

Book essay review: Light on the shadows

Shadow Education in Africa: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications (2021) by Mark Bray

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Introduction

Those of us concerned with what happens inside the classroom and the relationship between teaching and learning also often consider contextual influences outside the classroom. Between the classroom and its cultural and social contexts, a grey and often overlooked space is the influence of “shadow education”—not a high priority for many academic researchers, although something in which many do have personal experience. Shadow education is an apt metaphor for an often unclearly demarcated area where economic and social pressures for high-stakes examination success influence parents to take greater control over the educational process by paying for extra tutoring for their children. In Angola and Egypt, this new monograph overviewing shadow education in Africa tells us that over 90% of final secondary students receive or have received private tutoring. Survey figures on primary students range from 29% of South African Grade 6 students, through 46% of upper primary students in Burkina Faso, to 81% of Grade 6 students in Mauritius. Although countries in Southern Africa typically have lower participation rates than the rest of the continent, the indications are that their rates are increasing.

Mark Bray (formerly Director of UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning) was one of the first to recognise shadow education as a global phenomenon (Bray, 1999) and is a leading analyst on this topic. His present monograph—*Shadow Education in Africa: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications* (Bray, 2021)—draws together data from the 54 African member countries of UNESCO, which organisation financed the study as input to its 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report on non-state actors in education. The monograph is concise and commendably short at 73 pages of text plus an executive summary and 26 pages of references. The study brings together disparate information obtained from the extensive literature review, previous field visits in Africa, and a workshop involving 47 educators and administrators from 17 African countries.

“Shadow education,” Bray’s executive summary concludes, “has much expanded in recent decades, and will not go away” (p. xiv). Bray’s analysis throws light on three features in particular. One is the sheer size of the shadow, another is the role of corruption, and the third is the impact of exams. Clearly, something is going on and it directly affects schooling across the whole continent. How concerned should educators be? The answers to that question are somewhat mixed.

Field of study

Shadow education is rather polarising and studies in different parts of the world show varying degrees of enthusiasm for it. A considerable academic literature now exists, including recent studies on “developing” countries with cultural contexts as diverse as Cambodia (Marshall & Fukao, 2019), China (Zhang, 2020), and Uzbekistan (Khaydarov, 2020). Shadow education has become well recognised as a global phenomenon (e.g. Entrich, 2021) but, like the phenomenon it studies, the field lies somewhat outside mainstream school effectiveness and classroom improvement research.

In Africa, terminology for shadow education varies considerably, Bray (pp. 5–8) writes. The terms include “private tutoring” in Kenya and Nigeria, “coaching” in Rwanda and Uganda, *soutien scolaire* in Francophone Africa, and *explicações* in Lusophone countries, while Egypt has a number of specific Arabic names for different modes of delivery. The various labels encompass forms of delivery that involve fee-paying, private, supplementary tutoring. Usually, this extramural teaching is concerned with academic subjects in primary and secondary schools and has a particular focus on improving students’ exam performance. Complex forms of delivery can include various sorts and sizes of companies, and often involve mainstream teachers supplementing their incomes, as well as university students, retirees, and the otherwise unemployed. Study of shadow education does not conventionally consider extramural classes for preservation of minority languages not taught in school, free-of-charge assistance from family and community members, or religious education (such as in madrasas).

Extent in Africa

Quantifying the extent of shadow education, Bray (pp. 13–24) shows, is not easy, especially given an absence of agreed definitions for data collection. A list of 31 studies conducted in 25 nations across Africa during the last two decades indicates considerable levels of shadow education in most of the countries. Commonly, the most recent snapshots in a variety of grades identified that over a third of students were taking part (e.g. in Algeria and Botswana), often over half were (e.g. in Ethiopia and Kenya), while in Angola, Egypt, and Ghana, over 90% were. High usage was reported from most parts of the continent although levels were consistently lower in Southern Africa where Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, and Zimbabwe were all under 20%. There was also considerable variation within countries where such data was available, as in South Africa where the percentage of Grade 6 students receiving private tutoring in 2013 ranged from 10% in Limpopo, to 62% in Free State, with a

national average of 29%. Typically, higher participation rates occur in urban areas and in more prosperous communities where families can better afford the costs. Varying reports occur about participation by gender, the number of hours of tutoring per week, and its spread during the year. Where comparable data are available over time, usage is increasing, including in Botswana, Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, and South Africa.

