

Balancing the Debate

A critical response to the report: Private tuition - a waste of money?

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On first hearing about the report commissioned and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, authored by Judith Ireson and Katie Rushforth, on the effectiveness of private tuition; one first asks the question how valid is the evidence upon which the conclusion was based?

The authors of the report based their conclusions on a very small sample of students who sat their G C S E's in 2003. Three hundred students in total were used for the sample, of which 48 had received a private tutor for mathematics and 20 for English, not a large enough sample upon which to base or draw any conclusions from. This sample size represents less than one percent of the total number of students who sat their G C S E's in 2003. Such a small sample does not conform to good scientific experimental practice. Therefore it is very difficult to see how they could reach the headline conclusion that parents or guardians who pay for private tuition are wasting their money.

In order to balance up this debate there is a need for much more detailed research to be carried out over a number of years, using a random stratified sample across the range of social backgrounds from all parts of the United Kingdom by those who employ private tutors to supplement their children's schooling. Also it would be desirable if more than the two subjects English and mathematics were researched. This will allow parents to make an informed choice when considering tuition for their children.

Until this research has been carried out, it is hoped that this response to the report by the Economic and Social Research Council will help parents to make a better informed choice than they otherwise may have done by only hearing about the initial report with its associated startling headlines.

If and when a correct detailed scientific investigation is carried out into the effects of supplementary private tuition, then the conclusions reached would probably be more in line with my experiences gained over the past twelve years as a private tutor. During this time I have tutored more than 300 students at secondary level in mathematics and science.

The results presented by Judith Ireson and Katie Rushforth in their report were that boys improved their grade by three-quarters of a grade in G C S E

mathematics, while girls did not show any significant improvement in their grade. The results for G C S E, English showed no improvement for either boys or girls. These results are not that surprising taking into account the very small number of students sampled in both subjects.

During my time as a private tutor I have taken a large number of A-level physics students from a fail to a grade C or B in either one year or two years of tuition. These results are based on students taking module exams after studying A-level physics for a year at school without private tuition, and obtaining a grade U or N on receiving their results. This level of improvement can hardly be considered insignificant, or a waste of money. Similarly each year for G C S E mathematics, I have both boys and girls achieving grades higher than those predicted by their school. The increase in a grade is usually from a predicted grade D to a C, or grade C to B. Again these results do not support the prediction published in the report by Judith Ireson and Katie Rushforth.

Therefore from my own experience it is very difficult to accept or support the work carried out by Judith Ireson and Katie Rushforth on the effectiveness of private tuition, as my results over the years clearly differ with their findings.

However in their defence they do highlight the very important issue that private tuition is not regulated, as Professor Ireson says in the report: *“Most parents find a tutor through word of mouth and it can be difficult to find a good one. Our results suggest that tutors are not helping girls as much as boys at this level.”* This has always been a particular concern of mine, in that anybody can be a private tutor. For like all professions there will be both good and bad practitioners of that profession, thus there are good tutors and also some bad tutors, just like there are good and bad researchers.

I personally would like to see a system whereby all private tutors are required to not only have a degree in their chosen subject which they wish to teach, but also hold a recognised teaching qualification. This will help eliminate some of the unprofessional practices carried out by some private tutors, which one often reads about in educational newspapers. For example the practice whereby students employ tutors to help them with both homework and coursework projects, a practice which I never proscribed to.

Therefore in conclusion it is important that any research on the effectiveness of private tuition must be carried out over a number of years, using a large sample base with the correct statistical analysis being applied to the data. Until this is done, my experience in answer to the question, “Private tuition - a waste of money?”, clearly indicates that employing a private tutor is excellent value for money.

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