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# Learning in the shadows: exploring primary school students and their parents' perceptions of fee-charging private tutoring in Kazakhstan

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study explored the experiences and perceptions of primary school students and their parents towards fee-charging private tutoring (PT) in Astana, Kazakhstan. The data were collected from 503 Grade 6 students (aged 11–12) using a close-ended questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews with 21 parents. The questionnaire data from five mainstream schools found that 357 out of 503 (71%) students received PT, and highly educated parents invested in PT more than other parents. A total of 29% of students revealed that their parents spent 31,000–40,000 tenge (US\$ 67–87) on PT per month, and 9 parents acknowledged that PT was financially burdensome for them. Both students and parents affirmed that preparing for the exams and securing a place in a highly selective school represented the main motives for having PT. Some parents mentioned the soft, intangible gains of PT such as responding appropriately to students' social and emotional needs. Moreover, 48% of students were unaware of the identity of their tutors, and some parents criticised the spread of less qualified, costly tutors due to the unregulated PT market in Kazakhstan. However, none of the parents supported the idea of banning PT. This study suggests pedagogical implications and areas for ongoing research.

## ARTICLE HISTORY




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## KEYWORDS

Private tutoring (PT); access to highly selective school; primary school students and their parents' perceptions; Central Asia; mixed-methods study

## Introduction

Mainstream schools usually follow a recognised curriculum and are generally considered the primary means through which societies educate their youth. However, there are other educational options available globally. This paper focuses on one such option – private tutoring (PT). PT refers to lessons in core school subjects (e.g. mathematics and languages) that are financed by parents and conducted before or after formal school hours (Bray 2023). It can be delivered one-to-one, in small groups, in large classes, and over the Internet (Yung and Wong 2024). PT is widely known as *shadow education* because it operates alongside regular schooling and, to some extent, mimics its curricula and instructional practices (Bray 2023). Historically, shadow education is not a new phenomenon and has been documented in various countries since at least the nineteenth century. In Japan, *jukus* (academic tutoring enterprises) were developed and the first *juku* was opened in 1911 by a teacher in Tokyo who was asked by the parents of his former students to give paid tutoring to their children to assist their promotion to lower secondary schools (Hajar and Karakus 2022).

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Similarly, in Russia, private tutors advertised their services in newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century (Zhang 2023). However, it only became a specific domain in academic literature in the 1990s (e.g. Bray 1999; Marimuthu et al. 1991; Stevenson and Baker 1992).

East Asia, including Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan, has a long-standing tradition of shadow education. This region is considered a ‘cradle of private tutoring’ (Manzon and Areepattamannil 2014, 389) due to the influence of the Confucian-heritage cultures that value formal certification, which requires diligence, passing high-stakes examinations, and family support and obligation (Zhang and Yamato 2018). Since the turn of the millennium, the phenomenon of shadow education has become increasingly prevalent worldwide. This is evident in the numerous published books on this domain, covering regions such as Africa (Bray 2021), Central Asia (Silova 2009), Europe (Bray 2011), and the Middle East (Bray and Hajar 2023).

Despite its prevalence and implications for the nurturing of new generations, household expenditures, the operation of formal education systems and social stratification, there is still a lack of research on fee-charging PT among primary-aged children with much of the focus to date on tutoring among secondary school students. As Addi-Racah (2019, 940) fittingly remarks, ‘very limited evidence exists regarding pupils’ voices in evaluating their participation in PT and that little is known about pupils’ embodied experiences and reflections’. Also, ‘few scholars in the domain of shadow education have studied parents as key actors’ (Kobakhidze and Štastný 2023, 73). Guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological theory, this mixed-method study sought to address this lacuna by quantitatively exploring the nature and effectiveness of PT as perceived by Grade 6 students (aged 11–12) in Kazakhstan. As parents are important but under-researched stakeholders in PT research, qualitative data were also collected from 21 Grade 6 students’ parents (15 mothers and 6 fathers) to understand their motives for sending their children to PT and their evaluation of it, especially because almost all previous studies on PT in Central Asia were conducted from students’ perceptions. This study also investigated the issue of educational inequity in gaining admission to highly selective schools in Kazakhstan and how PT can create a ‘Matthew effect’ (Lamb 2011; Zhao, Shi, and Wang 2024), where stronger students become even stronger while weaker struggle. That is, families with more financial resources are more capable of devoting family capital to learning resources for their children, especially in relation to PT participation.

