

Shadow Education in the Middle East Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications by Mark Bray & Anas Hajar

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While some call the phenomena of supplementary lessons, private tutoring or private tuition, Mark Bray and Anas Hajar in their 2023 book develop the construct of ‘shadow education’ to define its international scope and key elements and describe its outlay in the Middle East. This contribution enables ‘after school schooling’ to be comparable across regions, and ultimately, to bring private tutoring in Middle East into the global conversation. From the executive summary, the scope of what shadow education is – and is not – is immediately clear. Shadow education is fee charging, academic, and supplementary. The provision concerns children and teens in mainstream schools as a means of remediation or enrichment. Therefore, shadow education excludes lessons aimed at personal development, such as music lessons, religious training and sports. The Introduction also unpacks when online learning is ‘shadow education’. For instance, when online learning replaced regular lessons during the recent COVID pandemic, it was outside of scope, but becomes in scope when it supplements lessons taught in school for review.

From the outset, the reader gains an overview of how shadow education operates in the Middle East. The spotlight is on teachers in government schools on employment visas with far less attention on university students who take up a few hours for cash payments. However, there is attention on tutorial centers, although this service is not as prevalent as in Korea and Hong Kong. The growth opportunity for the region, outlined in detail in the last chapter, is for the development of regulations governing practices in schools and tutoring centers. With this orientation, the book sheds light on reported practices in 12 Middle Eastern countries, which have been neatly divided into two subgroups according to income: the wealthier GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen) and poorer Levant countries (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria). All countries are similar for the dominant use of Arabic and the official language and cultural values shaped by Islam.

There are several strengths of the book. One strength is evident from the Forward and Introduction: the collaborators’ subject matter expertise. Mark Bray, as the first author, builds on his reputation and contributions for “popularizing the metaphor” (Rahmouni, 2023, p. 1) via prior studies on Africa and Hong Kong and from leadership with UNESCO’s International Institute of Educational Planning. The second author, a regional expert in multicultural education with command of Arabic, enables access to Arabic language research reports, which are not available in English. Data sources include literature reviews in English, and, also, questionnaire data and input from policy makers and the media in the two languages. This means the reader gains valuable insights in under-reported zones, such as the use of WhatsApp for tutoring in Yemen. Thanks to UNESCO’s Regional Center for Educational Planning in Sharjah, the United Arab Emirates, data collection within the region was facilitated by hosting

a bilingual policy forum with 33 educational players of ministry personnel, researchers and teachers.

Another strength is the book's accessibility. The Routledge Focus book is a lightweight, soft cover book with 102 pages and 94 of pages of core reading. It is also open access so can be freely downloaded at <https://www.routledge.com/Shadow-Education-in-the-Middle-East-Private-Supplementary-Tutoring-and-Bray-Hajar/p/book/9781032329802>. The book is organized into seven chapters with clear headings and sub-headings to move the reader from the global picture to the regional distinctions. The chapters succinctly clarify drivers of demand and supply for readers new to the topic. The book succeeds in reframing 'shadow education' so educational stakeholders can see the gains for their constituents when using a consultative approach to develop regulations which accommodate the perspectives of teachers, students and their parents.

Another strength is the book's internal cohesion. From the first chapter to the last, the core argument builds in a logical fashion. The first chapter situates the phenomena of private tutoring within its global context, drawing on previous research internationally, such as the UK, the Nordic countries, and East Asia. This chapter positions shadow education as a form of supplementary education, which mirrors the curriculum of mainstream education but exists in its shadows. It shows that shadow education responds to gaps in provisions for students requiring remediation and those seeking enrichment. The second chapter on global perspectives on shadow education identifies when tutoring is conceptualized as a problem and as a resource for teaching and learning. It also gives space to understand the costly implications for parents who must cope with the inadequacies of poorly resourced schooling.

The third and fourth chapters establish the contextual features which support comparison but tune into differences between countries, drawing on internal diversity, student performance on internationally benchmarked assessments, and different influences on private and government schools among other factors. Chapters 3 and 4 provide snapshots using available data presented via useful tables and charts to provide concise summaries of research reports. Readers interested in an overview of the quality of educational provisions and available research benefit from bullet points of key tutoring takeaways, as seen from survey data on page 31, and themes from qualitative research on page 37. The fifth chapter is short with research showing what is known about the effectiveness of supplementary education.

Chapters 6 and 7 convince the reader of viable pathways to bring private, supplementary tutoring out of the shadows. The main argument is that policy makers should focus on improving the overall quality of education especially for all. The way to do this is better oversight with policies that support equitable approaches to schooling and avenues for the motivated to learn more and those who need support to catch up. The authors also suggest bottom-up collaborative partnerships, including engaging parents and teachers' unions so voices of civil society are captured and establishing links between ministries to align on strategies and common priorities. Despite patchy reporting of the phenomena of shadow education in the Middle East, the book makes the most of available data by targeting the problematic issues, such as corruption and social stratification where benefits are afforded to the urban and rich. Using the global backdrop, the potential to see supplementary teaching as a resource appears. If policy makers recognize that shadow education can be a complement to local provisions of schooling, visions of extra lessons being locally coordinated by progressive educational leaders appears.

Within the text there are consistent references to gaps in research, which shows the command of the literature review. Unfortunately, there is only a summative paragraph on page 76 about the need for greater partnerships with researchers in universities. Given the significant barriers in accessing high-quality empirical data for in-depth quantitative analysis of trends (Shockley, 2022), this book, or a follow-on book, should make bolder directives to policy makers. Policy makers should guide researchers with targeted grants for research in the following areas:

- Large scale mixed methods using census data and jurisdiction-wide surveys so subregional patterns of shadow education can be deduced. Ministries of Education should know more about time commitment across the academic year and holidays, subject matter preferences and difficulties, and needs of different types of learners (i.e. male or female, age group, achievement levels, etc.).
- Qualitative case studies on perspectives of parents and the factors influencing their decision-making (e.g., financial resources, peer pressure, school resources, and individual needs of their children). Local school leaders can benefit from a picture of internal diversity (e.g., employment and family status) and the impact of contextual and geographical factors (e.g., a greater range of choices in urban settings versus no choice in rural settings).
- Qualitative studies on the gendered experiences of schooling and supplementary lessons with a focus on the choices of additional math and science lessons given the poor performance on international benchmarks. National governments often need to report on gendered dimensions of academic performance.
- In-depth studies of teachers' experiences with tutoring to use both anonymous surveys and, when possible, ethnographic interviews. Researchers are well qualified to capture authentic experiences, if enabled to do so. In addition, there is scope for a future book to take on board other related topics not addressed. One is other service providers in the region, namely private staffing, such as full-time governesses and nannies, as well as university students who may work in a more piecemeal fashion. There is also value in learning more about and more attention to literacy in Arabic among national and non-nationals in order to drive Arabic language teaching above the current subpar status (Chazy & Thomure, 2022). In sum, *Shadow Education in the Middle East Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications* succeeds in bringing shadow education in the region into view, and convinces the reader that regulatory frameworks are needed. However, what policy makers need more of is targeted research. With better quality information, meaningful after-school provisions can be imagined so all stakeholders benefit. Good teachers can earn an honest extra salary, and motivated children can accelerate and underachievers can get the attention they need with only a minor investment for parents. This book provides welcome insights about instances where progressive thinking has achieved this vision. This book advances thinking on what has before been construed as the underbelly of education. Shadow education can link with mainstream schooling, and, in so doing, come out of the shadows of an unregulated marketplace, and become an additional channel for satisfying learning.

Reference

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