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### Shadow education in the Netherlands

*The position of shadow education in the educational landscape and students' school careers*

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#### Publication date

2021

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Jansen, D. (2021). *Shadow education in the Netherlands: The position of shadow education in the educational landscape and students' school careers*.

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# Chapter 6

## General discussion and conclusion

In the Netherlands, as in many countries, the use of shadow education is growing, raising several questions about its position and function. Shadow education refers to fee-based, organized, out-of-school learning activities that provide students with instruction or guidance in school subjects (Bray, 1999). In this dissertation, I engaged in a confirmation of the remedial, competitive, and compensatory functions that shadow education fulfills, as well as an exploration of other functions it may (un)intentionally fulfill for secondary education students. Furthermore, I also explored the distribution of educational responsibilities among schools, families, and tutors in Dutch secondary education. In this final chapter, I present an overview of the main findings, outline the contributions of my research to the study of shadow education, and detail its limitations and suggestions for future research. I conclude by presenting what my findings mean for educational practice.

## SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

In Chapter 2, I asked to what extent students' social background, in terms of parental education and parental income, is associated with their use of shadow education. Moreover, I was interested in discovering whether the relationship between SES and achievement is mediated by shadow education, and whether this relationship varies according to indicators of institutional structure and quality. To study these research questions, I applied MASEM (Cheung & Chan, 2005), examining effect sizes (correlations) representing associations between SES, shadow education use, and achievement outcomes in 62 existing studies. In doing so, I distinguished between family income and educational level as indicators of SES. The argument for establishing a relationship between family income and the use of shadow education is straightforward: a higher family income generates more financial resources to invest in shadow education. The argument for relating parental level of education to the use of shadow education is that higher educated parents are more likely to aspire to higher education for their children (cf. Sewell et al., 1969), which would render them more likely to invest in their children's education (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2019).

My findings show that, across the 62 examined studies, it is particularly parents' educational attainment that relates to shadow education use, pointing to shadow education as a tool for the transmission of social privileges across generations (Byun et al., 2018; Entrich, 2020). Furthermore, I found that the positive relationship between parental educational level and shadow education use is more pronounced for students in upper secondary education. This relationship holds regardless of the quality of schooling. I found no support for a relationship between shadow education and achievement, which is in part attributed to the high level of

heterogeneity among and within tutoring programs. Engaging in a meta-analysis of this kind revealed several shortcomings as to how programs are measured and defined. I showed that when a specific measure for a program is used (e.g., one-on-one tutoring), effects can be more robust than when a general measure is used (e.g., participation in shadow education: yes/no).

In Chapter 3, I focused on the Dutch upper secondary school context. I tested one frequently cited hypothesis regarding shadow education: that its use is related to increasing pressures to perform in examinations (Exley, 2020, 2021; Zwier et al., 2020). Whereas cross-national research has provided some support for this hypothesis (Baker et al., 2001; Zwier et al., 2020), selectivity is measured using proxies that are not transposable, or are only weakly transposable, from one country to another. To examine this hypothesis within one national context, I capitalized on the opportunity provided by a change in the Dutch educational system in 2011, when performance standards in secondary education were raised. Before 2011, previous school grades could be used to compensate for failing the nationwide exit exams. After 2011, this possibility was reduced, when the average nationwide exit test scores started requiring a passing mark (i.e., above 5.5 on a scale from 1 [very poor] to 10 [excellent]) with only one non-passing grade allowed in the core subjects of mathematics, English, and Dutch. This change, I argued, creates a control group of students with lower pressures to perform, which we can compare to those taking their exam after 2011, who experienced higher pressure to perform. Using data from a national cohort study on 2,502 students, I applied PSM to obtain two cohorts that are as similar as possible on a selection of covariates, such as SES, performance, ability, and motivation. I showed that the exam policy change relates to an increase in shadow education use, at least for the matched sample of exam-year students. This chapter provides country-specific indications for the relationship between the design of the educational system and shadow education use, which, in Chapter 2, I had shown to exist cross-nationally.

