

BOOK REVIEW

Bray, M. & Hajar, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Shadow Education in the Middle East: Supplementary tutoring and its policy implications.* London: Routledge.

Reviewed by *Munirah Eskander**



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“Shadow Education in the Middle East: Supplementary Tutoring and Its Policy Implications” by Mark Bray and Anas Hajar (2022) is an insightful exploration of the impact of shadow education in the Middle East. Focusing on the 12 countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, the book provides an informative outlook on the economic and political factors that have contributed to the growth of shadow education. It also offers a helpful overview of global perspectives on this phenomenon, while further addressing some of the advantages and disadvantages it brings to all stakeholders involved. The authors predominantly rely on secondary sources in Arabic and English, supplemented by media reports, interviews, a regional seminar, and other discussions held with colleagues and researchers. By analyzing the impact of shadow education on academic achievement and social inequality, Bray and Hajar (2022) discuss various implications for policymakers, while emphasizing the need for greater regulations and partnerships. As an under-researched form of education, they conclude their work by highlighting the need to “take the topic [of shadow education] out of the shadows” to better understand how it influences students, educators, and policymaking more broadly (p. 94). Through its investigation of the scale and nature of private tutoring in the region, Bray and Hajar’s (2022) work serves as the first of its kind to attempt to map this phenomenon in the Middle East. However, brief contextualisation with regard to cultural and gender-related factors that affect private tutoring and education systems can place a limit on the comprehensiveness of this study. In their book, Bray and Hajar address educational and cultural commonalities that are similar across the 12 countries, specifically referencing the role of Arabic and Islam, which they argue has an effect on existing gender roles and social hierarchies. In addition, they further refer to how cultural features may “shape the tone of educational delivery” in these states (p. 16). However, this section does not elaborate further on the kinds of cultural features that shape the tone of educational delivery, nor does it shed light on the nuances of gender roles or social hierarchies that are shared in common. While few statistics and studies are available on private tutoring in

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A typo in the name of the reviewed book’s second author (Jahar instead of Hajar) was corrected on 22 January 2024.

the region, greater elaboration on the link between culture and education more broadly would have served as useful background information for less well-informed readers. Cultural factors are also mentioned tangentially in relation to how they may affect the supply of shadow education. Focusing more closely on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Bray and Hajar (2022) note that migrant communities often transpose their own distinct cultural perspectives toward private tutoring to their host country. They additionally provide the example of how 17 different curricula have been established in the emirate of Dubai in the UAE alone. However, no cultural attributes unique to these 17 different corresponding countries are identified, as the authors only reflect on how students from some countries may be more inclined to enrol in private tutoring than those from other cultural backgrounds. This makes it difficult to understand the exact differences between cultural attitudes of nationals and non-nationals toward shadow education as well as what any ensuing policy implications may be.

In their work, Bray and Hajar (2022) also briefly discuss the influence of gender on education and private tutoring. They address how, historically, boys have been favoured over girls in formal education, which has been reflected in private tutoring trends. While acknowledging that boys and girls have more equitable access to tutoring in recent years, and noting that girls have been outperforming boys in certain cases, the authors do not reflect on whether there is a link between gender and the *need* for tutoring due to the existence of the reverse gender gap in education. Since data on gender and private tutoring is only provided for five of the 12 countries (three of which are GCC countries), it is difficult to extrapolate further due to the lack of consistency across studies referenced in terms of data collection methods, year of publication, sample size, and the education level of participants.

In addition, while Bray and Hajar reflect briefly on gender segregation, they only do so in relation to how gender segregation may limit private tutoring in one-on-one settings, which may decrease the incidence of child sexual abuse during tutoring sessions. However, this comment suggests that same-sex molestation does not take place and does not provide a nuanced understanding of the role that gender segregation plays in affecting private tutoring or education more broadly. Moreover, news reports covering sexual assault cases abound across Arab countries. Thus, more research could have been done to show the extent to which sexual exploitation occurs in private tutoring in different Arab states, which would also serve as a more powerful reason to better regulate this practice to protect children from predators.

In sum, Bray and Hajar's (2022) work serves an informative and timely study to explore the impact of shadow education in the Middle East. By compiling and reflecting on the available literature on this topic, the authors point to the significance of better understanding and mapping private tutoring practices across the region. Moreover, they point to areas that are more deserving of attention and research, including the nexus between gender, academic achievement, and private tutoring. This book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in education, policymaking, or private tutoring in the Middle East.

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