

Exploring the Complexity of English Language Teacher-Tutor Identities in Rural Kazakhstan

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Shadow education refers to fee-based supplementary tutoring that operates alongside mainstream schooling and has become increasingly prevalent. Although urban tutoring markets in Kazakhstan have been examined, rural schoolteachers' perspectives on English private tutoring (EPT) remain underexplored, particularly in relation to their dual roles. Guided by Ball and Youdell's (2008) theory of hidden privatization and Ramarajan's (2014) intrapersonal network identity approach, this study explores the experiences of six rural English teachers from the southern, central, and eastern regions through semi-structured interviews and narrative writing. Findings show that teachers engaged in EPT due to market-driven demand, the need for financial resources, and professional enjoyment and development. They also encountered challenges of limited time, high parental expectations, and emotional strain. Identity negotiations revealed power, enhancing, conflicting, and temporary ties between teachers' institutional and tutoring roles. Participants further highlighted the need for regulation and expressed concern about the commercialization of education, which both fills systemic gaps and deepens inequalities. This qualitative study suggests pedagogical implications and areas for further research.

Keywords: *English private tutoring (EPT), English teacher-tutors' identities, Central Asia, tutoring regulation.*

Over the last decades, there has been an increasing trend in private tutoring (PT), commonly referred to as shadow education, a paid academic service often in academic subjects that mirror the curriculum and teaching methods of formal schooling (Bray 2021). There is continuous concentration on institutions and formal education has been reflected in a growing body of education literature, and PT, while “*inevitable, universal, and likely to continue to intensify into the foreseeable future,*” (Baker, 2020, p. 311, italics in original) appears to receive little attention.

PT has become integrated into educational systems worldwide, mainly as a response to intensifying social and academic competition (Hajar & Karakus, 2022). Its global diffusion is evidenced by a growing body of research that explores region-specific dynamics, emerging from contexts such as Africa, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Bray, 2021; Bray & Hajar, 2023; Silova, 2009). Particularly, Yung and Hajar's (2023) comprehensive volume synthesizes EPT research across 13 countries, showing growing interest in EPT can be explained by the broader neoliberal context, where English has acquired new forms of symbolic and market value, contributing to increasing inequalities in linguistic access (Hamid et al., 2018).

Several studies have explored how EPT teachers construct their professional identities within neoliberal contexts, such as in China (Xiong et al., 2020) and Kazakhstan (Hajar & Manan, 2025), revealing hybrid roles and ethical tensions. However, there are limited studies on how such identities operate in rural settings, where different social and institutional dynamics may shape teachers' experiences. This qualitative case study draws on interviews and narrative writings from six rural English teachers in southern, central, and eastern regions in Kazakhstan to examine their motivations for engaging in English private tutoring, the challenges they face, and the ways they negotiate their dual identities.

The Nature and Development of Fee-Charging Private Tutoring in Kazakhstan

PT is considered to be described as shadow education since it mirrors the curriculum and teaching methods of formal schooling (Bray 2022; Hajar & Karakus 2022).

Shadow education is expanding in Kazakhstan, largely due to the increasing pressure of high-stakes examinations at both secondary and higher education levels, such as the Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS) entry exams, and the Unified National Test (UNT). For instance, Kalikova and Rakhimzhanova (2009) reported that less than half of first-year university students relied on private tutoring to prepare for these assessments. Furthermore, the UNT significantly contributes to the demand for private tutoring, with subjects such as mathematics (67.2%), history (36.2%), physics (36.0%), and the state language and literature (17.8%) being the most frequently tutored. The demand for private tutoring in Kazakhstan is driven not only by students' academic needs but also by parents' concerns that mainstream schooling often lacks practical, market-relevant knowledge.

Studies on the Experiences and Identity Construction of English Private Tutors

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in understanding the professional identities of language teachers in diverse settings. While much of this literature has focused on formal school contexts, the identities of teachers involved in EPT remain underexplored. The research on EPT globally has largely concentrated on the perspectives of students (Hamid et al., 2018), parental motivations and decision-making (Yung & Zeng, 2022), the academic effects of tutoring (Hajar & Karakus, 2022), and its broader implications for schooling. However, the experiences and identity negotiations of English private tutors have only recently begun to receive scholarly attention.