## **Kazakhstan and its education system**

Kazakhstan, the largest country in Central Asia, gained independence in 1991. With a population of about 18 million, it is home to over 102 nationalities, making it a culturally diverse country (McLaughlin, Winter, and Yakavets 2024). School education in Kazakhstan is divided into primary (grades 1–4), lower secondary (grades 5–9) and upper secondary education (grades 10 and 11). These levels of education are compulsory and provided free of charge. Kazakhstan joined the Bologna Declaration process in 2010 and began integration with the European Higher Education network. One way of achieving integration was setting up 20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NISs) for gifted children nationwide in 2008 (OECD 2014). NISs are the leading site for testing Kazakhstan’s trilingual educational model of Kazakh, Russian and English to ensure ‘the transformation of Kazakhstan into a country with competitive human capital’ (Shamshidinova, Ayubayeva, and Bridges 2014, 72). NISs enrol less than 1% of the age cohort and receive much more funding than public schools (Mehisto 2015). Grade 6, the focus of the present study, represents a critical stage in education in Kazakhstan because many students at the end of Grade 6 take a special academic entrance exam to join one of the 20 NISs. Each region has at least one NIS. The entrance selection process includes tests in mathematics, Kazakh, Russian, and English languages, as well as quantitative reasoning and spatial thinking skills required to study mathematics and science (OECD 2014). In this context, many parents invest money, time and energy into their children’s education, often subscribing to PT to coach them for high-stakes tests like the NIS.

## Overview of fee-charging private tutoring in Central Asia and beyond

In Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – the educational sector witnessed a significant outflow of teaching personnel from schools to the private sector due to the collapse of the former socialist bloc in 1991 and the subsequent economic decline, which made governments spend below 3% of Gross domestic product (GDP) on education (Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izekenova 2023; Silova 2010). In these circumstances, many families in Central Asia turned to PT as a default strategy to bridge educational gaps and provide additional income to underpaid teachers whose salaries were below the national average (Zhang and Bray 2024). Carlsen (2020) postulates that the PT phenomenon has expanded in Central Asia mainly due to the central testing system, low official salaries, and growing competition for access to highly-selective schools and universities. PT in Central Asia, therefore, has contributed to ‘increasing social inequities, distorting curricula, inviting corruption, and depriving the state of tax revenues’ (Carlsen 2020, 20).

In terms of the scale of PT in Central Asia, Silova (2009), in her edited book, revealed that all countries in the region had significant enrolments in PT that reached more than 50% in the final grade. In a recent study conducted in Uzbekistan, Hajar and Tabaeva (2024) found that 56% of primary school students (574 out of 1024) had received PT to improve their exam scores and expand their knowledge. Khaydarov (2020) also asked 109 Grade 12 students in two schools in Uzbekistan about their PT experiences over the previous 12 months. He found that 95% of students had received PT, mainly to prepare for the university entrance exam. Regarding Kazakhstan, the context of the present study, the PISA 2012 data showed that 71.2% of 15-year-olds were enrolled in PT, including fee-free PT (Entrich 2021, 452).

The few empirical studies on PT in Kazakhstan were conducted from students’ perspectives (e.g. Hajar and Abenova 2021; Hajar and Karakus 2023a; Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izekenova 2022; 2023 and 2023b; Kalikova and Rakhimzhanova 2009). Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izekenova (2022), for instance, qualitatively explored 30 Grade 6 students’ PT experiences from three mainstream schools in Kazakhstan. The study found that while many students had PT to meet their parents’ expectations and secure a place at one of the NIS schools, some of them articulated other reasons for having PT, including enhancing their interest in learning and helping them achieve their ideal future selves in terms of expanding their knowledge and working abroad. Elsewhere, Hajar and Abenova (2021) investigated the motives and effectiveness of PT as perceived by 144 first-year Kazakhstani undergraduate students. The study reported that 60% of participants had received PT over the last 12 months, mainly to obtain high scores in the final exam and join their favourite universities in Kazakhstan. Concerning the modes of PT delivery, 50% of the participants took PT lessons in groups, 27% reported receiving both individual and group tuition, and 16% only had individual PT. This finding concurs with Silova’s (2009) study, which found that over 40% of students in Central Asia sought PT in groups.

Like Hajar and Abenova (2021), Kalikova and Rakhimzhanova (2009), in their quantitative study with 1,004 first-year university Kazakhstani students, reported that 59.9% sought experienced PT over the last 12 months, mainly to prepare for university entrance examinations (42%). The participants in Kalikova and Rakhimzhanova’s (2009) study mentioned other reasons for taking PT like to develop their understanding of school subjects (31%), fill knowledge gaps (26%), and compensate for the poor quality of education in mainstream schools (11%). The authors also found that the subjects in strong demand were mathematics (67%), history (36%), physics (36%), and the Kazakh language and literature (17%), primarily because these subjects are compulsory in the Unified National Test (UNT), a high-level entry test for most Kazakhstani universities.

