THE SURVIVAL OF TUTORIAL SCHOOLS IN THAILAND IN THE MIDST OF ACTIVE LEARNING OF SCIENCE

Patarapol Pisanpanumas and Pratchayapong Yasri*

Institute for Innovative Learning, Mahidol University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Academics and educators tend to have negative attitudes towards tutorial schools, especially in science subjects. Tutorial schools have been accused as providing only rote learning and exam preparation tips, without promoting conceptual understanding through active learning. However, a number of school students and parents find tutorial schools helpful in different ways. In Thailand, there have been implementations of educational policies such as a new system of national tests and assessment systems which aim to minimise the roles of tutorial schools. However, the business of tutorial schools is still growing. This is because tutorial schools adapt themselves to meet the needs of students and parents successfully. Science teaching in tutorial schools nowadays does not only help students for exam preparations, it does also incorporate different learning supports to assist students including hands-on activities, e-learning system, and educational guidance. In addition, the quality of private tutors in terms of their educational background and teaching skills is also distinguish. Therefore, instead of rejecting tutorial schools, we propose that there are lessons that educators can learn from them. The intention of this presentation is not to compare between tutorial schools and regular schools. It only aims to broaden perspectives on the current development of tutorial schools that can benefit students significantly.

Keywords: tutorial schools, science and mathematics education, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Apart from mainstream education in both primary and secondary school levels, it has been known that a number of school students particularly in Asia (Bray & Kwok, 2003) and elsewhere (Bray, 2006) spend their extra-time to attend tutorial schools. In Thailand, research shows that

over one third of middle and high school students attend tutorial schools for a number of reasons ranging from educational purposes (i.e. to increase understanding in their lessons, to know faster thinking methods and short-cut techniques to solve exam questions, to increase confidence in exam preparations) to personal purposes (i.e. following friends and parent's suggestions) (Napompech, 2011). However, while receiving a great deal of interest by students, there are critiques of tutoring. For example, it emphasises on exam preparations and short-cut tricks. It pays little attention on conceptual understanding which is far more important than solving exam questions. It pays little focus on development of learning skills. In addition, it requires extra educational costs from parents and creates competition and pressure among students. Last but not least, many claim that it only runs for business, not educational purposes (Kinyaduka, 2014). Among other subjects, science and mathematics are found to be the most popular subjects that students need an extra tutorial. This is evident in Thailand as science and mathematic tutorial schools have been established (Napompech, 2011).

Not aiming particularly to demolish science tutorial schools from educational system; however, educational policies in respect to science and mathematics education in Thailand have been implemented to promote active learning that serves the development of 21st century learning skills which seem to lessen the importance of tutoring that focuses more on scores and exam preparations. These education policies include a large movement of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education or STEM run by a government institution whose responsibility is for promoting science and mathematics education across the country. There is also a 5-year long project for science and mathematic teachers' professional development run by a private sector whose aim is to expand the use of inquiry-based learning of science in over 50 provinces across the country. On top of this, there is an educational movement in the national level to implementa student-centred approach integrated with inquiry-based learning to promote 21st century learning skills in both science and mathematics. In addition, new assessment tools such as PISA and TIMMS have become a centre of interest which require critical thinking skills rather than just answering exam questions procedurally.

However, the expectation that science and mathematics tutorial schools would become less popular among Thai students due to the educational movements is not valid at all. In fact, the number of middle and high school students participating tutorial schools remains high, especially in big cities like Bangkok, Khon Khan, Songkla and Chiang Mai (Napompech, 2011). A question of interest of this paper then arises. What makes tutorial schools in Thailand survive while the new strand of educational trends like STEM education and active learning emerges? This short communication based on two case studies therefore would like to provide some potential explanations. We propose that there are two main reasons that make tutorial schools survive which compose of (1) the requirement of university admission exams that still focus on scores,

and (2) the active adaptation of tutorial schools to meet the needs of students and parents educationally and psychologically. Now we will elaborate this in more detail.

SETTING

Over a period of three months before university admission exams in Thailand in 2016, we had paid our closer look to the activities of two tutorial schools. One is a very popular science and mathematics tutorial school which has over 50 branches throughout the country. The other is a brand-new school which runs tutorial events for a quick content summary and exam preparations in one day or just over a weekend. Although these two different schools have forms of tutorials and target groups, they share similar features that are worth considering as the potential explanations to the question of interest. In this article, we will refer to the first school as Demand and the other as NokMueng.

Explanation 1: Although the new trend of educational movements focuses more on active learning which requires less skills in solving exam questions, university admission exams still focus on student achieved scores in which those skills are crucial.