In Asia, recent studies have provided deeper insight into how tutors position themselves within competitive and exam-driven environments. In Hong Kong, Yung and Yuan (2022) found that tutors often crafted public personas as popular, authoritative figures who were simultaneously educators and celebrities. These overlapping roles emerged from a mix of school expectations, societal norms, and the media. Similarly, In China, Xiong et al. (2022) revealed that private tutors commonly adopted multiple personas shaped by neoliberal values and exam-

centered teaching. Their participants described their work as requiring both pedagogical skills and marketing strategies, which at times created tension and led to uncertainty about their professional identities.

Study Details

Despite the growing relevance of EPT across various educational landscapes, schoolteachers' own perspectives on their motivations for providing such services and the dual roles they navigate as both institutional educators and private tutors remain insufficiently explored, particularly in Central Asia. This gap may partly be explained by teachers' hesitancy to openly discuss their tutoring activities, especially in regions where regulations prohibit formal educators from engaging in fee-based tutoring, which could put their official employment at risk.

Accordingly, this qualitative study aims to analyze the EPT phenomenon in rural Kazakhstan, offering theoretical, practical, and policy-level insights. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do teachers define and manage their dual roles?
- (2) What motivates them to engage in EPT, and what challenges do they face?
- (3) How do contextual and institutional factors influence their identity development?

Methodology

This study draws on Ball and Youdell's (2008) concept of hidden privatization in education, which distinguishes between endogenous and exogenous privatization. Endogenous privatization refers to the internal restructuring of the public education system through the adoption of private-sector values, tools, and management practices. Exogenous privatization occurs when private entities assume the delivery and governance of educational services for commercial purposes (Ball & Youdell, 2008).

In relation to private tutoring, Ball and Youdell (2008) identify it as a clear example of exogenous privatization, as it operates outside the formal system and supplements public education for private gain. This interpretation is supported by Hamid et al. (2018), who argue that EPT should be seen not only as a learning opportunity but also as an educational product that is bought and sold. Access to private tutoring is often unequal, reinforcing educational and social disparities between wealthier and less advantaged families (Bray, 2017; Yung, 2020).

The marketization of education also reshapes the roles and responsibilities of teachers. Ball and Youdell (2008) point out that such shifts may affect how teachers perceive their work and encourage a more transactional relationship with students. In the global tutoring industry, tutors are increasingly viewed as service providers and students as paying clients. This shift brings ethical chal-

lenges, particularly when teachers tutor students they teach in formal settings, raising concerns about fairness, role conflict, and accountability (Hamid et al., 2018; Kobakhidze, 2018).

To explore these dynamics further, this study incorporates Ramarajan's (2014) intrapersonal identity network model, which offers a framework for understanding how individuals manage multiple professional identities (Table 1). In this study, the two primary identities under examination, schoolteacher and private tutor, are treated as nodes in a personal identity network. According to Ramarajan, the connections between these identity nodes can take on different relational forms, such as conflict, enhancement, or integration, depending on how the individual perceives and manages them. This framework provides a useful lens through which to examine how English teacher-tutors in Kazakhstan experience and interpret their dual roles.

Background and Sampling

This qualitative study involved six English language tutors from northern and southern regions of Kazakhstan, including Almaty, Karagandy, and Zhetysu. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which helped identify individuals actively engaged in EPT. All tutors were between 23 and 40 years old, with experience ranging from one to fifteen years. The sample included three female and three male tutors with varied professional backgrounds. Before participation, all tutors were informed about the study's aims, ethical procedures, and confidentiality measures, and informed consent was obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect identities. These tutors were recruited based on their active involvement in the EPT market outside formal school employment, contributing to a broader understanding of tutoring as both a pedagogical and economic activity in Kazakhstan.

Table 1.