The above studies have given some insights into the scale, nature, and effectiveness of PT at one of the key transition points in Kazakhstan’s educational system, i.e. the transition from secondary to higher education. These studies were mainly from students’ perspectives, and the parents’ voices were missing. Little information exists on the nature and implications of PT at another significant

transition point in Kazakhstan's educational system, i.e. Grade 6 students' PT experiences while attempting to join NISs, highly selective schools in Kazakhstan. To help remedy this lack, this paper reports the views of Grade 6 Kazakhstani students and their parents on the PT they received or funded in the previous 12 months. The participants came from 5 mainstream schools in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

## Theoretical framework

In the field of education, ecology is characterised by the interconnectedness and balance of relationships between different stakeholders such as the quality of communication between students and parents regarding educational issues, as well as levels of parental monitoring of their child's educational achievement and performance (Kobakhidze and Štastný 2023). It also encompasses physical and social environments, such as homes, public schools, tutorial centres, and other influencers like policymakers (Kobakhidze and Štastný 2023). This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory, which elucidates how human development is affected by environmental systems at various levels. At the core of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) theory is the concept that an individual is surrounded by five socially organised subsystems that promote and direct human growth: *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem*, and *chronosystem*.

The *microsystem* refers to the immediate environment where individuals interact with other elements of the educational ecosystem, such as family, schools, communities, and broader social structures (Bronfenbrenner 1994). According to Mischo (2014, 118), PT is a microsystem that encompasses the tutor, the student, and other students in the case of group tutoring. It also includes the student's family, which comprises their parents' socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The *mesosystem* represents the processes and interactions between two or more settings, such as home and school or school and tutorial centre (Bronfenbrenner 1994). These settings involve actors such as immediate family members, private tutors, schoolteachers and principals.

Concerning *exosystem*, it refers to a system of two or more settings where one setting affects another indirectly and at least one of the settings does not include the individual being considered (Bray and Kobakhidze 2015). For example, when a parent experiences work-related stress, it can spill over into family life and affect the child's academic progress. At the fourth level is the *macrosystem*, which 'consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture of subculture', such as cultural beliefs and values (Bronfenbrenner 1994, 40). The *chronosystem* refers to changes or stability in an individual or environment over time. The current study mainly concentrates on the two lower levels, i.e. *microsystems* and *mesosystems*, but also partly on *macrosystems* while examining the differences in the governance and regulation of the PT market.

## Data and methodology

Very limited evidence exists of primary school students' evaluation of their PT experience in Central Asia (e.g. Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izenkova 2022 in Kazakhstan; Hajar and Tabaeva 2024 in Uzbekistan) while none of these studies have delineated the picture of PT through understanding the experiences of parents, an important but under-researched stakeholder group. This mixed-methods study, therefore, has expanded the literature on shadow education by revealing the parents and young children's specific experiences with PT in Kazakhstan over the previous 12 months. It serves as a response to the call made by Pinter and Zandian (2014, 66) that children need to be recognised as 'capable of providing useful and reliable insights into their own lives, and they can be resourceful and knowledgeable, especially concerning their own experiences'. To capture the influences of PT on the ecology of education from the perspectives of Grade 6 students and their parents, this mixed-methods study sought to answer the following research question: *How does*

*PT as a microsystem influence other subsystems in the ecology of education (i.e. other microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems)?*

In Astana, there are a total of 89 state-maintained secondary schools. For the purpose of the study, the researcher selected nine potential schools located in Saryarka, the oldest district of Astana known for its industrial and poorer residential areas. The researcher visited these schools and met with their principals to explain the purpose and process of the study. However, only five schools agreed to participate in the study, while the other schools apologised, indicating their involvement in other research projects or concerns about the sensitivity of the PT topic as reasons for not participating. All these schools adopted both Kazakh and Russian as mediums of instruction. The research covered three classes of Grade 6 students in each school, with an average class size of 35 students. Consent forms were distributed for the students to take home to show their parents and ask for their consent; the signed consent forms were brought back.

The data for this study were collected between October and December 2023, using a mixed methods design to gain a broad and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and corroborate findings (Zhang 2014). A total of 529 Grade 6 students were invited to participate in a closed-ended questionnaire, out of which 503 students completed it, resulting in a response rate of 95%. The questionnaire was designed based on one developed by Bray, Kobakhidze, and Kwo (2020) and aimed to gather information about the socioeconomic status and parental education of the participants. Additionally, the questionnaire sought to understand the scope, cost, modes, gender differences, motivations and effectiveness of PT in the previous 12 months. Initially, the questionnaire was in English and was later translated into Russian and Kazakh. The students were given the questionnaire in paper format, and it took them approximately 20 min to complete it. Out of the 503 students who completed the questionnaire, 357 of them (71%) received PT in the previous 12 months.

