The Success of Celebrity Tutors: Causes and Implications

Ernest CHU
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Introduction

Celebrity tutors have become a major force in shaping the education scene of Asia, especially of Hong Kong (Ng, 2009; Sharma, 2012), and their thriving existence raises the question: what value do they add to students’ education? Numerous explanations have been synthesised by journalists, critics and academics, and this paper will address some of these viewpoints through the perspective of educational psychology. To explore this issue, the paper first provides a brief overview of the current scene of cram schools in Hong Kong, followed by exploring the motivation of celebrity tutors and their tutees with elements of motivational theories of learning. Then, based on the discussion on motivation, the paper will infer and analyse common pedagogical techniques used in cram schools. Finally, the paper will evaluate the weaknesses of Hong Kong’s secondary education system based on the areas which the cram schools have attempted to address.

Before any further discussion, we must make clear the definition of celebrity tutors. Whilst private tuition is common in Hong Kong, much separates the regular private tutors from the celebrity tutors, and thus it is important to distinguish the two. Although there is no official definition of a celebrity tutor, the general consensus is that celebrity tutors package and advertise themselves as superstars and their cram schools are highly standardised and oriented towards helping students cope with public examinations (Sharma, 2012) by allegedly cramming students with information. This paper will use the terms “celebrity tutors” and “cram schools” interchangeably, depending on the context.

The cram school phenomenon, although not new, requires the increasing attention of educational psychologists due to its growing scale and influence on the students’ learning experience and the education system. In 2006, the Government of Hong Kong has estimated that 34% of Hong Kong students receive supplementary education outside of regular class (Bray, 2009). Moreover, the influence of cram schools may be even more far-reaching than private tutoring due to its ability to capture a wide variety of students because celebrity tutors are able to cater for students
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from less affluent families by providing inexpensive mass tutorials (Sharma, 2012). Hence, the celebrity tutors’ teaching principles can affect students’ perception and attitude towards learning, which will have “far-reaching economic, social and educational implications” (Kwok, 2001).

As regards the methodology of this paper, numerous secondary sources will form the bulk of the information necessary to facilitate discussion. Unfortunately, despite the massive impact which cram schools have, the subject has not been rigorously and systematically studied (Kwok, 2001; Liu, 2012). Some academic studies on cram schools in Hong Kong (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Kwok, 2001) have taken sociological and economic perspectives; but as insightful as these perspectives are, it is equally important to focus on the psychological aspects of the actual cram school experience, and such is the ultimate goal of this paper.

To assist with the psychological analysis, this paper will also gather information from several questionnaires conducted by the author as a primary source of evidence, attached as an appendix at the end of this paper. Some questions in the questionnaire are based on the Motivating Instructional Contexts Inventory (MICI) framework utilised by Lam, Pak and Ma (2007). It is important to recognise the fact that, due to the small sample size of the questionnaire, the primary sources will not be able to support conclusions developed in this paper authoritatively. Nevertheless, this paper should be able to suggest areas of concern, which will hopefully serve as an indicator of where further research would be valuable.

Motivation

Allegedly, advertising and marketing greatly contribute to cram schools’ reputations (Lai, 2012). Hence, it is important to first assess the marketing strategies utilised by celebrity tutors, in order to understand the underlying motives of the tutors and, more importantly, their implications. Celebrity tutors’ marketing is focussed on two aspects (which will be the backbone of the analysis):

1. To help students obtain high grades
2. To create a glamorous image for the tutors
The Quest for Good Grades

The first aspect establishes the fact that celebrity tutors base their success, and inadvertently the success of their tutees, on quantitative results. This is also empirically implied by Bray and Kwok (2003), who observed that demand for tuitions were higher when nearer to examination periods. Such evidence suggests that celebrity tutors appeal to students’ “desire to gain recognition from others and to earn good grades” (Slavin, 2012, p. 295), which fits the definition of performance goals.