In Chapter 4, I explored students' goals when attending shadow education, what benefits they experience from attendance, and how they relate their goals and experienced benefits to their home and school context. Whereas similar studies have been conducted in other countries, such as the United Kingdom (Hajar, 2018), no empirical research exists on how students in the Netherlands experience and reflect on their tutoring use. I conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with secondary education students, not only those who used homework support (Dutch: *huiswerkbegeleiding*) or one-on-one tutoring (Dutch: *bijles*), but also those who used a type of shadow education that is more hybrid, containing elements of both homework support and tutoring. I asked what students hoped to get out of shadow education (i.e., their goals) and what it offered them (i.e., their perceived benefits).

The results show that students attach goals to shadow education, such as boosting performance or receiving career support. In their responses to the benefits experienced from tutoring attendance, students also mentioned the benefits of being better prepared for school exams and asking more questions in the classroom. It is interesting to note that, despite being offered the opportunity to do so, no student mentioned having limited free time due to tutoring or experiencing pressures to perform. Moreover, in describing their goals and perceived benefits, students positioned shadow education as a unique learning space that both plays a physical role in offering a quiet place to study and a symbolic role in offering support that neither parents nor teachers provide. These comments lead me to conceptualize shadow education as a “third place” between school and home, drawing on Oldenburg’s (1999) ideas about the emergence of a place that is separated from the home atmosphere (i.e., the first place) and the school atmosphere (i.e., the second place).

In Chapter 5, building on this idea of the “third place,” I asked what distribution of educational responsibilities teachers, tutors, and parents consider as ideal, and what such distribution looks like in practice. In five school-based focus groups, I placed a physical triangle in the room to invite respondents to move around responsibilities regarding student learning and discuss what they believe the pedagogical and educational tasks of schools, tutors, and parents are or should be. The results show that two related tensions arise during role allocation: the normative question of whether a tripartite configuration that includes tutoring should be accepted or defied, and increased concerns about tutoring not being equally accessible to students from all social classes. Although the latter issue remained unresolved during the conversations, most respondents could explicate their distribution of responsibilities and find ways to work together under an emerging tripartite configuration.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the previous section, I summarized my findings. In what follows, I bring these findings together to draw a bigger picture of the question raised in the introductory chapter: what is shadow education, and what does it look like in Dutch educational practice, in terms of its position and function in this context?

### **What shadow education is: an umbrella term**

The meta-analysis in Chapter 2 shows that although shadow education is an attractive and understandable metaphor, arguably “shadow” has become an umbrella term with no clear meaning. Zhang and Bray (2020) echo this statement,

pointing to the argument that better operationalization of the shadow is needed. To provide an example from this research project: the initial proposal for the meta-analysis was to study and test a comprehensive model in which multiple individual-level (e.g., SES, prior achievement) and system-level predictors (e.g., tracking, standardization) lead to the prevalence of shadow education and, in turn, result in multiple individual-level (e.g., achievement by SES) and system-level (e.g., performance differentials by SES) outcomes. Reading over 400 empirical studies on shadow education soon curtailed our ambitions: few authors provided detailed information on the types of programs being examined, nor were correlations provided for the variables of interest. Thus, my findings resonate with what Malik (2017) once asserted: “the field seems to be building more floors upwards before looking at the foundation and strengthening it” (p. 19). My work identifies the need to go back to the foundations, describe the programs being examined in detail (cf. Zhang & Bray, 2020), and to shed light on the development of participating students—be it academic or non-academic development—to contrast such development with that of non-participating students or those participating in a program that differs in a characteristic of interest.

### **What shadow education looks like in Dutch educational practice: a hybrid field**

For better operationalization of shadow education, my research outlines some of the specific features unique to the Dutch context. Based on the tutoring cases included in Chapters 4 and 5, which are also described in a practice-based publication (Elffers et al., 2019), I observed one central feature of the Dutch shadow education landscape: the existence of hybrid forms of shadow education. These forms do not focus on one specific goal or target group, can be at the intersection of different functions, or have several providers who cooperate in executing the offerings (Elffers et al., 2021). Dutch commercial companies have, for instance, been collaborating with schools to allow groups of students to participate in their offerings free of charge via subsidies (Elffers et al., 2021). More targeted evaluations and conceptualizations on these hybrid programs in the Dutch context and abroad, seem justified, preferably in comparison to the more traditional types of fee-based tutoring.

