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Parental choice of private tuition: Valuing attention, judging quality and navigating access in England's underregulated supplementary education market

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Abstract

Private supplementary education is burgeoning worldwide, and over 25% of English children have received private tutoring. The neoliberalisation of education and parents' responsibilisation for children's attainment have driven market growth, but not all can afford to participate. Curiously, in contrast with school choice, there is a lacuna in knowledge about parents' roles as consumers, specifically how they choose tuition services, with such practices in this 'shadow education' sector remaining hidden from view. This paper challenges this occlusion, utilising qualitative research in three English regions. The research explores parental choice of private tuition, considering: what parents value in different services; how they assess provider legitimacy/quality; and how classed and racialised parents navigate access to group or individual tuition. The paper makes three contributions. First, it reveals different perceptions of children's need for attention associated with the choice group or individual tuition. This sets a new agenda for research into the diversity of educational products sold. Second, it spotlights parental strategies for assessing tuition providers' legitimacy. This pinpoints an urgent policy issue as their actions are necessary but insufficient to ensure safeguarding and quality. Third, the paper elucidates how Bourdieu's diverse capitals and

place-specific field intersect to reproduce classed and racialised inequality in parental choice, disproportionately funnelling working-class and racialised-minority children into group rather than one-to-one tuition. This signifies that the conceptualisation of supplementary education as an 'arms race' between tuition 'haves' and 'have nots' must be reframed, as participation in the market also reproduces classed and racialised inequalities between consumers.

KEYWORDS
education markets, private tuition, responsibilised parents, shadow education

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses a research lacuna about how parents choose private tuition services. It examines: (i) what they want in group or individual tutoring; (ii) how they judge tuition provider quality; and (iii) how classed and racialised parents try to navigate access to these supplementary education services in an underregulated marketplace.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

First, it sets a new agenda for research into the diversity of private tuition products sold. Second, it pinpoints an urgent policy issue as parental choice cannot guarantee safeguarding or educational quality. Third, it reveals that researchers and policymakers must address the reproduction of inequality between participants in private tuition markets.

INTRODUCTION

Supplementary education is an umbrella category used in international and comparative education to refer to predominantly commercial services that instruct children in academic subjects outside of school hours to enhance their in-school attainment (Aurini et al., 2013; Bray, 2017). Last century this was a practise 'mainly visible in Asia' but it has since become a 'worldwide phenomenon' (Yung & Bray, 2021, p. 680). This includes England and Wales (Ireson & Rushforth, 2011; Pearce et al., 2018) where, in 2016, the market in commercial private tuition was calculated to be worth £1–2 billion (Kirby, 2016). Despite some challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pimlott-Wilson & Holloway, 2021), the market has rebounded, and record numbers of English and Welsh children are now using tuition during their school years (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023).

Commercial supplementary education attracts different local names around the globe, and this paper adopts the terms private tuition and private tutoring, which are suited to its

case study in England, where this service is offered on a group or one-to-one basis. Its growth and role in the educational 'arms race' though which privileged parents seek to entrench advantage has raised concerns about social mobility (Kirby, 2016, p. 1). Overall, 26% of children have had tuition during their school years, but it is used disproportionately more by: middle-class children (i.e., 31.2% highly affluent; 15.5% low affluence); those living in southern regions of England (e.g., 44% London; 27.5% East Midlands; 13.5% North West); though also by racialised minorities (i.e., 45.8% Asian; 44.1% Black; 34.5% Mixed-Ethnicity; 21.7% White) (Holloway & Kirby, 2020). It is notable that the supplementary education market is underregulated in England, as, unlike state schools, childcare and social services for children, group and individual tuition is not inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) for quality and safeguarding (Bray, 2025; Kirby, 2016; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2025).

Existing social scientific research identifies the neoliberalisation of education, and its intersection with intensive parenting cultures, as root causes of market growth in commercially provided tuition around the world (Duong & Silova, 2021; Liu & Bray, 2022). Considerable attention is also paid to market form in the literature. On the one hand, the metaphoric moniker shadow education is commonly used to capture the ways the outline of the private sector market in each country is shaped by the demands of its national education system, even as these tuition businesses are often shaded from official scrutiny (Bray, 2017). On the other hand, equity and efficacy have also been vital concerns, as access to supplementary education is shaped by class, race and region, and not all forms of tuition are equally effective (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023; Matsuoka, 2018; Šťastný, 2016; Wan & Weerasena, 2017). To complement this attention to market form, there is now also a growing supply-side literature on the nature of private tuition business practices (Kobakhidze, 2018; Yung & Yuan, 2020). However, there is a striking dearth of attention paid to parents' role as consumers in expanding markets in the Global North. Specifically, there is a lacuna in knowledge about parental choice of tuition services.

This paper challenges omission and provides a novel focus on how parents choose private tuition in England's underregulated supplementary education market. The paper follows a standard structure of literature review, followed by a discussion of the qualitative methodology. The central empirical sections are devoted to parental choice of group and individual tuition, considering: what parents look for in tuition; how they assess provider quality; and how they gain access to a service in this underregulated marketplace. The conclusion emphasises the paper's significance for educational research and policy. First, it uncovers how a variegated desire for attention underpins parental choice of group and individual tuition, thereby setting a new agenda for research into the diversity of educational products on sale. Second, it reveals the strategies parents employ as they try to select the best tuition for their child in this economy, spotlighting a pressing policy problem as parental efforts to assess legitimacy cannot ensure safeguarding or quality. Third, it elucidates how parents' diverse capitals intersect with habitus and field to frame their consumer choices, showcasing the importance of future research on parental choice, as these processes reproduce classed and racialised inequalities between consumers.