Types of relationships between multiple identities

Types of relationships between multiple identities (Ramarajan, 2014)	Explanation	Examples
Conflicting ties	A person's two identities are in tension due to role conflict or ethical concerns	A teacher may feel uneasy about tutoring because of its informal or profit-driven nature.
Enhancing ties	One identity strengthens another by contributing new skills or insights.	Tutoring may improve classroom teaching through personalized instructional experience.
Integrating ties	A person's two identities share common goals or values.	Teacher and tutor roles may align with educational equity.
Power ties	A person's one identity is more dominant due to social legitimacy or institutional authority.	Public teaching often holds more prestige than tutoring
Temporal ties	A person's identity is adopted for a short-term purpose.	Teachers may take on tutoring only temporarily

Note: Ramarajan, L. (2014). Past, Present and Future Research on Multiple Identities: Toward an Intrapersonal Network Approach. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), Article 589659.

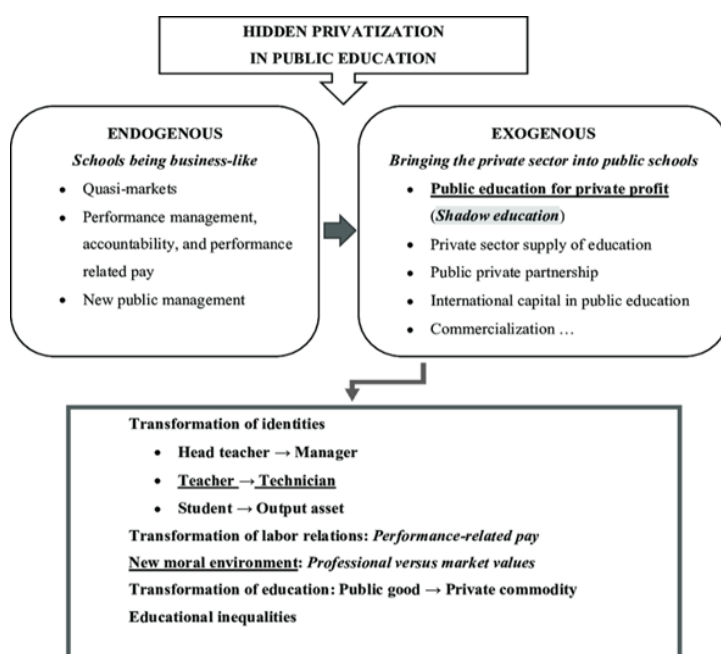
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.912379>

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected from February to March 2025. Informed consent was obtained from all six participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study and their rights. The interviews were conducted through Google Meet, allowing flexibility for participants in rural areas of Almaty, Zhetysu, and Karagandy. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview, and all interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clark's (2006) approach, and the process involved repeated readings of the transcripts, generating initial codes aligned with themes related to teacher identity and privatization, and grouping similar codes into broader themes and subthemes. Member checks were conducted to enhance credibility. A visual summary of the thematic relationships is presented in Figure 1, and the analysis aimed to capture how participants navigate the professional, ethical, and emotional dimensions of English private tutoring.

Figure 1.