### **Shadow education: understanding the new player in the educational landscape**

In Chapter 2, I point to the predictive power of parental level of education on shadow education across institutional contexts, especially in upper secondary school. For the Dutch context, in Chapter 3, I show that raising performance standards on the exam during this period (i.e., the end of secondary school) has a strong relationship to shadow education use. Previous studies have either used

large-scale assessment data, such as PISA to compare countries on the prevalence, predictors, and outcomes of shadow education use (e.g., Byun et al., 2018), or conducted a country-specific analysis on the relationship between institutional characteristics of educational systems and shadow education use (Byun, 2014; Guill & Lintorf, 2019). This dissertation combines both research strands, simultaneously studying shadow education across multiple countries and within one specific country. One of the lessons I draw from such an endeavor is that shadow education is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather one that requires an understanding of how the primary institutions (i.e., home and school) are organized and function. To explain my findings, below, I detail some of these functions and their relationship to shadow education use.

One of the central functions of education is to prepare students for the labor market (Van de Werfhorst, 2014; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010), where employers increasingly value credentials such as a university degree. As others also possess the same credential, students and parents aim to improve their relative standing in the educational competition (cf. Halliday, 2016). In doing so, families can feel pressure to perform well academically, as the risk of not doing so may translate to downward social mobility, which according to relative risk aversion (RRA), all individuals, regardless of their social class, wish to avoid (cf. Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). Students from lower classes will reach the same educational level as their parents sooner than their counterparts from higher classes (Guerrero, 2020; Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). Individuals from higher social classes generally need more education than their lower-class counterparts to avoid social demotion (Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). Thus, they may “rationally” invest in shadow education, increasing their chances to stay in the educational system longer than their lower-class counterparts with equal ability. Moreover, as a form of transmitting cultural capital, higher-class parents are believed to “hover over their children” (Lareau, 2003, p. 165) by inquiring about their performance, keeping close contact with the school, or intervening in their child’s education through, for instance, employing private tutors (Ying & Wright, 2021). In doing so, shadow education becomes more prevalent during the transition from one level to another, as these are key moments when social demotion is likely (Enrich, 2018, 2020; Enrich & Lauterbach, 2019). Next to this theoretical explanation for my findings, there is also a more normative one: as tutoring prevalence rises, families can come to see shadow education as a typical activity that is expected from a “good” parent (Byun et al., 2018).

Another central function of education is the promotion of equal educational opportunities, which refers to individuals having equal chances to obtain a particular position within the educational hierarchy (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs,

2010). My findings in Chapters 2 and 3 confirm Holloway and Kirby's (2020) assertion, that policy, free markets, and consumer behavior intersect with one another to create market forces that form a basis for the reproduction of inequality. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the use of shadow education can be related to the effectively maintained inequality hypothesis (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2019; Lucas, 2001). Upper-class parents find a way towards social distinction, for instance, by buying more shadow education of higher quality than their lower-educated counterparts. In this sense, lower-class parents cannot "keep up" with purchasing more and better shadow education, resulting in maintained inequality (Lucas, 2001). Currently, large scale datasets are used to test social reproduction theories, but these datasets rarely include information on shadow education use. When they do, the available measurements are often not accurate enough<sup>vi</sup> (Bray et al., 2020) to draw valid inferences about SES gaps in tutoring access (i.e., inequality in educational opportunities) or inequality in outcomes (Choi & Park, 2016; Kang & Park, 2021). Either way, this dissertation demonstrates that studying inequality of educational opportunities without accounting for educational phenomena such as shadow education would be similar to what Renzulli (2014) described as studying the "sociology of schools rather than the one of education" (p. 150).

