

Book Review: Shadow Education in the Middle East: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications

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Shadow Education in the Middle East: Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Policy Implications by Mark Bray and Anas Hajar explores the extent and nature of private supplementary tutoring in twelve Arabic-speaking countries. Six are high-income members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; the other six are lower income: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. Private supplementary tutoring is often referred to as “shadow education” because it mimics the structure of formal schooling. This book is a welcome addition to the existing literature on shadow education that has predominantly focused on post-Soviet states (Silova et al., 2006), the Mediterranean (Bray et al., 2013), East Asia (Zhang and Yamato, 2018), South Asia (Joshi, 2021), and Africa (Bray, 2021). Researchers, policymakers, and educational practitioners interested in the field of private supplementary tutoring will find this book useful in further understanding the development of shadow education as a global phenomenon.

This book comprises seven chapters. It commences with a brief Chapter 1 that sets the framework and outlines the remaining sections. Chapter 2 defines the scope of the study and presents global perspectives on shadow education. These perspectives cover the major providers and modes of private supplementary tutoring, the geographical and cultural variations that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, and the benefits and detriments of private tutoring. What emerges from the literature, as the authors argue, is that private tutoring may help slow learners catch up with academic studies and further motivate high achievers to perform well in national examinations. Nevertheless, private tutoring may maintain and exacerbate social inequalities because upper- and middle-class families can afford better-quality tutoring than working-class families. Moreover, ethical issues tend to arise when active teachers are one of the major providers of private tutoring. Some schoolteachers may be tempted to neglect their regular classes to meet the demand for private tutoring.

Chapter 3 directs readers’ attention to the Middle East. Despite some commonalities in the 12 countries, such as having Islam as the dominant religion and Arabic as a core subject, the authors argue that there are significant social, economic, and political diversities within the region. These diversities manifest themselves along the lines of political systems, demographic features, and social stability, which profoundly shape the overall role of the state in education as well as the scale of private tutoring. For instance, private tutoring was frowned upon in Saudi Arabia, however, its government allowed public schools to provide remunerated supplementary services for students seeking remedial support. For Dubai, owing to its high percentage (91 percent) of non-national

residents, the government has historically played a minimal role in the provision of public schooling and adopted a laissez-faire approach to private tutoring. Meanwhile, for countries like Syria and Yemen, protracted internal conflicts have weakened their governments' ability to provide public schooling. With many teachers leaving their posts, private tutoring has emerged as the major alternative to mainstream schooling. These manifestations of private tutoring in Arabic-speaking countries suggest very distinct contexts under which mainstream schooling and private tutoring are operating compared to those in other parts of the world.

Chapter 4 presents the scale and nature of shadow education in the 12 countries. Bray and Hajar argue that the scale of shadow education in the Middle East has expanded considerably in recent decades. Notwithstanding variations across the national education systems in the region, the modes of delivering private tutoring and drivers of its supply and demand have exhibited similar patterns in other parts of the world. These patterns include an overwhelming majority of primary and secondary school students receiving tutoring, greater demands in mathematics, science, and English language, and larger concentrations of private tutoring services in urban over rural areas. In Chapter 5, the authors raise concerns about the expanding scale of shadow education in the Middle East. The negative impact of shadow education is most noticeable in the backwash effect on schooling, as Bray and Hajar (2023) argue, "Private tutoring is not simply a neutral shadow; rather, it has a backwash on the system that it imitates. Private tutoring may subtract as well as supplement" (p. 57). This effect may foster students' dependency on tutoring to pass matriculation examinations and, on a societal level, damage the mandate of fee-free education and reduce the social value of meritocracy. Moreover, owing to its commercial nature, private tutoring raises ethical issues among serving teachers who are also involved in the business of shadow education. In the worst case, one-to-one private tutoring may bring risks of sexual misdemeanors.

Chapter 6 states the policy implications for regulating private tutoring. These include regulating the provision of private tutoring by active teachers and the operation of tutorial centers. On top of that, the authors emphasize the need to include all stakeholders, such as branches of government, schools, teachers' unions, parents, and media, in reducing the necessity of private tutoring. In Chapter 7, the authors conclude that shadow education in the Middle East largely resembles the trends exemplified in the global picture in terms of its scale and nature. The authors suggest that shadow education is likely to be an enduring phenomenon because it pertains to social competition; one possible way to regulate the phenomenon is through the collaboration between state and non-state actors.

This book represents one of the very few attempts to systematically investigate the development of shadow education in the Middle East. It contributes to the existing literature on private supplementary tutoring by furthering the agenda of strengthening the collaboration between state and non-state actors. This agenda pertains to the 2021/22 edition of the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2021) that highlights private supplementary tutoring as a typical educational phenomenon that cannot be tackled by

governments alone and thus proposes the inclusion of other non-state actors in achieving the fourth of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4). In this regard, Shadow Education in the Middle East carries the same spirit by shedding light on the complexity of the phenomenon and proposing a more collaborative approach to regulating private tutoring.

The rigor of this book is limited by the fragmentary data presented. As noted by the authors in Chapter 4, there is a lack of comparable data among the 12 selected countries. For instance, the enrolment rate data of private tutoring in the 2010s were largely drawn from the 2015 and 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) whereas those before the 2010s were mostly based on individual national studies from the 1990s to early 2010s that varied in terms of sample sizes, stages of schooling, gender, and school subjects. This was because data on this topic was not collected before the 2015 TIMSS. This methodological note is telling because it testifies to the under-researched nature of shadow education in this region vis-à-vis the existing literature in other parts of the world, such as Nordic countries, Asia, and Africa. While the authors have drawn on other sources to substantiate their analyses, such as questionnaire results obtained through UNESCO's Regional Centre for Education Planning (RCEP) and relevant media commentaries, elaboration on the treatment of such fragmentary data to increase its rigor and comparability across the selected nations would strengthen the book. Moreover, some aspects associated with shadow education are not adequately addressed. These include the increasing prevalence of Internet tutoring after the outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease in 2019 (COVID-19) and the role of Islamic culture in shaping gender norms in education. Further research on shadow education in this region needs to address these aspects to generate a more nuanced picture of the provision and reception of private tutoring.

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