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Francesca Casertano & Daury Jansen

Abstract: Despite growing concerns about private tutoring (PT) potentially amplifying inequalities between low- and high- socio-economic status (SES) students, scant attention has been paid to the phenomenon of PT in European countries marked by persistent educational inequalities – such as Italy. Our mixed-methods study delves into the relationship between students' achievement, socio-economic status (SES), and PT usage among 15,628 respondents to the PISA 2012 questionnaire. Results reveal that higher SES (OR = 1.37, $p < .001$), and lower achievement (OR = 0.99, $p < .001$) increase the likelihood of using PT. We also interviewed 21 high school students on the forms of, and motives behind their use of PT. Our comprehensive dataset not only provides a preliminary understanding of PT use in Italy but also goes beyond a purely comparative approach, underscoring the necessity of a more nuanced exploration of the roles PT fulfills across various countries.

Keywords: private tutoring, students, achievement, socio-economic status

Introduction

The phenomenon of private tutoring (PT) is often referred to as shadow education because, much like a shadow, its content mimics that of regular education (Bray, 1999). The use of PT is deeply rooted in the educational tradition of certain cultures influenced by Confucianism, especially in Asian countries such as Japan (Entrich, 2017) and South Korea (Hajar, 2018; Kim & Jung, 2019; Jansen et al., 2020). Lately, private tutoring has become increasingly established in parts of Europe as well (Jansen et al., 2021, 2024). Patterns of tutoring vary widely across Europe, with Northern European countries being the ones in which families recur to PT services the least, and families from Southern European countries, especially Greece and Cyprus, using PT the most (Bray, 2011; Bray et al., 2014, Zhang & Bray, 2020). Despite the overall growth in the use of PT in South European countries, in the author's knowledge, little is known about how PT manifests in the Italian context.

Growing participation rates in PT raise several questions on the implications of PT for the reproduction of educational inequalities - conceptualized as the difference in educational opportunities between students with different social origins (Byun et al., 2018). Being a fee-based service, the access of students to PT is conditional on the family's economic capital (Park et al., 2016). Therefore, PT can become a way through which already existing performance gaps between low- and high-SES students are widened. In fact, in Italy, factors such as students' SES, migration background, and gender, already affect students' academic performance, and their likelihood to access academically oriented tracks (Azzolini & Barone, 2013; Cordini & De Angelis, 2021; Pensiero et al., 2019). These same factors are also likely to shape access to out-of-school academic support (Kim & Jung, 2019; Park et al., 2016), such as private tutoring, particularly in the Italian context where public support services are limited (Pensiero et al., 2019). Our study, situated in the Italian secondary school context, is therefore particularly suited to examining how differences in access to and use of educational resources extend beyond school through private tutoring, and to identifying mechanisms that may also be at play in other contexts.

So far, Italy has been included as a country in comparative studies conducting a secondary analysis of data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; e.g., Byun et al., 2018; Entrich, 2018); nonetheless, to the authors' knowledge, no study has yet used PISA data to explore with greater depth the use of PT in Italy. Regardless, quantitative research does not fit the purpose of exploring students' motives and aspirations behind the decision to follow tutoring, which in turn can be done by using qualitative research approaches (Park et al., 2016). Therefore, we conducted a mixed-method study in order to overcome the limitations of a purely quantitative study.

We applied a convergent mixed-method design, in which the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research are performed independently and brought together in the overall interpretation of the findings (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The present mixed-method study aims to investigate the role of private tutoring in Italian upper secondary education, exploring differences among students with different social origins and achievement, while accounting for the experiences and perspectives of the students themselves. We formulated the following research questions:

1. To what extent does students' SES relate to their likelihood of attending PT?
2. To what extent does students' achievement relate to their likelihood of attending PT?
3. Does students' SES moderate the relationship between students' achievement, and their use of PT?
4. What are the forms of, and motives behind the use of PT in Italy?

In the quantitative part of the study, we investigated the first three research questions, while we explored the fourth research question in the qualitative part of the study.

Students' SES and PT

Bray defined PT according to its supplementary, academic, and private nature (1999, p. 20). First, PT serves to supplement subjects and topics already studied in school. Then, the nature of the subjects covered during the tutoring is academic (e.g., language, mathematics, science, history). Finally, tutoring is private, meaning it is provided in exchange for a fee, paid by the student or by their family. Being a fee-based service, equal access to PT is not granted to all students.

