

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

by *Mark Bray and Anas Hajar*

Routledge

London and New York

2023

pp. xviii+102

GBP49 or free online from <https://www.routledge.com/Shadow-Education-in-the-Middle-East-Private-Supplementary-Tutoring-and/Bray-Hajar/p/book/9781032329802>

**Review DOI** 10.1108/JICE-11-2023-056

This book analyses the functioning of private supplementary tutoring in the Middle East and its profound effects on social structures and formal schooling in various ways. Thus, it addresses the intellectual needs of policymakers, entrepreneurs, teachers and researchers. Moreover, parents and other education stakeholders can benefit from the study to make well-informed decisions for the education of future generations.

Mark Bray is Distinguished Chair Professor and Director of the Centre for International Research in Supplementary Tutoring (CIRIST) at East China Normal University. He is also Emeritus Professor holding the UNESCO Chair in Comparative Education at the University of Hong Kong. He has written extensively about shadow education worldwide. The second author, Associate Professor Anas Hajar, is a Syrian national teacher at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. His areas of interest include shadow education, internationalization, education abroad and language learning strategies.

Private tutoring is becoming more popular worldwide and is called shadow education since tutoring often follows the school curriculum. The topic of private tutoring has received a lower priority in research and policy attention in the Middle East in contrast to East Asia and other parts of the world. In this context, this book starts with a global overview before turning to patterns within and between 12 Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern countries. It looks at how these countries are similar in terms of education and culture, how demand and supply affect shadow education, how tutoring works and how it affects school education. The work considers tutoring that is fee-charging, academic and supplementary (to that provided by schools) for primary and secondary education. The study divided the 12 Middle East



countries into two groups. One comprises the six high-income countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The other group includes the six lower-income neighbours – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The study's main data source was published literature in Arabic and English, complemented by formal and informal interviews of various types. The book also uses data and insights from a regional seminar on private tutoring in countries with Arabic-speaking populations.

In the introductory chapter, the authors provide an excellent overview of the book. Then in the second chapter, they explain several definitional points and global perspectives on shadow education to set the ground for the study. They identify three categories of private tutors globally. First are teachers in public and private schools who provide tutoring to supplement their incomes. Second are businesses founded for the purpose, some informal and not paying taxes, others registered. Most businesses are small, although some operate nationally or internationally through branches, franchising or the internet. Informal self-employed providers are the third category. Many university and secondary students worldwide tutor for additional cash. Others are full- or part-time self-employed specialist providers. They can be anyone from recent graduates to retirees. In addition, this chapter, with the support of secondary data, explores geographic and cultural differences in private tutoring and the perceived positive and negative effects in many countries.

The authors establish the Middle East contexts concerning shadow education in chapter three. They illustrate on the one hand the educational and cultural commonalities, and on the other hand significant social, economic and political diversities between and within the two groups of countries. Further, they critically analyse the state's role in education in terms of policy and practice.

The next two chapters elaborate on themes. In chapter four, the authors discuss the scale and nature of shadow education by presenting statistics on enrolment rates, modes and durations of private tutoring, and drivers of demand and supply. Then in chapter five, the authors focus on educational and social impact. They address issues of learning gains, backwash on schooling and social values.

Building on this analysis, chapter six turns to policies and their implications. A starting point is on regulations, first concerning provision of private tutoring by serving teachers, and second concerning tutorial centres. Some countries have relatively detailed regulations, but others are *laissez faire*. The authors stress the need for regulation, noting that private tutoring will always exist because competitive families need it to remain ahead.

The concluding chapter again emphasizes commonalities and diversities in understanding the big picture of shadow education globally and in the Middle East. Most importantly, the authors recommend assessment of balances between negatives and positives, aiming to reduce the negatives (e.g. wasting students' money and time) and increase the positives (e.g. assisting slow learners).

I would like to highlight a few more themes discussed by the authors. For example, they mention the demand and supply of private tutoring. According to them, social competitiveness drives private tutoring demand worldwide. Most tutoring is driven by a desire to get good grades in school. Some pupils catch up with peers through private tutoring, while others maintain their lead.

Parents and kids may complain about teachers' instruction and lack of individual attention in large classes. A big issue occurs when teachers neglect their normal classes or purposefully remove content to promote their supplementary services. The negative influence of private tutoring culture on families and individual students is well discussed in the book. For instance, most families think that academic success is aided by tutoring, and many children and families experience peer pressure to spend money on it. Regular teachers may work fewer hours if most of their students have tutors. Students are also worn out and

---

ineffective from tutoring on top of schooling. Further, private tutoring plays a significant role in upholding and escalating social inequities, and it can negatively affect the dynamics of public education. The geographical disparity also exists since tutorial centres are more prevalent in urban than rural locations. Most crucially, ethical standards and societal norms are frequently seen to be declining. Teachers, for instance, put private tuition ahead of their usual responsibilities.

Situations where teachers pressure their current pupils to take extra classes are particularly problematic. In this context, private tutoring should be reduced with regulations. Families will always be competitive, but politicians may address curriculum issues, especially high-stakes examinations. They might also evaluate instructor delivery strategies and in-school support for different kids. Moreover, Ministries of Education cannot fix private tutoring problems alone. The book emphasizes the necessity for and instances of cooperation with other ministries, subnational governments, teachers' unions, parents, schools and the media.

The book will significantly interest academics and education officials concerned about the changing roles of the state and private sectors. In keeping with this observation, the writers emphasize the need to pull the matter out of the shadows by holding public conversations that include all parties. These discussions can occur at various levels, from local and school-based to national and transnational. Finally, the book paves the way for research into the practices of both regular classrooms and private tutoring facilities, with the goal of proposing a fresh and successful pedagogy.

**Md Tariqul Islam**

*Hiroshima University, Higashihiroshima, Japan*

#### **About the authors**

Dr. Md Tariqul Islam is a JSPS postdoctoral research fellow at Hiroshima University, Japan. He worked as assistant professor at BRAC University in Bangladesh at the BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED). Tariq earned his PhD in Education from Deakin University, Australia. He received his bachelor's (Hons) and master's in education from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. As a researcher, he worked with several national and international organizations, e.g. BRAC, NAEM, FREPD, UNESCO, UNICEF and ActionAid. He has written a number of peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters that have been published in leading journals and by leading publishers. He has also given papers at national and international conferences. His research interest largely focuses on the sociology of education, with particular attention to education for sustainable development. Tariq's current research focuses on education for global citizenship, higher education, youth (un)employability, teaching-learning in higher education, teachers' professional development, ICT in education, lifelong learning, educational inclusion and exclusion, and play for learning and socio-emotional development.