### **The functions of shadow education in students' school careers: the third place and its execution by schools, shadow education, and families**

In Chapter 4, I describe that, in students' view, shadow education adds to home and school life. In other words, the practice introduces a new layer in education that does not replace the old, but adds to it (Exley, 2021; Thelen, 2003). Students' reflections on the goals and benefits of tutoring attendance can help us understand what this layer looks like. Students not only focused on how learning content was presented by tutors, but also how these tutors provided challenges and support for students to achieve their longer-term goals, such as pursuing a career in a particular domain. These ideas align with the way Guill et al. (2020a) describe private tutoring classes: as one-on-one or small-group settings where material covered in school lessons is

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<sup>vi</sup> The items on shadow education in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are discussed in detail by Bray et al. (2020). PISA 2012 is used by various authors (Byun et al., 2018; Entrich, 2020; Zwier et al., 2021), as it includes a question on the use of out-of-school classes organized by a commercial company and paid for by parents. Other waves of PISA (2006, 2009, 2015) and TIMSS (1995, 2003, 2015) are less valuable to answer questions regarding shadow education, as they ask students about their participation in general (both public and private) out-of-school lessons.

revised, expanded, and repeated until students' understanding is enhanced, which is also a central goal of regular classroom instruction (Guill et al., 2020a; Kim & Jung, 2019). Thus, shadow education seems to be an educational space where independent agents—students, parents, and tutors—co-facilitate student learning. This does not necessarily imply that tutoring is on par or in competition with schools. However, my findings do signal that tutoring is a learning space that requires the intellectual attention of educational theorists (Kim, 2016).

To contribute to this theorizing, I discuss the idea of a third place, which, to the best of my knowledge, is the first time this concept was introduced in the student-level shadow education literature. Oldenburg (1999) refers to third places as public, accessible, community-based spaces, which at first might seem at odds with the fee-based nature of shadow education. However, my findings align with Oldenburg's ideas, as he conceptualizes places as social constructs that are developed out of a need to provide what the primary and secondary places cannot offer. As shown in Chapter 4, although students try to study at home, an alternative, quiet place to study is appreciated and is thus—through shadow education—created based on the existing needs of parents and students.

Whereas students in other studies mentioned that shadow education provides an unfair advantage in the educational competition (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015; Hajar, 2018), the students in my sample did not seem to be concerned with gaining a competitive advantage over others. Moreover, unlike earlier studies such as those by Yung (2020) or Kwo and Bray (2014), students' focus on using shadow education was not only on academic achievement but also on academic-adjacent outcomes, such as learning to plan their schoolwork for an upcoming exam or being confident enough to ask more questions in class. Hajar (2018) has pointed towards final-year primary students in the United Kingdom experiencing pressures to achieve on an exam, which they identified as the reason for attending private tutoring. My results differ from Hajar (2018) as I studied a sample of secondary education students who had already faced a decisive selection moment in Dutch education: the transition from primary to secondary education. It could be that students in the final year of primary education do experience the pressure to pass the exam as stressful, and shadow education could help relieve such stress. My sample also included students in their final year of secondary education, when students faced an upcoming exam. Yet these students also described shadow education as a dedicated place to study. So far, a focus on the role of shadow education as a physical place is absent in shadow education research.

In the introduction, I pointed towards a tension regarding the functions shadow education may intentionally and unintentionally fulfill: contributing to student learning and presenting a potential threat to educational equality (Luo &

Forbes, 2019; Wang & Bray, 2016). As argued by Exley (2021), countries can become “locked-in” to such tension, in which tutoring markets escalate and become “irreversible,” such as in the South Korean case (p. 4). The findings in Chapter 5 show that in some cases, schools and providers of shadow education explicate their roles and responsibilities, and that when such explication occurs, the tension between respondents’ ideals and their practice can be discussed. That is, although inequality of educational opportunities was mentioned as something that persists, stakeholders discussed what they do and do not expect from each other concerning this problem.