Looking at private tutoring through the lens of social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), it can be understood as a resource through which high-SES families maintain and transmit their advantage to their children via education, thereby contributing to the persistence of social inequalities (Byun et al., 2018; Entrich, 2015, 2018; Jansen et al., 2021). Seen from this perspective, Gupta (2022) argues that private tutoring can be conceptualized as a form of capital exchange, in which high-SES families exchange their economic capital in order to enhance their offspring's cultural capital. In turn, the cultural capital accumulated through PT will possibly help them secure, in the long run, higher economic capital, (e.g., favoring access to desired job positions). Moreover, high-SES parents adopt parenting styles that may favor the intergenerational reproduction of their social status. Lareau (2003) posits that middle- and high-class families usually adopt the parenting style of 'concerted cultivation', consisting of including a series of extracurricular activities in their children's routines to foster their talents and abilities, which

helps with the reproduction of the family's social status. It has been theorized that PT is one of those extracurricular activities, used by parents to reproduce their class privilege and cultural capital through education (Park et al., 2016; Zwier et al., 2020). Differently, working-class parents tend to adopt a 'natural growth' parenting style. Their children's routines tend to be less structured than the ones of their middle- and high-class counterparts, and overall, less pressure is given to the children to attend those extracurricular activities, including PT (Lareau, 2003).

PT and Students' Achievement

Students access PT services at diverse levels of academic performance. Findings from Byun and colleagues (2018) showed that, in most geographical areas, including Western and Southern Europe, 15-years old students with relatively low academic achievement are more likely to access private tutoring than their high-achieving counterparts (Byun et al., 2018). This pattern has also been shown for younger students transitioning from primary to secondary education in Germany (Guill & Lintorf, 2019). Nonetheless, there are a few exceptions to this pattern of higher use of PT by students with relatively low-achievement, found mainly in Southeastern and Eastern Asian countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, where high-achieving students are more likely to access PT than their low-achieving counterparts.

Different Purposes Among Strata

SES may moderate the relationship between students' achievement and their use of PT, determining when families consider it worthwhile to invest in such services. High-SES families may enroll their children in PT regardless of academic performance, using it both to support low-achieving students and to maintain high achievement, thereby reinforcing existing social class advantages. In contrast, access to PT among low-SES students is more likely to be conditional on their scholastic performance (Guerrero, 2020). Those families may invest in PT primarily when it is perceived as necessary, such as when grades are low or insufficient, rather than to enhance already satisfactory performance. Thus, unlike high-SES families, low-SES families may be less likely to invest in PT when students are already performing well.

Forms of PT

Previous studies identified different forms of tutoring. PT services can differ in group size (one-on-one, small group, or classroom-based; Bray, 2011), modality (physical or online), and in tutoring provider (individuals or institutions; Zhang & Bray, 2020). More individual forms of PT, such as home-visit private tutoring, in which the tutor goes to the tutee's house, are often the most expensive, mainly accessed by middle-class families (Kim et al., 2018). According to the theory of effectively maintained inequality (EMI), high-SES

families use PT, especially highly individualized forms, to maintain their advantage by securing access to high-quality formal education, which is often contingent on students' academic performance or entrance tests (Entrich, 2018; Lucas, 2001; Lucas & Byrne, 2017). Accessing high-quality education leads to advantages for those students, such as better higher-paying jobs and increased social capital (Guerrero, 2020) which may, in turn, contribute to the intergenerational reproduction of class advantages. Research confirmed this pattern in certain countries, such as Japan (Entrich, 2017), and South Korea (Byun, 2014), with high-SES families selectively focusing on more individualized, and therefore more expensive, forms of PT (Entrich, 2018). On the other hand, less individualized forms of PT, such as group tutoring offered by tutoring institutes, are usually the least expensive and most accessible (Bray, 2011).