The sample for providing interview data consisted of 21 parents (15 mothers and 6 fathers), all Kazakh born. The interviewees were chosen randomly by asking the principals of the five schools to send consent forms to the parents of Grade 6 students who participated in PT through a WhatsApp group. The WhatsApp groups were created by each school for students' parents. Thirty-one parents gave their initial acceptance, but only 21 participated in the study. One semi-structured, in-depth interview was conducted, using Kazakh or Russian to help the interviewees express their ideas freely. Verbal permission to digitally record responses for later transcription was also obtained from the interviewees. The interview with each participant mainly focused on their motives for sending their children to PT and its advantages and drawbacks from their perspectives. Each interview lasted for around 45 min and took place in café shops (see Appendix A for a sample of interview questions).

Descriptive analysis of the quantitative data was produced using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. The semi-structured interviews were analysed using Clarke and Braun's (2013) guidelines for conducting thematic analysis, aiming to identify and interpret themes across qualitative data in rich detail. The researcher familiarised himself with the data by reading and rereading the interview transcripts 'actively, analytically and critically' (Clarke and Braun 2013, 205) to enable him to generate the initial codes in the light of the theoretical framework adopted in this study. Following this, codes that shared features were collated to generate themes derived from the coded data and the entire data set. Once all the themes had been found, the researcher provided extracts under each theme to explain the participants' in-depth accounts of their experiences. This will be illustrated in the next section.

## Study findings

### *The family microsystem*

In the ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1994, 39) defines parental involvement as 'the effort by parents to keep informed about, and set limits on, their children's activities outside home'.

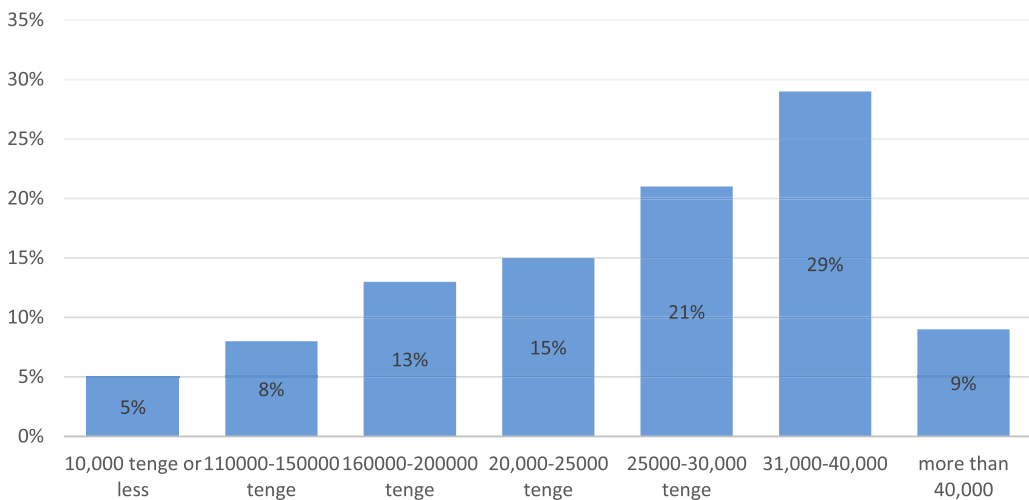
According to Mischo (2014), the family's decisions to mobilise various resources, hire a private tutor, organise activities, and engage in their children's education are part of the microsystem. The quantitative data revealed that 71% (357 out of 503) of Grade 6 students indicated that their parents sent them to PT over the previous 12 months. This result resonates with that of Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izekanova (2022), who found that 316 out of 406 Grade 6 students (79%) received fee-charging PT. This implies that large proportions of students were receiving PT in these studies, mainly because the data were collected from Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, where many families can afford fee-charging PT. Related to this, the quantitative showed that 243 fathers (68%) and 268 mothers (75%) with the highest level of education, 'university', sent their children to PT. Fifty fathers (14%) and 43 mothers (12%) whose highest level of education was 'secondary education', and eight fathers (2%) and four mothers (1%) whose highest level of education was 'primary education or lower' had invested in PT for their children over the last 12 months. However, the data related to 56 fathers (16%) and 42 mothers (12%) were missing. This finding indicates that parents with higher levels of education and likely better economic situations than other parents were more aware of the importance of education for their children's future. These parents could afford to provide their children with additional training for passing the NIS test, in particular, through the use of PT.

The analysis of quantitative data revealed that 29% of the students who received PT reported that their parents spent 31,000–40,000 tenge (US\$ 67–87) monthly, while 21% spent 25,000–30,000 tenge (US\$ 54–65) (see Figure 1).

During the interviews, 9 out of 21 parents expressed concerns about the financial burden of spending on their children's PT sessions. However, several interviewees mentioned they could afford it, mainly because they sent their children to tutorial centres. The following extracts illustrate this point.

