

Book Review

Shadow Education in Myanmar: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications By Mark Bray, Magda Nutsa

Kobakhidze & Ora Kwo.

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Working on research projects on South East Asian (SEA) education, I have been interested to understand more about Myanmar's education system. While there has been increasing research on private tutoring in SEA countries such as Cambodia, Singapore, and Vietnam, I wonder if this practice is also prevalent in Myanmar. If the country bears a similar trait in its education system, what lessons can other regional countries learn to deal with this practice? The book *Shadow education in Myanmar: Private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications* is a helpful read for me. Having written extensively on private tutoring, the book's co-authors--Mark Bray, Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze, and Ora Kwo--provided an in-depth analysis of the private tutoring situation in Myanmar.

The book examines private tutoring in secondary schools in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city. It resulted from a collaboration between the University of Hong Kong, the Yangon University of Education, and UNESCO. Using a mixed-method approach, the researchers collected data from students in transition grades (Grades 9 and 11), teachers, and principals of eight randomly selected urban and peri-urban schools. The authors also compared the views of multiple stakeholders, including parents and personnel from international agencies and non-governmental organizations. These perspectives are significant in that while focusing on Myanmar, the book situates private tutoring as a widespread phenomenon that has drawn attention from actors at both the local and global levels.

Along these lines, the first chapter, "*International Perspectives on Shadow Education*," sets the stage for the study by reviewing the development of private tutoring in various countries around the world. This review shows that private tutoring has a long history, and as the name 'shadow education' suggests, it has become an integral part of many education systems.¹ Chapter two provides an overview of the local context of Myanmar pertaining to private tutoring. The authors underscore the National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021) as the foundation for the current educational reform in Myanmar, echoing other scholars who noted that the country is transforming politically, socially and educationally (Lall, 2013; Lee, 2016).

¹ The term 'shadow education' was first used by Bray (1999) to suggest that as the mainstream curriculum changes, much of the content in the shadow changes accordingly.

The central component of the book lies in Chapters four and five, highlighting the research's findings concerning the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers. With rich evidence from quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, Chapter four portrays a broad picture of the scope of private tutoring in Yangon and reasons for students and parents to pursue private classes. The research shows that higher-performing students were more likely to receive tutoring than lower-performing ones as learning achievement was regarded as measurable through examination results. However, the situation remains paradoxical because significant household expenditures were spent on private tutoring. Myanmar parents justified this spending as a legitimate attempt to satisfy the exam-driven curriculum and as an indispensable investment in human capital. Meanwhile, just as in many other settings in Asia (e.g., Kennedy & Lee, 2018), the broader visions of education in Myanmar are still deemed unattainable, including schooling for the public good.

Chapter five provides an insight into the perspectives of teachers related to private tutoring. It is interesting to note that although teachers were strictly prohibited from providing private tutoring, nearly half of the sampled teachers indicated that they had tutoring classes. Also, some teachers thought that their principals were encouraging the practice, while many reported the other way round. These contradictory results indicate the complexity and ambiguity associated with competing forces and variegated relationships in the shadow educator sector. An important inference is that private tutoring bans tend to be ineffective, no matter how fierce they are. This brings us to the next chapter that discusses policy implications related to private tutoring regulations.

In Chapter six, the authors reflect on some fundamental issues around private tutoring, including financing the education system, learning assessment, and parents' rights to invest in their children's education. In this regard, teachers' inadequate salaries and high-stakes exams are reported as major causes for the perpetuation of private tutoring; yet these chronic issues persist not only in Myanmar but also in other SEA countries (Bray, 2002; Duong & Silova, 2021). All things considered, the authors suggest that it is better to regulate the shadow sector rather than eliminate it.

The book proposes two primary areas of private tutoring regulation: (i) regulating private tutoring provided by serving teachers and (ii) regulating the practice in the marketplace. Among diverse views about teachers' provision of fee-based extra lessons, the authors explicitly stated that tutoring current students must not be tolerated because of ethical issues. Nevertheless, tutoring students from other schools, as occurring in the marketplace, appears judicious as it shares the government's responsibility to increase the teachers' salaries. More important is the recommendation for school leaders who should take primary action in handling the private tutoring practice at the school level. Additionally, the authors point to the need to create school-level channels to communicate among teachers, students, and parents regarding private tutoring. Finally, with respect to regulating the practice in the marketplace, the authors suggest attending to the business and education dimensions of private tutoring, including taxation, health and safety, tutors' qualification, and pricing issues. These recommendations are particularly pertinent to transitional contexts where the marketplace for private tutoring is branching out.

This book depicts the first comprehensive picture of shadow education in Myanmar, zooming in on the country's largest city. It contributes to the international scholarship on private tutoring with the exemplary approaches to the mixed methods. I highly appreciate the meticulous integration of qualitative narratives that helps to illustrate and add nuance

to the quantitative data. Given that the statistical analysis is primarily descriptive, audiences interested in quantitative research might be curious to learn about the relationships between aspects of private tutoring potentially derived from the inferential analysis. That said, the book is a valuable reference for comparative education researchers who may take advantage of much information in the book, including sample survey questionnaires and interview guides, to replicate research or compare with other educational contexts. Finally, education administrators, especially school leaders, would find recommendations in this book practical and helpful in addressing an educational phenomenon that, as the authors rightly indicate, will never disappear but calls for collective action for a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Bich-Hang Duong is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Minnesota. She received her Ph.D. degree in Comparative and International Education from Lehigh University (USA). Her research interests include citizenship studies, cultural politics of education, educational equity, professional learning and development, comparative education, and critical theory.

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