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# Exploring private supplementary tutoring in Finnish general upper secondary education

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## ABSTRACT

We examine private supplementary tutoring within the context of Finnish general upper secondary education. Specifically, we focus on profit-driven private preparatory course providers who cater to individual students and their families, aiming to improve applicants' prospects of gaining access to higher education. We examine this during a time when a recent education policy reform has renewed seeking admission to higher education in Finland, consequently impacting the private supplementary tutoring market associated with it. We draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus as a starting point for discussing the complex dynamics between public and private actors in the field of Finnish general upper secondary education and the role of economic capital. The ethnographic data analyzed for this paper consist of field notes and interviews ( $n = 58$ ) from three general upper secondary schools, produced in 2019-2020. The study aims to investigate the negotiations between the public and private spheres of education within the everyday practices of Finnish public upper secondary education during an educational policy reform. We conclude that the fields of public and private education are not separate but rather intertwined, and they can become blurred in the everyday life of schools through both temporal and spatial overlaps.

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## Introduction

The privatization of education has been of interest in recent educational research worldwide. Studies have explored a range of aspects of privatization, including the role of education policies (Cone & Brøgger, 2020, Ball, 2009), processes of privatization and commercialization in the context of public education (Hogan & Thompson, 2020), and questions of social justice and economic inequalities (Entrich, 2020). In the Nordic context, research has focused in particular on the emerging conflict between privatization and welfare state ideals of egalitarian education (Dovemark et al., 2018). In an international comparison, the emergence of private educational providers in Finland has been rather modest (Bray, 2021, Dovemark et al., 2018). Still, a recent notion from Finland is the strengthening role and expanding variation in the provision of private supplementary tutoring related to admission to higher education (Kosunen, 2023, Mertanen & Brunila, 2023, Kosunen et al., 2022a).

In this article, we explore a part of the *private provision of education* in Finnish public education. Specifically, we focus on Finnish private, profit-making educational providers, whose primary form of provision is supplementary tutoring, and whose customers are individual students and their families

(Jokila et al., 2021; see also Ireson & Rushforth, 2011). These providers sell courses and study materials with the goal of improving applicants' prospects of gaining admission to higher education. The aim of this article is to explore and analyse the role of these private preparatory course providers within Finnish general upper secondary schools during a time when an educational policy reform has changed the conditions for seeking admission to higher education in Finland, consequently impacting the supplementary tutoring market associated with it (Kosunen et al., 2022a). Additionally, our study aims to investigate the negotiations between the public and private spheres of education within the everyday practices of Finnish public upper secondary education. We address the following research questions: 1) *What is the role of private preparatory courses in the everyday life of Finnish general upper secondary schools, and how does this contribute to the accumulation of field-specific capital?* and 2) *How are the public and private spheres negotiated in the everyday practices of general upper secondary schools?*

In their study, Jokila et al. (2021) described Finnish private preparatory courses as commercialization of entrance exam preparation, a process

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through which private education creates its market by supplementing (not replacing) public education. The Finnish case of private preparatory courses could also be identified as a form of *shadow education*, which is a widely used concept in recent research (see e.g. Bray, 2022; Gupta, 2022; Mikhaylova, 2022; Entrich, 2020). The metaphor of shadow education refers to supplementary education or tutoring that takes place outside formal education (Zhang & Bray, 2020; see also Stevenson & Baker, 1992). While shadow education has faced criticism for its limitations in capturing the diversity and rapid changes within private supplementary tutoring (Luo & Chan, 2022, Jobér, 2020, Smyth, 2008), the metaphor aptly captures how private supplementary tutoring exists alongside public education, mimicking its form like a shadow while remaining distinct from the formal education system (Zhang & Bray, 2020, Bray, 2011, Stevenson & Baker, 1992). In other words, private supplementary tutoring is dependent on the formal education that it is ‘shadowing’, and changes to the form and content of public education, such as educational policy reforms, will also impact its shadow.

In the context of the higher education admission reform in Finland, there has been a notable shift in the emphasis on student admissions. This shift has seen a partial replacement of traditional entrance exams with a greater emphasis on applicants’ previous academic performance (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). Currently, more than 50% of new higher education students are selected based on their matriculation examination grades, which refers to standardized nationwide tests taken before the completing general upper secondary education. There is, however, discipline-based variation in these amounts in universities. In addition to the emphasis on earlier school achievement, the reform emphasized the admission of those without earlier study-position in higher education and introduced a centralized and nation-wide admission procedure (see Karhunen et al. 2021). Before the reform the admission was by a vast majority discipline- and institution-based, which resulted in multiple entrance examinations for candidates. It appears that since the reform conducted in 2014–2020, private preparatory course providers are now catering both higher education applicants preparing for entrance exams and general upper secondary school students, shifting the focus to an earlier stage in the education system (see Kosunen et al., 2022a). Besides the reform, another characteristic related to admission to Finnish higher education is its competitive nature: each year, fewer than half of all applicants are admitted (Education Statistics Finland, 2023a, Isopahkala-Bouret, 2020). In the most competitive university disciplines, such as medicine and law, the acceptance rate can be even lower than 5% (Education Statistics Finland, 2023b). This is

one aspect fuelling the expansion of the private preparatory course market, and according to recent research in Finland, one-third of general upper secondary school students had taken, or were contemplating taking, private preparatory courses (Kupiainen et al. 2023, p. 132). However, research on private preparatory courses in Finland is still rather sparse, especially in the context of upper secondary education.

