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**Private Tutoring and the Subjective Rationalities of Parents:
The Experiences in South Korea and Singapore**

Abstract

Purpose – This article proposes a model of subjective rationalities to shed light on the global phenomenon of parental reliance on private tutoring for their children. The model is illustrated using the examples of the rational decision-making process and outcome of parents with regards to enrolling their children in private tutoring in South Korea and Singapore.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a theoretical paper that relies on a critical review of official documents, academic publications and newspaper reports.

Findings – This article proposes a model of subjective rationalities to illuminate the prevalence of parental reliance on private tutoring for their children. It is argued that parents in South Korea and Singapore manifest their subjective rationalities by selecting private tutoring services based on available information at a reasonable cost. It is further contended that the parents' differentiated investment in private tutoring reflects their cost-benefit analysis that is conditioned by contextual resources, opportunities, and constraints.

Research limitations/implications – This is a conceptual paper that proposes a theoretical model so there is no empirical data.

Originality/value – This article proposes an original model to shed light on the global phenomenon of parental reliance on private tutoring for their children. The model highlights the following: the dynamic interactions between parents, education policy and private tutoring; the active role of private tutoring providers; and the socio-culturally embedded and complex nature of educational decisions.

Keywords private tutoring, Singapore, subjective rationalities, South Korea

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Private tutoring, also known as private supplementary tutoring or shadow education, refers to “outside-school learning activities paralleling features of formal schooling used by students to increase their own educational opportunities” (Baker, Akiba, LeTendre and Wiseman, 2001, p. 2). The extant literature on the educational trend of private tutoring is well-established, with the bulk of the research focusing on the popularity of private tutoring and its effects on students, parents and society (e.g. Bray and Kwo, 2013, 2014; Bray and Lykins, 2012; Carr & Wang, 2017; Choi and Cho, 2016; Dawson, 2010; Entrich, 2014, 2015; Kwon, Kristjansson and Walker, 2017; Seah, 2016; Tan, 2017, 2019a).

But an existing research gap is the dynamic interactions between the parents, education policy and private tutoring. In other words, what are the factors that collectively shape the educational decisions of parents with regards to private tutoring for their children? A related point is that private tutoring is often described in passive terms as the choice of parents or target of educational reform. What is largely

overlooked are the active role and adaptive ability of private tutoring providers in responding to changing circumstances and creating new opportunities for parents. This article aims to fill the gap by investigating the rational decision-making process and outcome of parents with regards to enrolling their children in private tutoring. Specifically, this study proposes a model of subjective rationalities to shed light on the global phenomenon of parental reliance on private tutoring for their children. This is a theoretical paper that relies on a critical review of official documents, academic publications and newspaper reports.

To illustrate the application of the model, this paper focuses on two East Asian countries – South Korea (hereinafter Korea) and Singapore. Both Korea and Singapore have a high subscription of private tutoring where students attend paid classes that are offered by private organisations or individuals. In addition, both countries are Confucian Heritage Cultures that “share Confucian values, which consistently reflect in their social behaviour and practices, including academic outcomes and learning approaches” (Park, 2011, p. 381). Both jurisdictions are also known as High-Performing Education Systems (HPESs) where their students have distinguished themselves in international large-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The status of Korea and Singapore as CHCs and HPESs are relevant to our examination of private tutoring as the social norms and strong academic achievement provide the essential motivation for the demand for private tutoring in both localities.

The paper is organised as follows. The first part of the article introduces a model of subjective rationalities that shape the educational decision of parents to rely on private tutoring for their children. This is followed by an application of the model to Korea and Singapore. The last section of this article highlights the major implications arising from our comparative analysis.