Motives Behind the Use of PT

Students may have various purposes for using PT, such as improving grades, learning better strategies for self-directed study, and preparing for high-stakes testing (Jansen et al., 2020). In prior research, achievement has often been used as a proxy for students' purposes (Entrich, 2018). Tutoring has a remedial purpose whenever students access it to remediate for their low scholastic performance, aiming to improve their grades (Bray et al., 2016; Park et al., 2016). Differently, when a student already performs well and aims to maintain or further improve it, tutoring serves an enrichment purpose (Bray et al., 2016; Park et al., 2016). Nonetheless, certain purposes may fall outside the remedial-enrichment binary. This categorization has been expanded by qualitative studies, which show that students also use PT for reasons not tied to achievement, such as engaging in social interactions with tutors and peers, and receiving guidance to structure their future career plans (Chan & Bray, 2014; Entrich, 2015; Jansen et al., 2020).

Methods. Quantitative Part of the Study

Data

The PISA 2012 wave best accounts for the private, academic, and supplementary nature of PT (Zhang & Bray, 2020). Specifically, we used data from the PISA 2012 students' and schools' questionnaires. The PISA student questionnaire has a rotated design: it is composed of three different forms, randomly assigned to the students within schools to ensure coverage of the content of the questionnaire (OECD, 2014). Two out of the three forms contained questions on PT, and they were administered to a subsample of 19,378 Italian students (Entrich, 2018; Woods et al., 2021). The information on the use of PT by students who did not receive the questionnaire is missing completely at random (MCAR). Removing MCAR does not affect the generalizability

of results, therefore we proceeded with listwise deletion (OECD, 2014). Out of the 19,378 students, complete observations were available for 17,193 of them, which was the final sample of the present study.

Measures. Dependent Variable

Shadow Education Use. PISA 2012 contains two items investigating the use of PT by students. The first item is about tutoring with a (private) tutor, and the second one is about tutoring with a commercial company. We decided to use the former variable to measure students' use of PT; nonetheless, this variable only partly accounts for the private nature of tutoring, not distinguishing between the use of paid and unpaid one-on-one tutoring (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014). Using this variable to measure students' use of shadow education, we account for the fact that it is not possible to precisely estimate the number of students attending paid tutoring. Moreover, the item investigates students' *frequency* of use of shadow education, asking how many times per week students worked with a personal tutor. Nonetheless, to answer the research questions it is necessary to investigate the *prevalence* of the use of private tutoring in the sample. Therefore, we created a binary variable, in which a value of 0 indicated that the student did not attend PT (on average, 0 hours of private tutoring per week), and 1 indicated that the student attended PT (on average, at least 1 hour of private tutoring per week).

Measures. Independent Variables

Student SES. Students' socio-economic status in the PISA assessment is measured by the index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS). The ESCS index is a composite score of higher parental occupational status (hisei), higher parental educational status (hisced), and household possessions (homepos), including items on material possessions (e.g., a car, a television), and cultural possessions (e.g., number of books at home).

Student Achievement. In PISA, students' achievement in mathematics, reading, and science is measured by five plausible values (PVs) in each subject, for a total of 15 plausible values. Internal consistency of the items was calculated using Cronbach's alpha by the PISA 2012 assessment (OECD, 2014). The internal consistency values in the Italian sample are $\alpha = .93$ for mathematics, $\alpha = .91$ for reading, and $\alpha = .91$ for science. Some studies decide to represent achievement by using PVs from only one of the three learning domains (see Zwier et al., 2020, which only used PVs in mathematics to assess students' performance). However, in line with Entrich (2018), we considered using a general achievement output to give a more accurate estimate of students' academic performance, rather than reducing students' achievement in one PVs domain. Therefore, to run models with an overall achievement variable, we fitted each model by multiply imputing 15 datasets – one for each PV, and we

obtained overall estimates by pooling together the 15 estimates of each model according to Rubin's rule.

Control Variables. In line with previous studies (e.g., Park et al., 2016), we controlled for students' gender (female = 1), school maintainer (public or private; private = 1), and school location (1 = village, 2 = small town, 3 = town, 4 = city, 5 = large city).