Types of delivery variably include one-on-one tutoring, school-like teaching to full classes, and large-scale lectures (where, in Egypt, 300–500 students are not unusual). In some countries, such as Morocco, internet delivery is common and use of mobile phones is likely to increase. Face-to-face delivery variously occurs in tutors' homes, tutorial centres, churches, and mosques. In all contexts, the most popular subjects are maths and languages (variously Arabic, English, French, or Portuguese, according to the country concerned). This is partly because they are core subjects in the exams and partly because they facilitate achievement in other subjects. Beyond this generalisation, Bray (p. 26) notes, much depends on the curriculum, although a tendency also exists for demand for tutoring in science subjects.

Costs and comparisons between countries are difficult to establish, but various studies identify substantial household expenditure; indeed, some estimates were that annual expenditure on tutoring in Egypt exceeded the government's education budget. Such data are crude, but high levels of demand very clearly exist for tutoring and many tutors—trained and untrained—are willing to supply the service.

Supply and demand

What drives demand for shadow education? Bray (pp. 25–30) ascribes the demand to social competition. In essence, the more students receive private tutoring, the more others have to follow suit to keep up, especially when confidence in the quality of schools and teachers is lacking. Families see educational qualifications as a major pathway to either improve or maintain their socioeconomic status and increasingly view schools as inadequate. Mixed parental motives for engaging tutoring can also include their own lack of knowledge of school subjects and a perceived need to keep their children occupied when they cannot themselves provide supervision.

Perceptions about social competition and rising expectations of education have occurred against widespread but slow improvements in access to primary schools in the decades following independence in most countries, subsequent expansion of secondary schooling, increased stratification of tertiary providers, and increasing competition for entry to all levels. High-stakes exams act as gateways between and within levels, determining who is pushed out, who progresses to the next level, and how they are streamed. Even where full progression occurs from primary to post-primary schooling, as in Mauritius, high prestige secondary schools can be selective.

Even though there is considerable official hostility to shadow education in many countries, over the decades it has become more acceptable on the national policy front (pp. 8–11). In the

years following independence, most countries in Africa ambitiously placed strong emphasis on the state role in education, especially to expand access to schooling. Financial constraints and population growth meant governmental provision of primary, then secondary, schooling was an uphill battle in most countries. Shadow education helps relieve that pressure. Top-down policy concerns coincided with the bottom-up parental concerns about meeting strong competition for educational places to better position their children in difficult job markets.

The opportunities for the commercial sector are considerable. Urban areas commonly have a range of suppliers. Most are based locally but some have extensive reach. Bray (pp. 32–35) describes at some length a report by a company promoting educational investment in sub-Saharan Africa (Caerus Capital, 2017). The company considered that investment opportunities were founded in the demographics of a young population, expansion of the middle class, rapid urbanisation, and increasing use of communications technology—all of which could generate considerable opportunities in supplementary education. Prime investment targets were said to be South Africa then Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Liberia. Commercial opportunities could range from franchising established educational brands to development of small and medium-sized companies. Caerus Capital viewed the potential for educational investments in sub-Saharan Africa as being USD 0.4–0.5 billion, generating revenues of 15–20%.

Economic realities

Lest the gentle reader be shocked by the volume of dollars predicted by Caerus Capital, and whatever the merits of its specific claims, they are consistent with other reports. Bray (pp. 35–36) notes several studies indicating extensive and sometimes quite innovative commercial operations in African education, and international literature has discussed the emergence of the *global education industry* (e.g. Moeller, 2020; Mohamed & Morris, 2019; Verger et al., 2016; Wolhuter & van der Walt, 2019). In international policy arenas, as neoliberalism took hold in the 1990s, private sector provision of education became not just a pragmatic response to pressure on state provision, but also an ideological position that continues to operate in support of Western economic and political interests (Guthrie, 2021b, pp. 35–39). Delivery of education aid activities has increasingly been taken over by a network of private sector and commercialised university interests. Internationally, the industry is embedded in all stages of policy making, delivery, and monitoring that revolve around the selling for profit of dubious “best global practices.” Developed countries exercise soft power and obtain hard currency, their universities increase financial strength, and their academics find employment.

The nexus of donor aid programmes and the education industry can disadvantage local providers while projecting a progressive academic and policy worldview that aligns with cultural imperialism. Indeed, in Australia the head of IDP Education (the commercial marketing arm of Australian universities) was, in 2019, Australia’s highest-paid chief executive, taking away AUD 38 million (in considerable part as shares gained) when IDP became a publicly listed company (Khadem, 2020). Much less well remunerated, teachers in

Africa have considerable involvement in shadow education as tutors so that demand for tutors has been met by supply.