It is an educational tragedy that no matter what educational policies have been implemented to change school science and mathematics from paper-based to active learning, the university admission exams still measure student abilities through exam scores both from school and national tests. In order to achieve satisfactory scores, skills in solving questions quickly and short-cut tricks seem to be of value. Based on this fact, the two tutorial schools therefore put their main focus on helping students to have a better chance to get a place in a university by raising university admission scores. From our personal conversations with them, they revealed that although they know what ideal science and mathematics education should look like (active and inquiry-based learning with intellectually engaging investigations), they are concerned that the national tests still require students' ability to solve exam questions. No matter what educational campaigns have been implemented during school terms, at the end of the final grades, all students wishing to go to university will have to take the same admission exams. So, these two tutorial schools catch this point and run their business based on this reality. The success of their business is claimed based on the increased number of students who attend their school events and courses over the past few years.

Explanation 2: The tutorial schools do not only focus on exam preparations but they also actively adapt their business strategies to meet the needs of both students and parents educationally and psychologically.

From educational perspectives, following the educational trend of active learning, the tutorial schools are actually taking a small step towards active learning that focuses on both conceptual

understanding and exam preparation simultaneously. Demand provides a number of demonstrations to help students conceptually understand physics concepts. However, this active learning strategy has a small portion of hands-on activities but rather involves more on minds-on activities and demonstrations. Demand has its recorded demonstrations published online so that students can access to these materials at anytime and everywhere they wish. NokMueng uses a great number of analogies to promote students' conceptual understanding leading to their ability to solve exam questions. In addition, NokMueng tutors integrate storytelling as a strategy to make abstract concepts more concrete and more engaging to students. From our discussion with students, they said that they love the way both Demand and NokMueng adopt because it is accessible and enjoyable. This aspect of learning is actually lacking in many regular schools.

Apart from this, both tutorial schools also quickly adapt to educational innovation such as using technologies to enhance student learning through the use of e-learning system. Their use of technology is rather simple; for example, using animation to make a presentation more exciting. They set up a system for students to be able to review the materials at anytime they want with no extra cost. They realise that students have different paces and styles of learning so that in a session where a lesson is delivered, it is unlikely that every single student will get the same level of understanding. So, their system is developed to support this individual difference. However, this system is not that technologically advanced. It is just a database to deposit videos and instructional materials.

This is not surprising at all to the mind of educators of course. However, what surprises us is that their simple use looks more effective and the level of use by students is very high. Students seem to enjoy the videos and often revisit the lessons. We think the message that we learn from this is that the use of technology like animation does not have to be really fancy. What is considered more important is how to use and the frequency of use. Perhaps, we as educators spend too much time on knowing and getting to deeper understanding of technology with little action. In contrast, the private sector would just implement what looks simple and makes use of it effectively. In addition, high technology although looks exciting, it does impact to a limited group of learners, especially those who are financially able to purchase which is not accessible to the mass of students. However, the use of simple technology based on both Demand and NokMueng is accessible to a much larger groups of students which requires only a laptop notebook or a mobile device to access at anytime and anywhere.

From our observation we also learn that the claim that tutorial schools focus only on exam preparation is not quite true from these two cases. Repeatedly done in each class, they use formative assessment to check whether students are following the lesson or not. Thai students are usually shy in nature. When teachers ask questions, they tend to be quite so the teachers may not know whether they understand the content or not. Most of the time, they would just say

everything is fine, but in fact they may understand only little from the lesson or even misunderstand quite a lot. However, the tutors of both tutorial schools constantly use formative assessment in their friendly use of words. This makes them able to dig into what students actually think and understand. Importantly, they can help students who have difficulties in the learning immediately.

They believe that getting only final results as a summative assessment might be too late for them to help students. Their concern on this reflects an effective instructional approach. Of course, this may sound unsurprising for educators. But what is surprising is that even though formative assessment is known to be useful for educators and teachers, they rarely do it. In contrast, private tutors adopt this as their usual teaching habits. On top of this, not only the tutors assessing students, they are also open to student feedback. One of the questions that impresses us is that Demand tutors always ask students what they like and dislike from their teaching. Following this up, they ask what they could do better to get 10 out of 10 based on student perspectives. They are keen to change their teaching approaches to satisfy the learners. We do not think that this has done much in regular schools. Many might do formative assessment, but less would pay careful attention to adaptation according to student feedback. Teachers seem to be highly respected at least in the Thai context and would not want to change according to student suggestions.

From psychological perspectives, we also learn another aspect that makes tutorial schools very interesting. Apart from good teaching and effective assessment of student development of understanding, one of their main missions is to inspire students to run after their dreams. Before ending each lesson, the tutors from both Demand and NokMueng often give a word of encouragement to hold up students and from time to time they provide some educational guidance regarding the nature of each career, university courses and university life. They understand that students are in a situation with great pressure as they need to pursue their life in a university. So, they refresh them by encouraging them with friendliness. We reckon that this support may lack in regular schools. This psychological support gains trust from students as well as their parents and breaks down the wall of teacher-student relationship from the perspective of general Thai students. The students seem to view their tutors as senior friends (in the Thai translation this relationship is even much closer as it would call "brothers" or "sisters").