MARKETISING EDUCATION, RESPONSIBILISING FAMILIES AND THE PRIVATE TUITION CONSUMER

Much has been written in recent decades about the ways economic restructuring in many advanced nations has suffused the education system with market values, prioritising education's instrumental role in human capital production over the intrinsic value of learning (Ball, 2012; Johansen et al., 2017; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In this marketised model, schools

have been forced to compete 'to attract parent-consumers of the educational "product" they are offering' (Angus, 2015, p. 395), most crucially access to educational credentials which function as an institutionalised form of cultural capital in class reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents, by contrast, have been responsibilised for their children's education: they have been exhorted to behave as 'consumers optimising their social and labour market opportunities' (Ball & Nikita, 2014, p. 83), with the expectation being that they will navigate school markets and make the 'right' choices for their children (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015). Any failure to enact this neoliberal subjectivity is cast as a 'transgression of parental duty', regardless of material circumstances mediating parents' capacity to act (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017, p. 577).

This neoliberalisation of schooling has been identified as a key driver of unprecedented increases in supplementary education (Duong & Silova, 2021). Practically, the increased importance of high-stake tests in neoliberal education policy in diverse nations promotes growth as parents want to help children finesse exam performance (Duong & Silova, 2021). Ideologically, the 'increased acceptability of the notion that education is a marketable service' (Bray, 2017, p. 480) means supplementary education emerges as a palatable solution for parents responsibilised by neoliberal ideology for ensuring their children's success (Liu & Bray, 2022; Vincent, 2017). Doherty and Dooley (2018) argue that neoliberal emphasis on educational choice 'morally enlists and mobilises autonomous individuals in the pursuit of socially valued goals… on the condition they do so under their own steam' (Doherty & Dooley, 2018, p. 552). Parental reliance on the supplementary education market to mitigate risk is, they contend, a deliberate feature of the neoliberal project. Qualitative research that explores why parents are disposed to tuition reinforces this view, demonstrating that neoliberal policies enhance parental anxieties about class reproduction and stimulate tuition use (Liu & Bray, 2022), though it also suggests that in newly expanding markets in advanced economies of the Global North, racialised parenting cultures are likewise important (Dhingra, 2018; Holloway et al., 2024; Sriprakash et al., 2016).

Acknowledgement of neoliberalism's role in driving tuition growth must be tempered with recognition that it is not a monolithic force, meaning supplementary education is not simply the same everywhere. Research in international and comparative education demonstrates that global variations in neoliberal education policy matter, as a nation's supplementary education market 'shadows' the specific nature of schooling (e.g., school provision; local high-stakes examinations) (Bray, 2017). The provision itself takes diverse forms (Kim & Jung, 2019), including, for example, large-class cram schooling providing regular after-school and holiday classes, smaller-group learning centres (shadowing state or utilising own-brand curriculum), extra tuition from teachers and one-to-one tuition in the home. Temporal differences also arise: in some Asian nations, tuition sessions may take place multiple times a week, but in some northern European nations it is more likely to be a weekly session (Holloway & Kirby, 2020). In England, supplementary education was initially dominated by one-to-one tuition, but group tuition that is more easily accessible on the high street has flourished in the twenty-first century (Wainwright et al., 2023). Research in England suggests that high-quality one-to-one tuition is most effective, but high-quality small-group provision can also raise attainment, especially if aligned with school curriculum delivery (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023).

Global variegation in the form supplementary education takes is paralleled by social differentiation in its use within nations. Class matters, as unsurprisingly children from wealthier families use supplementary education more, but it is compounded by geography, wherein those living in wealthier neighbourhoods, urban areas and more developed regions within a country also have higher access than their class alone would suggest (Azam, 2016; Bray, 2023; Matsuoka, 2018; Šťastný, 2016). The ethnic majority have higher usage in some, but not all, parts of Asia (Pallegedara, 2018; Wan & Weerasena, 2017), but in the Global North racialised minorities have higher uptake as racialised parenting cultures, and fears

of discrimination, lead to the prioritisation of educational achievement (Dhingra, 2018; Ho et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2024; Sriprakash et al., 2016). These classed, racialised and geographical factors are all evidenced in England, where wealthier, southern and racialised-minority children are more likely to access private tuition than their poorer, more northerly and White counterparts (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023; Holloway & Kirby, 2020).

This analysis of neoliberalism's role in the growth and form of supplementary education markets is necessary but not sufficient; it is also vital that the literature explores how this sector works as a business. The supply-side literature was slower to develop (Tanner et al., 2009), but now spans learning centres in North America and the United Kingdom (Aurini, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2023), business practices in East Asian cram schools (Dierkes, 2010), tutor entrepreneurship, alongside increasing emphasis on the confluence of mainstream and shadow education when teachers are involved in tuition (Bray, 2021; Duong & Silova, 2021; Kobakhidze, 2018). Discourse analysis of tuition websites has shown how businesses seek to entice consumers into the market. Kozar (2015) argued that some Russian tutors pursue a bold approach, positioning tuition users as consumers within a neoliberal marketplace, while Yung and Yuan (2020) show that Hong Kong websites produce a complex hybrid persona emphasising authoritative exam expertise, star quality and friendly teaching. In contrast, studies in Sweden and Australia demonstrate that family vignettes and parental testimonies may be used to sell tuition as a trusted solution to diverse educational problems (Briant et al., 2019; Hallsén & Karlsson, 2018). Indeed, business manuals for prospective private tutors in the United Kingdom and the United States emphasise the importance of securing trust and performing professionalism in order to legitimate service provision (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020).

