

A Question of Values



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How much tutoring goes on and who participates in it may not depend that much on what's happening inside schools: it's a reflection of the social and cultural attitudes outside of school. Ultimately, whether these investments of time and money in a particular aspect of education are worthwhile comes down to values.

To those in Norway, which has one of the highest college graduation rates in the world, spending so much time in test-preparation would seem ludicrous; and allowing it to go on so inequitably would be seen as irresponsible.

But in Singapore, where students perform strongly on international tests, many might feel that regardless of family income and circumstances, the failure to provide tutoring, homework assistance, and other supports outside of school borders on child abuse. (This partly explains why test-prep books take up huge sections of bookstores and are sold at street corner magazine stands as well).

To sort out the question of value and values, we need to make more visible how we spend our resources on education. As an analogy, consider a bank my sister gave my children for keeping their allowance. That bank has three clear plastic columns, one for money to spend, one for money to save, and one for money to give away. What if we had something like that to track investments in education?



The "Text and Assessment Ville" section in a bookstore in Singapore.

For every hour and every hundred dollars spent developing the basic skills students need to succeed on standardized tests, pass college-entrance exams and reach other short-term learning outcomes, we could invest another hour and another hundred dollars helping students develop the interests, expertise, and higher order abilities needed to become successful and responsible citizens in the long-term. Then we could devote another hour and another hundred dollars making sure that every child has the same short and long-term learning opportunities.

Whether we're talking about schooling, tutoring or other forms of supplementary education, we need to keep asking ourselves, are the children spending their time in the best possible way?