A Model of the Subjective Rationalities of Parents

This section outlines a model of the subjective rationalities that accounts for the educational decision of parents to turn to private tutoring for their children (see Figure 1). The model is primarily derived from the works of Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), Goldthorpe (2007), Glaesser and Cooper (2014) and Need and de Jong (2000). As shown in the figure, two key factors – education policy and private tutoring providers – interact with and influence the educational decisions of the parents. It should be added that the factors that shape the parents’ preference for private tutoring are not limited to the two before-mentioned factors, i.e., education policy and private tutoring providers. Other factors include the type of schools that the child has attended and is currently attending, the profile of the student, and quality of teaching and learning the child has received and is presently receiving. But the model proposed here focuses on only education policy and private tutoring providers as these two factors are arguably among the most significant factors that contribute to the subjective rationalities of parents.

[insert Figure 1 around here]

The concept of ‘subjective rationalities’ (Goldthorpe, 2007) originates from Rational Action Theory (RAT) that has been expounded by, among other scholars, Bouden (1974), Goldthorpe (1996) and Breen and Goldthorpe (1997). RAT, in its basic form, posits that human beings make decisions based on a calculation of cost and benefit.

Varieties of RAT have been criticised for “making overly simplistic and/or unrealistic assumptions” (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014, p. 465; also see Bouden, 1993, 1998). A major criticism concerns the notion of rationality. Contrary to the assumptions of some variants of RAT, human beings often do not act in a purely rational manner (Goldthorpe, 2007). It is not the case that humans act on the basis of the best information imaginable (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014) nor are their beliefs and attitudes unaffected by social category or cultural factors (Sullivan, Zimdars and Health, 2010). In response to the above criticisms, Goldthorpe (2007) introduces the concept of subjective rationality that refers to “the idea that actors may hold beliefs, and in turn pursue courses of action, for which they have ‘good reasons’ in the circumstances in which they find themselves, even though they may fall short of the standard of rationality that utility theory would presuppose” (p. 143). Expanding the notion of subjective rationality, Glaesser and Cooper (2014) point out that human beings often act on the basis of ‘satisficing’, i.e., act on the available information at reasonable cost.

Adapting from Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and Need and de Jong (2000), there are two key characteristics of the subjective rationalities of parents that shape their educational decisions. First, subjective rationalities for educational decisions take place against a backdrop of primary and secondary effects that account for social divergence in education (Bouden, 1974). Briefly, primary effects encompass “all influences that shape the distribution of ability in the earlier stages of schooling” (Need and De Jong 2000, p. 75). The influences that determine a child’s capacities can be divided into sociocultural and family factors. An example of sociocultural factor that affects an individual’s demonstrated academic ability is Confucian tradition that prevails in Confucian Heritage Cultures (hereinafter CHCs) such as Korea and Singapore. CHCs are known for the following characteristics: achievement-orientation, the importance of education, continuous development, educability of and perfectibility for all, the centrality of personal effort and resolve in learning, collectivism, high expectation of parents of their students’ academic performance, attribution of success to effort, high status of teachers, exam-driven schooling, and a hierarchical social structure (Kim, 2009). These Confucian qualities comprise the primary effects that contribute to the efficacy and expectations of children in academic performance.

The second factor that constitute primary effects is family. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) stress that individuals’ subjective rationalities are determined by “their experience in their families of origin” as the latter “provides upper and lower boundaries on their expectations and aspirations, and on their sense of what is possible or impossible for them” (p. 476). The types and amount of capital possessed by a household has a direct impact on the child’s trajectory in schooling and life. Capital, as explained by Bourdieu (1986), is “accumulated labour (in its materialised form or its ‘incorporated’, embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour” (p. 241). There are various forms of capital such as cultural (e.g. educational resources and academic credentials), social (e.g. network of institutionalised relationships) and economic (e.g. money and property) (Bourdieu, 1986). Highlighting the primary effect of family background, Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) report that children of more advantaged backgrounds generally perform better in standard tests as they are greater access to capital.

