

The Many Spaces of Learning: Private Tutoring and Post-2015 Education For All

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Summary: This article argues a post-2015 Education For All agenda must include multiple spaces of education that cannot be reduced to just public or private education. The absence of these hybrid spaces has consequences for where and how education officials at the country level direct their attention.

An honest review of the Education For All (EFA) initiative begins in the mirror. The biggest failure of learning over the past 25 years hasn't come from students, as the *2013 Global Monitoring Report* (GMR) suggests, but rather from the "experts" who make up the education-for-development industry. Until recently, experts and scholars—including the present authors—have been reluctant to broaden our conceptualizations of education to include anything beyond public, mainstream schooling or its counterpart, private, low-fee schooling, even as the reality of education for students has changed.

EFA and the associated goals were developed and have been used to track and draw attention to the progress of countries in educating their populations. Emphasis has been almost entirely restricted to children and adolescents at the primary level within public and—more recently—low-fee schooling (GMR, 2013, pp. 272-275). Yet, as we will briefly discuss, these targets do not now adequately reflect or capture essential educational spaces that have increased since EFA was first created. The reality of education today is that multiple, complex, and overlapping learning spaces have emerged that cannot be reduced to static

notions of public or private education. Indeed, multiple forms of semi-private and semi-public schooling have now been institutionalized within and beyond the boundaries of what has historically been considered "public" education. You might say that the "learning crisis"—if there is one—is our current inability or unwillingness to see these diverse spaces of learning as meaningful and with real implications for equity. Moreover, the absence of these spaces in our understanding of education has important consequences for where and how education officials at the country level direct their attention, a point to which we will return shortly.

In our own research—which focuses on education in Cambodia—we learned the hard way that there exist hybrid spaces of learning beyond mainstream school. At the outset, we adopted the labels promoted and utilized by other scholars and by the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). Whereas the former have found evidence of a fee-based shadow system, the latter has focused almost exclusively on what occurs during the traditional school day (i.e., mainstream schooling). We later learned, however, that the terms "shadow" and "mainstream" miss the diversity and overlapping nature of the spaces of education found in Cambodia as students progress through primary and secondary school.

Primary students, for example, go to "mainstream" school—financed by a mixture of government, international, and household funds—for four hours and then must navigate a complex landscape of other schooling opportunities, often inside the very spaces of "mainstream" schooling and taught by "public" schoolteachers. The

most popular non-mainstream schooling opportunity takes the form of what can be called “normal private tutoring.” This is a fee-based system of private tutoring taught by “public” schoolteachers after, but sometimes during, “mainstream” school hours and covers the national curriculum designed by MoEYS. It is nearly impossible to tell the difference between “normal private tutoring” and “mainstream” schooling, save for the lack of school uniforms in the former space. That said, some teachers provide more one-on-one attention and the opportunity to practise more exemplary problems during “normal private tutoring” than they do in “mainstream” schooling. The larger point, however, is that this space has become normalized and necessary to such an extent that many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide scholarships to students from poor families in order to participate in it. Nevertheless, children from poor families are often excluded from “normal private tutoring” because of cost or time constraints.

Outside the space of “mainstream” schooling, but dependent on it, there is also “special private tutoring.” “Public” schoolteachers also teach this type of tutoring, but classes take place at home in groups no larger than five students and for a much higher fee than “normal private tutoring.” “Public” schoolteachers in this space act more like a private tutor than a teacher of large classes. Separately, even when students are on vacation between grades from “mainstream” school, they have the opportunity to attend “holiday private tutoring” in order to begin the national curriculum of the next grade with their future “public” schoolteacher. It is thus difficult to discern where the “shadow” system begins and the “mainstream” system ends, given the extent to which private tutoring has crept into—and become necessary for success in—what is thought of as traditional “public” schooling.