In addition, we learn that the claim that tutorial schools focus only on business is probably invalid at least in these two cases. They actually provide educational opportunities for students in both big and rural cities across the country. Over the period of observation, they run additional events to visit students in different cities in order to do content review, exam preparations and educational guidance for students with a very low registration cost. Interestingly, students were very much looking forward to their visit as if they were super stars. This actually helps private tutorial schools gain more acceptance and creditability from schools and also positive attitudes

from many teachers. What surprises us the most is that not only school students, they did also provide educational opportunities for Buddhist novices with no charge. We are realistic enough to discuss this that in the capital economy, well education is driven by financial support. We would not see that the registration fee that students had to pay to attend their events is not appropriate. All development needs financial inputs. In fact, more analysis perhaps needs to be done to compare financial use between tutorial and regular schools. We might be surprised that regular schools may charge more.

Finally, the competitiveness among tutorial schools results in greater quality of tutors and their teaching techniques. The quality does not only depend on the degree that they obtain but does depend on who is teaching and who can deliver the materials more effectively. Only few tutors in this two tutorial schools have a degree in education. Most of them have science or engineering degree. However, they are skilful in teaching and have engaging techniques to teach and to make academic content more vibrant. In addition, they can bring things down to earth by using non-academic language. It appears to us that they understand how to teach. They understand the students from psychological perspectives. Often, academics tend to find people who are specialised in a specific area. However, these tutors may not know much deep knowledge; yet they know other areas well enough which can really broaden students perspectives. Based on NokMueng, teaching physics is not limited only to physics content but there are some other areas of knowledge that students can learn from one lesson. This in turn brings the nature of STEM education to a tutorial lesson. A tutor can integrate multi-disciplines in their particular lesson.

Having discussed all of these possible explanations in relation to factors that help tutorial schools survive in Thailand while there are educational movements in the national level that seem to lessen the importance of tutorials, we have to make it clear that we have no intention to communicate that tutorial schools have done any better job than regular schools. We only aim to broaden perspectives of educators who may have negative attitudes towards non-regular education. In fact, we think there is much more for us to learn how tutorial schools can keep their popularity as well as quality.

We reckon that they rest their business on the real need of students and parents in respect to their need to enter to a university and a faculty that they wish. However, the tutorial schools do not take advantage from this need and run their business purely for their benefits. They have adapted and adopted some effective strategies to improve the quality of their schools as well as their tutors' teaching such as to focus both conceptual understanding and skills to solve exam questions. They are keen to provide necessary skills for learning of science such as hands-on and minds-on activities through demonstrations. In addition, they integrate accessible technology in their teaching to make the lessons more interesting and exciting to students with require no extra cost. Importantly, their understanding of students' and parents' psychological needs in terms of

educational guidance and support in any possible ways makes their business more interesting. Last but not least, their ability to hire teachers who have great performance is their extra point.

We wish that both private tutorial schools and regular schools will be able to do their best for the sake of students. It is not helpful for one to just criticise the other with no actions. Let students and parents choose what is good for them. Criticisms without actions may only sound noisy. But critical reflection with active development can bring good fruits to students.

ACKNOWLEDEGMENTS

REFERENCES

Bray, M. (2006). Private supplementary tutoring: Comparative perspectives on patterns and implications. *Compare.* 36(4), 515-530.

Bray, M., & Kwok, P. (2003). Demand for private supplementary tutoring: conceptual considerations, and socio-economic patterns in Hong Kong. *Economics of Education Review.* 22(6), 611-620.

Kinyaduka, B. (2014). Private tutoring: A critical analysis of world experiences. *Merit Research Journal of Education and Review*. Vol. 2(8) pp. 135-140

Napompech, K. (2011). What Factors Influence High School Students in Choosing Cram School in Thailand. *International Conference on Business and Economics Research. IPEDR* Vol.16 (2011) © (2011) IACSIT Press, Singapore

Authors Detail :

Mr Patarapol Pisanpanumas is a research student in Science and Technology Education at Institute for Innovative Learning, Mahidol University. He is interested in physics teaching in both active learning and large lecture formats. His current research is on the development of hands-on activities to foster students' conceptual understanding of convection in water currents, the air and fluid in relation to the occurrence of natural disasters.

*Dr Pratchayapong Yasri is a lecturer is Science and Technology Education at Institute for Innovative Learning, Mahidol University. His PhD research was on Psychology of Learning. He is now working on enhancing student learning of science subjects through the lenses of psychology and learning sciences.

Corresponding author