The negative consequences of performance goals are well-documented. Encouragement of performance goals may adversely affect the learning experience of students, and education should instead be based on learning goals. Shih’s study on Taiwanese students argues that performance-oriented learning will cause students to learn less than students who are motivated by learning goals (as cited in Slavin, 2012, p. 296). Midgley and Urdan (2001) furthers the argument by claiming that performance goals will induce students with low grades to “learn helplessness” and self-handicapping themselves – a symptom of self-serving biases (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2008). Therefore, performance goals have far-reaching negative consequences not only on students’ learning experience, but also on their self-esteem.

But are celebrity tutors to blame for performance-oriented learning? Evidence from Liu (2012) and Chen and Lu (2009) indicates that cram schools are, in fact, successful in helping students attain better grades and become academically more successful. Furthermore, most respondents of the questionnaire agree that celebrity tutors have boosted their confidence in their academic abilities (Appendix I). This would suggest that cram schools can be a means to aid students’ performance and self-esteem, as opposed to causing them in the first place.

Nevertheless, one must be cautious when crediting celebrity tutors for their “remedies”. The evidence clearly suggests that celebrity tutors have simply recognised the problems created by performance goals and profiting from them, instead of attempting to correct the mind-set of students. Essentially, the root of the underlying problem has not been addressed – students continue to strive to be winners, and celebrity tutors strive to turn students into winners.
The problem with performance goals is exacerbated by peer pressure. Both the questionnaire results and academic literature (Watkins, 2009) have documented that fierce competition amongst peers compel students to aim for academic excellence. The questionnaire results clearly indicate that students do not wish to lose out and to be disadvantaged by the rigorous examination preparations provided by celebrity tutors.

However, there is also evidence that learning goals are not dominated by performance goals. Studies cited by Watkins (2009) shows that, despite the tiring competition faced by Hong Kong students, the students have shown evidence of intrinsic motivation and the application of learning goals in their studies. Watkins also criticises the bipolar nature of the strict performance versus learning goals approach, claiming that this approach may not be suitable in collectivist cultures inherent in Hong Kong, and group-oriented goals should too be considered. Lam et al. (2007) also suggest that caution must be taken when applying motivational theories developed in the West to Hong Kong. In addition, a study by Urdan and Maehr shows that performance and learning goals may both hold simultaneously (as cited in Watkins, 2005). Whether or not cram schools will change the status quo, however, remains to be seen.

Therefore, summarising the different perspectives, the implication of students’ goal orientations is not absolutely clear. It is difficult to determine with confidence whether performance goals are overshadowing learning goals, or whether they exist simultaneously. It is, however, certain than celebrity tutors’ encouragement of performance goals may detrimentally contribute to the education system in the long term.

The Glamour of Celebrity Tutors
The glamour of celebrity tutors have not received much attention of educational psychologists, perhaps because it appears to be more of a marketing and business tool, and have very little educational implications. The opinions of people, such as Lai (2012), make it clear that the celebrity status of the tutors is readily dismissed as superficial, or even accused of insulting the notion of education. The questionnaire responses also reflect that students think little of the attractiveness of the advertisements and ignore the tutors’ physical attractiveness. Thus, there appears to be little reason to analyse this phenomenon from the educational psychologist’s perspective.
Yet, the importance of the celebrity tutors’ glamour does perhaps have some implication in educational psychology. According to Richard Eng, a celebrity tutor of English, his makeover appeals to the students and “increase[s] their interest to attend… classes” (Ng, 2009). By appearing more attractive, or at least less boring, students may enjoy classes more and be encouraged to attend classes. However, it is unclear how significant the tutors’ appearances are to the students’ learning experience, nor whether they will serve as distractions rather than help the purpose of teaching. The questionnaire results suggest that students consider grades to be a more important factor. Richard Eng, too, concedes this fact, indicating that “if there was no examination in Hong Kong, no matter what I say or look like, [students] would not come to [him]”. Hence, the ultimate motivator is still the promise of good grades.

Marketing tutors as celebrities, however, may reduce the value, principle and notion of education down to superficiality, as these advertisements appeal to the consumerist nature of students, which Bray (2001) describes as the corruption of education. There is currently no strong evidence of such a trend, but it needs to be considered, because this trend would imply that student motivation will become increasingly extrinsic. Although such extrinsic motivation can be useful in the short term, educators should strive towards intrinsic motivation after extrinsically motivating students (Long, Wood, Littleton, Passenger & Sheehy, 2011).