**Extract 1:**

I am a nursery schoolteacher. Although tutoring is vital to preparing my son for the NIS test, it has been financially exhausting for me to pay for tutors for three subjects: English, Russian, and Mathematics. I spend almost half of my salary on my child's tutoring, and being a single parent, it becomes challenging for me to manage my finances. (Interviewee 5)



**Figure 1.** Cost of PT per month.

**Extract 2:**

As tutoring is an investment in our children's future, I decided to send my two children to a tutorial centre. We pay 50,000 tenge per month for their education. However, as my wife does not work, the cost of tutoring is sometimes a financial burden on us. The tutorial centre even calls me if I am one day late with a payment. (Interviewee 9)

**Extract 3:**

We spend almost a quarter of my salary, between 54,000 and 56,000 tenge, every month on our daughter's tutoring. However, her exam results have not improved much despite the cost. (interviewee 15)

The above extracts align with Bray's (2013, 20) suggestion that 'investment in private tutoring may give a feeling that parents are doing what they can for their children at crucial stages in their children's lives'.

**The school and tutoring microsystems**

Bray and Kobakhidze (2015) indicate that the first intersection point between the family microsystem and the PT microsystem occurs when the motivation behind students or their families seeking PT is comprehended. The study found that 62% of students indicated they had PT for tangible benefits, including practice for school exams (32%) and the NIS test (30%) (see Table 1). However, 51% indicated that they had PT to understand the subject better. Other possible reasons, such as teacher recommendations or doing what classmates did, did not significantly impact students having PT.

Most of the students who participated in the survey reported receiving private tutoring (PT) in Maths (336 out of 357 students). The next most popular subjects for PT were English language (n.287), Kazakh language (n.170), Russian language (n.152), History (n.21), and Science (n.14). It is interesting to note that 104 out of 357 students (29%) took PT lessons in all four required subjects for the NIS high-stakes test: Kazakh, Russian, and English languages and Mathematics. Concerning the frequency of PT attendance over the previous 12 months, 147 out of 357 students (41%) indicated that they received 3 PT sessions per week, while 86 students (24%) had 2 PT sessions per week. A total of 72 students (20%) had more than 4 sessions per week, 35 students (10%) had 4 PT sessions per week and 17 students (5%) took only one PT session per week (see Figure 2).

The data collected from interviews with parents was in line with the quantitative data. Out of 21 interviewees, 17 reported that their primary reason for sending their children to PT was to help them prepare for the NIS entrance test and/or achieve high scores in their exams. Additionally, many parents expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of education provided by mainstream schools. They felt that the teachers did not familiarise their children with the format of the NIS test and that students did not receive enough individual attention. Extracts 4 and 5 illustrate this point.

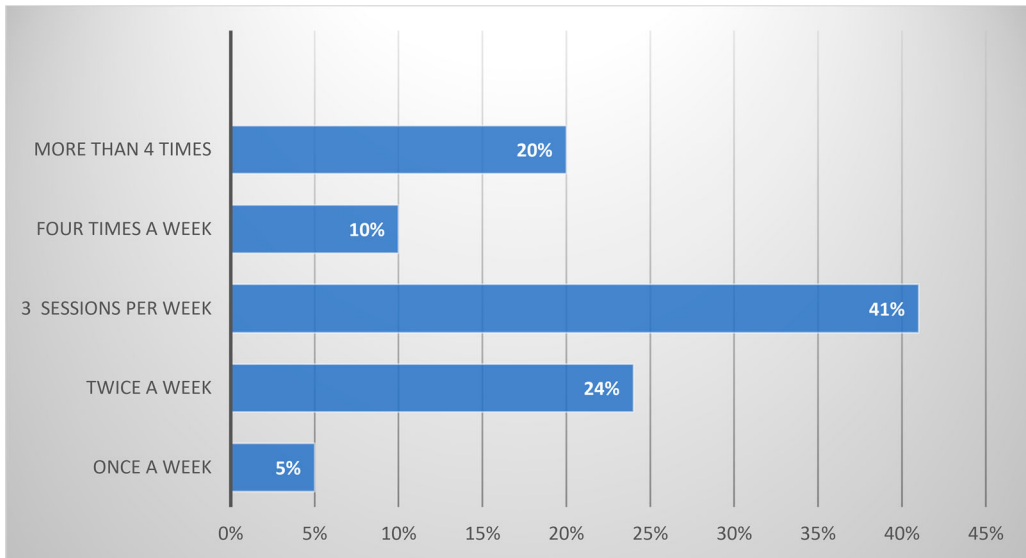
**Extract 4:**

We decided to hire two private tutors to help our daughter prepare for the NIS test. Unfortunately, her school-teachers were not providing adequate preparation for this important exam. We noticed that many children

**Table 1.** Numerical data of reasons for having PT from students' perspective.

Reasons	Frequency (n = 357)	Percent	
I want to understand the subject better	182	51%	
I want to improve my test results	114	32%	
I have been preparing for the NIS test	107	30%	
My parents chose it for me	43	12%	
Other reasons	Many of my classmates were doing it	7	2%
	To study abroad	7	2%
	My teachers recommended it	4	1%





