
Book review: Shadow education in Myanmar: private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications

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This book analyses the prevalence in Myanmar of private supplementary tutoring, which has been recognised globally as “shadow education” vis-à-vis school education and whose positive and negative aspects have been discussed internationally in a growing literature. Shadow education is referred to as “tuition” in Myanmar. Tuition has long been known to exist but has not been adequately analysed, and the attention it received due to major political changes following the 2015 general elections is the backdrop to this book. The first author, Mark Bray, has published numerous books and articles on shadow education worldwide since 1996.

In this book, under the collaboration between the University of Hong Kong, the Yangon University of Education and UNESCO, data were collected in urban and peri-urban areas of Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar. The findings show that tuition is common (86.2% of Grade nine students surveyed receive it) and that, despite strict regulations, many teachers (47.7%) provide tuition for income and other motives. These statistics point to the importance of bringing tuition “out of the shadow” and engaging in a dialogue between teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders. This picture can be seen as a way to explore the coexistence of formal and nonformal education. The book also provides insight into the formation of a society in Myanmar that emphasises educational background, similar to the “diploma disease” that Dore (1976) observed, and the challenges facing school education.

In this book, the prevalence of shadow education in various countries and its relationship with school education is first presented based on previous research, providing an overview of the international context (Chapter 1). This is followed by an overview of the social, economic and educational systems in Myanmar (Chapter 2). The next chapter describes the process of conducting the quantitative and qualitative surveys adopted for the study (Chapter 3). The findings from these surveys are then reported from the perspective of students and their parents (Chapter 4) and teachers (Chapter 5). The last chapter discusses the policy implications of the findings in terms of financing, social inequalities, teaching and regulation (Chapter 6).

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This book provides an overview of shadow education in Myanmar. Therefore, there are aspects of tuition that are not fully analysed. Academic enthusiasm is, of course, the main focus, but how does tuition attract people? For students to continue learning, tuition needs to have a certain entertainment value, for example, as a place to make friends and interact with them. A detailed analysis of boarding institutions, which are also discussed in this publication, may show the unique characteristics of shadow education in Myanmar. In addition, private tutoring in the marketplace may be affected by the impact of globalisation, but such analysis remains an issue for the future. After the publication of this book (2020), economic growth in Myanmar was projected to be 3% in the fiscal year ending September 2022, following an 18% contraction due to political turmoil and the impact of COVID-19, with firm downside risks (World Bank, 2022). Readers should be aware of the likelihood for changes in tuition, especially in the marketplace, in Myanmar today, which is not assumed in this book.

As this publication aims to derive policy implications for tuition and the school education that induces tuition, it inevitably lacks an analysis of the structures that drive students and parents towards excessive academic success, even though this book also covers the social, economic and educational situation. Why do the people of Myanmar think dropping out of schooling is a critical failure in life? What industrial structures and social relationships are behind the Myanmar people's desire for academic success? Do monastic institutions affect plans for the future? As this book also points out, the commercial supply of tutoring stimulates further demand for academic success. To prevent the excessive demand, what alternative society and economy should be sought, and what educational objectives and shadow education should be established, taking into account the relationship between education and the labour market? Such discussions need to take place not only in Myanmar but also globally.

This book responds to the interests of researchers in the fields of international and comparative education and the sociology of education, as well as to practitioners engaged in educational cooperation. For example, shadow education is actively exported by entrepreneurs in Japan, and the Japanese government provides policy support as part of international cooperation in education. This book can provide clues to the issues and solutions arising from the acceptance of such educational exports. Furthermore, the book, including appendices, carefully describes data collection methods and provides several methodological suggestions for data collection based on cross-national collaborations involving many researchers. This is a must-read book for anyone involved in international educational cooperation, not just in shadow education in Asian countries.

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