Supply of tutoring by teachers occurs with many variations around the continent, but especially in rural areas in the absence of commercial providers. Pressure on families to fund private tutoring can increase where teachers demand rights to provide it to supplement low and eroding salaries. Surveys variously show that teachers sometimes justify this in terms of the importance of exam performance to students' futures; sometimes the justification is to complete overloaded syllabuses or to provide remedial work for those falling behind. All this generates and shapes the types of tutoring that occur, especially towards the end of secondary schooling. Quite commonly, when teachers are the tutors, delivery occurs in schools, with or without official approval. Where delivery occurs in schools with official approval, a high proportion of the income typically goes to the teachers, some to the school, and some can also go to administrators in the system.

Corruption

The sheer size of the shadow stands out in Bray's monograph; so too, does the role of corruption. The positioning of teachers and their organisations generates potential for conflicts of interest and for corruption, especially given that considerable amounts of money can be involved.

An opaque phrase in the executive summary refers to "an opportunity to steer the shadow education sector before it gets engrained in cultures" (p. ix). This alludes to remediation of several downsides expanded upon later in the report (pp. 42–46). Many examples of corruption are given. For example, in a 2013 Egyptian survey, where tutoring can officially occur in schools, teachers explained that they had to make periodic gifts to key administrators, and some school principals imposed "fees" on teachers for showing leniency over teacher absenteeism, poor teaching, and toleration of veiled coercion of students to enrol in tutoring. In Egypt, Kenya, and Zanzibar, anecdotal evidence of coercion also occurs: teachers can open tutorial centres alongside their regular duties, absent themselves from classes, or teach ineffectively and then ask their students to join extra classes. In Kenya, a parent reported that teachers can omit vital content in school and ask parents to pay for extra tuition. Cases were also reported of schools that made holiday coaching compulsory and refused students reentry to school if they did not pay the fee. The extent of such matters is difficult to determine but the examples seem genuine.

Other downsides include backwash effects such as competition between shadow education and schooling. In many places, Bray further discusses, teachers want to teach in subjects that demand tutoring, in higher grades, and in communities with sufficiently affluent parents—all of which contributes to teacher shortages in less favoured areas and subjects. Widespread allegations include that teachers can neglect their regular duties to devote their energies to private tutoring. In Zimbabwe, one report was that teachers created separate groups in their classes and paid special attention to those whom they tutored. Teachers in Kenya, where there

is official disapproval of the use of schools, can provide tutoring out-of-school to avoid being found out in the face of official disapproval. The generation of psychological pressures on students—pushed by their parents and becoming overburdened with homework from both teachers and tutors—has been described as burnout, even child labour. Private tutoring can also open opportunities for sexual abuse.

Abuses of shadow education are symptomatic of wider societal problems, including poverty and corruption. Likewise, the ability of families in more prosperous communities to pay for shadow education generates an inherent socioeconomic bias that facilitates social class formation. As Bray writes, backwash effects include adding to educational inequalities:

Since in practice shadow education is more commonly accessed by students who are already higher achievers, it is much more likely to increase gaps than reduce them. In turn, these disparities raise challenges at the classroom and school levels as well as at the system level. (p. 47)

The underlying issue is that social and educational inequalities are not a function of shadow education alone. Its downsides reflect the nature of the school systems and the societies in which they exist. Corruption, especially, should be dealt with strongly in shadow education as elsewhere. However, political attacks on shadow education run the risk of creating a public sideshow that can deliberately divert attention from inequalities and from wider corruption in schools and in society and, ironically, place corruption further in the shadows.

Examinations

Despite actual and potential abuses, the upside of shadow education is indicated by expanding demand, in large part because it is perceived as contributing to exam success. This leads to the third feature highlighted by Bray's analysis: the impact of exams. The evidence about actual improvements in academic performance from tutoring is very limited, but several widespread surveys indicate that students usually perceive it as improving their knowledge or study skills (pp. 40–42). The major function of high-stakes exams is selection and, as Bray notes, they can reward diligent students regardless of their home or school circumstances. Further discussion of exams and the problems that go with them (pp. 52–55) indicates that exams exacerbate issues arising from the structure of schooling and unequal access to it. Long-standing academic criticism of the “diploma disease” (Dore, 1976; Little, 1997) does not appear to have influenced this social reality in Africa.

Exam systems and shadow education respond to competition for education, channel students through the system, and reinforce social and economic inequality. External selection exams become especially important at the end of primary and secondary schooling if they decide students' future in the formal education system or subsequent employment. As a sidebar, we can note that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's PISA and the TIMSS international testing regimes are not a substitute for high-stakes public exams. These regimes test student achievement against international standards that may or may not conform with each country's intended or implemented curricula. The measures are of system

performance rather than individual student progress and they do not have a selection function for further education or employment, which is the role of the public exam systems that shadow education supplements.