Secondary effects refer to “the effects that condition the choices that people make” (Need and De Jong 2000, p. 75). In other words, these effects are displayed through the actual choices that parents made for or with their children in the course of the latter’s schooling journeys, including the choice of exit (Breen and Goldthorpe,

1997). Returning to the same example of CHCs, parents who are influenced by Confucian values would privilege a school that delivers high test scores for their children rather than a school that specialises in non-academic achievements such as artistic development. For the same reason, wealthy and well-educated parents are likely to enrol their children in private tutoring from a young age so as to give them a head start in life. Participation in private tutoring is “the result of a willful decision made by individuals” (Entrich, 2015, p. 194). To sum up, secondary effects result from decision-making of educational actors that proceeds from what they regard as rational choices. Far from being static, the rationalities of individuals are continuously shaped by secondary effects and circumscribed by primary effects.

The second salient feature of the subjective rationalities of parents is the centrality of cost-benefit analysis that is made in the context of contextual resources, opportunities and constraints. As averred by Need and De Jong (2000), educational decisions are “rational choices made by individuals who evaluate costs and benefits of possible alternatives” that “predict, to some extent, the outcome to alternative courses of action” (p. 75). The cost-benefit evaluation of possible alternatives does not take place in a vacuum; instead the evaluation is conditioned by variations in the typical challenges and prospects open to actors and the amount of capital they command (Breen & Goldthorpe 1997). Overall, the subjective rationalities of parents and their children are situated within and conditioned by a confluence of primary and secondary effects. Parents strive to counteract their children’s educational disadvantages and give their children a competitive edge through private tutoring and other means on the assumption that the expected returns to education will exceed the costs (Entrich, 2014). Having introduced the model, the next section illustrates its usefulness to explain the phenomenon of private tutoring by examining the developments in Korea and Singapore.

The Subjective Rationalities of Parents in Korea and Singapore

Private tutoring in Korea comes in different forms such as one-to-one tutoring, cram schools (*hagwon*) and internet tutoring. 81.1 % of elementary school students, 69.1 % of middle school students, and 49.5 % of high school students are enrolled in private tutoring in 2014 (KOSIS, 2014; for details on the schooling system in Korea, see Tan & Yang, 2019; Yang & Tan, 2019). Like Korea, private tutoring in Singapore can take place through various modes such as one-to-one or group, as well as face-to-face or online (Cheo & Quah, 2005; Kaur & Areepattamannil, 2013; Seah, 2016; Tan, 2009; Tan, 2017, 2019a). A 2015 survey shows that 7 in 10 enrolled their children in extra classes (Davie, 2015a, b). Nearly 8 in 10 parents with children in primary school, and more than 6 in 10 parents with secondary school children, paid for private tuition. The parents in both Korea and Singapore demonstrate their subjective rationalities through their enthusiasm to enrol their children in private tutoring. The parents’ reliance on private tutoring is based on what they think are good reasons, i.e. available information at reasonable cost, in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The majority of parents chose to send their children for tuition because of a desire to ‘satisfice’ – act on the basis of incomplete but ‘good enough’ information at a price that they can afford. The rest of this segment elaborates on the application of the model to Korea and Singapore based on four categories: primary and secondary effects, cost-benefit analysis, resources, and opportunities and constraints.

Primary and secondary effects

The subjective rationalities of parents in Korea and Singapore are dependent on and reflect the prevailing primary and secondary effects. To understand how the subjective rationalities of the parents involve cost-benefit analysis, it is important to locate the educational decisions of the parents in prevailing socio-cultural conditions. A prominent primary effect in both countries is their status as CHCs. Lee (2014) contends that “the Confucian family orientation, such as family feeling obligated to support children’s education and respecting the advice of parents and family elders” are major contributory factors to the prevalence of the shadow education phenomenon (p. 13). A credential- and exam-orientated environment provide the justification and pressure for parents in South Korea and Singapore, which are both CHCs, to rely on private tutoring to help their children perform academically. It is therefore not surprising that Korean and Singaporean parents value academic ability in their children and direct their economic capital to this end through private tutoring. Primary effects are also exemplified in the differentiated investment in private tutoring that is determined by “their experience in the families of origin” (Glasesser and Cooper, 2014, p. 476). Parents who are more affluent spend more on private tutoring for their children – a point that I shall return to in a later section on resources.