In sum, the existing literature produces a broad-scale analysis of *why* and *where* tuition is booming under neoliberalism, *which* social groups use it and, to some extent, *what* business practices are in operation. What it does not provide is insight into parents' experiences of consuming tuition in globally expanding markets. This lack of research into how parents encounter and negotiate access to tuition markets is curious. In the Global North, considerable attention has been paid to how families perform their roles as 'consumers' in competitive school markets (Angus, 2015; Bagley & Hillyard, 2015), but such analysis has not yet developed for expanding supplementary education markets. Given that tuition has systematically been linked to educational inequality, there is an urgent need for research on parental choice. This paper focuses on England, and its first two aims therefore: (1) to explore what diverse parents seek in their choice group and individual tuition; and (2) to examine how different parents judge quality/legitimacy in choosing a tuition provider for their child/ren.

To address this lacuna in knowledge about diverse parents' encounters with the private tuition market, the paper turns to Bourdieu's multi-threaded notion of capital, and his thesis that cultural reproduction through education is essential to the social reproduction of class inequality (Bourdieu, 1973). Cultural capital, for Bourdieu, may be: embodied in the individual; objectified in cultural goods; or institutionalised as educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). He differentiates this cultural capital from economic capital (money and resources) and social capital (the nature and value of social networks), but the three are ultimately interrelated as they may be transformed into one another, in a potentially beneficial, but also a costly and risky, process (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, a parent might utilise economic capital to purchase tuition in the hope of augmenting their children's cultural capital (institutionalised as examination results), thereby reproducing them as middle-class citizens, but this result is not guaranteed. Crucially, Bourdieu argued that *capital* combines with *habitus* (individual or group dispositions) in different social environments or *fields* to shape social *practice*, a relationship he summarises succinctly as '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. 95). His concepts have been hugely influential in educational debates (Reay, 2019); however, Davies and Rizk (2018) point out that empirical research

into cultural capital's role in the reproduction of inequality through education has sometimes taken the concept out of this broader theoretical framework. This paper deliberately avoids this rupture as it explores how parents secure access to provision. Its final aim is therefore: (3) to trace how parents with a relatively similar *habitus* (in that all want to use tuition), but differential *capitals*, intersect with England's uneven private tuition *field*, to shape social *practices*, namely access to group and individual private tuition. To address these three aims, the paper draws on original research as detailed below.

RESEARCHING WITH PARENTS IN PRIVATE TUITION MARKETS

Quantitative research demonstrates who uses private tuition in England (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023; Holloway & Kirby, 2020). This study, by contrast, took a qualitative approach to develop a rich understanding of parents' experiences of neoliberal education markets. In total, 60 individual semi-structured interviews were untaken with parents from different families (54 mothers; 6 fathers), who had state-educated children in school years 8–13 (ages 12–18), about their attitudes to, and engagement with, private tutoring. As the tuition market intensity varies across England, we sought insights from 20 parents in: the low-usage North West; the average-usage East Midlands; and high-usage London (Holloway & Kirby, 2020). These regions are characterised by different levels of wealth and income inequality (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Mean disposable household income is lowest in the North West, average in the East Midlands and highest in London; however, the capital also sees the widest wealth gaps between rich and poor in England (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Parents were invited to participate via online and offline flyers circulated through diverse educational institutions, employers, community groups and cultural and leisure organisations. As classed and racialised differences intersect with geography in shaping access to private tuition (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023), we recruited families from diverse classed (60% middle class; 40% working class) and racialised backgrounds (25% South and East Asian; 20% Black African and Caribbean; 20% Multi-racial; 35% White British and White European). Both users and non-users of tuition took part, but here we draw on the 42 parents who used private tutoring. Our goal in researching with this mix of parents was to ensure representation of diverse experiences rather than simple representativeness. Indeed, including this mix of parents is not intended to legitimise these socially constructed categorisations, but rather to foment discussion about divergent tuition use amongst families classed and racialised in these ways.

In recruiting participants, class was measured using fivefold self-coded National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (coding NS-SEC 1 & 2 as middle class; NS-SEC 4 & 5 as working class; NS-SEC 3 as middle or working class according to work type) (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This was preferred to self-definition as many professional workers claim working-class heritage in England (Reay, 2019). Non-employment elements of class were incorporated through parents' educational attainment (Dumais et al., 2012) and neighbourhood Acorn classification (CACI, 2021). Participants were asked to self-define their ethnic or racial group; this was used to classify families as Asian, Black, Multi-racial or White, the categories seen in previous English research on private tuition (Holloway & Kirby, 2020).

All research team members undertook semi-structured interviews with parents in English. These were partially structured to direct discussion towards private tuition, including questions about what they sought in tuition, how they judged its quality and their access to tutoring services, but parents were also ensured sufficient free range in conversations (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Focus groups were avoided as pilot research indicated

they could constrain individual viewpoints. During the study, the research team, who are White, northern and first- or second-generation middle class, reflected on our varying roles as insiders and outsiders, and the 'fluid and unpredictable' ways this plays out in research (Mellor et al., 2014, p. 141). Specifically, while we acknowledge that humans as emergent subjects neither have, nor can, communicate full self-knowledge (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), our strategy was to engage directly with emergent cultural ambiguities in interviews (Riessman, 1987), asking parents to explain placed, classed or racialised practices to those outside their communities—which sometimes, but not always, included ourselves. We found this approach of openly discussing socially differentiated parenting practices helpful: it not only ensured those who saw sameness in us fully articulated their views but also created (albeit imperfectly) an atmosphere where difference was respected, enabling parents to explain what mattered to them. Nevertheless, we are cognisant that all research is a social production, not an unfiltered version of reality, meaning interpretation requires critical reflection. For details of research ethics, see the statement at the end of the paper.