Learning Experience and Outcome

Whilst each celebrity tutor have their own teaching styles and persona, it is clear from the discussion above on motivation that their ultimate goal is to boost students’ grades. Therefore, the objective of celebrity tutors would ultimately be to help students learn or memorise subject contents relevant to examinations and to improve students’ examination techniques, both which may serve to compromise the students’ learning experience and psychological well-being (Chen & Lu, 2009). On the other hand, the opinions of the questionnaire respondents are mostly mixed in the regard of teaching style. However, most respondents agree that the celebrity tutors are interesting and engaging, and that their main focus is on examination techniques.

Unfortunately, the questionnaire results do not reflect the reasons why celebrity tutors are interesting and engaging. This could be down to the tutors’ eloquence, ability to vary the pace of
teaching and maintaining the classroom momentum by rehearsals (Slavin, 2012). The questionnaire results, however, does show some evidence of celebrity tutors’ use of media as teaching aid, and to help students understand the real-life relevance of the subjects in question. The ability to apply knowledge is especially important for assimilation and accommodation, as implied by Piagetian theory (Long et al., 2011).

It is well-documented in studies (Chen & Lu, 2009; Liu, 2012) that cram schools have positive effects on academic achievement, and this is consistent with the questionnaire results. However, cram schools are also viewed negatively due to the emphasis on massed practice and emphasis on memorisation, rather than understanding (Kwok, 2001). The questionnaire results show some elements of memorisation and rote learning, as part of preparing students for examinations. However, the questionnaire results also show that students are able to understand the subjects of study better after attending cram schools.

In fact, the debate on the relationship between memory and reasoning skills is on-going. Heit and Hayes believe that “the lines between different cognitive activities are often blurry” (as cited in Heit, Rotello & Hayes, 2012). Although research shows that the two variables are positively correlated (Heit et al., 2012), causal relationship cannot be established easily. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the relationship between memory and reasoning in the discussion of celebrity tutors, in order to have some idea of the implications of memory-based learning.

Two hypotheses dominated the memory-reasoning debate: memory necessity and constructivism (Reyna & Brainerd, 1995). According to Reyna and Brainerd, theories based on memory necessity, such as the information processing model, theorises that memory is a prerequisite to reasoning, as memory is important to the construction of schemata. On the other hand, whilst Piagetian constructivists views memory as crucial, they also believe that “memory is subordinated to reasoning”, and therefore it is more important to emphasise reasoning as part of the accommodation and assimilation processes.

The conflicting hypotheses nevertheless highlights an important aspect of celebrity tutors’ teaching style – memory and reasoning work together, and it is in the celebrity tutors’ interest to promote the two simultaneously. The questionnaire results clearly show that celebrity tutors
enable students to simultaneously memorise and understand the subject contents better, which in fact suggests that the tutors may be using some correct pedagogical techniques in cram schools, contrary to popular beliefs. However, most respondents of the questionnaire also feel that cram schools do not help improve their critical-thinking skills. Nations’ (2007) study suggests that the constructivist approach to learning may help deal with such manipulation of the “infinite knowledge” the modern-day student is exposed to.

Implications
The above analyses suggest that cram schools are not the cause, but the symptom of a problem, yet this symptom may serve to worsen the problem. Students’ motivation to achieve performance goals comes mainly from the deeply-rooted influences of Chinese culture (Li, 2009; Watkins, 2009) and increasing competitiveness between students (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Watkins, 2009).

The problem presented by the inherent Chinese culture is multi-faceted. Li (2009) identifies five “virtues” of the Chinese learner: resolve, diligence, hardship, perseverance and concentration. Hong Kong students may be influenced by these ideals, and as such the motivation to perform well academically cannot be easily classified as intrinsic or extrinsic. Furthermore, parents’ conditioning and reinforcing of cultural ideals may also increase their effects (Liu, 2012). The extent to which culture affects students’ motivation, however, remains to be gauged (Li, 2009).