In this article, we draw on Bourdieu’s (1984, 1996) concepts of field, capital, and habitus as a starting point for discussing the complex dynamics between public and private actors in the field of Finnish general upper secondary education, and the role of economic capital during the time of the reform. In addition to Bourdieu, we apply Ball and Youdell’s (2008) theorizations of privatization within public education and public-private partnerships. Ball and Youdell (ibid.) use the term public-private partnership to refer to private actors operating within public education and working in collaboration with public education actors. Ball and Youdell’s conceptualization allow for an examination of the diverse roles of privatization and how it shapes the field of public education, creating openings for possible further privatization (see also Verger & Moschetti, 2016). As has been discussed in previous studies, public and private education should not be seen as counterforces but as intertwined actors within the field of education (Gutiérrez et al. 2023; Mikhaylova, 2022; Cone & Brøgger, 2020; Mockler et al., 2020; also in Finland Laaksonen & Jokila, 2023; Seppänen et al., 2020). Additionally, even though the functioning of the private supplementary tutoring is dependent on the autonomy of public education it shadows, it can still have influence on public education, work in collaboration with it and shape the way we think about and act upon educational matters, and what we understand public education to be (Lubienski, Yemini & Maxwell, 2022, Forsberg et al., 2021, Ball & Youdell, 2008).

To empirically examine the role of private preparatory course providers in general upper secondary schools, we have analysed ethnographic research data produced in three general upper secondary schools in the Helsinki metropolitan area during the years 2019–2020. For this article, we analysed the role of private preparatory course providers specially in guidance counselling and the admission-seeking process for higher education during a time of policy reform.

The article is structured as follows: first, we will discuss the theoretical concepts used in the article. Subsequently, we discuss private supplementary tutoring within the Finnish education system. After presenting our data and methodology, we discuss results, beginning by discussing public-private partnerships and negotiations formed around admission

seeking to higher education. Our exploration then extends to the role of private supplementary tutoring in the everyday life of general upper secondary schools, examining the different forms of private supplementary tutoring and how the public and private spheres are negotiated and blurred. In the conclusion, we discuss findings in relation to previous research, particularly focusing on the overlaps and interconnections of public and private in the educational context.

### **Intertwined public and private actors within the field of Finnish education**

According to Bourdieu (1984, 1996), the social world comprises interconnected fields, such as education, where hierarchical positions are determined by the volume and combination of capital (social, cultural, and economic) one possesses and can mobilize, forming a habitus. Habitus refers to internalized dispositions that guide actions in social fields (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu, the field of education is a structured space of hierarchical positions, some dominant and some subordinate, and the level of autonomy within the field tends to vary (Bourdieu, 2020; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; see also Naidoo, Shankar & Veer, 2011). However, the nature of a field is not fixed; instead, it is a dynamic and temporally constructed space that exerts forces on all who enter, initially excluding some and directing others into different positions (see also Hilgers and Mangez, 2015, Naidoo et al., 2011). In this article, we focus on the field of education, particularly general upper secondary education (and the transition to higher education). Although private preparatory course providers operate outside of the formal (public) education system, they can still contribute to shaping the logic of the field of education and the accumulation of field-specific capital (see Candido et al. 2023). In this case, for example, the private preparatory course market enables the mobilization of private economic capital when seeking admission to higher education within a tuition-free public education system (Kosunen, 2018, 2023).

In the Finnish context, publicness in education typically pertains to the fact that comprehensive, secondary, and tertiary education are free of charge for all Finnish citizens. Additionally, public education is predominantly financed by the state (Dovemark et al., 2018). By our definition, the field of general upper secondary schools is a locally constructed school market consisting of non-tuition-fee-paying academic upper secondary schools.<sup>1</sup> Upper secondary education is regulated by the state, which provides permissions for establishing new schools. Serving approximately half of each age cohort, general upper secondary education selects its students based

on their grades from comprehensive school. Before graduating, the students all take the same standardized test called the matriculation examination.<sup>2</sup> Each year, general upper secondary schools are ranked in a public ranking based on either their admission thresholds or their matriculation examination results. In this sense, general upper secondary education is a setting for the production of seemingly meritocratic rank orders, which may nonetheless be subject to embedded social and economic hierarchies.