Hidden Privatization in Public Education



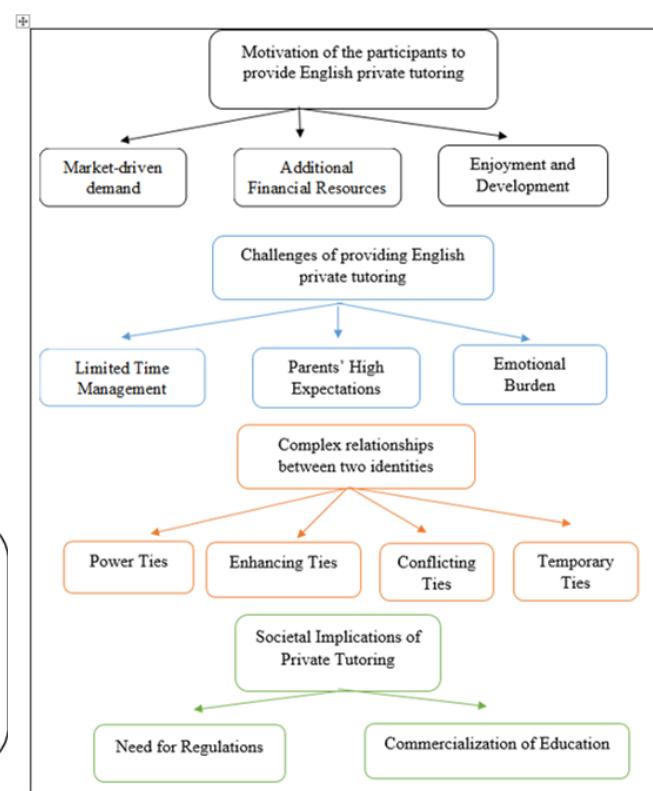
Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, all participants received informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, interview procedures, data storage, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were assured that their narrative essays would not be evaluated and that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers regarding their EPT practices. Prior to the online semi-structured interviews, they were reminded that participation was voluntary and could express any concerns. Written consent and verbal assent for audio recording were obtained, and all recordings and transcripts were stored in a password-protected cloud system accessible only to the researcher and supervisor, with data retained for three years before deletion.

Although full anonymity could not be guaranteed due to video-based interviews, confidentiality was strictly maintained. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and institutions (Braun & Clark, 2006), and individuals were reminded that they could skip any question or withdraw without consequences.

Figure 2.

Thematic Map



Findings

Motivation of the Participants to Provide English Private Tutoring

The findings indicate that teachers' engagement in EPT was shaped by economic, social, and personal considerations. As shown in Figure 2, three interconnected subthemes emerged: market-driven demand, financial necessity, and a sense of enjoyment and professional growth. Particularly, market-driven demand was raised by all six participants. Several described being encouraged or, at times, pressured by parents in their communities, particularly in rural areas where there is a need for English teachers, and examination pressures are high. As a result, some teachers felt compelled to tutor out of community responsibility as well as job-related insecurity.

Extract 1 (Amina): Initially, I did not plan to tutor, but parents repeatedly approached me for after-school lessons. In a village with few English teachers, it felt like I had to help. Tutoring also gives me some financial security in case anything happens with my main job.

Extract 2 (Ali): “I never searched for tutoring opportunities; parents kept requesting help. Being the only English teacher made it difficult to refuse, and what started as occasional support gradually became part of my routine practice.”

Financial motives emerged as the strongest driver. Despite recent salary increases, participants emphasized that their teaching income alone does not provide sufficient stability.

Extract 3 (Karina): “I started tutoring because I worried about my finances. Teaching alone felt unstable, and tutoring was a manageable way to supplement my income.”

Extract 4 (Amir): “Tutoring is simply an additional source of income when I have free time. My school salary covers the basics, but tutoring helps with unexpected needs, so I treat it as a flexible supplement rather than a main job.”

The last motivator factor was enjoyment and professional development, mentioned by three participants. For these teachers, tutoring offered space for creativity, autonomy, and more meaningful interaction with motivated learners.

Extract 5 (Gulnar): “Low academic performance in my area initially pushed me to tutor. Seeing students improve made the work deeply rewarding.”

Extract 6 (Amir): “I enjoy working with motivated students. Their energy makes the lessons productive and reminds me why I chose teaching.”

Extract 7 (Madiar): “Tutoring provides academic freedom—I can choose materials, experiment, and tailor lessons. This flexibility helps me grow professionally.”

Overall, although economic needs remain the most prominent motivator, parent-driven demand and intrinsic satisfaction also influence teachers’ engagement in EPT. These findings demonstrate the complex interaction between market forces, professional identity, and emotional fulfillment.

Challenges of Providing English Private Tutoring

The analysis revealed three main challenges faced by participants as they balanced their work as schoolteachers and private tutors: limited time, parents’ high expectations, and emotional strain. These difficulties were closely interconnected, highlighting the tension between their professional obligations and personal well-being.

