
Book Review

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Shadow Education in the Middle East: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications, Mark Bray and Anas Hajar, Routledge, 2023, xx + 102 pp.

The term “shadow education” might sound enigmatic at first, as one identifies private tutoring as distinct from the formal school system, even though it may be governed by changes in formal education. In the book, *Shadow Education in the Middle East: Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Policy Implications*, the authors Mark Bray and Anas Hajar adopt the term “shadow education” to discuss the widespread phenomenon that runs parallel to mainstream schools, with special emphasis on the changing curriculum that shadow institutions mimic—in line with changes occurring in the formal education system—as a process of shadowing. The metaphor of “shadow” captures the essence of the book, and it is used repeatedly to probe numerous questions. The book begins with the understanding of private tutoring as a parallel system to formal education, which, as case studies from the Middle East show, turns out to be deeply intertwined with school education, to the extent that schools are given the responsibility of private tutoring.

The book makes a crucial contribution to the literature on private supplementary tutoring in the Middle East, which has received considerably less attention when compared with East Asia and other regions of the world. The book primarily synthesises published literature in English and Arabic, supplemented by data from the Regional Center for Educational Planning’s questionnaires and their Policy Forum, international assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), as well as formal and informal interviews. The study comprises 12 Arabic-speaking countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen, which could develop religious and cultural perspectives on shadow education.

Divided into seven chapters, the book begins with an introduction to fundamental terminologies as they delve into the global context of shadow education. In the second chapter, the book

draws attention to how shadow education has become a global phenomenon with its varying presence in different parts of the world. The third chapter focuses on the Middle East, noting that private tutoring has existed in some form in the region since the nineteenth century, and it has seen a significant expansion with increased attention from governments in the late twentieth century.

The study identifies commonalities and differences in the systems of education under consideration. The common elements in the 12 countries include the model of schooling, standard structures, grades, trained teachers, and examinations. These help in explaining why tutoring in the Middle East often mirrors those elsewhere in the world despite vast social, economic, and political diversities. The population size, diversity (religious, non-nationals), and density, as well as the contrasts in per capita income create significant differences, governing schooling and shadow education across the regions in the Middle East. The income of residents and their nationality contribute to the varying patterns in shadow education, as private tutoring has costs associated with it. Further, countries such as Qatar and the UAE have significant overseas populations, who bring their cultural attitudes and needs to the mix.

The fourth chapter maps the scale and nature of shadow education. While the data can be patchy, it shows a high prevalence rate in the Middle East. As the book illustrates, in a 1994 survey, 69% of students received private tutoring in Bahrain. Private tutoring has existed in Kuwait as early as the mid-1960s. Further, TIMSS data for Class VII mathematics in 2015 and 2019 provide quantitative insight into the prevalence of shadow education in several countries in the Middle East. Platforms like Noon Academy, based in Saudi Arabia, harness technology to reach millions of students across national borders. The authors discuss how the demand for private tutoring is multifaceted. The reasons cited in the book are poor quality teachers and schools, helping students to pass examinations, social competition among students to achieve higher marks, keeping children gainfully occupied, and the social pressure, all of which come together to make private tutoring the norm. The supply side of the phenomenon is attributed to the low salaries of the teachers, which compels them to provide private tutoring to supplement their income. Another reason cited is the high curriculum density, which makes it challenging for teachers to complete everything within the regular academic calendar, and thus, students need extra help.

The fifth chapter portrays the complex impact of shadow education. While access to private supplementary tutoring can be academically beneficial to some, the authors challenge the notion that it is helpful to all. The direct proportionality between academic progress and tutoring has been contested. Private tutoring is also described as helping to reduce stress.

The authors highlight the role of tutoring in exacerbating social inequalities, as it is not free, and the quality of tutoring and the type vary based on the capital input; wealthier families can afford good coaching, whereas lower-income families sometimes can barely afford schooling or tutoring. The authors further discuss how shadow education may “backwash” mainstream schooling, where teachers may end up putting lesser effort in regular classes and pressurise students to take lessons privately. The chapter also predicts how private tutoring may increase the dependency of students on the tutor, reducing their ability to work independently and hinder deep learning. Amid all this, when private tutoring becomes obligatory, the authors underline the hollowness of free education.