In her thesis exploring the relationship between public and private education in Russia, Mikhaylova (2022, p. 19) notes how the term ‘shadow education’ emphasizes the interconnectedness between public and private education, but also positions private education as subordinate and inferior to public education (see Bray, 2021, Kim & Jung, 2019). In Finland, public and private education are traditionally discussed separately, with Finnish public education primarily defining itself by providing education as a public good and having more autonomy than private education, which operates in its shadow and is not part of the formal education system (Kosunen, 2023). However, public education does not have full autonomy either and is subject to regulation and education policy. Furthermore, within a field, institutions such as general upper secondary schools are hierarchically positioned in terms of their prestige and social structure, and can therefore respond to privatization differently (see e.g. Forsberg, 2018). Previous research has shown that institutions in more vulnerable positions are more likely to be affected by market forces (Naidoo et al., 2011), and that schools from different positions in the field encounter private preparatory course providers and their effects on the field differently (Martin & Gregg, 2015). Institutions with high academic status, and which are highly ranked in the hierarchy within the field, therefore have a motive to resist change and protect the academic principles structuring the field to conserve their privileged position (Bourdieu, 1996; see also Naidoo et al., 2011, Wacquant, 2007).

Some decades ago, Ball and Youdell (2008) explored the characteristics of private education providers and privatization within public education systems. They introduced the concept of hidden privatization and public-private partnerships to capture the diverse mechanisms of privatization within public education. They described how a public-private partnership brings the values and methods of private actors into the public field and presents them as solutions to any problems that the public field might have (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 35; cf. Forsberg et al., 2021). In Finland, where the education system is predominantly publicly funded, and private education primarily consists of private supplementary tutoring, examining public-private

partnerships provides a valuable analytical perspective. Following the conceptualizations of hidden privatization, we do not understand public-private partnership as being solely based on the direct investment of economic capital, but rather as a wider form of partnership through which abstract ideas and culture can be realized.<sup>3</sup> As Hallsén and Karlsson (2019) and Forsberg et al. (2021) have noted in the Swedish context, private education should not only be described in relation to economic capital, but also in relation to educational policies and changes in what we understand public education to mean (see also Lubienski et al., 2022, Ball & Youdell, 2008). Rowe (2020, p. 184) has adequately noted how publicly funded education systems promoting fairness and equality could easily be presented as dichotomic counterforces to private education; however, their relationship is far more complex and there are also educational inequalities and frictions within public education systems (see also Hogan, Thompson & Mockler, 2022). This notion of the boundaries between public and private education being intertwined and blurred is nothing new and has been widely recognized in recent research, which examines the intertwined relationships between public and private actors within the field of education (e.g. Gutiérrez et al., 2023, Laaksonen & Jokila, 2023, Jobér, 2023, 2020, Cone & Brøgger, 2020, Mockler et al., 2020, Seppänen et al., 2020).

### The private preparatory course market in the Finnish context

Recent Finnish research indicates, that there is a growing influence of the private sector that has affected the public education system at all levels (Seppänen et al., 2023, Paananen et al., 2019, Kosunen, 2018). The emergence of private supplementary tutoring can be understood as a phenomenon that is rooted in the historical construction of each national educational context, such as the rise of privatization in the 2000s (see Dovemark et al., 2018). However, private supplementary tutoring is not a new phenomenon in Finland. Since the 1970s, access to higher education in Finland has seen the emergence of a market for private supplementary tutoring, largely consisting of private preparatory courses (Kosunen, 2018). Access to Finnish higher education today is highly competitive (Education Statistics Finland, 2023a, 2023b), and has applied a *numerus clausus* principle in its admission process since the 1960s (Rinne et al., 2008). This competitive setting seems to have created marketing opportunities for private preparatory course providers selling private supplementary tutoring to prepare students for higher education admissions (Ahola et al., 2017).

Today, there is a wide range of private preparatory courses available: independent study materials, online courses, classroom courses, and private tuition. Prices range from 0 to 7,700 euros, with the most expensive courses entailing intensive tutoring for entrance examinations for status disciplines such as medicine, while free courses are in the minority and are a political reaction to the emergence of this private market (Kosunen et al., 2022a, pp. 70–71). The type of course attended (physical, online) has not been shown to have a major impact on admission success (Ahola et al., 2018). However, research has indicated that many of the young people applying for status disciplines have taken private preparatory courses to enhance their chances of gaining admission over other candidates (Kupiainen et al., 2023; Kosunen, 2018, p. 174; Ahola et al., 2017; see also Bray, 2021; Smyth, 2009). As these courses require money for the course fees, as well as time, students enrolled on private preparatory courses typically come from affluent backgrounds (Saari, Inkinen & Jokila, 2021, Ahola et al., 2016). Thus, for economic reasons, not all applicants have equal access to the courses (Saari et al., 2021). Besides economic distinctions, the market for private supplementary tutoring can contribute to the ways in which prospective applicants rate their chances of being admitted to higher education if they are unable to invest money in supplementary tutoring (Kosunen, 2018). In this article, we analyse private preparatory courses in the context of recent education policy reform, which seem to have shifted the private preparatory course market towards younger students, who study in general upper secondary education.

