BOOK REVIEW: Shadow education in the Middle East: Private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications

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Bray, M., & Hajar, A. (2022). *Shadow education in the Middle East: Private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003317593 122 pages.

This book is a comprehensive overview of the impact that private tutoring—or shadow education—has in the Middle East, a region where educational equity issues are increasingly pressing. Grounded in empirical evidence gathered from UNESCO-distributed questionnaires and enriched by stakeholder engagement and contributions, the study serves as a key resource for understanding this phenomenon. The impact of private tutoring has perplexed many academics, politicians and school systems for over two decades, raising questions about its nature and influence (Baker et al., 2001; Bray, 1999; Ireson & Rushforth, 2005). Notable researcher Mark Bray, after extensive study in Asia, now turns his focus to the Middle East with co-author Anas Hajar, offering new insights into this global issue's regional manifestations.

Shadow education, defined as private, fee-based classes that mirror or "mimic" the curriculum, has penetrated modern Middle Eastern society. The discourse surrounding private tutoring is often negative, with officials, academics and journalists citing it as a significant threat to educational integrity and equity. Recognising these concerns, Bray and Hajar delve deeper into the phenomenon in their short but comprehensive book, examining how private tutoring affects educational practices, reforms and policies in the Middle East. They focus on 12 countries where Arabic is an official language: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE and Yemen.

This seven-chapter handbook builds on Bray's previous works and offers new insights into shadow education's socio-economic and cultural contexts in the Middle East (e.g., Bray, 2021; Bray et al., 2020; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Silova, 2009). It begins with an executive summary that contextualises the study, detailing the research's definitions, scope and scale. The authors acknowledge the complexities in defining the Middle East, particularly the interpretations and frameworks for understanding the region as well as the major social, economic and political diversities. They also address the disruptions caused by civil war and other armed conflicts, significantly influencing the study's contexts.

Bray and co-authors have highlighted the role of educational equity and justice in achieving UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which envisions "inclusive quality education for all" by 2030 (Bray, 2021; Bray et al., 2020). In *Shadow education in the Middle East*, Bray and Hajar critique the societal changes and uncertainties students face in navigating schoolwork to obtain optimal academic outcomes. They focus on how shadow education challenges equitable and quality education by emphasising the need for (1) comprehensive data to inform policy changes, ensuring education aligns with equitable objectives, and (2) strategies to integrate shadow education with formal educational systems to reflect the realities of teaching and learning.

One of the book's strengths is its reliance on empirical research, including analyses of policies and interviews with educational stakeholders, including parents. Chapters 5 and 6 are particularly noteworthy. Chapter 5 examines the effects of shadow education on learning outcomes in Middle Eastern society, discussing its positive impact on educational quality and social equity and its negative consequences, such as "gaming" the system for academic advantage. Chapter 6 shifts focus to parents and identifies them as key stakeholders in their children's education. It then explores factors influencing parents' decisions to hire private tutors, including parents' prioritising "quick marks" over learning for deep understanding.

The diversity in findings highlights the scale and nature of shadow education across rural and urban settings throughout the region. Large-scale population differences show how private tutoring can address school deficiencies and exacerbate educational achievement gaps. These complexities reflect broader socio-economic realities within the region. The authors emphasise the importance of understanding the "big picture" characterised by the duality of a wealthy minority and a large expatriate workforce and disparities in wealth and economic and political stability among countries.

Bray and Hajar revisit concerns about private tutoring, echoing findings and policy recommendations from previous publications. They identify key factors shaping educational practices exacerbating inequities, such as private and commercial tutoring organisations. The authors highlight the role of stakeholders—including governments, policymakers, schools, families and service providers—in the neo-liberalisation and responsibilisation of education. For those familiar with the series by Bray and colleagues, the concerns about growing academic achievement gaps persist with insufficient attention or solutions. More work is needed to address these issues and ensure accountability. Amplifying voices of concern involves on-the-ground advocacy, engaging with policymakers and forming collaborations to prioritise actionable reforms that advance educational equity.

This book is a valuable resource for researchers, educators and policymakers interested in the dynamics of educational systems in the Middle East. It not only explores private tutoring but also provides broader insights into the intersections of shadow education, social and economic structures and educational policies across diverse cultural contexts. The future requires less cleverness and more empathy, moving away from outdated practices and towards inclusive educational equity. This means providing everyone access to quality education and addressing rather than ignoring underlying issues. The authors' call for equitable educational opportunities extends beyond the Middle East, making their work relevant globally and underscoring the urgency for reforms.

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