The most significant challenge for participants was time constraints. According to the teachers, unexpected school duties such as meetings, substitutions, or administrative tasks frequently disrupted their scheduled tutoring hours, leading to rescheduling, cancellations, and feelings of professional guilt.

Extract 8 (Amina): Managing both roles is difficult because sudden school meetings or replacements often clash with my tutoring schedule. When I cancel, I feel guilty toward my students, but I also need time to rest and prepare. Sometimes I wish I had a clearer boundary between the two jobs.

Extract 9 (Amir): Time is the biggest challenge. School takes most of my energy, and I still have to fit in private lessons. When schedules don’t match, I adjust in both directions, and it becomes exhausting. Working late evenings leaves me with very little personal time.

In addition to these temporal pressures, participants also reported substantial expectations from parents, many of whom anticipated rapid academic improvement. Such expectations were often perceived as unrealistic, particularly when students lacked foundational knowledge or consistent motivation.

Extract 10 (Gulnar): “Parents often expect quick results, which is stressful. They want high marks after just a few lessons, but language learning takes time. I sometimes feel judged for things outside my control.”

Extract 11 (Madiar): “Many parents assume grades should rise immediately once tutoring starts. I try to explain that understanding and confidence matter more than quick score changes. It can be uncomfortable when they compare me with other tutors.”

Extract 12 (Amina): “There are days when I end both school and tutoring completely exhausted. I give all my energy to students and have nothing left for myself or family. It’s hard to stay motivated when I’m that tired.”

Moreover, balancing long workdays, parental demands, and limited rest contributed to notable emotional strain. Participants described feeling mentally exhausted, undervalued, and at times overwhelmed, despite their continued commitment to students. Overall, these pressures illustrate how structural and interpersonal demands combine to shape the challenging nature of teacher-tutors’ dual roles.

Complex Relationships of Dual Identities

The analysis showed that participants experienced several forms of identity negotiation while balancing their roles as schoolteachers and private tutors. Drawing on Ramarajan’s (2014) typology, four types of ties were identified: power, enhancing, conflicting, and temporary; each illustrating how teachers managed boundaries, responsibilities, and personal values within dual professional identities.

For some teachers, the school identity remained dominant, and tutoring was carefully regulated to avoid overlapping with institutional duties. Participants emphasized ethical workload management, often reducing either teaching hours or tutoring sessions to maintain balance.

Extract 1 (Gulnar): “I avoid taking a full school workload because doing both roles intensively would be too much. School comes first, and I plan tutoring only when it won’t interfere.”

Extract 2 (Amir): “I reduce the number of school classes I teach so I can support tutoring students without compromising school duties.”

Extract 3 (Madiar): “I schedule tutoring strictly outside school hours to prevent any conflict between the two roles.”

Other participants described tutoring as an activity that complemented and strengthened their teaching identity. It offered space for creativity, closer interaction with motivated learners, and renewed professional energy.

Extract 4 (Amina): “Although demanding, tutoring gives me a different kind of motivation and helps me reconnect with why I became a teacher.”

Some teachers experienced direct clashes between school responsibilities and tutoring commitments, leading to frustration and emotional strain when private lessons had to be canceled due to unforeseen school duties.

Extract 5 (Karina): “Sometimes I cancel tutoring at the last minute because I’m suddenly called back to school. These interruptions disrupt my plans and relationships with tutoring students.”

Private tutoring was seen by a few participants as a short-term or secondary activity rather than a central part of their professional identity. Their focus remained on academic development and long-term career goals in formal education.

Extract 6 (Ali): “Tutoring is not something I see myself doing long-term. It’s useful for some extra income, but I prefer investing my free time in my own professional growth.”

Societal Implications of Private Tutoring

Participants also raised broader concerns about the societal implications of English private tutoring, particularly in relation to regulatory oversight and the growing commercialization of education. Although tutoring provided space for pedagogical flexibility and additional income, several teachers expressed discomfort with its unregulated nature and the structural inequalities it may inadvertently reproduce.