### Materials and methods

The data analysed for this article were produced during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three general upper secondary schools in 2019–2020. In using ethnography as a methodology, our aim was to examine everyday life at the schools and the role of private preparatory courses and negotiations between the public and private spheres in the everyday practices at the schools.

The three schools selected were located in different parts of the Helsinki metropolitan area, with entrance thresholds ranging from the highest quartile, through the middle quartiles, to the lowest quartile based on entrance quotas. In Finnish general upper secondary schools, the entrance limit for the school is based on students' grade point average in comprehensive school. *School 1* is in the highest quartile of entrance thresholds. *School 2* also has a relatively high entrance limit, but not as high as *School 1*. Most students at both *School 1* and *School 2* came from (upper-)middle class backgrounds. The entrance threshold for *School*

3 is in the lowest quartile and there were more students with migrant and working-class backgrounds than at the other two schools, whose student population mainly comprised white middle-class students. We aimed to choose three different schools, and hence they have different academic merits and are located in different areas in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

The data consist of observations conducted on 75 school days, and of student interviews ( $n = 43$ , 16–19 age range) and educator interviews ( $n = 15$ ).<sup>4</sup> Special emphasis was placed on following the work of guidance counsellors, guidance counselling courses, and individual meetings with students. We also followed several of the courses provided and took part in other activities at the schools, such as information events for graduates, visits from higher education institutions, and the schools' open-door events, as well as other everyday activities at each school, such as breaks, lunches and other school events. In the student interviews, we discussed the interviewees' educational history and prospects, experiences of study counselling, admission-seeking strategies, educational choices, and current life situation. Research permissions and active consent to participate in the study were obtained accordingly. All names and other identifying information have been pseudonymised.

The field notes and interview data were subjected to theoretically driven reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, we read through the field notes and interview transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data and to map out episodes and interview talk related to private supplementary tutoring (Lappalainen, 2007). Subsequently, we applied open coding using Atlas.ti, aligning our analysis with our research questions. We began with descriptive codes (e.g. 'private preparatory course providers visiting the school'), which were then refined into more interpretive and analytical codes (e.g. 'public-private partnership'), through which recurring themes and connections were identified (Terry et al., 2017, Braun & Clarke, 2019). At the macro level, our analytical focus was on higher education student admission reform and construction of the fields of public general upper secondary education and private education, more specifically private supplementary tutoring, which is the form how private education in the context of higher education admission in Finland is primarily organized. At the micro level, we focused on the everyday practices at the schools and the emergence of private supplementary tutoring. When coding more selectively and formulating analytical codes, we employed Bourdieu's theoretical tools to construct an understanding of the emergence of private preparatory courses in general upper secondary schools and the accumulation of field-specific (economic)

capital. In conjunction with this, we applied Ball and Youdell's (2008) theorizations of hidden privatization in public education and public-private partnerships, focusing in particular on the various practices and materializations of privatization emerging in the schools. The analytical section that follows is a result of several read-throughs of the data, engaging in a dialogue between theory and empirical findings, enriched by the discussions we shared while working on this article, and situated within a wider context (see Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### Private education providers' entry into public schools: negotiations around higher education admission-seeking

Previous research has illustrated how private education providers operate both *in schools* and *outside schools* (Mikhaylova, 2022). In the data analysed for this paper, we observed how the private preparatory course providers actively reached out to the schools. They invited the guidance counsellors to participate in marketing events that they organized outside the schools, provided marketing materials to be presented and distributed at the schools, and offered to visit the schools in person. In our analysis, we focused in particular on encounters that took place in the schools. As private preparatory course providers are not part of the formal public education system in Finland, they needed to negotiate their access to the schools. The decision to allow or reject these public-private partnerships was in the hands of the schools and the guidance counsellors, who acted as gatekeepers.

In two of our three schools (Schools 2 and 3), the guidance counsellors told us that they allowed private preparatory course providers to come and deliver a lesson due to their having so much knowledge about higher education admissions, as it is their business (cf. Verger & Moschetti, 2016). We observed how both guidance counsellors and private preparatory course providers expressed a shared interest in students' transitions from upper secondary education to higher education, and noted that they possessed similar expertise. The importance of having up-to-date knowledge was particularly evident in 2020, which coincided with the first year of implementing the higher education student admission reform (Laaksonen & Jokila, 2023). In the field note extract below, a private preparatory course provider is visiting one of the schools on a guidance counselling course. The visit was framed as an information event (*jatko-opintoinfo* in Finnish). The private preparatory course provider is delivering information about matriculation examinations and higher education entrance examinations from their own perspective:

A preparatory course provider is giving a presentation. He is standing in front of the class wearing a T-shirt stating the name of the company he works for. He is showing PowerPoint slides to the students.