Most countries in the world have regulations on private tutoring, and so do the Middle East countries, which the authors discuss in the sixth chapter. The regulations on teachers providing tutoring vary widely, from conditional permission through educational services centres in Saudi Arabia to outright prohibition in several countries, including Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Syria, and the UAE. The enforcement remains challenging, and unregulated private tutoring prevails. Other regulations highlighted include licensing of tutorial centres, staff qualifications, premises, minimum and maximum students, and occasionally, price ceilings. The book describes how regulations are often disregarded due to objections from teachers, students, and parents. Government-sponsored online alternatives to private tutoring have not been able to replace private demand, as the authors describe with a case study of Oman’s *omtut.com*. The authors urge for policy changes “making private tutoring less necessary” by reducing curriculum density, reviewing teachers’ salaries, regulating class sizes, and addressing the impact of high-stakes examinations.

The chapter further emphasises the need for dialogue and partnership with various stakeholders, helping to reduce the obligation for shadow education. These include government ministries, subnational authorities, teachers’ unions, parents, schools, and the media. Parents are described as the primary drivers of the demand. Empowering them with the freedom to access information will help in correcting possible market failures. Schools act as an important

connection between students, parents, and teachers; involving them in partnership will thus help in improving school-level policies. The media is described as a tool for facilitating public discussion. The authors stress on taking the topic “out of the shadows” through engagement with researchers who will bring better data and analysis to understand its implications, along with showcasing the trends that can develop over time.

The concluding chapter brings back the discussion to commonalities and diversities when considering the global picture of shadow education and its regional study in the Middle East. The authors urge a balance between the positives and negatives of shadow education, describing it as an enduring and evolving phenomenon. The authors also highlight the need for policymakers to develop the capacity to steer shadow education.

The book stands out as the first comprehensive regional study of shadow education in the Middle East. The authors acknowledge that available data may be “patchy,” which means that a precise quantitative picture of the phenomenon across the region remains elusive. However, the strength of the book lies in the authors’ drawing from diverse sources, including both English and Arabic literature. The authors skillfully use their expertise and language knowledge to access information and identify the contours of shadow education and its implications. An example of this is how the presence of shadow education did not just exist parallel to formal schooling under regulations from the government but was found to be part of the formal schooling process in Qatar and Dubai. The schools, instead of “making private tutoring less necessary,” were found to encourage it to increase their revenue. This increases the concern over the quality of education in schools, as it is not just a teacher pressurising a child to take up tuition for their personal gain, but obliged to do so to save their job. The book identifies complex drivers and multifaceted impacts of private tutoring, such as the role of shadow education in exacerbating social inequalities and the backwash effect on mainstream schooling.

The book shows a close alignment in shadow education practices across the selected nations and other parts of the world. The Middle East, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, has an immigrant population that exceeds the local population. These immigrants, representing the rest of the world, potentially impact the education system and shadow education, making it a relevant study across the globe. With special reference to Dubai where 91% of the population comprises non-natives, the largest group is Indians, making this a must-

read book. Incidentally, Indian immigrants were found to be the highest users of tutoring facilities in Dubai.

The book also provides a base for a comparative study of the regulations for private supplementary tutoring within the Middle East. However, while the authors identify aspects of shadow education that could offer a nuanced understanding of private tutoring in the Middle East, they fail to address them in the book—the role of university students and retirees, the gender of the tutor and their student in relation to Islamic culture, the difference in price charged by women tutors, and changing patterns in internet-based tutoring. Further research on shadow education in the region needs to address these concerns, to generate a more contextual understanding.

The book helps educational scholars and parents to develop an understanding of shadow education as a pervasive phenomenon, its implications on education quality and equity, and the measures that governments take to tackle it. The concluding emphasis on the need for policy dialogue and stakeholder engagement to “take the topic out of the shadows” offers valuable guidance for future action. Drawing instances from the Middle East, the book offers a critical account of policy restrictions as an inefficient measure in regulating the shadow education market, presenting a challenge to policymakers for developing a policy to efficiently steer supplementary private tutoring.