BOOK REVIEW

Shadow education in Africa: Private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications

Mark Bray. Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC)/Centre for International Research in Supplementary Tutoring (CIRIST)/East China Normal University (ECNU), Hong Kong/Shanghai, 2021, 91 pp. CERC Monograph Series in Comparative and International Education and Development, no. 14. ISBN 978-988-14241-9-8 (pbk); free download (in English or French) available at https://cerc.edu.hku.hk/books/shadow-education-in-africa-private-supplementary-tutoring-and-its-policy-implications/

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The quality of education is still one of the major challenges to economic development on the African continent. At the same time, supplementary private tutoring has seen tremendous growth rates in recent years and appears to be filling the gaps of seemingly inadequate educational systems. On the one hand, private tutoring can improve the performance of students and make higher education accessible to social strata that had little chance to send their children to university in earlier generations. On the other hand, since education achievement is a positional good, private tutoring can lead to social competition that exhibits the characteristics of an arms race and shifts the responsibility away from schools and public education towards families. In other words, private tutoring exhibits strategic complementarities and imposes negative externalities on other students: instead of improving the overall quality of education, those students with sufficiently affluent parents tread water while others with less access to shadow education are left behind.

Mark Bray’s Shadow Education in Africa – Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications is a timely and highly relevant study of “[the] forms of fee-charging supplementary academic instruction delivered outside the regular domain of schooling” (pp. 7–8), i.e., shadow education. Focusing on primary and secondary education, Bray provides us with a systematic analysis of shadow education across the African continent. In seven chapters, he offers a broad yet detailed overview of
the current state of the literature and carefully discloses the ambiguous role of private tutoring on the continent. While Shadow Education in Africa first and foremost speaks to policymakers, given the geographical segmentation of the research in the field, it also appeals to scholars working on shadow education.

The initial chapters stress the urgency and importance of policies to address issues arising from shadow education. Bray discusses the changing role of the state and the perception of private education that contributed to the continuous growth of the sector while simultaneously shifting the financial burden from the state to parents. He stresses the interplay between the weak quality of public education and the eroding salaries of teachers as well as the growing attractiveness of the educational market for commercial providers and individuals.

Chapters 5 and 6 are the most interesting chapters for policymakers and raise some important questions. While, in most countries, private tutoring is perceived as improving the performance of students, it remains unclear whether perception conforms with reality. Teachers who offer private tutoring face a conflict of interest. Improving the quality of their regular teaching not only diminishes the demand for paid private classes; given limited resources and energy, it also reduces the quality of the latter. This situation is exacerbated by a higher degree of respect for private tutors compared to teachers (an important point that requires further investigation, see below) and has led to a number of ethically questionable practices: teachers may deliberately withhold material and neglect their duties during regular classes. Private tutoring may be mandated by institutions to benefit not only the lecturer but the school itself. Such methods directly affect the values that students learn from their supposed role models, particularly if the power relations between teachers and students go as far as sexual abuse of students. Furthermore, shadow education does not only add to the financial burden of families and widen the attainment gap between richer and poorer strata as well as high and low achievers; it also directly puts additional strain on children and leads to fatigue and exhaustion. However, these characteristics of shadow education are not universal, as is demonstrated by notable exceptions Bray discusses, such as South Africa, the Gambia and Benin.

Chapter 6 is, I believe, the strongest chapter in Shadow Education in Africa. Bray not only offers robust policy recommendations and shows that some African countries have been entirely ignored by scholars; he also points to gaps in the existing body of literature. The list of the critical areas in need of more data (particularly the last item) indicates, in my opinion, the most crucially missing aspect in current research: Bray notes the need to analyse “what impact shadow education has on the values of children and parents, teachers, tutors, and the broader society” (p. 51). Yet, I believe it is necessary to extend the scope of this item. Shadow education does not only shape social institutions; in turn, these institutions determine the viability of unethical practices within the context of shadow education. Yet, little can and has been said about the behavioural and normative drivers of shadow education.

Both the literature and Shadow Education in Africa make it clear that not only tutors but also school administrators and principals have a financial interest in preserving this system (as has been shown in the case of Egypt, also discussed on p. 25 in Shadow Education in Africa), which potentially hampers any enforcement of policies to regulate abusive practices. We do not only need to carefully study who
are the stakeholders of shadow education other than tutors; we also need to better understand the incentive structure of those involved. Those who financially benefit from shadow education exploit behavioural biases and coordination failures of parents and students. For example, elsewhere, my co-author and I (see Ille and Peacey 2019) have demonstrated that families in Egypt pay substantial amounts for private tutoring – half of the families in our sample paid more than EGP 1,000 per year and a quarter more than EGP 2,000. Yet, families are still mostly unaware of how much they pay on average, since payments are composed of small but frequent amounts. At the same time, paying for private classes has become a social convention that parents can only challenge collectively, not individually. Many parents therefore rationalise their payments ex post, mainly on the basis that tutors are deserving of the supplementary income given the latter’s small wages. At the same time, we found in our own study that although supplementary income is the main motivation to offer private tuition, regular salaries have negligible impact on the decision. Reputation and public perception, on the other hand, are decisive for tutors. While wage erosion has vitally contributed to the growth of shadow education and exploitative methods in Egypt and elsewhere, merely increasing wages would not be enough to overcome socially accepted and reinforced practices. Bray also highlights some earlier work by Hania Sobhy (2012) on secondary schools in Egypt which illustrates how teachers who teach equally well in regular and private classes are heavily criticised by colleagues. The latter are shown to block attempts by the former to improve the quality of regular teaching because it undermines demand for their tutoring services. In our own research, we have demonstrated that these collective practices become self-reinforcing social conventions, and thus attempts to improve the quality of teaching can be perceived as norm violations and difficult to countermand.

Therefore, in addition to knowing which policies are needed, we have to study how best to implement them. Successful implementation requires an examination of the underlying social factors, norms, and practices in the form of behavioural and experimental research to develop better ways of overcoming social and behavioural inertia.

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1 Ille, S., & Peacey, M. (2019). Forced private tutoring in Egypt: Moving away from a corrupt social norm. *International Journal of Educational Development, 66*, 105–118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.12.003.

2 Sobhy, H. (2012). Education and the production of citizenship in the late Mubarak Era: Privatization, discipline and the construction of the nation in Egyptian secondary schools. PhD Thesis. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK.