

Shadow education: Scale, drivers and future directions in the global spread of private supplementary tutoring

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The author draws attention to the growing trend of private tutoring external to formal education systems (i.e. 'shadow education') that is impacting traditional education in myriad ways. He advises that policy-makers and education stakeholders determine the scope of this supplementary intervention and understand its impact to better shape the inevitable overlaps of these two domains.

Private supplementary tutoring is commonly called 'shadow education' because much of it mimics the mainstream. As the mainstream grows, so does the shadow and as the curriculum changes in the mainstream, so does it change in the shadow (see e.g. Bray, 1999; 2009). UNESCO's (2015, p. 72) *Rethinking Education* report recognized that "in re-visioning education in a new global context, we need to reconsider not only the purposes of education, but also how learning is *organized*." The report added that:

In light of the diversification of partnerships and the blurring of boundaries between public and private, we need to rethink the principles that guide education governance and, in particular, the *normative* principle of education as a public good and how this should be understood in the changing context of society, state and market (UNESCO, 2015).

The global expansion of shadow education, which is set to develop further, is part of this blurring of boundaries. It has far-reaching implications for the coming decades.

Some indicators of scale

Shadow education is a major phenomenon in parts of East Asia. In the Republic of Korea, for example, 82.5% of elementary school pupils were estimated to have received private tutoring in 2018 (KOSIS, 2019). In Japan, a 2017 survey found that 33.7% of elementary students, 51.9% of lower secondary students and 29.3% of upper secondary students attended tutorial enterprises called *juku* (Kimura, 2019, p. 1). In China, 48.3% of sampled students in a 2017 nationwide survey received some form of private supplementary tutoring (Liu, 2018, p. 144).

The phenomenon is also prevalent in lower-income regions of the world despite contrasting educational settings. In India, for example, a 2018 survey of West Bengal rural students in Grades 1-5 found that 69.9% received private supplementary tutoring, and the figure for Grades 6-8 was 77.4% (Pratham, 2019, p. 301). Proportions have also long been high in such countries as Egypt (Ille and Peacey, 2019) and Cambodia (Bray et al., 2018).

Turning to other regions, a 2018 survey of students aged 11-16 years in England and Wales indicated that 41% of London residents and 27% of residents in the rest of the country had received private or home tutoring (Sutton Trust, 2018). Shadow education has become widespread elsewhere in Europe (European Commission, 2017, pp. 41-42), in Africa (see e.g. Napporn and Baba-Moussa, 2013), and in North and South America (Bray, 2017; Park et al., 2016).

In summary, shadow education has become a global phenomenon – albeit with variations. For many families, it is a normal activity that makes up part of daily life alongside schooling. However, shadow education is not neutral – it has an impact on the education system itself. Teachers commonly assume that many or even most of their students will receive supplementary help, and may therefore devote less effort to duties in school than they might otherwise. They also have to cater to greater diversity in classrooms when students receive different types of supplementary support outside of the formal system. Further, some government teachers are direct providers of private shadow education. For these and other reasons, boundaries between public and private provision have become blurred in an *ad hoc* manner.

The drivers of shadow education

When considering this growing trend, one contextual factor to consider is the growing acceptability that education is a marketable service offered by the private sector alongside state provision, and in many cases serves as an alternative to government provision in both formal schooling and shadow education. Thus, the educational landscape in the contemporary era is very different from that in the second half of the twentieth century (Locatelli, 2018). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stressed the role of the state in ensuring education provision, and declared not only that education was a human right but also that “Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages” (United Nations, 1948, Article 26.1). That principle underlay much UNESCO advocacy and government action in the following decades. It now is mixed with neoliberal ideology that stresses the role of the market in providing choice and perhaps improving efficiency.

A second contextual factor is the strengthened intensity of competition, which is itself partly driven by globalization. Families and employees no longer compete just with other families and employees in their immediate neighbourhoods or even in their own countries. Rather, they compete with counterparts across the globe in an environment that can move capital and jobs at the click of a computer mouse.

