

The Tutoring Epidemic

Kemi Jona, Ph.D

May 15, 2007

Last Monday at 6pm I had an hour to kill before picking up my kids from their karate class. I decided to go sit in the café at the local Borders bookstore to find a quiet place to do some work. As I pulled out my laptop and got busy, I began to realize that the Borders café wasn't quiet at all. Looking around, I saw the tables around me were filled with students working on their math homework with tutors. I counted at least 3 tutors holding court at their respective tables—all of them talking noisily away.

Since work was now out of the question, I began to listen in on these conversations (not that difficult given the decibel level). These weren't middle school kids wrestling with lowest common denominators. These were high school kids working on Calculus and figuring out asymptotes.

When 6:30 rolled around, it became clear that these tutoring sessions were regular weekly affairs. "See you next Monday," said the tutor as the kid stuffed the 10 lb Calc textbook into his backpack. Then, to my surprise, the kid sitting at the next table got up and took a seat at the tutor's table. Apparently, this tutor had kids stacked up in holding patterns at adjacent tables like airplanes coming in for landings at O'Hare.

Now, I can understand that when some children struggle with math, getting them a tutor can be a tremendous help in bolstering their skills and self-confidence. My daughter had a wonderful math tutor in 4th grade. But, why did these all bright kids need extra help with an advanced math class? Moreover, they were not at all concerned about having other kids see them working with a tutor – this is clearly an accepted practice nowadays.

The real kicker came when, listening to the tutor at the next table, I realized that he knew all of the teachers at the kid's school by name and by teaching style. He was a teacher at that school too!

As I closed up my laptop and headed for the car, I realized this apparently run-of-the-mill scene at Borders raised some important questions about educational policy, school reform, and our national obsession with testing and accountability.

Specifically:

- Why do people equate “coverage” with better education? We have now created a school system where we insist teachers “cover” more and more topics? When your child says “I learned about President Lincoln today” that usually means they heard the teacher say the words. The end result of all this is that teachers must move through the required curriculum so quickly that students don’t have time to learn anything in depth (think AP courses here).
- Are schools so broken that smart, committed parents would rather solve the educational problem by paying for tutors rather than demand change in the classroom? Do we all really believe that an acceptable form of instruction during the school day is a teacher lecturing for 45 minutes while students madly scribble notes and struggle for understanding?
- Do the schools and teachers (at least in the well-off suburban area this Borders was in) feel that the pressure is off since parents will make up for any shortcomings in student learning by hiring tutors for their kids?
- Doesn’t it bother these parents to be shelling out \$50-100 per hour per week (and that’s only for 1 subject – I hope these kids aren’t struggling in all their classes!) on top of the teacher salaries they pay from their five-figure annual property tax bill?
- How will the standardized tests mandated by Bush’s No Child Left Behind program measure the true effectiveness of the schools in these areas when so much of the teaching is happening after school at Borders? Who is really being held accountable here?
- What would happen to all the so-called “failing schools” in the Chicago Public School system (and other urban or rural districts serving poorer neighborhoods) if their students had access to the same top-notch private tutors after school as the kids sitting next to me at Borders?
- And, perhaps most cynically, are teachers facing a conflict of interest when they know that any lack of clarity in the classroom (where they make maybe \$25 or \$30/hr) can land them tutoring gigs after school at Borders for 2 or 3 times as much?

Something doesn’t add up here. Maybe it’s time I got a tutor.