Based on my findings in Chapter 5, I empirically tested the relationship between schools, families, and shadow education, which is often presented in the literature as competitive or compensatory (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015), but is rarely structurally examined. My findings show that schools, families, and tutors not so much see themselves as actors competing for space in the ecosystem (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015), but rather as stakeholders that try to find a suitable configuration. In this configuration, collaboration is sometimes considered conceivable and as contributing to student learning. However, that does not mean that schools, parents, and shadow education *should* form a triad. Some secondary schools consider it problematic for shadow education to take any role in students’ school careers, and some schools actively seek out solutions other than shadow education for student support, such as community or after-school programs. Indeed, some respondents explicitly stated that shadow education is just *one of the many* solutions mentioned during a parent-teacher meeting at which a student needing support is discussed. Thus, my findings do not imply that the formation of an explicit triad is necessary. Instead, they underline the need for educators to consciously think about and explicate which actor gets a seat at the table and its purpose.

### **Limitations and future research**

While this dissertation sheds light on how shadow education relates to school and home, and the functions it fulfills in students’ school careers, there are some limitations to consider. First and foremost, my dissertation is limited to the role that shadow education plays in a specific context: Dutch secondary education. Future studies, focused on generalizability rather than exploration, are needed to extrapolate my findings to other respondents and contexts, such as students and schools in primary, higher, and vocational education. Second, whereas I did use relatively advanced methods such as propensity score matching and meta-analytical structural equation modeling, which are more informative than reporting mere correlations, it is important to note that none of these analyses are geared towards

causation. A limitation that should be mentioned in this regard is that in Chapter 3, shadow education use continued to grow after the policy change. In case more detailed shadow education data becomes available, researchers will be able to apply a difference-in-difference design to establish a causal link between an educational system's institutional features and shadow education use.

Due to the limitations in my measurements, we should also consider alternative explanations of the current findings. In the meta-analysis, for instance, I was not able to study parents' aspirations or their knowledge of the educational system, which, as argued by Forster and Van de Werfhorst (2020), is an essential element in the rational calculations that parents make to avoid downward transitions within secondary education. Whereas I contacted authors directly to inquire about the availability of broader measures of SES, shadow education, and achievement, these did not become available. I therefore had to rely on the information provided in the papers, which in many cases was limited to income and highest completed level of education. To conduct a review study with less heterogeneity in effect sizes, researchers can focus on fewer studies, with a more specific measure for the variables of interest (e.g., number of books at home, museum visits). Also, as Chapter 4 showed several academic-adjacent benefits that students experience from participating in shadow education, future meta-analyses may benefit from including behavioral and emotional outcomes, particularly given the growing research base on such outcomes (Chen & Kuan, 2021; Montebon, 2016; Otto & Karbach, 2019).

Although the five secondary schools included in my thesis are spread throughout the Netherlands, and while I was in constant interaction with the school representative to ensure a non-selective sample of respondents, the schools included still form a limited representation of secondary education in the Netherlands. I mainly studied relatively large schools (above 10,000 students) with multiple tracks. Therefore, future research may examine perceptions of educators on shadow education within schools with one track only, for instance, those schools with a high concentration of students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. As more data becomes available, we may better map the experiences of shadow education for different sub-populations, and compare outcomes between students who participate in shadow education and those who do not. From these comparisons, we can learn more about the implications of shadow education for student learning and inequality.

Lastly, many of my findings are based solely on participants' reports during semi-structured interviews. In other words, social desirability might have played a role in the way students, parents, teachers, and tutors answered my questions. As argued by Bergen and Labonté (2020), in qualitative research, some respondents can

give the impression that “everything is perfect here” (p. 783), which might create a distorted view of reality. Although I attempted to account for this by establishing rapport and asking respondents to write down their thoughts before sharing them, it remains possible that respondents did not share (other) problems, challenges, or shortcomings related to shadow education. In future studies, it could be worthwhile to combine a group conversation with an observational study during, for instance, a meeting in which schools and tutors discuss a specific student. Sleenhof et al. (2021) provide an example of how teacher meetings could be observed in terms of the structure and functions of the discussions. Through research on these meetings, we may obtain a moment-to-moment explanation of what happens as schools, tutors, and families define their responsibilities in a specific student’s case. As used by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, vignette studies may also be a valuable avenue to study parents’ motives for including shadow education in their children’s education (Education Inspectorate, 2021).