Preparatory course provider: Let's imagine a situation in which you are all accepted to higher education via the matriculation examination certificate next year. I would still argue that 80% of you will be also preparing for the entrance examinations, because there is this structural thing, that you will not know whether you are going to get accepted prior to the entrance exams [...] And when you are preparing for those there is this one thing you should know: the types of questions in the entrance examination differ from the ones in the matriculation examinations, so you have to have a different mindset in order to succeed. (Field notes 2020, School 2)

The private preparatory course provider explains that there is an overlap in time between gaining entry to higher education via the matriculation examination certificate and the entrance examination. As gaining access to higher education is competitive and uncertain, students might seek admission via both the matriculation examination certificate and the entrance examination. In the field note above, the preparatory course provider takes the position of an expert on seeking admission to higher education, and the guidance counsellor, an expert within public education, did not contradict this. By giving a presentation, the private preparatory course provider demonstrated their expertise and how they have knowledge that can be used to 'decode the puzzle of access to the field of higher education' in a competitive situation (cf. Forsberg et al., 2021). Gaining access to lesson time in public schools seemed to legitimize and validate private preparatory courses due to the authority that public education exercises. These encounters can be seen as public-private partnerships (see Ball & Youdell, 2008) and were observed in different forms in all three schools.

At the beginning of the presentation, the private preparatory course provider stated that 'today we are not going to talk about private preparatory courses', and hence advertising such courses was more of a hidden, unspoken agenda. During the presentation, the private preparatory course provider gave the students a written assignment, which involved filling in a form. The form asked the students to indicate their interests in a maximum of three disciplines, their year of study, their contact information, and their opinion of the presentation. While the course provider did not explicitly claim that filling in this information was mandatory, nor did they state that it was voluntary. The private preparatory course provider mentioned that by receiving this information, they could send the students 'more information about the disciplines'. In our analysis, this was a key moment

emphasizing the fact that the class was not just an information event for further studies, but also a means for the course provider to explain for an hour why their courses, particularly for university entrance, would be essential, and then to collect the prospective customers' contact information. Our analysis also indicated that it was not clear to the students, nor discussed with them, whether such presentations given by private preparatory course providers were marketing events or part of their mandatory studies in upper secondary school. The lessons that the private preparatory course providers delivered in the field schools were part of mandatory lessons in guidance counselling courses. In encounters like this, the distinction between public and private was in some cases blurred for the students (i.e. the customers).

For the guidance counsellors, the distinction between public and private was considered to be clear, as one of the guidance counsellors indicated:

Linda Maria: Do private preparatory course providers visit the school?

Guidance counsellor: Yes, in the guidance counselling course [you are participating in] they come and present what's new when trying to get into higher education. They talk about seeking admission to university and different disciplines. We usually start our course with that. So yes, we have been allowing them to participate in the course.

But yeah, after their presentation they give out leaflets, collect the students' contact information and get in touch with them later on. And of course, they also organise all sorts of things for guidance counsellors. But you need to use your common sense with these. They don't guarantee admission, but you might get some help and a boost. [from them] (Guidance counsellor, interview, School 2)

The guidance counsellor reflects the relationship between public and private education and public-private partnerships: the field of public education enjoys greater autonomy and can either allow or deny private preparatory course providers access to public school space. The guidance counsellor also reflects on the private preparatory course providers' agenda in marketing their business. However, as described above, the guidance counsellor considered that the students would still benefit from these presentations and viewed them as positive supplements to their course programme. At one of our schools, the lack of resourcing of guidance counselling was evident. Uncertainties with regard to how to guide the students during the reform were evident in all three schools, but particularly in the school lacking permanent and formally qualified guidance counselling staff. In the latter case, the staff did not question the presence of private supplementary tutoring companies on the course.

