

BOOK REVIEW

Researching Private Supplementary Tutoring: Methodological Lessons from Diverse Cultures. By Mark Bray, Ora Kwo and Boris Jokic (Eds.) (2015), 292pp. ISBN: 9789881424136, Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.

This book is the latest in a series covering the phenomenon of private tutoring. Previous books have discussed the phenomenon and its implications for policy makers, however as the introductory chapter highlights, less is known about the research methodologies involved in studying private tutoring. Hence, this book is the first of its kind on research methodologies in the study of private tutoring. The book had its origins in a 2014 Colloquium hosted by the Comparative Education Research Centre at The University of Hong Kong, and contains five chapters written by Colloquium participants who report on their attempts to adapt research instruments developed in Hong Kong for use in their own countries. The editors mention that the term ‘diverse cultures’ in the book title refers not only to variations of cultures within and across national boundaries, but also to diverse research cultures. They also claim that the collection of chapters in the book is by no means comprehensive either geographically or methodologically.

The first three chapters focus on quantitative research instruments. Chapter one reports on the collection of data on shadow education in Georgia during two large-scale international studies – Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) – in 2011. Among the questions raised are the difficulty in ensuring that questions are worded in an accurate and age-specific manner, as well as if research ethics are universal or subject to variations across individual countries. In chapter two, Kenyathulla analyses the dilemmas she faced in enlisting government’s support and involvement in questionnaire distribution. In addition, she echoes the point made in chapter one about the need for questionnaire items to reflect socio-cultural factors in particular national contexts.

The next four chapters discuss qualitative research methodologies. Jokic highlights the difficulties in conducting cross-national research on private tutoring in Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia and Georgia. Prime among these was the need to ensure common understanding of research concepts and design elements among a diverse cross-national team. The intensive communication had trade-offs in terms of budgetary strains and a slower pace of work. Yung’s case study of a large Hong Kong tutorial centre offers several lessons for researchers: seeking participants’ informed consent; the ethics of offering incentives to recruit participants; managing the balance between familiarity and distance in participant-researcher relationships; the pros and cons of insider versus outsider researcher status; and ensuring participants’ data confidentiality and anonymity.

Chapter eight is the first of four chapters in a section dealing with mixed research methods. Bray and Kwo led a research team studying Hong Kong teachers’ and students’ perceptions of private tutoring. Their team encountered challenges in sampling and in matching questionnaire and interview data for individual students. Another challenge was the difficulty of getting students and teachers to be candid in their responses owing to the sensitivity of private tutoring.

The final two chapters sum up key lessons learnt from the previous chapters. Liu considers major issues that emerged during the adaptation of the original research instrument for use in other countries. These included the adaptation of questionnaire items for reasons such as varying

socio-cultural contexts and researcher agendas, as well as differing target respondents. Seemingly mundane issues such as questionnaire layout, question format and questionnaire administration are crucial in establishing a meaningful basis for comparability. Bray and Kwo point out that private supplementary tutoring takes on diverse forms in different contexts. Researchers therefore need extreme clarity in their definitions and parameters. The authors also encourage the use of multi disciplinary lens in the analysis of private tutoring. Other lessons include the importance of researcher identity and the dilemmas involved in research ethics.

This book fills a crucial gap in research knowledge about methodological issues facing researchers exploring the worldwide phenomenon of private tutoring. It is indeed impressive for the editors to have assembled a cross-national collection of chapters that focus on a variety of research methods. Every chapter provides helpful lessons and points the way forward for future research on private tutoring.

Jason Tan
National Institute of Education, Singapore