Many technical critiques of exams are founded in progressive curricular challenges to formalistic teaching and related disapproval of exams that test factual knowledge rather than higher-order thinking skills. Such challenges occur predominantly in Anglophone-influenced countries. My own literature survey (Guthrie, 2021a, pp. 235–238) estimated that progressive curriculum policy take-up was much lower in Northern sub-Saharan Africa (0%), Western Africa (18%), and Central Africa (0%), where Francophone and Islamic educational influences prevail, than in the predominantly Anglophone Eastern Africa (64%) and Southern Africa (91%). There is no evidence of sustained adoption of progressive methods by classroom teachers anywhere in the continent, nor of successful challenges to exam systems. Over time, many examples occur of exam-led teaching and its social and cultural foundations even where progressive or neoliberal curricular pressures exist, for example, in Botswana (Tabulawa, 1997, 1998, 2004), Ghana (Brooke, 1980; Zimmerman, 2011), Malawi (Ginsburg, 2009), and Tanzania (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2013). Intended reformist curricula based on national policy are usually neither implemented by teachers nor tested by exams. Indeed, Bray notes (p. 55) that one of the unintended outcomes of curriculum reforms is that new approaches often lead to parents being unable to provide subject support at home and teachers identifying need for supplementary tutoring to complete the syllabus.

Despite all these issues, especially reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities, the examination system offers hope to the poor. Public exams in mainstream schools are a high-stakes opportunity that might provide a rare, and hopefully corruption-free, chance for upward mobility, escape from poverty, and the capacity to support family; indeed, somewhat like lotteries, they offer hope. Whatever the content validity of public exams (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019), they have cultural validity (Guthrie, 2021b, pp. 72–74). As Bray puts it in economic terms, “the marketplace to some extent sends signals about what families want and are even willing to pay for” (p. 55).

Implications

While the available data are improving, there are major gaps. Some countries appear to have no data and only Egypt and Mauritius have relatively more information, Bray notes. However, while filling data gaps is important enough, it is not fundamental to the underlying issue. This is the ongoing need to improve the quality of and accessibility to schooling, especially for disadvantaged sectors of society, and there is plenty of data about that. Undoubtedly, many aspects of shadow education are problematic but it could provide a stimulus for state systems to improve their performance.

How far should government regulation of shadow education go? Can regulation be more than window dressing? Some African countries, including Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, have taken regulatory action about tutorial centres. In Ethiopia, registration of centres

identifies requirements about facilities, location, tutors' qualifications and experience, the curriculum, timing and duration of classes and their sizes. The complexities are considerable: over-prescription of requirements can lead to non-compliance, implementation and enforcement can be costly, and regulation of online programmes is difficult to enforce. Several African countries have also attempted to regulate teachers' involvement, including unsuccessful attempts to prohibit serving teachers from providing tutoring (pp. 59–63). Most regulatory efforts are punitive, although a more creative effort in Zanzibar allowed schools to offer extra teaching after hours for a fee, which at least could channel payments to supplement teachers' salaries and take pressure off over-stretched government budgets. In effect, the opportunity could be taken to anticipate issues in countries where shadow education is not yet entrenched. However, important though controlling abuses is, no overriding prescription exists about regulations and their enforcement. Shadow education varies considerably from country to country and continues to evolve. Governments have widely differing attitudes to it, and each country's approach needs to be appropriate to its own context.

Conclusion

Bray provides a considerable service in bringing together such a wide range of information and throwing light on shadow education across the whole of Africa. The source data is often patchy but the monograph provides a coherent and insightful overview. The resulting picture is very mixed. Clearly, there is demand for and supply of shadow education, but it has many downsides. So, how concerned should educators be?

The phlegmatic social realism in which my own reactions to Bray's analysis are based interprets shadow education as a manifestation of deeper issues, not as an aberration. Neither the corruption that can be associated with some tutoring, nor the exam pressures that shadow education feeds on, would disappear from society were shadow education eliminated. There is no doubt whatsoever that many abuses need rectification. However, the most fundamental issue involves improvement of educational quality in schools, especially in poorer communities where families cannot afford tutoring. This is where educators can make the most constructive long-term contribution.

Teachers struggling to survive on inadequate incomes and parents trying to do the best by their children have legitimate grounds for their involvement in shadow education. Many tutors appear to do their work faithfully and well, and many parents and students appear to be satisfied with their investments of money and time. Shadow education is here to stay—in Africa as elsewhere.

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