

Review of Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia: Understanding the Meaning, Value, and Use of Shadow Education by East Asian Students

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Abstract

On international tests of academic knowledge, students in East Asian countries typically are among the best in the world. While the public school systems of these societies understandably deserve some recognition for these scholastic achievements, they are also partly the consequence of an extensive array of supplemental tutoring services that are widely used throughout these societies. These services form a thriving educational industry in the private sector that is not so well known to researchers and is thus commonly referred to as shadow education. This essay reviews *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* which is a recent book that provides a highly informative overview of shadow education. Especially many Western social scientists and educational specialists have often overlooked or misunderstood shadow education in East Asia. The history, sociology, and public policy aspects of shadow education are discussed for several different East Asian societies including Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* is an important contribution not only for educational studies but also for the sociology of social stratification and inequality more broadly.

Keywords

Education, Shadow Education, Supplemental Educational Tutoring, East Asia, Educational Administration, School Systems

1. Introduction

East Asian countries typically rank among the top 10 in the world in regard to

average scores on international tests of the academic knowledge of their students. For example, combining average scores on mathematics, science and reading among 15-year-olds as evaluated by the Programme for International Student Assessment tests, Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan were all in the top 10 in 2018 (OECD, 2019). Several of these societies are also highly competitive in international academic competitions such as the International Math and Science Olympiads (Rindermann, 2011).

These high international rankings are arguably compelling testimony to the general success of the public educational systems of those societies (Jessop, 2016). The impressive rankings often engender a certain degree of national pride for their populations and politicians (as well as a bit of envy among other less competitive countries, such as the United States). What is less commonly well known to persons outside of East Asia, however, is that underlying each of these acclaimed public educational systems is a large but generally unacknowledged, private-sector industry that provides supplemental tutoring and a wide array of supportive educational services. Although typically thriving and often highly lucrative, this supplementary educational industry operates mostly in obscurity and independently of the official public school system. The supplementary educational industry is entirely out of the limelight, so to speak, is thus traditionally referred to as shadow education (Stevenson & Baker, 1992; Byun & Park, 2012; Liu, 2012; Zhao, 2019; Zhang & Bray, 2020).

2. Overview

Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia: Understanding the Meaning, Value, and Use of Shadow Education by East Asian Students is a very welcomed contribution that throws substantial light on this important industry that has been largely hidden from view for far too long. The authors, Young Chun Kim and Jung-Hoon Jung, are professors at universities in South Korea where the shadow education (SE) industry is perhaps the most pervasive and highly developed. The book consists of 13 chapters plus an introduction. A total of 15 impressive scholars contributed to this volume which includes separate chapters on SE in Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Young Chun Kim or Jung-Hoon Jung is a coauthor for 7 of the chapters.

In the introduction, Young Chun Kim or Jung-Hoon Jung provide an excellent overview of the major issues relating to SE in East Asia. While various positive, as well as negative aspects, are noted and debated, SE is clearly a critically important phenomenon that cannot continue to be ignored if researchers are to adequately understand education in East Asia. SE is widely used and is commonly accepted in all of these countries. The admired outcomes of their public educational systems cannot be viewed in isolation because SE is undergirding them at every schooling level (Mori & Baker, 2010).

Another important conclusion is highlighted in the introduction and is sup-

ported throughout the evidence considered in the succeeding chapters: the view that students are passive and mindless clogs stuck in an undifferentiated SE pipeline is misleading. SE services are quite varied as well as highly responsive to market demand. Students and parents are actively engaged in utilizing SE most effectively, and they shop around for the services that best fit their studying needs, educational goals, and budget constraints.

SE varies from informal conversational English language classes for young children to institutes for high school students who are intensively preparing for rigorous college entrance exams. SE also includes various online instructional courses, private tutoring either online or at the student's home, different types of after-school learning programs, and varied educational activities that may relate to hobbies and personal interests. SE is often available for persons studying for graduate school admissions, professional exams, occupational licenses, and more specialized work skills. All of these may be customized according to the student's educational situation and financial circumstances. The users of SE constantly evaluate, reconsider, and adjust their participation depending upon their experiences, achieved prior results, and current learning objectives. In deciding how to use SE, students are actively creating their own learning environment even in regard to the actual physical spaces that they go to during the course of a 24-hour day.

