

Tuition: Enabler or crutch?



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BY JAKE GOH - 3 HOURS 59 MIN AGO

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Tuition used to be for students who failed and needed help to pass their exams. Nowadays many parents are sending their children for tuition just to maintain grades or get better grades.

Tuition is an enabler when it is a forced revision for students whose parents are working or cannot monitor them after school hours, and for children who are not intrinsically motivated or disciplined. It also enables weaker students who cannot keep up with the rest where, due to the class size, the teacher may not be able to reach out to every individual.

Will tuition foster a crutch mentality, stymying independent learning in students? Possibly, if a child is given tuition from Primary 1 or worse, pre-school. These children have no chance of trying to learn on their own before taking their first tests.

Children should be left to learn independently at least until the end of Primary 2. Thereafter, if they are failing or only managing borderline passes, parents should not default to tuition without first finding out from their teachers the possible reasons for under-performance. Is it due to inattentiveness and lack of interest? Or is it carelessness or lack of practice? Have learning difficulties such as dyslexia been ruled out?

Why do parents provide crutches for their children even before they have fallen and hurt themselves? Is it because they feel that their children have fallen short of expectations? Or they are just trying to protect their children from experiencing failure?

Mistakes can be the best teachers. And failure is like chicken pox — the later you experience it, the worse it is, while the earlier you get it, the quicker you recover and the more resilient you become.

PERILS OF 'TEACHING AHEAD'

That aside, there is one trend I find particularly worrying.

In a bid to get more students enrolled in their programmes, some tuition centres and tutors are teaching students ahead of their lessons at school. Students claim this helps them understand the lessons more quickly than when they are merely instructed by school teachers. I think this is wrong for several reasons.

Firstly, it indicates that tutors are usurping the role of mainstream teachers in becoming the first to teach the lesson. It's not unheard of for students to tell the class teacher trying to introduce a new method: "But my tutor taught me another way." Tuition should be supplementary, not mainstream.

Secondly, students who have undergone this "advance" tutoring and already know the topic could become disruptive or inattentive in class, to the detriment of classmates who have not had the same advantage. Teachers may assume from responses that they can move on quickly with the lesson, again unfair to those without the benefit of tuition.

Thirdly, tutored students may develop a false sense of superior intelligence. They are setting themselves up for possible disappointment in life later on.

Some tutors I spoke with said they were asked by students to "teach ahead" of the syllabus, but they refused because they think it is unethical. I applaud such tutors and urge others to do the same.

Yes, tuition may help a student to get better grades in order to get into the secondary school of choice. But if he or she has not learned on their own how to apply knowledge and skills to real-world problems, would they end up worse off at university or in the working world? They may start to wonder why their crutches are not useful any more.

Jake Goh is the Principal of a private kindergarten and is interested in educational trends around the world.

