

Education

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The private tuition industry in the UK

By May Woods

The private tuition industry in the UK is booming. And nowhere more so than in London, where approximately 41% of 11-16-year-old state school students have benefitted from private tuition. Outside of the capital, the figures are lower, yet still substantial. According to social mobility charity The Sutton Trust, over a quarter of secondary school pupils have at some point made use of a private tutor.

With record numbers of parents investing in extra educational support, it's clear that a crisis in confidence is, to some extent, fuelling the boom. Underfunded, overstretched schools are the new normal; a reality that has left teachers reaching into their own pockets for classroom necessities. Research by teachers' unions suggest that 80% of schools in 2020 are set to receive less funding per pupil in real terms than in 2015. This is despite government commitments to invest. It also assumes that promises to reverse cuts will be fulfilled.

Whether there exists a link between class size and learning outcome has long been debated. What's clear is that students struggling with a particular subject face an uphill battle when deprived of attention and support. Increasingly large group settings have become an unwelcome reality for both teachers and pupils. In 2019 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that British primary schools have the largest class sizes in the developed world: an average of 28 pupils in every class. For context, this is almost double the average size of classes in Luxembourg or Costa Rica, where pupil to teacher ratios are fifteen to one.

David McCarthy is Director of Education at Sophia, a private home tuition app which connects tutors, students and teachers. Tech disruption within the industry hasn't substituted its core offerings; the growth of EdTech and existence of Sophia feels

symptomatic of the innate value of the industry. Online tuition allows learning to reach every corner of the globe, yet such offerings can never replace the impact of -to-face learning. What Ed-Tech can do, though, is to offer security and ease: two of Sophia's key selling points.

McCarthy agrees that the recent plight of state schools has boosted the tuition market, but emphasises the complexity of the dynamics of supplementary education.

"It's not one size fits all", McCarthy explains. "Yes, class sizes have increased, I think BBC News actually found evidence of a school in West Yorkshire with 46 pupils in one class. But there's also confusion around changes in the state education system. The rate of change has left both parents and teachers bewildered. Often, extra help seems the smartest option". The practice of constantly evaluating pupil progress through formative and summative assessments shows little sign of wavering; neither does the demand for extra help.

With the tuition market now estimated to be worth a hefty £6.5 billion in the UK, it seems that the private flourishes as the public fails. Unsurprisingly, social mobility campaigners are concerned: more needs to be done to combat any facilitation of educational inequality. Yet the elite sector continues to thrive. While school fees can rise into the hundreds of thousands of pounds over the course of a private education, families with the means to do so are continuing to dig ever deeper in the pursuit of educational excellence.

Increasingly, investment comes in the form of specialist, one-to-one tuition; tackling core subjects but also Mandarin, Japanese, public speaking and even chess. For some, it is an education arms race. For others, it is simply common sense. Learning experiences can be finitely tailored, and communication between teacher and pupil dramatically improved. That *eureka!* moment becomes infinitely more likely.

In some cases, explains McCarthy, employing a tutor before the leap from primary to secondary can actually represent a frugal move.

"If a child gets into a grammar school, it can save families who would otherwise go private over £140,000. A lot of emphasis is then put on passing the 11+ exam, the highly competitive gateway to Grammars", McCarthy said.

According to Luke Sullivan, Founder of elite agency Riviera Tutors, the (legitimate) perception of competition is a key driver in the tuition boom. Sullivan refers to what many of the teenagers his company serves might describe as FOMO: the fear of missing out. The notion of others pulling ahead due to greater investment; perhaps in the form of a residential holiday tutor; is



often enough to prompt others to follow suit. As such, Riviera Tutors operates almost entirely through the power of recommendations.

"Word amongst high-net-worth clients travels fast", Sullivan explains. "The problem is that this creates a real vulnerability. It's natural for parents to want the best for their children, so it's

very important for us not to exploit this, and to operate honestly".

For Sullivan, this choice is savvy as well as ethical.

"Any enterprise which takes advantage of parental good will and trust will eventually pay the price. Word travels fast; this works both ways. Transparency is key in this industry."

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