The interviews, which were on average one-and-a-half hours long, were systematically analysed to ensure rigorous interpretation. Following full transcription, the researchers re-immersed themselves in the interviews through active reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, transcripts were coded deductively for themes that emerged from the literature, and inductively as participants broached unforeseen issues during interviews (Reichertz, 2014); codes were recorded using a branching-tree system in NVivo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). We remained critically alert not only to dominant themes, but also to countervailing views (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The outcomes of the thematic analysis—a process which saw the collective development, refining and reviewing of key and counter themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006)—are presented in the central sections of the paper. We ensure parental anonymity by using pseudonyms and quotations devoid of identifying information; an ellipsis indicates that superfluous words have been removed. Our approach has been critically reflective (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but no methodologies are perfect. Future research could focus on individual ethnic groups to facilitate greater reflection on intra-group differences.

PARENTAL CHOICE OF GROUP TUITION

Attention in an 'extra little group session'

Parents in this study share a similar habitus, in wanting to use private tuition to support their children's education. This disposition is seen in families in England who turn to private tuition both to maximise children's position in state education (e.g., securing places at selective schools and in higher sets [classes grouped by attainment]) and to improve their individual attainment (e.g., consolidating maths and English skills; finessing higher General Certificate of Secondary Education grades [state examinations taken at age 15–16]) (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023; Hajar, 2020; Jerrim & Sims, 2019). In this study, parents who choose group tuition reveal that the educational playing field is crucial in shaping their dispositions. Specifically, these parents articulate concerns about the level of individual learning support (Guill et al., 2020) available in large state-school classes, and stress their desire for children to receive more focused attention as the key factor shaping their tuition decisions. Anita Jackson, a working-class mother in a multi-racial East Midlands family, explains this imperative for her daughter:

> [A] *teacher in a classroom has got thirty-two children, they can't listen to everybody in that hour, can he? If everybody's got a question? So things get*

> *overlooked… I think when you're below target* [grade], *you need that extra little group session, because they can explain better… they're not rushed*.

In an underregulated marketplace (Bray, 2025), the value placed on small-group learning warrants closer examination. Existing research demonstrates that the use of group environments is more common amongst families from lower-income and/or racialised-minority backgrounds in England (Holloway & Kirby, 2020; Wainwright et al., 2023). In this study, parents using group tuition reflect this demographic pattern, but there is striking diversity in their goals, as they value the attention tutors give to children with very different attainment levels (cf. Guill et al., 2020). Val Dhanda, for example, a working-class Asian mother in the East Midlands, whose child has average attainment, echoes Anita (above) whose daughter struggles in the bottom sets:

> [W]*e chose* [provider name] *because the maximum they have in a group is 6… the teacher* [tutor] *would have time to speak to them… if they were struggling with something they'd be able to give my child the time*.

Moreover, Anita and Val's views resonate with middle-class Black London mother Diane Thomas, whose sons have high attainment:

> *… the most that's ever been in that class were four kids, and two of them were mine… it's like if they were at private school. It's all about class sizes and individual attention… When you've got thirty kids to a class, how on earth can you make sure that child's learnt everything*.

This illustrates that the value placed upon tutors' attention in an educational field characterised by stretched state-education services drives lower-income and/or racialised-minority parents' use of group services, but that their goals span the desire to 'catch up, keep up, or get ahead of their peers' (Choi & Cho, 2016, p. 600). We term this market an 'attention economy' as the focus on the child is ultimately delivered through commercial services; however, it is clear from the outset that this economy is internally differentiated, serving diverse educational purposes.

Assessing tuition quality: Choosing by group size, provider personability or educational product?

This emphasis on tutors having time for children means group size emerges as a proxy for quality when sourcing group tuition in a marketplace where there is no independent evaluation of tuition services (Kirby, 2016). Research in tuition-intensive India identifies multiple ways that tuition services may use their 'temporal advantage' (Gupta, 2022a, p. 784) to secure public trust—such as offering longer hours than, or teaching topics in advance of, schools—but the importance of time has as yet received less attention in the Global North's expanding markets. This study elucidates how responsibilised parents (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017) in England operate in a field where class sizes are a contentious issue, and this infuses multiple mobilisations of group size as a quality indicator, with it acting as a proxy for time available to meet children's needs.

This is seen, on the one hand, as Anita (above) references state-school class sizes of 32 to illustrate why her daughter needed small-group attention to underpin improved attainment, demonstrating her membership of the 96% of English parents who think class size affects learning (Department for Education, 2011). On the other hand, Diane (above)

reads the quality of her sons' tuition by comparing its staff–student ratios with an elite product, namely private schooling, where class sizes are lower and individual attention higher (Department for Education, 2011). Furthermore, discourses about the benefits of small-group teaching are reinforced through practical parenting experience in this marketised tutoring field. Asrat Destra, a working-class Black father in the East Midlands, moved his children to a smaller-group tuition provider to avoid wasting time after his original choice had:

> *Plenty of kids…* [but] *one tutor to get to my son where he's stuck, he has to wait maybe forever. So what's the point. He gets one hour a week. Some, most of the time he's stuck… waiting. Yeah, I stop, no point*.