Another important contribution of this book is to reveal the more social aspects of SE. Supplementary institutes often have social media groups, clubs, social activities, parties, and ceremonies to help students feel welcomed and integrated. Students may receive personalized coaching evaluating their learning styles and identifying their stumbling blocks. Personalized advice and training can effectively help students to make educational progress which in turn can promote self-efficacy, confidence, psychological stability, and social adjustment.

However, SE services certainly are not free, and this book shows that countries vary in terms of how much SE is regulated including in regard to its costs. A common criticism that is raised in many of the chapters is the potentially high costs of SE especially when utilized to its fullest extent. The associated sociological issue that is then immediately raised is whether SE may exacerbate inequality in educational opportunity to the extent that students from wealthier families have an advantage in using more expensive and more efficacious services. *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* provides a broad overview on a variety of related topics in different countries so definitively addressing this important sociological issue is beyond the scope of the book. Nonetheless, as a recurrent theme throughout the chapters, this issue certainly needs to be more fully investigated in future research.

Some East Asian societies, most notably Singapore, periodically undertake reforms to their formal school system to reduce excessive competition and to promote more "holistic education" that is less focused on obtaining high scores on entrance exams. However, many parents often view these reforms as having

the effect of “lowering standards”. Even when parents appreciate the good intentions of encouraging more “holistic education”, many parents nonetheless feel obliged to use SE so that their children won’t be disadvantaged in the competition to attend better schools. As long as college entrance exams are the dominant criteria for admission into prestigious universities—which are widely seen as the key cornerstone to achieving career success later on as adults—most parents seem to believe that SE is an inevitable necessity for their children. Indeed, SE has even become slightly more popular after such reforms are implemented because some parents come to feel that the revised studies at public schools are lacking sufficient rigor.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

In regard to future research, comparing the cultural and national context of shadow education in East Asia in contrast to other countries would be a fruitful area of investigation. The parental responses towards SE as described in this book are likely embedded in the broader societal culture. As is noted throughout most of the chapters, all of the societies considered in this book in fact share some connection with a Confucian cultural heritage. As such, education by tradition is highly valued, and education is seen as the major avenue for upward social mobility. Competitive exams are considered integral to the hierarchical schooling system in East Asian societies. While the final chapter of the book briefly considers SE usage in non-Asian countries, understanding the significance of the Confucian and other cultural contexts is an important topic for future research.

Another significant area for further study is more specifically analyzing the connections between SE and its value or effects on labor force productivity. For example, using recent data for China, Zhao (2019) finds that SE enhances cognitive skill but not non-cognitive skill. If SE thereby directly increases economic productivity by way of advancing cognitive skills, then assessing the strength of this relationship would be quite relevant for public policy regulating the usage and costs of SE.

Those areas for future research are anticipated in the discussions contained in *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* which takes the first step in organizing and summarizing knowledge about SE in its most endemic region of the world. This book is highly informative for revealing the hidden underside of educational systems that are often praised for achieving superior academic outcomes. As convincingly argued by that volume, studying the latter without considering SE is potentially misleading. While SE has both pros and cons, *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* conclusively shows that SE needs to be more explicitly acknowledged and carefully studied in order to more fully understand its effects and supportive roles for public schooling systems as well as for the productivity of the labor force.

For this reason, this book is important not only for scholars who are interest-

ed in East Asia, but also for other educational researchers who seek a deeper understanding of the potential that private tutoring services have for advancing the ideals and objectives of public educational institutions. East Asia is only the most obvious case, but SE is certainly relevant and is to some extent already present in educational systems all around the world. Particularly in this era when the United States and some other Western nations are reducing the role of competitive exams in their school systems (Cashin, 2021), *Theorizing Shadow Education and Academic Success in East Asia* is must reading in order to better appreciate alternative policies.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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