At one of the schools (School 1), the guidance counsellors explained that they have a critical approach to private preparatory course providers and did not allow them to attend their courses, in contrast to the other two schools. Compared to School 3, this school benefited from having permanent, qualified guidance counselling staff. School 1 also had the highest entrance threshold, and possibly had more resources to regulate private preparatory course providers attending the school space (see Bourdieu, 1996). As the school has a reputation for high academic achievement, and as most of the students had high grades and came from affluent family backgrounds, they expressed a sense of entitlement. Access to the standard of teaching provided on private preparatory courses contradicted this habitus as such courses were not exclusive but open to everyone willing to invest the necessary economic capital. In the field note extract below, the guidance counsellor in School 1 encourages the students to think about their relationship with private preparatory courses after the topic was brought up during a guidance counselling lesson:

Guidance counsellor: So, I thought that maybe we should discuss these private preparatory courses a bit. You can have different opinions about them, and students often come to me asking whether they should or should not take these courses. Let's have a short discussion in small groups: What do you think about preparatory courses? Do you think they are necessary, can you succeed without them, and should you take one even during your general upper secondary studies? (Field notes 2019, School 1)

The guidance counsellor took the position of an expert in the field of public education and made the distinction between public and private educational providers, also encouraging the students to reflect critically on private preparatory courses. Still, the guidance counsellors at all three schools emphasized the complexity of the private preparatory course issue. They made it clear that the decision to enrol on such courses was up to the students themselves, as the courses were not part of the formal education system and hence the decision did not fall within the school's remit. This illustrates how private supplementary tutoring operates primarily outside the field of public education in private spaces, and is seen as a 'private decision' made by students and their families as customers (Kosunen & Haltia, 2018, Naidoo et al., 2011, Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

### **Changes in the private preparatory course market: from tutoring after to tutoring during secondary education**

When examining the private preparatory courses, we considered the recent higher education student

admission reform. Prior to the reform, private preparatory courses were an option for students and families to invest in after general upper secondary education, to improve students' chances of gaining admission to higher education. Since the reform, economic capital can now be increasingly invested at an earlier stage by investing in private supplementary tutoring targeting matriculation examinations (see Kosunen et al., 2022a). As a result, economic capital has gained more value in public general upper secondary education as a means of securing high grades and admission to higher education (Bourdieu, 1996). This shift in the acquisition of field-specific capital can have implications for the way in which admission-seeking and capital mobilization are constructed within tuition-free public education. Mia, one of the students planning to pay for preparatory courses before her matriculation examination, is an example of this shift:

I want to receive extra preparation covering the whole curriculum. When you're studying, you sometimes learn some things more thoroughly than others, but since the matriculation examination covers the whole curriculum, I really need to learn everything to succeed. In a preparatory course, you can also get more personalised coaching from the teachers. (Mia, interview, School 1)

Mia's description of her situation reveals that achieving good grades is not the only desirable outcome of participating in courses preparing students for the matriculation examination. Like many other students, Mia uses economic capital to gain access to more individual support and structure in her studies (see also Forsberg et al., 2021, Hallsén & Karlsson, 2019). In addition to individual support and structure, Mia also refers to the need for mechanisms of distinction to succeed in a competitive situation (see Bray, 2021, p. 11, 23). What Mia described was typical of students who participated in matriculation examination preparation courses designed to help them 'play the game' of seeking admission to higher education via their matriculation examination grades. As mobilizing economic capital to pay for the course was required, most of the students at the three schools who took these courses also had a habitus similar to Mia's: they came from affluent backgrounds, had parents who were willing to fund the preparatory course, and they wanted to gain access to higher education, often to compete in popular university disciplines such as medicine or law. In Mia's case, she was planning to apply for a medical school. Previous research has shown that students with a habitus similar to Mia's are more likely to gain access to higher education as they come from more affluent families with parents that have higher education degrees themselves (Nori et al., 2021). It is

therefore difficult to determine the role of private supplementary tutoring in gaining access to higher education. However, these courses do offer an opportunity to mobilize private economic capital within a tuition-free education system as part of an admission-seeking strategy to enter higher education. Private supplementary tutoring is organized outside the formal public education system and its fields, but the private economic capital mobilized is aimed at gaining access to the formal, public field of higher education, thereby linking it to the field of public education.

Our analysis illustrates how the reform has brought private preparatory course providers (and thus private economic capital) more closely into the everyday life of schools. When it came to private preparatory courses for matriculation examinations and entrance exams, the range of courses and other forms of support we detected in the everyday life of the schools was diverse. Besides traditional, class-based face-to-face courses, there were online study materials, self-help study guides, and mobile phone applications that the students could use. For matriculation examination preparation courses, the range was somewhat wider than for entrance exam preparation courses. Along with ‘preparation for the matriculation examination’, there were also materials largely designed to ‘support individual learning during general upper secondary education courses’, thereby supplementing public general upper secondary education. Temporarily, private preparatory course link to ideas of ‘more efficient’ use of time in studying (see Gupta, 2022), which is an attribute not that typically linked to public education but rather to private education. In the case of preparation courses, the role of the economic investment required was evident, with students describing both courses as private, profit-making education. In everyday life, students in public education supplemented their learning by taking private courses on the side. Leo describes how he is preparing for the matriculation examination:

Well, for example, in mathematics I have this preparatory course for my matriculation exam at school. Besides that, I also have this preparatory course that I’m taking in my free time. And then I’m going to do some independent studying as well. The same goes for psychology. Then for Finnish, I have a preparatory course here at school. (Leo, interview, School 3)

Leo bases the distinction between public and private on whether he takes the courses during school hours or in his free time. When it comes to the course content, Leo draws no distinction between public education and private supplementary tutoring, as both would prepare him for the coming matriculation exam and would follow the national core curriculum.