**Figure 2.** Frequency of attending PT.

struggle to learn the material covered in school, which may be due to the mediocre quality of teachers. This has led to the rise of private tutoring, which was not common in the Soviet Union. However, we have found that students who graduate from NISs often go on to attend prestigious universities. (Interviewee 17)

***Extract 5:***

There is fierce competition to secure a place in one of the NISs. As a concerned parent, I enrolled my son in a tutorial centre to provide him with sufficient training for the NIS entrance test and to improve his overall examination scores. I wanted him to understand the importance of striving for education. However, in his school, there are more than thirty students in his classroom. My son recently complained to me, ‘Mom, why didn’t my teacher allow me to speak? She kept telling me to be quiet and sit down in front of the whole class.’ (Interviewee 21)

In this sense, participation in PT by most students in this study was mainly to help them improve their examination scores in core subjects and/or be coached for the NIS test by receiving practice using similar test items and learning specific strategies to answer questions.

Apart from the tangible impact of PT in terms of measurable educational outcomes for students, four interviewees articulated long-term overarching goals for investing in education through PT. Precisely, these parents reported that they did not plan to have their children sit for the NIS test or were obsessed with the examination scores of their children. Instead, they believed that PT could have soft, intangible benefits by helping children boost their self-confidence and increase their interest and knowledge in core subjects, especially Mathematics and English, to study/work abroad. The following extracts explain this point.

***Extract 6:***

My daughter is happy in her current school and does not want to attend NIS. Additionally, my husband and I do not want to force her to take the test for admission. We have enrolled her in a tutorial centre to improve her math skills and fluency in English. She aspires to study or work in the United States in the future. (Interviewee 5)

***Extract 7:***

Tutoring boosted my daughter’s self-confidence, enabling her to actively participate in classroom activities. She developed a liking for mathematics and enjoyed engaging in additional exercises. She also delved into reading books in both Russian and English. (Interviewee 1)

**Extract 8:**

My son is a shy person. We haven't yet decided if he will sit for the NIS test. I have sent him to a tutorial centre to engage him in something useful and to help him communicate with other children. This is better than him just playing computer games at home all day. (Interviewee 9)

The above extract reveals how some parents used PT to enable their children to visualise the ideal self-image they want internally to achieve without being imposed by others or external factors (Dörnyei 2009). According to the interview data analysis, out of 21 parents, 14 reported that they were indirectly involved in their children's education by providing emotional and financial support. This support included encouraging their children to study hard, buying learning resources, and hiring private tutors. They explained that their limited involvement was due to their full-time work schedules and insufficient knowledge of certain core subjects, specifically English. This was because the English language had little presence in the public sphere during the Soviet era. Extracts 9 and 10 illustrate this point.

**Extract 9:**

The curriculum has become more complicated, and I find it challenging to teach my son mathematics and English. Since we did not learn English during the Soviet Union, tutoring is essential to prevent him from falling behind. (Interviewee 4)

**Extract 10:**

My wife and I have busy work schedules and are unable to assist our children with their homework or prepare them for the NIS test. As a result, we have enrolled them in a tutorial centre. Despite this, we keep in touch with their tutors to monitor their academic progress. (Interviewee 10)

The above extracts reveal that parents chose to subscribe to PT for their children to alleviate the pressure of being responsible for their education.

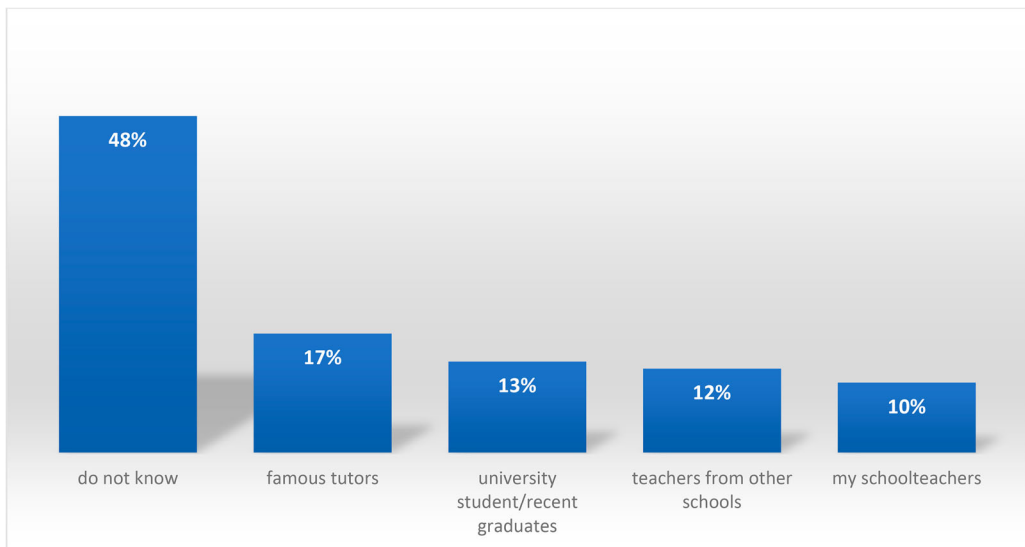
**Macrosystem of fee-charging private tutoring and its regulation**