As regards the increasing competitiveness between students, this may be perhaps down to economic reasons and social status (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Liu, 2009). These factors are inherently materialistic, and consequent of the competitive nature of the examination system inherent in Hong Kong. As Garrison (2007) indicates, standardised tests are often used as a measure of social value, despite the fact that it is inherently unfair to measure each students’ capabilities, let alone value, based on such examinations.

So it is clear that celebrity tutors is a free-market solution to make up for the missing elements in Hong Kong’s education. It is not the fault of celebrity tutors that they attract so much demand in the first place; celebrity tutors are the solution for poor quality of instruction in regular schools, albeit superficial, and may serve to exacerbate the issue. Again, it is difficult to resolve these
issues as the underlying problem is much greater than the scope of cram schools and celebrity tutors.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs paints an accurate, yet pessimistic, picture of the education scene of Hong Kong. Maslow has classified two types of needs: deficiency needs and growth needs (as cited in Slavin, 2012). Aggregating all the above analyses, it is clear that the purpose of celebrity tutors and, to a large extent, education as a whole, is to satisfy the basic deficiency needs. As important as these deficiency needs are, should education not inspire students intrinsically to achieve such goals, and aspire to guide people towards fulfilling their growth needs? As such, educators should design the education system with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in mind.

Similarly, Horn (2007) argues that education should serve a diverse purpose, and should also satisfy philosophical and psychological purposes in addition to functional purposes. Pragmatically these goals are indeed difficult to achieve, which is another issue that requires greater thought.

In conclusion, celebrity tutors are the signs and symptoms of an education system based on superficial principles. The flaws of the inherent education system are widely known, but certainly difficult to eradicate. Therefore, it is difficult to place the blame on celebrity tutors, who may be providing a solution to students and temporarily alleviate the distorted system. It is, therefore, important for educators to better establish students’ intrinsic motivation (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser & Davis-Kean, 2006; Slavin, 2012), and to look into the psychological well-being of students (Chen & Lu, 2009). Educators must not allow celebrity tutors’ influence to further encourage the distorted system. Once these issues have been resolved, the celebrity tutors, who are free agents in the market, will adjust their services accordingly to fit the needs of students.

Word count: 2744 (excluding titles and subtitles)
References


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Appendix I – Questionnaire Results

Questionnaire sample size: 6

Part I – Enrolment

1) I have chosen to participate in celebrity tutors’ class because…

The examinations are coming soon and I need help revising

I would like to get a head start and prepare in advance for the coming school year

I have lots of spare time during my holidays and do not want to forget what I have learnt

My parents want me to attend extra tuition

My regular school classes do not cover the course content adequately

My peers and classmates are enrolling, and I do not want to miss out

I am falling behind in class and would like to catch up.

I am curious about the subject(s) of study and would like to learn more.

I would like to obtain a good grade in my public examinations.
2) Please indicate the level of importance of the following factors when deciding which class to enrol in.

![Bar Chart]

- Success of tutors (seen from previous records/statistics)
- Experience / maturity of tutors
- Price of classes
- Popularity (number of students currently enrolling)
- Physical attractiveness
- Advertising / presentation
- Reputation of tutor amongst peers and classmates

Legend:
- Not Important
- Somewhat unimportant
- Neutral
- Somewhat important
- Important
Part II – Learning Experience

3) The tutors…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>Is able to address my specific problems, despite teaching large classes</td>
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<td>Place strong emphasis on practising past paper questions</td>
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<td>Place strong emphasis on examination techniques / how to interpret and answer examination questions</td>
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<td>Help students understand the concepts behind the facts</td>
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<td>Teach areas which are not relevant to the public examinations</td>
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<td>Explain the usefulness/relevance of what they have taught in/to real life</td>
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<td>Are interesting and engaging</td>
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Part III – Outcomes