During the interview, Leo later explained that the private preparatory course he mentioned was conducted in one of the general upper secondary schools in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Some upper secondary schools and/or school buildings are privately owned, which makes it spatially possible for private preparatory courses to be conducted there. There are many private actors involved in the day-to-day running of schools, covering facilities, cleaning services, school meals, and textbooks. Supplementary tutoring is not the only actor negotiating its position in relation to upper secondary education and the concrete school spaces. To some extent, this makes it easier for new commercial operators to position themselves as part of the operations in public schools, as other private operators are already present. However, the negotiation of the position seems relevant particularly when it is negotiated in relation to education and teaching (see Laaksonen & Jokila, 2023). Our analysis shows how conducting private supplementary tutoring in spaces used primarily for public education might suggest validation and link them to public education (cf. Hallsén, 2021). This may be particularly true when it comes to courses targeting students who are preparing for their matriculation examination because these ‘ME courses’ follow the same curricula as those adopted in public upper secondary education. Thus, public and private in education are not constructed as separate entities in the everyday life at school from the students’ perspective, even though they can be understood as part of different fields with different logics.

### **Diverse forms of private supplementary tutoring blurring the ‘public’ and ‘private’**

The students who were interviewed explained that they had not spent any money on private supplementary tutoring, but later in the interview, the same students mentioned that they had bought a mobile phone app with an online course to prepare for their matriculation examination. Mobile phone applications were described by the students as something that ‘many people just do and find useful’, rather than directly preparing them for competitive examinations. According to our field notes, some students even contrasted them with preparatory courses by saying ‘I am not going to buy a preparatory course; I just have this app on my phone’. Online courses and materials were less expensive than traditional preparatory courses, as they cost only tens of euros, and many of the students in the two higher-achieving schools said in the interviews that they used them. In the third, less advantaged school (School 3), the apps were not mentioned in the

interviews, and neither were other forms of private supplementary tutoring: many of these young people were struggling to scrape enough money together even for the basic course books at school, so buying supplementary courses was irrelevant as they were unaffordable.<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, most of the mobile phone applications aim to prepare students for upper secondary school studies, not for higher education entrance exams, and focus temporarily on the time that the students spend in upper secondary education. Spatially, these mobile phone apps were not bound to the school buildings but operated seamlessly in both public and private spaces, as the students carried them in their pockets between home and school.

Mobile phone applications seem to have opened up a new dimension for private supplementary education: the materials within these applications are designed and marketed to function more as a support measure and extra training alongside courses organized by upper secondary schools, and in this form, they have a remedial and supplementary role (for shadow education and the role of technology see Zhang and Bray, 2020). In the Finnish context, the private preparatory course companies mimic public education, align their marketing strategies with its message, and operate alongside the public (for Sweden, see Forsberg et al., 2021). The students said that they used study materials that were provided to them for free, and that followed the official, public curricula used in general upper secondary school courses. These courses were described as a positive supplement by the students. Sometimes they were even used during the lessons or promoted by the teachers, as Regina describes:

Regina: There's a site that offers free tutoring in mathematics. I've used it a lot; you can watch free tutoring videos there. I've also heard that many other students are using it. I've found it very useful.

Linda Maria: Where did you hear about it?

Regina: The teacher mentioned it and I've also seen some ads, heard about it from my friends, and read about private tutoring in the newspapers. I think it's super useful, especially since it follows the same book series and curriculum that we follow here at school, so there's all kinds of material that you can use in order to practise, like tests and so on. I think the materials are very good. (Regina, interview, School 2)

Like Regina, many of the students described how they used these free materials during their courses at general upper secondary school. Tellingly, free courses and learning materials provided by private preparatory course providers were not always recognized as private in everyday school life when the students talked about and used them. Our analysis suggests that the boundaries between public and private can

duly become blurred, particularly when private supplementary tutoring is provided in a form that is free of charge. Moreover, as the applications were not explicitly marketed as preparatory courses but as 'support for studying', the students did not consider them to be private preparatory course materials. In day-to-day lessons at school, the students had become accustomed to using a range of applications and computer software, some of which were officially recommended by the school, which might also create more openings for private educational providers when it comes to personal use not related to school. As the materials mimicked the national core curriculum for general upper secondary education, it seemed relatively easy for them to be positioned alongside the public education. In our field notes, we observed how the private preparatory course providers actively contacted the schools, offering to deliver advertisements and to visit the schools to talk about the applications.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the Bourdieusian framework and prior research on the privatization of education (e.g. Ball & Youdell, 2008), we analysed the role of private preparatory courses in the everyday life of Finnish general upper secondary schools, and the role of economic capital in relation to it. We also examined the extent to which public-private partnerships (Ball & Youdell, 2008) were established in the everyday relations between private preparatory course providers and public general upper secondary education, particularly in relation to guidance counselling and admission-seeking to higher education during a time of policy reform.