### **Implications for practice**

This dissertation identifies numerous promising ways for schools to explicate their roles and responsibilities, and for policy makers to respond to the emerging use of shadow education. One of the main findings of this dissertation is that shadow education occupies its *own* position in students’ school careers, separate from home and school. My dissertation may help shift the focus from a discussion on whether such a position is desirable or not, to one in which roles and responsibilities are further explicated. Some schools in my research did not develop a perspective on these roles at all. Other schools did appear to be thinking about the functions that shadow education fulfills, and possible avenues to prevent overlap in content between the support provided at tutoring and the regular school lesson. Recently, the Dutch Education Inspectorate warned that shadow education is a worrisome development that threatens educational equality, leading to education increasingly having the “characteristics of a free market” (Education Inspectorate, 2021, p. 7). This dissertation shows that such free-market dynamics in education are not something “just happening” they can be intensified through adaptations in the educational system that foster competition and performance pressure.

For various stakeholders, this dissertation may provide specific insight that may help design their practice. For tutors, my findings about the physical and symbolic place in Chapter 4 can provide relevant information about which spaces or practices students consider beneficial to their learning. While I did not explicitly ask for effective elements of tutoring practices, students did mention that having a designated space for learning helps them in their school career, and some parents confirmed improvements in their children’s learning. Particular elements that

seemed to contribute to students' learning were quizzing students on exam-related questions and being "on their side" (i.e., not giving the impression that they were being assessed like they typically are in school).

Lastly, my dissertation is finished when Dutch schools plan to initiate remedial tutoring projects provided to students free of charge. The Dutch government has invested a total of 8.5 billion euros in a National Program for Education (Dutch: *Nationaal Programma Onderwijs*), which allots each primary and secondary school 700 euros per student in the 2021-2022 school year to compensate for Corona-related delays (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, 2021). During a time in which a shared social responsibility is emerging for all actors in and around the school to address such delays, empirical research on private and public forms of tutoring is helpful and timely. My dissertation may contribute to this endeavor by providing a comprehensive bibliography of shadow education that is of potential interest to Dutch policy makers, tutors, and educators.

## IN CONCLUSION

Together, the chapters in this dissertation help answer the main research question: *What position does shadow education take in the Dutch educational landscape and students' school careers?* Shadow education takes its most prominent position at moments characterized by selection. Functionally, shadow education goes beyond the once much-documented remedial function of assisting underperforming students (Baker et al., 2001) or compensating for the shortcomings of regular schools (Brehm & Silova, 2014). As mentioned by the students in Chapter 4 and confirmed by the educators in Chapter 5, shadow education provides students with a fresh pair of eyes in the form of a tutor who is not a teacher or a parent, a quiet place to study without distractions, and a supportive and encouraging study environment. It complements parents' busy schedules and enriches learning by providing students with different content or another approach to explaining the curricular content. These functions of shadow education have so far remained overlooked, due in part, as I argue in Chapter 2, to how different types of programs have been aggregated in past research to test commonly held hypotheses.

Returning to the quotation with which I began this dissertation, the tutor's question of *"what happened here?"* finds a part of its answer in the design of the educational system and in one of the needs expressed by individual students and parents: a place that is separate from school and home. In response to the question *"what do we as a school do in response to that?"*, my dissertation points to the value of developing a perspective on shadow education. This perspective could, for instance, include the tutoring provider being responsible for the implementation of the

offerings within the school, whereas the school remains responsible for the quality and accessibility of the offerings. Safeguarding the accessibility of tutoring is important to prevent its benefits from being restricted to only those students from more affluent backgrounds (Elffers et al., 2021). The communication of this vision to all stakeholders involved may limit tensions about each stakeholder's responsibility for various aspects of students' learning process. With respect to the educational research itself, my thesis points to the need to look beyond traditional school structures, to better define the investigated programs, and to outline the competitive, complementary, physical, and symbolic roles they fulfill, and the conditions under which they are doing so. Only then can these roles be translated into what we perceive as schooling, thus ensuring that all students get the best possible education today and into the future.