Secondary effects are witnessed in the fixation with private tutoring within a credential- and exam-oriented society. The socio-cultural environment frames the expectations, aspirations and anticipation of the parents and their children, resulting in their preference for private tutoring. Demonstrating secondary effects is the tendency for parents to make educational decisions for their children that strengthen their existing capital. Enrolment in cram schools in Korea, apart from improving the child’s academic performance, has the added advantage of enhancing the social capital among students. Given that most high-achieving students in Korea turn to cram schools, these students promote and fortify the beliefs and approaches that are conducive to academic success in Korean society (Byun, 2014; Byun and Park, 2012). Kwon, Kristjansson and Walker (2017) add that participation in private education is “a mark of prestige in South Korean society” and “has become a form of social capital with which to pursue higher status or maintain the present one by entering a top university” (p. 202).

Cost-benefit analysis

Another manifestation of subjective rationalities is carrying out a cost-benefit analysis. The parents in Korea and Singapore are willing to pay for private tutoring as they believe that the benefits of attending such classes will outweigh the costs of paying for them. A dominant reason for the ubiquity of private tutoring in Korea and Singapore is a pressing need to prepare students to sit for the high-stakes assessment that testifies to the exam-orientation in CHC. The high-stakes nature of the terminal examinations has unsurprisingly brought about and entrenched a test-driven culture in Korea and Singapore. Governed by a cost-benefit calculation, students and their parents in Korea and Singapore reason that they will lose out to those who receive private tutoring. The situation of private tutoring in Korea is described as a ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ where “a person who does not want to be involved in a certain context inevitably does so because all other people are involved in that context” (Lee, Lee and Jang, 2010, p. 98). Likewise in Singapore, a 2015 survey reveals that a top reason for parents in Singapore to send their children for private tuition is to help their children keep up with others (Davie, 2015a; Yang, 2016). Conversely, the parents’ subjective rationalities inform them of the potential benefits they will reap if they send their children to private tutoring: unrivalled test scores, thereby maximising their chance of admission to renowned

educational institutions and landing their dream jobs (Choi and Cho, 2016).

Resources

As Korea and Singapore are all highly competitive societies, parents in these three localities are keen to channel their economic capital to pay for private tutoring so as to give their children a head start in life. But the type and amount of private tutoring services subscribed by the parents for their children would depend on the resources at their disposal. The unequal capital available to parents means that different children do not have equal access to private tutoring. In Korea, a 2015 survey reveals that 82.8% families that earn 7 million won (US\$6,189) and over enrol their children in private tutoring, as compared with only 32.1% of families that earn less than 1 million won (US\$883) who do so (Statistics Korea, 2016). Carr and Wang (2017) note that top income decile of Korean households spends five times more on private tutoring when compared with the bottom income decile. Describing private tutoring as “the stratified shadow education system” that depends on its costs and qualities, Lee (2014) points out that households with lower SES could only afford cheaper options such as study room or internet lecturers (p. 138).

The same picture emerges in Singapore where better-educated parents with higher incomes pay more for private tutoring. It is reported that households with monthly household incomes of more than S\$6,000 set aside a median sum of S\$200 each month on private tutoring at the preschool level, as compared with S\$100 for families who earned S\$3,000 and below (Teng, 2015). Seah (2016), based on his analysis of PISA 2012 data, notes that 15-year-old Singapore students who receive tuition in mathematics are more likely to be from wealthier families, measured by whether the families owned at least one car and are English-speaking. Some tutoring centres even charge up to \$300 per hour as they are targeted at more affluent parents (Teng, 2016). Private tutoring in Korea and Singapore has therefore contributed to educational inequalities as children from more privileged home backgrounds have access to more educational resources and opportunities.