The importance of establishing transparent regulatory frameworks for EPT was stressed by most participants. Rather than calling for prohibition, they advocated for moderate taxation and basic oversight, especially for tutors working with large numbers of students to ensure fairness and accountability. Some also noted that their entry into tutoring was driven not by intrinsic motivation but by persistent parental requests.

Extract 1 (Amina): I think private tutoring should be regulated through transparent policies and perhaps moderate taxation. When someone tutors many students, it makes sense that they contribute based on minimum reporting principles. Still, I’m not in favor of banning tutoring altogether; it just needs to be managed fairly.

Extract 2 (Ali, Interview 1): “My decision to begin tutoring wasn’t based on strong personal interest. I received constant requests from parents and eventually agreed. It wasn’t planned, it developed through repeated external pressure.”

Another prominent concern was the increasing commercialization of education, particularly where formal schooling was perceived as insufficient. For some participants, tutoring functioned as a response to systemic weaknesses, enabling them to provide targeted support that public schools could not always offer. While they appreciated the professional autonomy and creativity that tutoring allowed, they also acknowledged that these benefits pointed to deeper institutional limitations.

Extract 3 (Gulnar): “My initial motivation for tutoring stemmed from low academic standards in my region. Many students were underperforming, and the school system did not offer enough support. Tutoring became a way to compensate for these gaps.”

Extract 4 (Amir): “I enjoy working with motivated students. Tutoring sessions feel dynamic and energizing, unlike regular classes where engagement varies. It reminds me why I entered the profession.”

Extract 5 (Madiar, Interview 1): “What drew me to tutoring was the chance to explore different teaching resources. The school curriculum is rigid, but tutoring allows me to adapt materials and be creative. It gives me professional autonomy.”

Discussion and Implications of the Study

This study investigated the multifaceted motivations behind Kazakhstani schoolteachers’ engagement in English private tutoring (EPT) and how they navigated their professional identities in both public and private domains. Employing Ball and Youdell’s (2008) concept of hidden privatization and Ramarajan’s (2014) identity network model, the findings revealed that teachers’ involvement in the EPT sector was shaped by financial need, professional growth, personal satisfaction, and structural constraints in the public education system.

Among the most dominant motivators was the desire to supplement low official salaries. Participants described EPT as a safety net that provided financial stability and resilience amidst institutional uncertainties. PT was also seen as an avenue for self-actualization: teachers valued the opportunity to design flexible curricula, apply diverse methods, and witness tangible academic outcomes among their tutees.

Another important factor was demand-driven engagement, particularly many teachers reported that they had not initially planned to enter the tutoring market but were frequently approached by parents and acquaintances requesting help. This spontaneous entry, fueled by growing parental dissatisfaction with school-provided English instruction, emphasized the market-oriented nature of education in Kazakhstan. Teachers responded to this demand by offering EPT services, often without prior commercial intention, reflecting broader patterns of educational commodification.

The study further examined how participants negotiated their dual identities. Using Ramarajan's (2014) framework, identity relationships ranged from enhancing to conflicting. Some participants experienced burnout and scheduling conflicts when official duties interfered with tutoring sessions, while others embraced their tutor identity as complementary to their teacher role, describing a sense of empowerment and agency. For many, the tutor identity was temporary or instrumental, activated as needed and shaped by personal and professional demands.

Participants also held divergent views regarding EPT's societal impact. While some emphasized its importance in supporting student achievement in underserved rural areas, others raised concerns about inequality, lack of regulation, and the rise of unqualified tutors, and several advocated formal recognition and regulation of EPT, including fair taxation and quality assurance standards.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This paper examined the phenomenon of private tutoring with a focus on why English teachers engage in fee-based supplementary education, highlighting both personal and professional motivations. The findings of this study showed that tutoring offered teachers opportunities for lesson creation, greater autonomy, and additional income, while also requiring them to navigate multiple identities. The future pedagogical implications suggest clearer guidelines on ethical tutoring practices, targeted support for managing dual roles, and professional development that strengthens instructional quality across both school and tutoring contexts.

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