The desire for attention is driving parents' use of small-group tuition, and it is noteworthy that problematic 'waiting time' spent queuing when students have few weekly sessions contrasts directly with concern in tuition-intensive nations that children experience 'waiting time' in school, being bored before leaving for more advanced tuition classes (Bray, 2022, p. 8). The timescapes of tuition (Bray, 2022; Gupta, 2022a) clearly matter, but they are not universal and close attention to the field is required to explore their significance.

In addition, the personability and professionalism of the provider is also taken as a marker of quality. Kate, a working-class White East Midlands mother, describes her experience of popping into her high-street provider, where she builds social capital of value to her, a relationship based on resonating educational perspectives:

> *So I went past* [provider] *one day in* [high-street]*… and I just kinda said to my mum: 'I'm just gonna pop in here and just have a word with them'… I talked to the lady, Shabana. She was really nice… she just seemed really knowledgeable… things that I would really think anyway, she was telling me about… I'm like: 'Yeah, she knows what she's doing'*.

Supply-side research points to multiple ways the tuition industry seeks to promote trust and secure business (Briant et al., 2019; Hallsén & Karlsson, 2018) but combining an air of professional competence with a willingness to genuinely listen to parents (Aurini, 2004; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020) is indeed vital.

By contrast, it is striking that the educational product being sold garnered less attention. Group tuition in England takes diverse forms: some diverge from schools and offer their own brand of English and maths tuition (Bray, 2022); others are more aligned with the national curriculum, offering booster classes for key state examinations (Gupta, 2022b). Notwithstanding this diversity, it is noteworthy that few parents were vocal about providers' educational ethos, beyond articulating that children worked in small groups, asking for help as required. Kamal Vara, a middle-class Asian mother in the East Midlands with considerable cultural capital, stands out as an unusually reflective advocate for own-brand, practice-based, group maths tuition for her high-attaining children:

> [I]*t's mass customisation, so they have five students in the room and one teacher* [tutor], *and you keep doing it on a digital system… the teacher* [tutor] *has a dashboard where they see who's stuck there and they go and sit with you… these computer systems make a lot of sense, because they allow them to pace themselves*.

Her adoption of this form of tuition, which she labels '*a tool for excellence*', is informed by her childhood in India, where intensive tuition is common (Gupta, 2022a). In explaining, it is

noteworthy that she—like Val Dhanda above—refers to these tutors as teachers, thus verbally according them the (unearned) status of an educational professional.

Indeed, learning centres have been extraordinarily successful in selling a generic product as an individualised tool to increase attainment and confidence (Aurini, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2023); however, some counter voices do surface in this study. These perspectives emerge amongst families in which parents, or their high-attaining children, build the cultural capital to make alternative choices through engagement with the tuition field. Leela Habib is a middle-class Asian mother from London, who resisted pressure from family and friends to use group tuition during her daughter's primary schooling, using what she terms the Islamic '*religious card…* [saying] *whatever's written, she's gonna get*', yet she started using a centre recommend by family when her daughter was in Year 10. As she learned more about it, she became disillusioned both with the generic group product and the time mismatch with topics studied in school (Bray, 2022):

> [W]*e gave it* [group tuition] *a really good chance. The only thing we found was it was… a book that they were getting… they'd do that, and then anything they needed help with they'd ask… she would do something different* [topic-wise] *at school… Anika wanted specific help, so it wasn't tailored to her.*

Alignment with school curriculum is indeed central to tuition best practice (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023), and Leela's high-attaining child convinced her that '*all I'm paying them for is the desk space*', and they swapped to individual tuition.

Navigating access: The place of social and economic capital

Parental perceptions of quality, however, are not the only factors shaping their choice of group tuition. The local field matters as it is a source of social capital which can yield neighbourly recommendations. Nancy Ong, a working-class Asian North West mother, demonstrates how such endorsements shape tuition choices:

> [Group tuition] *just feel like, not much, not big groups of the kids and then just like recommendation, you know, everybody say the teacher* [tutor] *is good there, yeah, so we just use it.*

Moreover, the local field affords opportunities to some parents who can simply turn to the provider on their high street (Wainwright et al., 2023) but, given the recent rise of tuition in England (Bray, 2017), these opportunities are not available to all. The spatially uneven nature of the market (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023)—which has pockets of high provision in more southern and wealthy localities, and tuition deserts in more northern and less well-off neighbourhoods—means there is a postcode lottery as group tuition is simply absent in some localities.

Parental choice is also mediated through economic capital, which works in multiple ways to shape the intricacies of the choice for, and the type of, group tuition. Kate (above) opted for high-street group tuition before knowing that individual tuition existed, but her lack of economic capital means she continues to struggle with the cost, suspending her son's maths and English group sessions around Christmas when she is '*more financially strapped*'. Having learnt more about the market, she would now prefer one-to-one classes as '*you're 100% focused on that person*', but her growing cultural capital is not matched by her economic capital and she is clearcut that she '*can't afford them because they're £25 a session*'. Equally, costs can cause movement within the group tuition market. Amira Ffyad, a

working-class Black mother from London, uses group tuition '*because it is less expensive*', but is moving from a national chain to a group run by a local African teacher, as the cost is lower still. In addition to session costs, individual tuition may also require quiet space in the family home that not all can afford. Val Dhanda extols the value of group tuition (above) but is also compelled to use out-of-home tuition, as she has limited downstairs space and several children, meaning it is too noisy for tuition at home. Thus, the income inequalities that see some children included in, and others excluded from, private tuition (Matsuoka, 2018; Pearce et al., 2018) are also refracted through the preference for group tuition *and* the selection of specific group tuition providers.

