



Shadow education in conflict-affected contexts: experiences of internally displaced Syrian students with English private tutoring

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of seven internally displaced Syrian students (aged 14–15) learning English at a tutorial centre in Afrin, Aleppo Governorate. For data collection, the research used participants' written narratives and a subsequent online semi-structured interview. Findings reveal that students attended only face-to-face small group sessions at the tutorial centre due to financial constraints. They reported challenges in formal schooling, such as indifferent teachers, large class sizes, and disruptive peers. Participants valued the tangible benefits of English private tutoring (EPT), particularly in preparing for the high-stakes Basic Education Certificate Examination, which determines eligibility for upper secondary education. Tutoring offered targeted test preparation and effective instructional strategies. Additionally, students highlighted soft benefits, including increased self-confidence and a sense of hope amidst ongoing instability in Syria. The study identifies concerns about student absenteeism and the potential for EPT to 'supplant' rather than 'supplement' formal education. Some participants noted financial and psychological pressures on themselves and their families. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research, emphasising the critical role of EPT in the educational trajectories of displaced students in conflict-affected regions.

KEYWORDS

English private tutoring (EPT); internally displaced Syrians; student absenteeism; qualitative inquiry; conflict-affected contexts

1. Introduction

Vast swathes of teaching and learning occur outside regulated mainstream education, often through fee-charging supplementary tutoring. This widespread phenomenon is commonly recognised as 'shadow education', due to its close replication of mainstream school curricula, assessment criteria, and examination frameworks (Bray & Hajar, 2023). The conceptualisation of shadow education gained significant academic traction following Bray's (1999) seminal UNESCO-IIEP (International Institute for Educational Planning) book. Since the early 2000s, shadow education has experienced rapid global expansion, operating as 'an assemblage in which society, culture, education and business are entangled and interact with each other' (Chang, 2019, p. 462). Market forecasts from