Analysis

For the secondary analyses of PISA 2012 data, we used the program R (R Core Team, 2022) and retrieved and imported the data into R through the EdSurvey package (Bailey et al., 2020). To account for the nested structure of the data, we fitted multilevel logistic regression models using the package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015). In the analysis, we accounted for the weights of the student samples. First, we fitted a measurement model in which students' SES and achievement predict their use of private tutoring while controlling for students' gender, school location, and school maintainer (Research questions 1 & 2). In conclusion, we tested if students' socio-economic status moderated the relationship between their achievement and use of PT (Research question 3).

Methods. Qualitative Part of the Study

Sample

To recruit participants, we used a two-level purposeful sampling strategy. First, we contacted 194 private and public schools located in the provinces of Milan and Monza & Brianza. The schools that did not reply to the first e-mail received a follow-up message one week later. In the end, nine schools agreed to participate in the study. All the institutes were publicly funded. In total, 56 students adhered to the study. The inclusion criteria were: 1) being aged between 14 and 16 years old; 2) having attended private tutoring during high school. One student did not match the inclusion criteria; therefore, we excluded her from the study. In total, we conducted 55 interviews. Out of them, we reached saturation after 21 interviews, which is the final sample size of the present qualitative study.

Procedure and Instruments

After receiving the approval of the Ethics Review Board (ERB), we went to each school and briefly presented the project to all 9th and 10th graders. 56 students contacted us to participate in the study and submitted the signed forms of informed consent. To ensure students felt comfortable sharing their experiences, each participant was met individually in a quiet space provided by the school, usually an empty classroom. First, participants were asked to fill in

a short demographic questionnaire to collect descriptive information on the SES. Specifically, based on the questionnaires by Bray and Kwo (2016), OECD (2014), and Silova and Bray (2006), we formulated four questions investigating parents' jobs and education, and the cultural capital of the family. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews, in which we asked the participants about their personal experiences with PT. We designed the interview guide by following the interview protocols developed by Bray and Kwo (2016), Bray and colleagues (2016), and Jansen and colleagues (2020).

Before conducting the interview, we piloted the instruments with two students (aged 18 and 17) who followed PT throughout high school, and who were not part of the sample in this study. After the pilot interviews, we introduced a wrap-up question in the interview guide, asking students about the effectiveness of the tutoring they received.

Reflection on Positionality and Power Imbalance

In reflecting on the topic of positionality (cf. Beebeejaun, 2022), the researcher conducting the interviews acknowledged being an insider (i.e., Italian), speaking the language and knowing the structure of the education system simplified recruiting participants, building relationships with the school personnel, and conducting interviews. Moreover, it was acknowledged that interviews risk further enhancing the power imbalance between researcher and interviewee, especially when working with young participants (Dixon, 2015). Therefore, we decided to use interviewing techniques that can smooth the power imbalance, such as asking participants questions about their personal and scholastic life (e.g., what is your favorite subject? Do you like going to school?) and engaging in self-disclosure, sharing personal experiences with high school and tutoring, explaining them why the interviewer could relate to their personal experiences (Dixon, 2015). Also, it was possible to rely on the interviewer's young age and on her status as a student to position herself closer to the interviewees and to be seen as a more understanding figure by them.

Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, we conducted thematic analysis by using the software Atlas.ti (Version 22.0.6.0). The use of thematic analysis suited the purpose of the research by giving a systematic method to find patterns of 'shared experiences' with PT among the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The codebook was developed using inductive and deductive coding. While transcribing the interviews, we started working on a first, deductive version of the codebook, developed before coding, based on the theoretical framework we adopted in the study. Then, when we started coding the interviews, we modified the codebook accordingly, mainly by adding codes on students' purposes behind their use of PT, and on forms of PT (for the codebook, see

the supplemental materials). To ensure reliability, the authors confronted the coding strategy over two interviews and discussed it until an agreement was reached.

Results: Quantitative Study

The final sample is composed of 15,628 students (49% female). Out of them, 10,855 do not follow PT, and 4,773 do. The data have a clustered structure, with students nested in schools (ICC=.28; Hedges & Hedberg, 2007). Therefore, we account for the hierarchical structure of the data by fitting multilevel logistic regression models.

Correlation Statistics

All the correlations are significant at p< .001 (Table 1). There is a weak negative correlation between students' achievement and their use of private tutoring (r= -.13), and weak positive correlations of achievement with ESCS and its subcomponents. School location also has a weak positive correlation with ESCS meaning that, as the size of the city in which the school is located increases, so does the students' socio-economic status. Moreover, students' achievement positively correlates with the school location, indicating that, when the size of the city increases, students' grades grow accordingly.