PARENTAL CHOICE OF INDIVIDUAL TUITION

Valuing one-to-one attention

Two-thirds of tuition in England is delivered one-to-one: traditionally this usually took place in the tutor's or tutee's home, but online tutoring has also blossomed post-COVID (Pimlott-Wilson & Holloway, 2021). Parents who opt for individual tuition are also actors in an attention economy, but unlike those who choose group tuition they have sufficient cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to envisage a world where tuition is designed to meet their child's specific learning needs (Addi-Raccah, 2019). Parminder Rani, a middle-class Asian London mother, explains her reasoning:

> [T]*he one-to-one interaction that he gets firstly, as well as it's catered for his learning abilities… not every child learns at the same speed, at the same level… this is quite literally designed for my son*.

This concentrated focus on children's individual needs reflects intensive parenting trends and parents' responsibilisation for child outcomes seen in the local, and international, field (Doherty & Dooley, 2018; Vincent, 2017), and leads parents like Jemima Price, a middle-class White London mother, to reject group tuition's generic approach:

> *I wanted to work on Alexa's weak areas, whereas if she went to like Kumon… they follow a syllabus… there's however many of them are all working through that, that wasn't really Alexa's need*.

Moreover, some middle-class parents' cultural capital, exemplified through confidence in their abilities to help children, means they see less value in group tuition based on provider curriculum. As Wahida Bari, a middle-class Black North West mother, points out, this is not regarded as offering more than they themselves could deliver:

> *I don't like them centres… I'm not a big fan*. [Why not?] *They just stick them on a computer don't they and give them some sheets!* [Laughs] *Is the nicest way to put it! There's no… engaging the child, so, I could have done that myself*.

Her self-confidence as a humanities graduate means she sees less value in the generic group tuition popular with other Muslim families in her socio-economically mixed neighbourhood. Nevertheless, she is happy to pay for one-to-one tuition in subjects outside of her skillset.

For most children, this support is to keep up or excel, but less often it is because of diagnosed learning difficulties. Hasan Samrah, a working-class Black North West father,

uses private tuition as his son's EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan: a legal document outlining a child's special educational needs; the support required that Local Authorities are legally required to deliver; and desired outcomes) is not in his view being met by the school:

> [H]*e needs what is written exactly in his EHCP, catch-up, one-to-one catch-up lessons in the core subjects, to be able to pass his exams and to have his GCSE. And they are not doing this… it's illegal what they are doing but all the time they have their own excuses*.

Hasan—who is a graduate in his birth nation but lacks permission to work in the United Kingdom due to his immigration status—blames anti-migrant bias for this shortfall. Indeed, whilst severe financial pressures mean Local Authorities are struggling to deliver these EHCPs, there are classed, racialised and regional differences in the likelihood of receiving one (Lee et al., 2024).

Although one-to-one tuition is prized for its attention to children's individual learning needs, its social and practical accessibility is also valorised. Socially, access to one-to-one private tuition is undoubtedly shaped by class inequality (Pearce et al., 2018), but it is nonetheless cast as more accessible, as individual children may articulate their needs without peers hearing. As Alison Lloyd, a middle-class White North West mother, puts it, the one-to-one relationship means they are not '*humiliated in front of the class*'. Children's social capital is thus enhanced by adding a tutor to their network, who may respond both to their academic and socio-affective requirements (Addi-Raccah, 2019). For example, this personal relationship helps shier children articulate their needs, as Gaby Alves, a working-class White London mother, explains:

> [O]*ne-to-one I think it helps them because that person is just there to listen to them… I think it's much easier for them to ask questions, than in a class or a roomful of other children if they don't feel confident enough*.

Practically, one-to-one tuition is presented as accessible within time-pressured middle-class family life, where excellence in education may be combined with substantial extra-curricular activities (Vincent, 2017). Moreover, these diverse benefits can cohere to inform tuition choice: for example, Vivian James, in a middle-class multi-racial North West family, values practical convenience, social accessibility *and* individual attention:

> [C]*onvenience* [is] *probably the main thing because they're so busy, they do sport…* [continues]*… she wouldn't have been happy in a group… she could ask whatever questions she wanted to ask… without feeling stupid…* [continues]*… It gives them more time, it's an individual thing isn't it, rather than a class of thirty… their question can be answered*.

Thus, one-to-one tuition emerges as a parenting solution to ensure children's (re)production as middle-class citizens through education (Bourdieu, 1973), in a contemporary social field where children are cast as having individualised learning needs, and parents are responsibilised for their off-springs' educational attainment and extra-curricular development as a rounded 'Renaissance child' (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016, p. 272; Doherty & Dooley, 2018).

Differing sources of tutor legitimacy: Teachers, role models and racialised parenting cultures

Although viewing education as a market is ingrained in parents' discourses and practices (Angus, 2015), sourcing a tutor when faced with an underregulated field where anyone can sell their services (Bray, 2025; Kirby, 2016) is not necessarily an easy task. Michelle Martin, a middle-class White North West mother, explains the complexities of an internet search:

> *It was very difficult because all you see is a photograph of somebody and… maybe two or three lines about them… a lot of people advertise, if you just type in 'German tutors'… how do I know them? … how do I trust them? How do you know they're decent?*

One way to navigate this uncertain terrain is to employ a teacher as they are judged to embody the cultural capital required for the role. As figures of authority on educational matters (Aurini, 2004), teachers are not simply trusted to understand the curriculum, but also through their training and school experience to know how to work with children. Fadila Sarraf, a middle-class Black East Midlands mother, exemplifies this emphasis on teaching skill:

> [T]*hey'd been teachers, so they'd understand the pressures that Aliyah was facing. But also… how to kind of teach, how the learning process worked, how the assessments work, as opposed to just somebody who knew everything but didn't quite know how to deliver it to a 14, 15 or 16-year-old*.