Further, a combination of the above factors has created another contextual factor that is inextricably linked to the UNESCO’s Education for All (EFA) movement. First, the expansion of education placed greater pressure on governments, then achievement of universal

primary education led to demands for universal lower secondary education, which then expanded to upper secondary and higher education. Unit costs rose at each level, and government budgets felt the increasing strains. Second, expansion of education placed opportunities within reach of families for whom it would previously have not been possible. Essentially, social classes that in the past would have felt that higher education was reserved for other social classes now viewed it as within their reach. This pair of factors fueled shadow education as limits on government resources constrained the quality of education, inciting wealthier families to supplement it from their own pockets. Importantly, families competing for access to prestigious higher education institutions – or indeed secondary and primary ones – were rarely successful if not supplementing educational efforts with their own resources.

A further driver in many countries was perception by teachers that their salaries were inadequate. In many countries of the former Soviet Union, economies collapsed during the 1990s and teachers having to supplement their government salaries felt that private tutoring was an obvious way to do so. Families understood this, and as a result shadow education entered the culture to an extent not previously seen. Private tutoring became equally a norm in low-income countries of South Asia and elsewhere else that teachers felt a need to supplement their incomes. Some governments to varying degrees of success prohibited serving teachers from providing tutoring on the side – mainly on the grounds of conflict of interest and potential corruption. Some governments raised teachers' salaries to ensure that they would not need to undertake private tutoring to supplement their incomes. However, these measures did not quench the shadow education sector. Competition remained, and the families with resources that could no longer access the supplementary services of regular teachers turned to companies and self-employed tutors.

These explanations underline some of the forces that maintain social inequalities. Governments may announce that they wish to reduce social inequalities and may even mean to do so in good faith. In these circumstances, their policies to achieve the goal receive applause from lower-class families that naturally want the same opportunities as others. However, middle- and upper-class families are not generally interested in equality. On the contrary, they are typically interested in maintaining differences in the competitive environment that favour their own advancement. Upper-class families have their own mechanisms to do that which may not rely on the education sector, but middle-class families pay much attention to education, and in particular view shadow education as an instrument to help them get and stay ahead (Bray, 2017; Zhang and Bray, 2018).

Where are trends leading?

Some commentators have assumed that if weak education systems can be strengthened, then shadow education will diminish. Comparative analysis shows that this is not the case. Japan, Hong Kong (China) and mainland China, for example, have strong education systems, yet ongoing shadow education still thrives alongside them (Zhang and Yamato, 2018). So long as competitive forces remain – and there is every reason to assume that they will – so will shadow education. The years ahead will bring more rather than less shadow education as families in the increasingly privatized global environment see it as a way to get ahead and/or stay ahead, and as entrepreneurs see it as a lucrative business opportunity.

However, just as mainstream schooling varies widely within and across countries, so does shadow education. Much provision closely mimics the syllabuses and textbooks found in mainstream schooling while other components are complementary, depending in part on whether the purpose is remediation or enrichment. Ambitious families and ‘tiger mums’ adjust their strategies to whatever is seen to work for particular age groups in particular contexts and at particular times (see e.g. Liu and Bray, 2020). For some families and age groups, the emphasis is placed on sports, music and travel alongside academic studies, while within the academic realm, focus may be on the extension of the school curriculum to new domains accompanied by study skills, etc. The delivery of learning support may remain one-to-one, in small groups or even in large lectures taught by ‘star’ tutors. In addition, technology is increasingly harnessed for teaching and learning over the internet, reaching across national boundaries in innovative ways.

Thus, to return to UNESCO’s (2015) *Rethinking Education* report, indeed it is necessary to reconsider not only the purposes of education but also how learning is organized. Shadow education has come to stay and will only expand. Restructuring education demands an understanding of not only what happens beyond school walls but also what happens within them and how the two relate. As the *Rethinking Education* report also noted, this requires reconsideration of the normative principle of education as a public good and how it should be understood in the changing context of society, state and market. Certainly, it is still possible for state schooling to be free of charge as envisaged in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, families increasingly feel – even in countries with strong education systems – that state schooling by itself is inadequate and therefore feel a need to supplement that schooling with shadow education. Policy-makers need to recognize this new reality. To get a better handle of the situation, a good place to start is with improved documentation of the scale and nature of shadow education and then proceed to dialogue with multiple actors (families, schools, teachers, students and others) on ways to handle the complexities of symbiosis and blurred boundaries.

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