Opportunities and constraints

The cost-benefit analysis of the parents in both Korea and Singapore is also conditioned by the opportunities and constraints available to them. In particular, the subjective rationalities of parents mediate the impact of education policy. This section details how the education policy measures in Korea and Singapore present both challenges and prospects for both parents and the private tutoring providers.

The education system in Korea is marked by educational standardisation and limited school choice across schools (Byun, Schofer and Kim, 2012; Choi & Park, 2016; Park, Byun and Kim, 2011). Choi, Schofer and Kim (2012) assert that the small variation among schools is “largely being shaped by Korea’s egalitarian approach to education” (222). Park, Byun and Kim (2011) describe the “uniform standards adopted nationwide and centralisation that facilitates standardisation” as the “most salient feature of Korean primary and secondary education” (p. 6). The schooling system in Korea has undergone important reforms in recent years that allow Korean parents greater freedom to choose and compete for high-performing and specialised schools. But the liberalisation of the educational sector in Korea has ironically intensified the dependence on private tutoring. Driven by their subjective rationalities, the parents perceive private tutoring as more, not less, important, in helping their children to choose and qualify for a prestigious school based on a cost-benefit evaluation. Private tutoring providers, on their part, harness their resources to give individual attention to students

– something that the public schools are unable to provide (Choi & Park, 2016). Byun (2014) observes that the majority of cram schools “analyse patterns found in a variety of the high-stakes exams administered by individual K-12 schools by closely following the curricula of the main public education system, and provide practice examinations” (p. 55). The lack of ability-streaming, differentiated instruction and minimal partnership between the schools and parents, coupled with the high-stakes examination at the end of high school, means that private tutoring will always be in demand to prepare the students for the standardised assessments and enrolment in the coveted schools/universities.

It is apparent that the private tutoring sector works in tandem with the parents to roll out more and new tutoring services for the chief purpose of helping the children excel academically. The proactive, adaptive and evolving attributes of private tutoring are testified to in the customised tutoring programmes that prepare students for admission to elite schools. Even efforts to change the university entrance system by the government, such as University Entrance Liberalisation Policy that was implemented in 2008 did not reduce the enrolment in private tutoring. This policy includes non-exam-based selection criteria on top of the CSAT such as high school records, essay-style exams, extra-curricular activities, and involvement in social services. Rather than eliminating or undermining private tutoring, these policy measures have “actually ushered in *new forms* of private tutoring that specialise in the enhancement of the new selection criteria” (Choi & Choi, 2016, p. 147, italics added).

In contrast to Korea, the education system in Singapore is “highly stratified system of secondary schooling” where the PSLE serves as a “major determinant of the tracks in which students will find themselves” (Bray & Lykins, 2012, pp. 23-24; Tan, 2019b). High-performing and elite schools coexist with low-performing schools, the latter known pejoratively as ‘neighbourhood schools’ in Singapore. The three terminal examinations – at the end of primary, secondary and pre-university levels – serve as screening and placement examinations to allocate secondary and high schools (known locally as ‘junior colleges’ and ‘centralised institutes’) to students based on their exam scores. Parents in Singapore, therefore, enjoy more school choice when compared with their counterparts in Korea. But similar to Korea, parents in Singapore turn to private tutoring not because they could not choose the schools – as is the case in Korea – but *precisely because* they could choose the schools and wish to increase their children’s chance of being enrolled in a school of their choice. The subjective rationalities of the parents justify the continual reliance on private tutoring for the children on the basis that such investment will reap the desired benefits in time to come. Private tutoring providers, paralleling the case in Korea, seize the opportunities by offering an array of courses, activities and programmes from pre-school to pre-university levels.

Like Korea, Singapore has experienced major educational reform in recent years. A more student-centred educational vision was launched by the Ministry of Education in 2011 that seeks to equip students with “21st century Competencies and Student Outcomes”. Rather than exam-focused, schools are expected to develop the students’ holistic competencies such as critical and inventive skills for the globalised world. Instead of revolving around test scores, students should devote their energies and time to learn and thrive in different disciplines and ways of learning. As noted by Bach and Christensen (2017), “it is now stressed that in order to become creative and lifelong learners, Singaporean children must also enjoy their learning and learning should, therefore, not only be demanding and serious but also fun” (p. 135).