According to our analysis, private preparatory courses have now extended their market to support general studies during upper secondary education and preparation courses for the matriculation examination. The blurring of the public and private is conducted through spatial practices in accessing the secondary schools through lessons and mobile phone apps and pedagogically through mimicking the public curriculum (see Forsberg et al., 2021). This could potentially create a broader foothold for private actors within the education system. In addition, our analysis notes how mimicking public education with the aim of supplementing it seemed relatively easy, and providing free materials made it even easier to find openings in the field of public education. In the case of the latter, the role of private economic capital remains more hidden. This can bring new practices into everyday life in the field, as private supplementary tutoring takes a more general and longer-term approach to market support for general upper secondary education studies (see Bray, 2022). In this sense, the role of private economic capital becomes

more blurred while blurring the public and private at the same time, as they both offer similar curricula (cf. Forsberg et al., 2021).

Our results illustrate how private education providers needed to negotiate their access to public education in order to gain access to general upper secondary schools. The entry of private preparatory course providers into the public school space was one of the mechanisms we identified as blurring the boundaries between public and private in education. The schools were autonomous in allowing the private actors into their premises and there were differences between schools in the extent to which they allowed public-private partnerships in terms of teaching. For example, in the case of a private preparatory course provider giving a free lesson in a school, the role of economic capital was not clearly visible, even though it was present when the course providers marketed their courses as a by-product of the free lesson. Apparent mimicking of public education took place (Forsberg et al., 2021). Schools, and specifically the guidance counsellors in our data, played a crucial role as gatekeepers in this context, as we witnessed institutional differences in navigating the contact with the private supplementary tutoring companies (see also Martin & Gregg, 2015).

Our analysis illustrates how, particularly during a time of policy reform and thus of high uncertainty, there was a need for information about admission to higher education, which led to temporary public-private partnerships forming around the knowledge needed to enter higher education (Ball & Youdell, 2008). A temporal change was observed, with private preparatory course providers were willing to become increasingly involved in general upper secondary education to prepare students for the matriculation examination. In the everyday life of schools, preparatory courses for the matriculation examination served a broader purpose compared to preparatory courses for entrance exams, as they not only prepared students for exams but also provided support for their studying in general upper secondary education on their tutoring courses. This could be interpreted as courses both supplementing (Jokila et al., 2021) the studies in general upper secondary education, but also blurring the boundaries between public and private fields of education (see also Kosunen, 2023) through spatial and temporal practices.

In addition to traditional preparatory courses, we detected a market for mobile phone applications and other online study materials, which were provided either free of charge or at relatively low prices (tens of euros). These mobile phone applications were positioned effortlessly in the everyday life of general upper secondary schools and, in most cases, students

did not recognize them as private preparatory courses but ‘just as a study aid’ instead. These applications became part of the everyday learning for these young people at school and had both temporal and spatial dimensions, as they were used during the school day. Unlike traditional courses, the mobile phone applications were not tied to a physical location or person, which allowed them to be freely and easily integrated into everyday-life in public education. Also, their relatively low price made them accessible to many more than traditional supplementary courses would have been. Thereby using money on the apps was ‘usual’ in the everyday-life among many, which in the larger context of Finnish education system can be considered exceptional (see Dovemark et al., 2018).

In conclusion, our analysis illustrates the overlaps and interconnections between public and private (see e.g. Mikhaylova, 2022), which may create challenges for students in discerning the limits between public and private in education (regardless of whether such distinctions are relevant to them). Moreover, in our analysis private preparatory course providers are active agents who contest and mediate the role of economic capital accumulation in the public education system, and in the process of seeking admission to higher education. In one sense, this development contradicts the basic assumptions about the egalitarian nature of Finnish public education, which is officially tuition-free: the invisibility and perceived ordinariness of public-private-partnerships and use of private money in our analysis is revealing this contradiction

## Notes

1. None of the schools charge tuition fees (despite some being administratively private, fully state-subsidized independent schools), and the system is largely state-regulated and funded.
2. Apart from international baccalaureate schools, which are relatively few.
3. Despite the partnership with public education, private supplementary tutoring is not part of the formal education system and therefore in this article, we regard it as a form of shadow education.
4. Linda Maria Laaksonen conducted fieldwork and interviews at schools 1 and 2, while Sonja Kosunen conducted them at school 3.
5. Since 2021, upper secondary education has been free in Finland including e.g. textbooks (Oppivelvollisuuslaki [Compulsory Education Act] 2020/1214).

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