Bray (2023) points out that schools around the world are being increasingly regulated to ensure that they meet the goals of equity and social justice by enforcing safety standards and adhering to government directives regarding curriculum, financing, and class size. However, the PT sector has not kept pace with this process and needs to be regulated. Zhang (2023, 1) notes that the expansion of PT worldwide can be compared to 'a wild horse' because many governments assume that their only responsibility is to support mainstream education, and that self-serving tutoring providers can regulate the PT industry without any intervention from education ministries. In the present study, the quantitative data revealed that almost half of the students did not know precisely the identity of their private tutors (48%). The rest of the students indicated that their private tutors were famous tutors (17%), university students/recent graduates (13%), teachers from other schools (13%), and their schoolteachers (10%) (see Figure 3).

The qualitative data analysis revealed that three interviewees highlighted a drawback of PT due to the presence of unqualified tutors teaching in the tutorial centres. The following extract illustrates this point.

**Extract 11:**

Tutoring is a booming industry in Kazakhstan, but I had a bad experience with my child's previous tutors who were not qualified. I was misled by advertisements on Instagram from the tutoring centre. I believe the Ministry should regulate tutoring at the legislative level, as many tutors in tutorial centres lack proper knowledge of the subject matter. Additionally, these centres do not have clear criteria for selecting tutors, which makes me question the qualifications of the tutors. I keep wondering if the money I am spending on tutoring is truly helping my child's education. (Interviewee 16)



**Figure 3.** Providers of PT.

The above extract underlines that the Kazakhstani government needs to adopt effective measures to regulate the PT market. In this study, parents were asked whether PT should be banned, regulated, or ignored by the government. Out of 21 interviewees, 10 parents believed that PT is a valuable investment in their children's education and should be left as is. Extracts 12 and 13 exemplify this idea.

***Extract 12:***

I believe that the tutoring market should be left as it is and not banned. Just like any other business, it has advantages and disadvantages. Despite being costly, tutors provide individual attention to my son and give him constant feedback. They also answered his questions related to the NIS test and textbook activities. The atmosphere during tutoring sessions is relaxed, which helps my son learn better. (Interviewee 2)

***Extract 13:***

It is no secret that our public schools do not provide students with the complete knowledge they need. As a result, parents often have to hire tutors to help their children understand the school material better and get their questions answered. I do not want the government to prohibit tutoring. (Interviewee 17)

Meanwhile, 12 parents were in favour of encouraging PT but with government regulations in place, particularly regarding the qualifications of tutors and prices. However, none of the parents supported the idea of banning PT.

## Discussion

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model has been useful in providing a comprehensive perspective for understanding and interpreting the data of this study. It allowed the researcher to outline the multi-layered ecology relevant to PT. The micro level presents the individual-level factors and the closest environment to enable the emergence and development of interactions between children and their parents. As shown in this study, 71% of students (357 out of 503) reported that their families had sent them to PT. This high percentage can be mainly attributed to the pressure to perform well on a significant examination that determines access to NISs, as well

as the presence of a large number of tutorial centres in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Entrepreneurs and informal providers of PT, as Bray (2023) suggests, have a financial incentive to offer services primarily to families in larger cities, as they are typically more capable of affording PT.

In the present study, 68% of fathers (243) and 75% of mothers (268) with university-level education sent their children to PT. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis indicated that most parents were part of what Hajar (2019) refers to as a ‘trust network’. While they were generally supportive of their children’s education, they did not directly involve themselves in the children’s schooling since they were either working full-time or lacked the experience and knowledge to teach some core subjects such as English, which had a limited presence in the public sphere during the USSR rule. Their support mainly came in the form of emotional and financial support, including oral encouragement and financing PT. The parents felt it was their responsibility to invest in resources and hire private tutors for their children at crucial stages in their lives, to be considered ‘responsibilised’ and ‘good’ parents (Doherty and Dooley 2018; Zeng and Yung 2023). According to Mikus, Tieben, and Schober (2021), when parents invest in PT for their children, it can contribute to the perpetuation of structural inequalities in society. However, some empirical studies reported that PT was no longer limited to affluent parents; it had become a norm for parents from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds as well (Tan 2017; Yung 2021). As Yung (2021, 125) suggests, participating in PT to secure a place at highly selective schools or universities ‘may no longer be a voluntary decision’ for most families regardless of their socioeconomic status.