Research elsewhere suggests that teacher legitimacy as tutors is indeed reinforced by their 'insider understanding of the education system' (Gupta, 2022b, p. 578), and in England teachers experienced in marking state exam papers are particularly highly valued, as they are trusted to impart exam technique. Michelle Martin, who described the difficulties of an internet search (above), ultimately opted for these markers of quality:

> [H]*e's an ex-teacher and he's also ex-marker for the exams. So he knows kind of the marking criteria, what people are looking for… he teaches her how to sit an exam*.

In this way, these parents construct teacher-tutors as qualified, competent professionals (Duong & Silova, 2021) who possess the skills required to increase educational attainment.

Notwithstanding the lack of regulation, some parents chose to employ tutors who were not qualified teachers. Globally, it is common to find tutors without teaching qualifications (Bray, 2021) and these workers must secure legitimacy in alternative ways (Gupta, 2022b). In this study, two alternative pathways to legitimacy emerged. Firstly, some parents place value on subject knowledge and intelligence rather than teaching qualifications, meaning they construct graduates, university students and bright school children as potential quality tutors. As Lubna Memon, a middle-class Asian mother in the East Midlands, states: '*I think if a child is super bright… they're top of the top, they can help anyone*'. Indeed, their youthful position is itself a draw as they can expand children's social capital in role modelling success, sometimes mirroring the role of older siblings, as is seen in Indian tuition centres (Gupta, 2022b). Helen Walker, a middle-class White London mother, explicates this:

> *I wanted it to be somebody who was fun… kind of big sister…* [a] *switched on and really successful, high-achieving young woman… having her as a role*

> *model has been incredible… she's* [tutor]*… been accepted to Cambridge and her outlook is really sort of influential on Gracie*.

Secondly, some Asian parents reject school teaching methods, particularly for maths, preferring tutors whose pedagogic practices overtly emphasise repetition and hard work (see Sriprakash et al., 2016). Riya Chawla, a middle-class Asian North West mother, exemplifies this trend of choosing an Asian tutor with whom she shares cultural capital:

> *I think we're on the same wavelength… she very much says if you don't do the work, then you know you're not going to get those grades, and that's the sort of attitude that we have. And I think it's a little bit of an Asian mentality*.

Her invocation of 'an' Asian mentality is interesting: the Asian parents in this paper are diverse in class terms, and include first- and second-generation parents from East and South Asia. Nevertheless, in talking to White researchers, Riya happily articulates an all-encompassing Asian commitment to '*hard work before play*' as this is a subject of pride.

Accessing attention: Social and economic capital in the field of tuition

Teachers' professional, and unqualified tutors' alternative, sources of legitimacy are both navigated by parents through local social capital. Although larger tuition providers have sought to harness the power of promotional personal testimonies to secure trust (Briant et al., 2019), many families using individual tuition adopt an informal process, choosing people they know or who other families have used. Leela Habib and Renée Paul, who are middle-class Asian and Black mothers in London, both sourced their tutors (respectively a senior teacher and a student) through religious networks, though other parents also used wider classed as well as racialised local social networks:

> *My husband… helps run the local mosque, so through word of mouth, because we didn't want to do anybody that wasn't tried and tested… we wanted to do it on recommendation*.
>
> (Leela)

> [W]*e knew a guy at church who went to* [anonymised grammar school], *and he was at* [anonymised], *Russell Group University… So I asked him would he tutor Jade… it gave her that kind of positivity and role modelling that she needed*.
>
> (Renée)

The importance of local social capital in sourcing tutors demonstrates that marketising education does not enhance choice for all (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017); rather, using this capital to make education choices can reinforce existing social divisions (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015) as decisions may reflect your social milieu. Moreover, variations in the field mean that the subdued state of the tuition market in some neighbourhoods (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023) means that tutors can simply be hard to find. As Tess Young, a middle-class White North West mother, explains: '*there wasn't a huge amount of choice*' and '*we were quite lucky that… we found* [my son's tutor]*… it wasn't easy*.'

Economic capital is equally crucial. That ability to pay excludes many from the market is well understood (Pearce et al., 2018), but this study demonstrates that economic capital also structures access to different tutors amongst users of one-to-one tuition. Some tuition users

absorb the cost relatively easily and have a free choice of tutors. Sue Brown, a middle-class mother in a multi-racial North West family, makes clear that price has no bearing on her concurrent use of one-to-one and (particularly expensive) small-group tuition: she sees tuition as '*a priority and you know, it sounds stupid, but we would just pay*'. By contrast, Helen Walker justifies her choice of a '*school girl*' tutor in terms of role modelling, but this cheaper service also suits her lower budget, and she still limits the number of sessions per week for financial reasons. Cost is even more pressing for Gaby Alves, a working-class White European London mother, with bilingual children. Unable to afford any type of tuition when her children were younger, Gaby can now only purchase one-to-one maths tuition from a graduate tutor as she has found a migrant from her birth nation who charges less than others, as he can only teach in his mother tongue. Although existing global research accurately correlates familial social class with access or lack thereof to supplementary education (Azam, 2016), this study goes further in demonstrating how intersecting cultural, social and economic capital shapes access to different parts of the one-to-one tuition market.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the burgeoning neoliberal supplementary education market in England through a novel focus on how parents choose private tuition. In conclusion, the paper reflects on the threefold significance of attention to parents' consumer experiences for future research and policy in shadow education.