4) After attending the classes…

- **My critical-thinking skills have improved**
- **I will be able to use what I have learned in real life**
- **I will be able to recall what I have learned in the long term (i.e. after the examinations are over)**
- **It is easier to remember the contents for my examination**
- **I have greater confidence in my academic abilities**
- **I am able to catch up with regular school classes**
- **I have become more interested in the subject**
- **I have a better appreciation of the subject**
- **I am able to understand the subject better**
- **I am able to answer the examination questions more effectively, efficiently and accurately**

![Bar Chart](chart.png)

Legend:
- **Strongly disagree**
- **Disagree**
- **Neutral**
- **Agree**
- **Strongly agree**
Part IV – Comparisons

5) Compared with regular school teachers, the celebrity tutors…

![Comparison chart]

- Are better at addressing problems which I have
- Are more interesting to listen to
- Make the contents easier to understand
- Make the contents easier to memorise
- Are able to cover more content

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree
Appendix II – Questionnaire Sample

Questionnaire on Celebrity Tutors in Hong Kong

Dear participant,

I am currently a year three student of the University of Hong Kong, taking the undergraduate course PSYC0035 – Introduction to Educational Psychology (course instructor: Dr Lam Shui-fong). As part of the course requirement, I have chosen to write about celebrity tutors (please see definition below) in Hong Kong. Specifically, I would like to have a better understanding of the reasons why students choose to enroll in classes taught by celebrity tutors, the learning experience in these classes, and how they compare with regular school classes.

Although there is no official definition of a celebrity tutor, the general consensus is that celebrity tutors (“補習天王”) package and advertise themselves with “the prestige and visibility of film stars” (“Hong Kong’s celebrity tutors”, 2012), and their tutorial classes are highly standardised and oriented towards helping students cope with public examinations (Sharma, 2012).

I would appreciate it if you could kindly fill in this questionnaire. Since the questionnaire is for a short paper, it will not be onerous. Also, please be assured that your responses will be kept anonymous and with the strictest confidentiality.

If you have any questions regarding this questionnaire or the paper, please do not hesitate to contact me (ernhmchu@hku.hk) or my course tutor, Mr AU Fong Wing Justin (justyno@hku.hk).

Thank you very much for your help!

Regards,

Ernest H. M. CHU
General Notes

When completing the questionnaire, please consider your overall experience. If you have taken classes offered by more than one tutor, please aggregate your experiences as best as possible. If you feel unable to do so, please base your responses on your best experience.

Unless otherwise stated, “tutors” refer to the celebrity tutors as (loosely) defined on the previous page, and “classes” refer to the tutorial classes run by the celebrity tutors.

Part I – Enrolment

1) Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below by marking the appropriate box.

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree  \( \rightarrow \) 5 = Strongly agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have chosen to participate in celebrity tutors’ class because…</th>
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<td>I would like to obtain a good grade in my public examinations.</td>
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<td>I am curious about the subject(s) of study and would like to learn more.</td>
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<td>My peers and classmates are enrolling, and I do not want to miss out</td>
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2) Please indicate the level of importance of the following factors when deciding which class to enrol in.

Scale: 1 = Not important at all  \( \rightarrow \) 5 = Very important

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Part II – Learning Experience

3) Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below by marking the appropriate box.

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree → 5 = Strongly agree

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<tr>
<td>Is able to address my specific problems, despite teaching large classes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Part III – Outcomes

4) Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below by marking the appropriate box.

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree → 5 = Strongly agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After attending the classes…</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am able to answer the examination questions more effectively, efficiently and accurately</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am able to understand the subject better</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have a better appreciation of the subject</td>
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<td>I have become more interested in the subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am able to catch up with regular school classes</td>
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<td>I have greater confidence in my academic abilities</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It is easier to remember the contents for my examination
I will be able to recall what I have learned in the long term (i.e. after the examinations are over)
I will be able to use what I have learned in real life
My critical-thinking skills have improved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compared with regular school teachers, the celebrity tutors…</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are able to cover more content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make the contents easier to memorise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make the contents easier to understand</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Are more interesting to listen to</td>
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<td>Are better at addressing problems which I have</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Part IV – Comparisons**

5) Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below by marking the appropriate box.

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree → 5 = Strongly agree

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**References**
