice of children carrying book bags of 10 to 12 kilos will result in 10-15 years' time in most primary school children suffering from scoliosis. (UNICEF, 1994, p.37).

Mental problems

Studying for a whole day is already bad for children. But if tuition classes are held in large groups, in inappropriate premises, and in unhealthy conditions and if students cannot go to toilets which are clean or wash their hands properly, then their emotional, social and physical development is greatly impaired. They also suffer from stress and mental anguish. Psychiatrists, doctors and medical researchers are all unanimous in their condemnation of long hours of tuition under such conditions. Says one well known psychiatrist in Thailand, Withaya Nakkawatchaia, "The phenomenon of students attending tutorial classes tends to make students tense and can result in mental and physical problems in the future ... They suffer from headache, tiredness and sometimes sleeplessness. The children also get irritated very easily. (The Nation, March 5, 1995).

Problems of adolescent girls

While the above problems can be very distressing to students in general, adolescent girls are those who suffer most. Indeed, the first sign of menses to a girl who is subjected to physical and mental torture demanded by an inexorable system of education combined with tuition is already traumatic. Such a girl needs to change her pads

from time to time. But the inability to change sanitary napkins for long hours - because of the unavailability of a clean toilet - can only increase the trauma of the girl. Girls of secondary schools suffer even more because they take tuition for longer hours. One wonders how they can concentrate on their books or even remain clean when they have to remain in an uncomfortable state for hours.

Conclusion

Private tutoring in itself is not bad, if given in small groups and in satisfactory sanitary conditions. There are indeed a few cases where private coaching operates under almost ideal conditions. Unfortunately it is also true that lack of sanitation and private tuition combined have dreadful consequences on school children, especially on adolescent girls. But if all partners of education join hands, they will soon become conscious of the problem. They will then realise that access to adequate sanitation services is at the basis of a good education and that a health-promoting environment is in the interest of both the child and society.

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