Firstly, in revealing the different perceptions of children's needs linked to parental choices between group or individual tuition, the paper sets a new agenda for research into the diverse nature of educational products sold. Parents' accounts reveal variegated understandings of the nature of attention valued in this economy and differentiated timescapes between tuition types (Gupta, 2022a). To expand, the working-class and racialised-minority parents using group tuition want their children to catch up, reinforce or extend their abilities (Choi & Cho, 2016), and place great emphasis on the extra attention group provision affords, though few seem explicitly aware of the educational ethos of the product they choose. The more often middle-class parents using one-to-one tuition parallel these desires to help children address learning difficulties, keep up or excel but, by contrast, they explicitly emphasise one-to-one provision's orientation towards their children's individual learning needs, in a product considered socially and temporally accessible, as it is personalised and fits around busy middle-class lives (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). These insights highlight an urgent need for education researchers to investigate the variegated nature of tuition products being sold (He et al., 2021). Parents' choices span from practise-based learning centred on provider-specific curricula (Bray, 2022) to targeted individual interventions by qualified teachers (Kirby, 2016). Although both are conceived of as 'tutoring' by parents—some of whom refer to unqualified tutors as teachers—the services are unlikely to be equally effective (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023).

Secondly, the research showcases the need to examine supplementary education's business legitimation and its limitations. Parents in England are responsibilised for children's educational outcomes (Doherty & Dooley, 2018; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2017) but those who opt to purchase tuition encounter an underregulated marketplace (Bray, 2025; Kirby, 2016). Parents seek to identify business legitimacy in different ways for different services. Group tuition is judged largely on group size, or provider personability rather than educational product (Aurini, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2023). In one-to-one tuition, there is a sharp contrast between teacher-tutor legitimacy (secured through teacher training, school experience and perhaps state examination marking) and untrained tutors' potential (assessed through tutors' academic attainment, ability to role model success and sometimes teaching culture)

(cf. Gupta, 2022b in India). In uncovering the diverse parenting logics through which parents choose tuition services, the paper highlights an urgent policy issue. Private tuition is burgeoning in England, but most parents are left to negotiate commercial service provision which is neither regulated nor inspected for quality or safeguarding (Bray, 2025; Kirby, 2016). In this context, parental strategies for assessing legitimacy revealed here are entirely comprehensible but are nonetheless insufficient. Neoliberal education policy has encouraged market participation (Duong & Silova, 2021), but markets aimed at children require some checks and balances to ensure safeguarding at a minimum and preferably educational quality.

Finally, the paper has demonstrated the importance of research which attends not only to cultural capital (Davies & Rizk, 2018), but to the intersections of Bourdieu's conceptual triad of habitus, capital and field, when considering the arms race in supplementary education. Specifically, the paper illuminates how similar parental dispositions, diverse capitals and an uneven field reproduce classed and racialised inequality through tuition consumption practices. Cultural capital matters as parents' relative knowledge of available options, educational confidence and sense of entitlement disproportionately filters the working class and/or racialised minorities towards group tuition. Social capital crosscuts this, as existing classed and racialised networks reproduce inequality as they yield recommendations for different services. Economic capital is crucial in differentiating tuition users' experiences, as relative ability to pay disproportionately filters middle-class children into more expensive individual tuition. Moreover, it influences choice within those categories (e.g., more expensive national-chain group tuition versus cheaper local group provision; more costly teacher-tutor versus lower-priced student-tutor). The field is centrally implicated in the deployment of these intersecting capitals. Nationally, parents are responsibilised for their children's outcomes in an overstretched state system. Locally, differences in the field between tuition hot or cold spots (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023) mould parents' capacity to choose in this underregulated marketplace (Bray, 2025; Kirby, 2016). In conceptual terms, the research not only showcases the importance of considering diverse capitals, alongside a grounded interpretation of the field, in globally variegated tuition markets; its specific parental narratives about the complexities of tuition consumption also put paid to the neoliberal imaginary that suggests choice may simply be secured through the market (Snee & Devine, 2018). This signifies that conceptualisations of supplementary education as an arms race between those included and excluded from tuition markets must be reframed, as participation in market choice also reproduces inequalities between consumers.

In policy terms, recognition that market provision is a hotbed of inequality for consumers presents a conundrum. Developments like the now defunct National Tutoring Service temporarily provided tuition to help some previously excluded to catch up after COVID-19 (Cullinane & Montacute, 2023; Lynch et al., 2024), but this service did not tackle inequality within the commercial sector, even as it legitimated market provision. Policies to limit tuition markets (Choi & Cho, 2016) may have similarly contradictory outcomes: action may hurt less-privileged families (by cutting access to visible high-street services) but leave more affluent groups untouched (as domesticated one-to-one tuition cannot be curtailed). Greater regulation could have benefits, notably for safeguarding, but cannot be fully effective in an industry that can operate in the shadows (Bray & Hajar, 2023). The irony, in policy terms, is that the most effective answer to inequalities revealed here within the supplementary education market (as well as between those included in and excluded from services) is to end the tuition arms race through provision of better-funded state education.

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