

Navigating Hidden Privatization in Cambodia

William C. Brehm
The University of Hong Kong

Botum Chenda is a lower secondary school science teacher in Preah Go, a semi-rural town in northwestern Cambodia.¹ She has been teaching grades seven, eight, and nine since 2007. During my time shadowing and interviewing Chenda in 2014, I discovered the complex reality of teachers as they navigate an education system marked by hidden privatization. This is what I learned.

Privatization of public education in Cambodia manifests primarily in the form of private supplementary tutoring (called *rien kuo thoeumda*), which augments mainstream schooling in terms of curricular content and teacher salary. Chenda is a mainstream schoolteacher who provides fee-based private tutoring to her own students after school hours inside public school classrooms.

Private tutoring is considered hidden because educational actors do not “officially” recognize it as a (different) system. Government officials do not regulate private tutoring because they see it as a teacher’s business and therefore outside of mainstream school policy. In this view, privatization is “hidden” because it is not considered part of the mainstream school system. Students, parents, and teachers, meanwhile, do not recognize private tutoring as different from, or separate to mainstream schooling because they believe it is a necessary part of the education system. Privatization in this view is “hidden” because it is considered a normal part of the schooling system. These opposite ways of understanding private tutoring create an educational system that is partly based on free-market principles: students can choose to attend private tutoring or not and teachers decide what and how to teach during the extra classes.

Chenda feels she has more freedom in teaching style in private tutoring than in mainstream schooling. Although the spaces appear similar on the surface — the teachers, students, and classrooms are the same — Chenda uses different pedagogies in the two spaces. Whereas in mainstream school she uses teacher-centered pedagogies as a way to manage large class sizes and cover the curriculum in the designated time frame, in private tutoring she uses student-centered pedagogies by focusing on example problems (called *Lomhat*).

Private tutoring gives Chenda additional time to cover the national curriculum, which is designed by ministry officials in partnership with international development agencies and often excludes the voice of teachers, by focusing on *Lomhat*. Chenda explained to me that chemistry is only taught two hours each week, which is not enough time to teach quality lessons. Oftentimes she has to rush through the *Lomhat* in government textbooks during mainstream school in order to complete the curriculum on time. Other times she creates her own *Lomhat* as a supplement to the national curriculum, but is not allowed to use them in mainstream school because the ministry requires her to teach only the textbook.

¹ In order to protect Chenda’s identity, I have used pseudonyms for her name and for the town where she works.

In addition to extra teaching time, private tutoring provides Chenda supplemental income from students who pay fees. Chenda earns 528,000 Riel (US\$132) per month as a mainstream schoolteacher and approximately 800,000 Riel (US\$200) per month from private tutoring fees. Without the extra income from private tutoring, Chenda would have to find a second job, most likely unrelated to teaching, in order to earn a livable wage.

As a hidden system operating in a free-market, private tutoring contributes to social inequality, and teachers are often blamed for the consequences. Students who cannot pay the private tutoring fees are necessarily excluded from a space of education deemed necessary by parents and teachers for quality education. The excluded students receive less educational instruction than those students who can pay. In some cases, government officials and parents blame teachers for giving out examination answers during private tutoring as a way to financially profit from the system. These teachers are believed to be corrupting the education system by selling examination answers and scores.

In Chenda's opinion, the social inequalities from private tutoring arise because of the structural defects of the public education system, not because of unethical teachers. Private tutoring is only necessary, she believes, because mainstream schooling is too short, the curriculum too long, and the salaries too low. Private tutoring, in turn, remedies these system-wide deficiencies by providing more time for student learning and additional money for underpaid teachers. Overall, Chenda understands the social dangers posed by private tutoring, but believes, for the most part, the positives outweigh the negatives.

In response to the negative consequences, Chenda has implemented a de facto system of redistribution. She allows students to pay what they can for tutoring classes, offering children from poor families the chance to attend extra classes for free. In effect, she has created a system of equitable community financing whereby families with disposable income pay for the tutoring of other students. This payment system allows Chenda to increase her salary while also providing most students additional instruction time. Although this system does not reach all students, it does reduce some of the inequality arising from a system of hidden privatization.

In addition, Chenda recognizes that some teachers provide examination answers in private tutoring in order to manufacture student demand. Nevertheless, she believes this is the exception, not the rule. Most teachers do not participate in educational corruption. When I directly asked her about providing examination answers in private tutoring she responded by saying, "Teachers will always help their students because if lots of students fail the exam, it's the teacher's fault. But the teachers don't usually tell everything on the exam; they just tell some points for students to learn."

Chenda highlights the complexity of private tutoring as a hidden but necessary space of mainstream schooling. Arising from an under-funded educational system, private tutoring is a site where students and teachers work together to overcome the restraints of mainstream school. The additional learning time provided by private tutoring increases the quality of education for students and gives a livable wage to teachers. Like most teachers, Chenda hopes the public education system develops so private

tutoring is not needed. Until that time comes, however, Chenda will do whatever it takes to ensure her students receive a high quality education.