It is apparent that the education authorities in Singapore aims to shift the education system (including parents’ subjective rationalities) towards less test-driven

attitudes to education. But the education reform has ironically made education in Singapore more competitive, and the parents more dependent on private tutoring. As argued by Christensen (2015), “While the huge private tuition industry where students are drilled in traditional fashion for major examinations remains in place, it is increasingly supplemented by a more sophisticated (as well as more expensive) ‘enrichment industry’ where students are trained for those skills in sports, the performing arts or ‘higher order’ and ‘creative’ thinking that will make them more competitive in an education system that now emphasises holistic education and working smart rather than just hard” (p. 568). Therefore the education reform in Singapore has also changed the profiles of tutoring companies as well as educational competition in ways that parallel the developments in Korea.

To sum up, the private tutoring sectors in Korea and Singapore act and react flexibly to create new programmes and activities to meet the needs, demands and interests of the parents and students in terms of the contents and operation. The experiences of Korea and Singapore show up not just the logic of parents in seeking academic excellence for their children but also how their educational decisions, including paying for private tutoring, are the product of a cost-benefit calculation in the midst of contextual resources, opportunities and constraints.

Conclusions

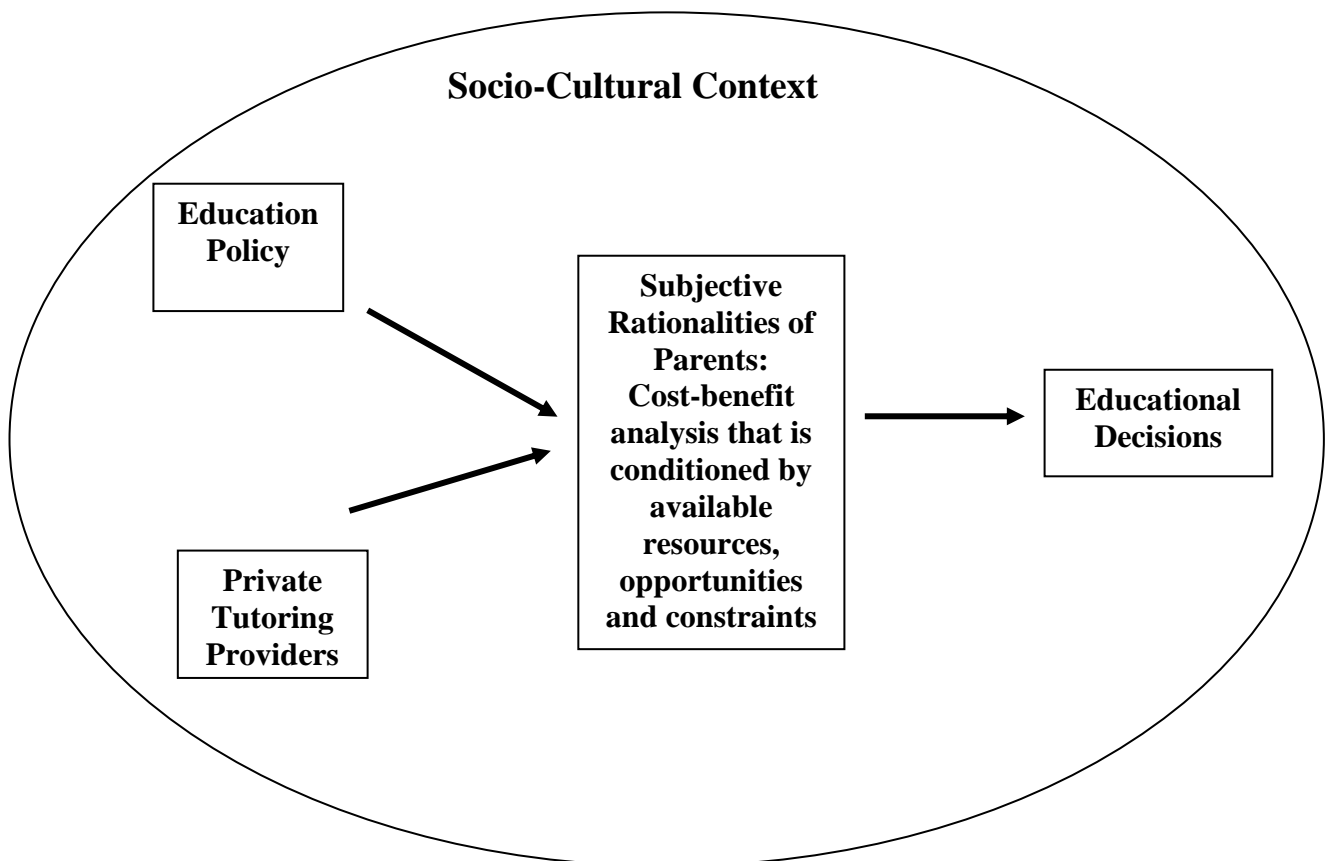
Applying the model to private tutoring in South Korea and Singapore, it has been maintained that the parents’ differentiated approaches to and expenses on private tutoring reflect their cost-benefit evaluation that is conditioned by the capital in their possession as well as the prospects and challenges confronting them. The subjective rationalities of parents in both jurisdictions are continuously shaped by secondary effects and circumscribed by primary effects. It is important to add that attitudes associated with CHCs are not equally widespread across social classes with different compositions of capital. Zhang (2020) concludes from an empirical research in Shanghai that the demand for tutoring was least among low-income families due to high costs and low aspirations. Participation in tutoring for children from highest-income families was also relatively low because it was “easier for the highest stratum to achieve school choice through other channels even if the children performed poorly, so these families were less likely to consider tutoring essential” (p. 395). Zhang’s (2020) research supports the model of subjective rationalities presented in this paper by highlighting the varied effects of different family cultural capital on parental approaches to tutoring in CHCs.

