

BOOK REVIEW

Shadow Education in Myanmar: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Policy Implications. By: Mark Bray, Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze & Ora Kwo (2020), 134 pages. ISBN 9789292236496/ 9789881424181. Paris/Hong Kong: UNESCO/ CERC.

Myanmar's education sector is challenging. Embodying paternalistic attitudes, a rote concept of knowledge, and receiving little funding, the system of education in Myanmar has a stunting effect on the development of the country. Part of this system is the customary practice of 'tuition'—i.e., out-of-school academic support, or shadow education. Tuition in Myanmar, while not compulsory for students, has been embedded in Myanmar's education system for generations. Bray et al provide a much-needed analysis of this readily observed but often overlooked aspect of education in Myanmar.

The text, produced as a book, effectively reads as a research report. Chapters one and two provide the necessary conceptual and cultural context in which Bray et al conducted their research. In chapter one shadow education (SE) is considered in a global context across a range of countries, with commonalities being that SE is widespread across regions and continents, occurs at all levels of household income, and exists throughout education systems from primary through to tertiary levels.

The second chapter provides a brief summary of Myanmar's history, social and economic features, the changes taking place in the education system, the pedagogy employed, and the structures of SE tuition. Here, the authors importantly report that teachers felt that their classes were too large and their salaries too low, and that for those reasons SE tuition was an attractive way for teachers to experience smaller classes and supplement their income. Also important is the authors' pointing to three key reasons why rote learning continues to dominate local pedagogical practices. First, teachers are themselves products of the traditional rote-based system. Second, the examination system encourages rote-learning. Third, alternative approaches, such as the child-centred classroom, are time-consuming. These points are symptomatic of a dated and under-resourced system.

These points are important. But chapter two also raises several questions. The authors list the major 'races' in Myanmar (p. 13), pointing to the commonly quoted and colonial-based taxonomy of over a hundred national 'races' (*taingyintha*). But the idea of 'race', both in general and in the specific context of Myanmar, remains unexamined. The idea of *taingyintha* is politically potent in Myanmar, and since education is inherently political, it warrants deeper consideration. Without such consideration, the text is open to being interpreted as tacitly maintaining the status quo of structural violence that these 'racial' divisions create. On this political note, the authors also refer to article 28 of Myanmar's 2008 constitution, but this is not interrogated. Of particular curiosity is the adverbial nature of article 28(a), the inclusion of 'national people' in article 28(b), and the assumptions incorporated in notions of 'correct thinking' and 'good moral character' in article 28(d). On a different note, the authors go on to indicate the attendance rate of students from primary school to middle- and high-school, in which male students are "pushed out" faster than females (pp. 15, 16). But, this push factor is not explained, and pull factors are not considered. Similarly, it is widely noted and easy to verify the predominance of female teachers in Myanmar, which the authors point to with a rate of 86.7% of female teachers at the secondary level. This is an important point, but in this chapter dedicated to the socio-economic factors influencing education, this point is left unexamined. This statistic of 86.7% manifests from deeper social values that shape the structure of Myanmar's education system. Digging a little deeper to identify factors that contribute to this statistic would add value to the text, to the research conclusions, and to the audience's understanding of the issues at play.

Chapter three outlines the methods used in the research. The research used a stratified random sampling design sourcing both quantitative and qualitative data sets. Stratification proceeded according to administrative levels, starting from a list of schools at the Regional (Yangon) level, through District to Township levels, after which schools were then randomly chosen. At the level of schools, sampling of respondents then became a matter of convenience. At this point, it is worth noting that the scope of the research was limited to the Yangon Region. The stated reason for this is that SE is apparently less common in rural and remote locations. This reason is supported by prior research that employed a purposive sampling approach and is thus not generalisable, and on ‘informal evidence’ that is equally unable to be generalised. With the supporting reason in question, it is then unfortunate that the geographical scope of the research was limited to Yangon Region. This Region contains the country’s major commercial metropolis and is not representative of the country since approximately 70% of Myanmar’s population live in rural areas and 30% in urban areas, while in Yangon this number is effectively inverted with 70% of Yangon Region living in urban areas and 30% in rural areas. This, together with multidimensional poverty being least prevalent in Yangon Region and most prevalent in rural States and Regions, causes this reader to question the ability of the research to have implications for other parts of the country.

Chapter four provides a platform for students and parents to share their voices. There are two notable virtues to this chapter. First, the streaming system (science or arts stream) used in Myanmar’s basic education schooling is explicitly identified, as is the levels used in year groups, ranging from ‘A’ for the highest to ‘K’ for the lowest. The rate of SE tuition is unsurprisingly found to be most frequent for students in the highest levels and less frequent for students in the lower levels. This tends to make it difficult for students to climb the academic ladder. Second, the chapter is studded with numerous extended quotations from respondents, which together paint a vivid picture of students’ and parents’ experiences of SE in Myanmar. Qualitative insights such as this add value to the research and the broader literature.

Chapter five moves on to teachers’ perspectives. “[F]ew teachers can afford their living expenses without tuition” (p. 61) remarks one principal. This is common knowledge in Myanmar, and is confirmed by 79.3% of teacher respondents in the authors’ research. Close to two-thirds of teachers report that they do not encourage rote learning, though this practice remains widespread as a traditional teaching method, especially in rural areas. Interestingly, a good portion (40%) of teachers felt that SE tuition “encouraged critical thinking about cause and effect” (p. 66). However, critical thinking has long been a buzzword in Myanmar, though with relatively little understanding of its logical and evidence-based dimensions. It would be interesting to read the Burmese translation used for ‘cause and effect’ to gauge any connotations and if it was conceptually related to the Burmese Buddhist notion of *kan* (karma). A particular curiosity is the line of questioning involving teachers’ “perceptions of principal’s attitudes” (pp. 71, 108). The primary data collected here is the respondent’s speculative interpretation of another’s attitude. It is unsurprising to find a disparity between teachers and students regarding this question, which the authors account for by way of an equally speculative modal verb on three occasions. For this reader, it is unclear what value this speculative data provides.

Chapter six shifts focus to policy implications. The authors note that community dialogue and public participation are key to developing alternative practices that reduce the negative impact of SE tuition and strengthen the learning outcomes of the regular classroom (p. 77). To that end, the authors mention that “the public should pay some collective attention to interrelationships between sectors and ensure that teachers receive needed support” (p. 93). This is a reasonable recommendation, but the context of Myanmar makes it difficult in reality. Civic support networks are strong in Myanmar, but the public sphere is weak, and it is the public sphere and communicative action that is required for the kind of attention the authors refer to. The authors’ observation is followed-up in practical terms by focusing on school principals as education team leaders and policy mediators. Yet, in Myanmar school heads (principals or rectors) will typically conform to the

requirements set by the Ministry of Education due to the long-established centralised command and control structure of governance.

Shadow Education in Myanmar was published in 2020. In February 2021 Myanmar's military enacted a coup d'état of the elected civilian government. The result of this is that the delivery of public education services and multilateral education projects will now have a lighter impact than previously envisioned. This deeply lamentable political upheaval tends to enhance the value of research into Myanmar's SE system, and of Bray et al's text, since the SE system has long been a feature of the formal education system and, owing to the coup, there is little likelihood in it featuring any less in the near future. If this research is replicated in the future, value would be added by increasing the scope of the research in all respects—especially geographical coverage and cultural context. This would provide education and development actors with vital information and a deeper understanding of the socio-economic complexities involved in Myanmar's SE. Bray et al's research is a first step toward providing that information and attaining that understanding.

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