Table 1. Pearson's Correlations

	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1)	PT	1.00			
(2)	ESCS	.09 ***	1.00		
(3)	Achievement	-.13 ***	.29 ***	1.00	
(4)	School location	.04 ***	.16 ***	.11 ***	1.00

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05*

Note. For PT, I use the original continuous variable measuring the weekly number of hours that students invested in PT. Higher parental education and school location are categorical variables, but because they have at least five categories, they can be treated as continuous (Rhemtulla et al., 2012).

Research Question 1: To what extent does students' SES relate to their likelihood of attending PT?

In line with the hypothesis, ESCS significantly impacts students' use of PT: results show that, for each one-unit increase in students' ESCS, their probability of receiving tutoring increases by 1.372 times, keeping the other values constant (Table 2).

Research Question 2: To What Extent Does Students' Achievement Relate to their Likelihood of Attending PT?

Results show that low-achieving students are more likely to attend private tutoring than their high-achieving counterparts. For each one-unit increase in students' academic achievement, their odds of receiving PT significantly decrease by 0.991 times, while controlling for the other variables. Therefore, the findings confirm the hypothesis that students who have low achievement are more likely to recur to PT services.

Research Question 3: Does SES Moderate the Relationship Between Achievement and Use of PT?

Then, concerning the third research question, the interactive model does not fit the data significantly better than the additive model, $\chi^2(1) = 1.23$, $p = .278$. Moreover, the interactive effect is not statistically significant (OR = 1.000, $p < .890$). Therefore, the findings do not confirm the hypothesis that students' SES moderates the relationship between their academic performance and their use of private tutoring.

Table 2. Results of the Additive and Interactive Multilevel Logistic Regressions

	Additive model			Interactive model		
Variable	**OR**	**95% CI**	**p**	**OR**	**95% CI**	**p**
Achievement	0.99	[0.99; 0.99]	< .001	0.99	[0.99; 0.99]	< .001
ESCS	1.37	[1.34; 1.41]	< .001	1.35	[1.15; 1.60]	< .01
Male	1.04	[0.69; 1.58]	.856	1.04	[0.69; 1.58]	.857
Private school	0.77	[0.54; 1.10]	.150	0.77	[0.54; 1.10]	.151
Small town	0.98	[0.60; 1.58]	.920	0.98	[0.60; 1.58]	.922
Town	2.03	[1.27; 3.25]	< .01	2.03	[1.27; 3.25]	<.01
City	1.97	[1.21; 3.18]	< .01	1.97	[1.21; 3.20]	<.01
Large city	3.40	[1.78; 6.51]	< .001	3.41	[1.78; 6.52]	<.001
Achiev:ESCS	-	-	-	1.00	[1.00; 1.00]	.888

Note. OR = Odds Ratio. CI = Confidence Interval. Achiev:ESCS = interaction effect among students' achievement and ESCS.

Results: Qualitative Study

Exploration of the Motives Behind the Use of Private Tutoring

Most of the students mention that they use private tutoring for remedial

purposes. Those students mentioned struggling to understand a certain subject or topic, which is reflected by their grades, described by them as low or insufficient. Therefore, those students resort to tutoring to get a better understanding of the subject, and to improve their academic performance. Students using PT for remedial purposes often mention having proximal goals, such as reaching the end of the academic year without being held back, with or without grades above the sufficiency level. Chiara, who struggled with mathematics throughout her whole school career, aims not to receive an insufficient grade in mathematics by the end of the year.

> *Interviewer: I wanted to ask you, what is the goal that you aim to reach this year with math tutoring?*
> *Chiara: I want to reach a six [1] by the end of the year because I haven't gotten a sufficient grade in mathematics since 8th grade, and it is terrible. […] I think I'll reach the end of the year with a five and a half, and maybe then I will have all other subjects with high grades in all other subjects, maybe [the professor] can give me a six then. Honestly, this is my purpose, but also getting a six in a test because for me, to get a six in mathematics is the same as getting a 10.*

Moreover, six out of 21 students reported seeking tutoring during summer to remediate for the insufficient grade at the end of the academic year. In Italy, if students get an insufficient grade in one or more subjects by the end of the academic year, they must take a reparation exam in order to demonstrate they have sufficient knowledge in that subject (Parmigiani et al., 2019). If they pass the exam, they can access the following academic year; otherwise, they will be held back a year. Schools may offer optional remedial courses during the summer break to help students prepare for this reparation exam.