The illustrative case studies of Korea and Singapore extend the existing research on private tutoring by illustrating the utility of a model that accounts for the educational decisions of parents. This study fills the existing research gap on the nature of the interactions between the parents, education policy and private tutoring within a particular socio-cultural setting. The model sketched in this paper allows insights that has not been foregrounded from the extant theoretical perspectives. The examples of Korea and Singapore demonstrate the cooperation between parents and private tutoring in responding to and counteracting the agendas and policies of the education authorities. The proposed model also brings to the fore the resilience and chameleon-like characteristic of the private tutoring sector where it adjusts itself to suit the needs, demands and interests of its clients in terms of the contents and operation. Far from being passive and reactive, private tutoring providers are in constant interactions and negotiation with the parents. Put otherwise, the agents in the shadow education industry

do not just respond to the parents' needs and aspirations; they also create new opportunities in tandem with or even in opposition to education policy.

The model of the subjective rationalities of parents also underscores the socio-culturally embedded and complex nature of educational decisions. What qualifies as 'rational' is moulded not just by the individual's life experiences, family of origin and available resources but also by the socio-cultural worldviews. In the case of Korea and Singapore, both are CHCs that share a common emphasis on the primacy of education, a high expectation for students to excel academically, personal effort; repeated practice, and parental involvement in education – accounts for the intractable and resilient nature of private tutoring. The experiences of Korea and Singapore demonstrate that educational decisions are not made in isolation but are “the cumulative outcome of all involved actors' preferences as reflected in their educational aspirations for a student's pathway” (Entrich, 2015, p. 195). Parents and students are not simply consumers of education nor are private tutoring centres and tutors merely service providers; instead, all parties are 'investing actors' (Lauterbach, 2013).

Figure 1: A Model of the Subjective Rationalities of Parents



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