As the findings of this study show, most parents lacked confidence in mainstream schooling and did not want their children to miss out on the benefits of PT that other parents were providing to their children. Nevertheless, 9 out of 21 parents have expressed concerns about the financial burden of paying for their children’s PT sessions. This financial burden was also observed in 5 out of 14 Grade 6 students who participated in a study conducted by Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izenkova (2022) in Kazakhstan. One participant in Hajar *et al.*’s (2022, 384) study put it like this: ‘I am attending tutoring to pass the NIS test, but I will stop this month because my parents told me that they are running out of money’. Hajar, Sagintayeva, and Izenkova (2022) concluded that some students in Kazakhstan might fail to obtain access to NISs not because of their academic abilities but rather because their families are incapable of affording private educational services, and therefore, PT underpins social inequalities. In this regard, Kobakhidze and Štastný (2023) underline that although competitive education systems are prompting all parents to invest in their children’s academic activities, low-income families have fewer resources to secure better-quality PT than prosperous families.

According to Mischo (2014, 118–119), the relationship between the macrosystem and the micro- and mesosystems is ‘bidirectional’ because the latter can influence social equity, educational justice, social beliefs and practices, and potentially education policy. As shown in the present study, almost half of the respondents did not know precisely the identity of their private tutors (48%). Also, some parents complained about the spread of less qualified, costly tutors. This finding recalls that of Rocha and Hamed (2018), who found in a 2017/18 national study of 3,929 parents of Grades 5, 9, 10, and 12 students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that 45% of sampled parents did not know the qualifications of the tutors that they had hired. Therefore, Bray and Hajar (2023) highlight the salience of encouraging parents to become more critical and discerning consumers when hiring a private tutor for their children. In this regard, Ministries of Education can operate advisory websites and channels for information and complaints (Bray and Hajar 2023). Related to this, Zhang (2023) argues that achieving UNESCO’s (2017) Sustainable Development Goals of providing quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 would be challenging without proper understanding and regulation of the PT market. This is because the PT industry is largely exclusive and inequitable.

## Conclusion

The present study was the first to examine the experiences and perceptions of primary school students and their parents of EPT in Kazakhstan, using a closed-ended questionnaire with students and one semi-structured individual interview with 21 parents. As ‘shadow education is here to stay’ (Zhang 2023, 113), it is essential for policymakers to enhance the quality of teaching in the school sector followed by issuing an effective licensing system to regulate the PT market by introducing codes of practice. This is because parents’ faith in schooling should be regained first; otherwise, they will continue to rely on paid PT, which will intensify within the broader context of neoliberal globalisation. PT regulatory measures are unlikely to produce the desired policy effects without considering this important issue. An area that deserves further research is the potential impact of high-stakes exams on children and young people. It is important to examine the academic and psychological consequences of not passing these exams, particularly for those who cannot afford PT. This research should consider the perspectives of the students and their parents, as well as educational practitioners.

As regards the government’s response to the spread of PT, Bray (2023) indicates that tutorial centres are primarily unregulated in many countries because the governments of these countries support the view that issuing regulations for licencing tutorial centres may indicate that they admit the existence of these centres and legitimate them. Elsewhere, Bray and Hajar (2023) illuminate how a few Middle Eastern countries have been more proactive towards regulating tutorial centres by introducing codes of practice. In order to licence a tutorial centre in Qatar, for instance, certain conditions should be available in the tutorial centre, including displaying prices in a visible location at the headquarters, employing tutors who only have a higher qualification in the field of specialisation and maintaining data on courses and other services. Having set out these regulations, the Qatar authorities devised a system to evaluate all accredited centres. As shown in this study, many parents were unaware of the identity of their children’s private tutors especially those who work at tutorial centres. In this regard, governments should work together with parents to clarify their goals and strategies and determine what is in the best interest of their children. Ministries of Education can provide advisory websites and channels for information and complaints, which can empower parents as consumers and influence the actions of tutoring providers. This suggests that parents should become more critical and discerning consumers. The current research, therefore, calls for further research to explore the possibility and effectiveness of regulating PT in different contexts.

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## Ethical approval

The study adhered to the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2013). Ethical approval was given by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan.

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## Appendix A

### *Indicative interview protocol for parents*

1. Why do you send your child to tutoring?
2. Who in your family made the decision to send your child to a tutor?
3. What is the average monthly cost for all tutoring lessons for one child?
4. Is it a financial burden for your family? Why or why not?
5. When does your child take tutoring? What type of tutoring do they take? Why?
6. Where do they take tutoring: in tutors' homes, in your home or elsewhere?
7. Who are the tutors?
8. What about the advantages and disadvantages of private tutoring?
9. In your opinion, should private tutoring be banned, regulated or ignored by the government?
10. What do you feel about the impact of tutoring on the wider society? Do you feel that it is something to be encouraged or discouraged?