> *Giorgio: as early as last year, I was following English tutoring, and I took it right from the beginning of the year to the end of the year and even in the summer, since I had taken the "educational debt"[2].*

Throughout the interviews, we have been able to identify a unique form of remedial private tutoring, used by students specifically during the summer break to remediate for their insufficient grades through the reparation exam, and access the following academic year.

Remedial Purposes Often Go Hand in Hand with Other Purposes

Students' remedial purposes can coexist with other purposes, such as the compensatory purpose, which refers to students' use of PT to make up for perceived shortcomings in the school's provision, either due to a lack or low

[1] In Italy, grades range from one to 10. Grades below six are insufficient. Grades above six are sufficient.
[2] Translation of the Italian term "debito formativo", which is the insufficient grade at the end of the academic year.

quality of instruction. Marta elaborates on the compensatory purpose behind her use of PT. During the interview, she mentioned her plans to continue using tutoring also in the following years. When the interviewer asked her why, she replied:

> *Marta: Because maybe in class, even if the professor is not really good at teaching, in this way [by continuing following PT] I can still understand with this help. Or maybe if I struggle understanding, if I don't understand them completely, the professor doesn't have time to explain them again only to me, and it is something that helps me.*

The reason why Marta wants to keep PT also in the following years is to overcome the struggles that could derive from the quality of teaching received in class, or from the lack of individualized support that formal schooling cannot offer her. Therefore, PT is depicted by Marta as an instrument to compensate for the deficiencies of formal education she experienced in terms of instruction.

Students also reported using PT to compensate for the lack of support they received at home from parents or caregivers, by having someone outside their household to help them with their education. Davide, following tutoring to remediate for insufficiencies in physics, chemistry, and mathematics, elaborates on his need to compensate for the instructions received by his father:

> *Interviewer: what pushed you, or your family, to follow tutoring?*
> *Davide: […] I felt the need to have somebody who was not my parents to help me. Because usually my father is the one who knows the most, and in fact he's the one who usually helps me with chemistry and physics, however lately it's not going great and so I decided to take [PT] classes.*

Students' Purposes Are Subject to Change

Even though we did not measure students' use of PT longitudinally, students themselves stated that their purposes behind the use of tutoring might vary over time. The change of purposes over time has been mentioned especially by students who followed tutoring across different steps of their education. For example, Martina, who started receiving tutoring in middle school mainly to enrich her performance, continued following it also throughout her first year in high school, but to compensate to the lack of understanding of the teachers' explanation:

> *Interviewer: […] what was the purpose of these language tutoring sessions?*
> *Martina: […] At first, English was mostly conversation because I had no problems with English, it was a subject… a subject in which I did well, I read it once, maybe I came across a rule, I read it once again and I already knew how to apply it. But when I got to high school, it changed because [the tutoring] became more than just a way to enhance my skills, but*

rather a way to solve doubts and problems that arose because of the fact that the explanation [in class] was completely in English.

The interview with Martina highlights how different aspects of students' lives are subject to constant change, from students' skills and motivation to the school they attend. Therefore, changes in those factors might also imply changes in their needs using PT, and consequently, the purposes behind their use of PT. Moreover, this result shows the importance of investigating students' purposes by using qualitative methods such as interviews, which are suitable to capture the evolutions and changes in students' use of PT.

Forms of PT

All students were following individualized tutoring at the moment of the interview (see Table 3). Students use online and in-person forms of tutoring, favoring the latter, or using them both. Home-visit tutoring, held at the tutee's house, or sometimes at the tutor's house, is overall the most popular form of tutoring among the interviewed students, attended by 12 students out of 21. Group tutoring does not seem to be popular among the interviewed students. For example, Giacomo mentioned that he was attending both individualized and group tutoring with the same teacher, but that he preferred having one-on-one tutoring sessions. Providers of tutoring usually work independently, rather than for institutions such as tutoring companies. The cost of tutoring ranges from 10 euros per hour with a university student, to 25 euros per hour with a high school professor. Giorgio, who followed tutoring throughout the previous summer to remediate for the insufficient grade at the end of the academic year, reflects on the differences in costs and quality of PT services offered by both university students and a high school professor.