Beyond tutoring by a student’s “mainstream” schoolteacher during or after the official school year, there are also myriad

spaces of “private” schooling that offer education in a variety of subjects, such as computer skills or English, in addition to examination preparation. These are not only “shadow” spaces that complement, supplement, or at times supplant mainstream schooling. They are also an additional, fee-based space of learning that students must navigate and must decide whether or not to attend. Outside of these “public” and “private” spaces of schooling, moreover, there exist diverse spaces of learning inside pagoda schools, NGO schools, and missionary schools, all offering different educational opportunities for children and adults at no or low fee. By not drawing attention to this range of non-mainstream knowledge delivery options—which admittedly differ across contexts within and outside Cambodia and are not captured accurately by the term “public,” “private,” “low-fee” or “shadow education”—any post-2015 educational agenda necessarily ignores the various and integral learning spaces that currently comprise students’ educational experiences around the world today.

There are multiple side effects to consider when the global education agenda overlooks non-mainstream learning spaces. We’ll focus on two. First, placing emphasis exclusively on the “mainstream” system puts pressure on governments to fake the numbers. When global attention is on “mainstream” schooling, national governments logically follow suit, particularly when funding is linked to achieving EFA and the development goals. Governments have a real incentive to make sure national statistics look good—or perhaps bad in some cases, depending on the funding that is sought.

Taking Cambodia as an example, it is clear that one contested number is the primary Net Enrollment Rate (NER), or the percentage of primary school aged children (6-11 years old) enrolled in school out of the total number of primary school aged children in the country. The official statistics reported by MoEYS in the Education

Management Information System (EMIS) indicate that the total number of 6-11 year old children who are out-of-school decreased from 104,778 pupils in 2008/09 to 38,086 pupils in 2012/13. This corresponds to an increase in the NER for the primary level from 94.4 percent to 97.9 percent, as of the 2012/13 school year. These numbers look good when viewed from the perspective of EFA: more primary school-aged children are enrolling in primary school each year. However, the number of overage students who start first grade each year is larger than the number of 6-11 year old children out of school. For instance, in 2009/10 there were 93,007 children aged 6-11 out of school (but not necessarily overage); however, in 2010/11, 94,755 overage children started first grade. These numbers, which were taken from the EMIS, can only work if tens of thousands of children older than 11 enrolled in first grade for the first time during 2010/11—a possible but highly unlikely scenario. Moreover, other ministries, which also collect data on education but which do not provide the information used for EFA targets, paint starkly different pictures of NER. The Ministry of Planning, for instance, which uses household surveys and commune council (i.e., subnational) databases, indicates the NER is 85 percent, not the official 98 percent according to MoEYS (which uses school-level statistics). When the focus is on “mainstream” schooling alone, ministries of education are incentivized to doctor the numbers in order to avoid the public shame that comes with the increasingly popular international league tables that document progress toward EFA goals.

Second, when “mainstream” schooling is the main focus of EFA, governments can justifiably take a *laissez faire* approach to other spaces of education. Indeed, in Cambodia, for example, despite a failed attempt by the MoEYS at banning “shadow” education and repeated calls from civil society and some international organizations for government action on this issue, MoEYS currently ignores the presence

and effects of various forms of private tutoring. By not regulating, addressing, or even discussing anything other than “mainstream” schooling, the government allows inequality to persist in, through, and because of unregulated spaces like private tutoring. And as we have seen in Cambodia, navigating and affording these spaces then become key obstacles for students in completing a basic education (grades 1-9). This is particularly the case during the transition from primary (grades 1-6) to lower (grades 7-9) and upper (grades 10-12) secondary school, where private tutoring is almost always required in order for students to pass both the monthly exams given by teachers and the sixth and ninth grade national exams given by MoEYS. If students cannot pass (or otherwise purchase a passing score on) these various tests, the possibility of advancing to the next grade reduces dramatically.

The EFA’s static conceptualization of schooling as “public” or “private” education limits development experts from seeing other, dynamic spaces of learning and how those spaces relate to “mainstream” education. In the post-2015 context, greater attention should be dedicated to understanding the hybrid spaces through which private tutoring is combining with and altering what has traditionally been labeled “public” education. One way to ensure greater attention to these spaces—by both development professionals and ministry officials—is to include them in the global education agenda, along with the development of associated indicators to track their various forms, prevalence, and effects over time.