Shadow Education in Germany: Compensatory or Status Attainment Strategy? Findings from the German LifE Study

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Abstract: In Germany we observe a strong increase in the enrolment in shadow education (‘Nachhilfe’) over the last two decades. To explain this development we draw on social reproduction theories identifying two strategies: (1) families seek competitive advantages for their children to maintain or achieve an advantageous education level (status attainment strategy); and (2) families seek performance improvement for their low performing children in order to meet the high demands in the pursuit of the highest school diploma (compensatory strategy). To test our theoretical ideas, we estimate regression models using data from the 2012 German LifE study. We find that shadow education is primarily used by disadvantaged educational strata to deal with higher demands in school. We conclude that the increased investment in Nachhilfe is an unintended but not yet negative outcome of educational expansion and recent educational reforms in Germany.

Keywords: shadow education, private tutoring, Nachhilfe, social inequality, Germany

Introduction

Shadow education is well established in East Asian countries and did also expand in many Western countries over the last 20 years (Park, Buchmann, Choi, & Merry, 2016). In Germany, the proportion of 17-year olds who ever received paid Nachhilfe, has increased from 27 percent in the early 2000 years to 47 percent in the early 2010 years (Hille, Spielberg, & Staneva, 2016, p. 116). The market is dominated by 4,500 Nachhilfe schools, of which most were founded since 1992 (Birkelbach, Dobischat, & Dobischat, 2017, pp. 59-62). International research highlights three characteristics of shadow education: It is academic, therefore excluding all non-academic forms of out-of-school education; it is used as a supplement and therefore taking place outside regular school hours; and it is private, profit-oriented and therefore fee based (Bray, 2017). Consequently, past international and German research is dominated by the view that shadow education exacerbates social inequality, be-

Nachhilfe (extra-help) is a broad description for all kinds of supplementary tutoring. We focus our analysis on private, fee-based, commercial Nachhilfe, which fits the formal definition of shadow education by Bray (2017). The terms shadow education, private tutoring and Nachhilfe are used synonymous.
cause parents with higher socioeconomic status (SES) seem to be in a better position to reap the benefits of private tutoring (Dohmen, 2012; Heyneman, 2011; Hille et al., 2016; Park et al., 2016). Several empirical studies confirmed that high SES students more frequently enrol in private tutoring and use the more cost-intensive lessons leading to higher performance and better educational placement, i.e. entrance to more prestigious schools and universities (e.g. Buchmann, Condon, & Roscigno, 2010; Entrich, 2018; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). Only few studies exist indicating that shadow education is used independent of parental SES and may even reduce social inequality by compensating performance deficits of low SES students (e.g. Entrich, 2018; Luplow & Schneider, 2014; Seiyama & Noguchi, 1984).

Whether Nachhilfe reduces the SES achievement gap and therefore social inequality is still “empirically open to research” (Stecher, 2018, p. 144). Against this background, we ask two questions:

1. Why has the demand for shadow education in Germany increased that much?
2. What are the implications of the increased investments in shadow education on social inequality?

We address both questions by outlining two educational developments which affect the demand for Nachhilfe: The reform of the German tripartite secondary school system and families’ massive pursuit of higher educational attainment. We draw on social reproduction theories to show that shadow education can be both, an instrument to counteract all students’ low academic performance and a status-specific investment strategy of families serving status maintenance and upgrade motives.

We predict the determinants of shadow education investment through logistic regressions using the 2012 Pathways from Late Childhood to Adulthood (LifE) study for Germany (Lauterbach, Fend, & Gläßer, 2016). The LifE study questioned parents and students on all key aspects necessary for this analysis. This allows a reliable analysis of SES-specific Nachhilfe investment in Germany.

Theoretical Frame

Institutional Context and Increase in Shadow Education

The German educational system has long been criticized for reproducing social inequality through early separation of students into three secondary school types of different length and curriculum: Hauptschule, Realschule and Gymnasium. The Gymnasium leads to the Abitur (12 or 13 years), the highest secondary school degree, which provides students with the opportunity to enter university. The curricula of the Real- and Hauptschule are less demanding, leading to lower secondary school degrees after 10 or 9 years of schooling, respectively. Both enable graduates to enter the dual vocational training system (Weiss & Schindler, 2017).

Following the 2002 PISA-shock in Germany, reforms were initiated to increase equality of educational opportunities (Ertl, 2006). The traditional tripartite school system was replaced in 12 out of 16 states by a bipartite school system. Hauptschule and Realschule were combined to create a comprehensive secondary school type parallel to the Gymnasium. From 2005