Giorgio: [...] In fact, this summer I spent much more because I followed tutoring with an actual professor.
Interviewer: [...] and did you feel a difference (with the other tutoring experiences)?
Giorgio: I felt a difference, yes, she was very good, but it's not something doable for the whole year, also because her price is way higher than the one of the others. In the future, in case I need a much in-depth study, I'm sure I would call her.

In Giorgio's opinion, the differences in price among tutors could be explained by the fact that tutors such as professors and working professionals were perceived to be offering services of better quality compared to the ones of university students. Therefore, because of the higher financial burden of this tutoring service, Giorgio said he plans to use this 'high-quality' service only in case he needs an in-depth study of a subject.

Table 3. Overview of the Demographic of the Sample

n	Name	School track	HS year	SES [a]	Cultural capital	Type of tutoring [b]	Price (per hour) [b]
1	Martina	Academic	1	Medium	High	Individual, physical	10 €
2	Davide	Technical	1	High	High	Individual, physical	13 €
3	Giorgio	Academic	2	Medium	Medium	Individual, mixed	~ 16 € ~ 13 €
4	Claudia	Academic	2	Medium	High	Individual, online	22 € [d]
5	Federica	Academic	2 [c]	High	Medium	Individual, physical	25 €
6	Marta	Technical	2	Medium	High	Individual, physical	10-15 € [e]
7	Alessia	Technical	1	High	High	Individual, physical	20 €
8	Francesca	Academic	1	Medium	Medium	Individual, physical	15 € 20-25 € [e]
9	Laura	Academic	1	Low	Medium	Individual, physical	15 €
10	Leonardo	Academic	2	High	Low	Individual, mixed	15 €
11	Filippo	Technical	2 [c]	Medium	High	Individual, physical	15 €
12	Antonio	Technical	2	Low	Medium	Individual, online	10-15 € [e]
13	Roberta	Academic	1	Medium	High	Individual, physical	15 €
14	Benedetta	Academic	1	Medium	High	Individual, physical	15 € 10 €
15	Maria	Academic	2	High	High	Individual, physical	-
16	Chiara	Academic	1 [b]	Medium	High	Individual, online	15 €
17	Dennis	Academic	2	Medium	High	Individual, physical	10 €
18	Giacomo	Technical	1	High	High	Group and individual, online	40 € 25 €
19	Beatrice	Academic	2	Low	High	Individual, physical	22 €
20	Rita	Academic	1 [c]	Low	Medium	Individual	20-25 €
21	Lidia	Academic	1	High	High	Individual, online	25 €

[a]: SES categories are derived from Verhoeven (2021) and determined upon the parent with higher education and occupation. [b]: Information on the tutoring they were following at the time of the interview. [c]: The student repeated one year of school, so he/she is one year behind (but still falls in the age range between 14 and 16 years old). [d]: 50 minutes. [e]: The student mentions a price range.

Discussion

The present study investigated the use, forms, and motives behind the use of PT among Italian secondary education students with different socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievement. Overall, our analysis of the quantitative data indicates that Italian students' SES and achievement relate to their use of PT, while the qualitative data builds on this by illustrating how PT use manifests in students' day-to-day school lives.

In the present sample, PT seems to primarily serve a remedial role, being used to achieve more immediate goals such as improving insufficient grades rather than enhancing already strong performance. Moreover, from the interviews it emerged that some students used PT specifically to remediate the "educational debt" (i.e., having to make up for failed subjects during the summer), suggesting that reparation exams may play a role in shaping the demand for PT among upper secondary students in Italy. Furthermore, students' reflections suggest that PT in Italy may be used to compensate for perceived insufficient support in class, both in quantity and quality. PT often acts as an extension of public education, sometimes even recommended by teachers, implying that formal public education cannot always meet students' needs on its own. These findings thus point to the increasing relevance of PT in Italian upper secondary education - not only as an academic fallback but also as a distinct educational space where students develop dispositions towards achievement. This aligns with studies such as Jansen and colleagues (2020), who described private tutoring as a 'third place' other than school and home, and Gupta's (2025) conceptualization of coached habitus, in which tutoring plays a formative role in shaping students' academic orientations and meritocratic beliefs across their educational trajectory.

In line with the hypothesis and with previous research (e.g., Entrich, 2018), the quantitative findings show that high-SES students are more likely to attend PT, pointing toward the direction of social reproduction theory. Nonetheless, quantitative findings do not support the hypothesis that students' SES moderates the relationship between their achievement and their use of PT; therefore, the achievement levels of students attending PT do not significantly differ among students from different strata. The absence of a moderation effect may partly be understood considering the qualitative findings, which show that students primarily turn to PT to remediate low or insufficient grades. In line with the additive model, this suggests that PT in Italy is mainly used in response to relatively low academic performance, regardless of students' SES.

One way our study contributes to the existing literature is by reflecting on mechanisms discussed in the effectively maintained inequality hypothe-

sis, which holds that high-SES students tend to access higher-quality forms of education. While our qualitative data do not allow us to test this hypothesis, they do suggest that such mechanisms may operate less through differences in the level of individualization and more through differences in tutors' qualifications, with high-SES students more likely to access tutoring with more highly qualified teachers, while low-SES students rely on less expensive services provided by less qualified tutors.

Overall, the present study shows the added value of examining private tutoring within individual countries, to complement a purely comparative approach that may overlook the unique characteristics of each nation. Diverse characteristics of countries' education systems, cultures, and policies, could further shape their demand and characteristics of PT, and studies like ours help inform our understanding of its prevalence beyond commonly studied contexts such as South Korea and Japan.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study does not come without limitations. Although the PISA 2012 wave offers more detailed information on private tutoring than other waves, it does not fully capture its private nature, as it does not distinguish between paid and unpaid forms of individual tutoring. Furthermore, the data were collected more than 10 years ago: since then, the Italian education system has undergone different policy changes, which impacted privatization and marketization mechanisms in the country (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2012; Lo Schiavo, 2018). According to global and national patterns of PT use, it is likely that the popularity of PT services in Italy increased since 2012 (Byun et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of potentially outdated data limits our ability to fully capture the current landscape of PT in Italy. Patterns of use and disparities across student subgroups may have shifted, especially after the pandemic. At the same time, our study offers a valuable baseline for understanding and further exploring these patterns.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the study adopt a cross-sectional design. As shown by our findings and by Liu and Bray (2020), students' use of PT can change in form, purpose, and frequency. The present findings suggest that students may use PT at specific moments in the academic year, and for specific goals, such as preparing for the reparation exam at the beginning of the upcoming academic year. Although access and progression within high school are not selective in Italy, entry to universities is more selective and often involves high-stakes testing or consideration of students' high school grades. Hence, it might be that differences between student groups become more salient at later school stages than those captured by PISA, for example towards the end of high school, when students pre-

pare for school-leaving and university-entrance examinations (Bray, 2011). Therefore, longitudinal studies may help overcome the limitations of purely cross-sectional designs and provide a better understanding of how students' decision-making process around PT evolve over time.

Conclusion

The present study offers insight into the role that PT plays in students' academic lives in Italy, by bringing together PISA data and the views and experiences of students themselves. It shows that private tutoring in Italy takes a distinct form compared to other countries. More specifically, it emerges as a predominantly individualized and remedial practice, often used on a short-term basis and even during the summer break. The analysis also points to a set of motives behind the use of PT that can be understood as compensatory, moving beyond the commonly studied remedial–enrichment distinction in PT research. In addition, our study provides tools such as an interview guide that can be used not only by researchers but also by schools seeking to engage students in conversations about PT. In doing so, we gain a better collective understanding of the needs that formal education may not fully meet and can work towards more equal access to educational opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, both in Italy and beyond.

Data Availability Statement & Supplemental Materials.

The data that support the quantitative findings were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/pisa2012database-downloadabledata.htm. The questionnaire, interview guide, interview scripts, and the codebook that support the qualitative findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Francesca Casertano, upon request.

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