

Commercialised Education and Sustainability: Examining the Hidden Costs of Shadow Education on Students' Psychological and Cognitive Well-being in India

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Abstract

Education is increasingly seen to be shifting towards an industry model, driven by commercial concerns where the traditional status of education as a public good has been diminishing (UNESCO, 2016). Exacerbating this situation is the recent rise of shadow education, an emerging billion-dollar coaching industry, originating in Asian countries and subsequently spreading worldwide. Private supplementary tutoring that operates parallel to the mainstream education of the regular school hours is known as shadow education. The objective of the paper is to understand the impact of shadow education on students' academic performance and emotional well-being. The paper is based on empirical research conducted in Chandigarh City, India. 200 students who are studying in 12th grade as well as preparing for All-India level entrance examinations in Medicine and Engineering streams were interviewed by employing stratified random sampling technique and descriptive survey methods. The findings are alarming as many shadow education institutes enrol students for a two-year program by collecting huge fees for tuition and hostel/transportation facilities. Thus, a significant number of students skip regular school and attend coaching centres. The study witnessed that majority of the students experienced anxiety, stress, isolation and decreased emotional resilience due to the rigorous academic demands placed on them. Consequently, the key indicators of sustainable development, including quality education, reduced inequalities and social justice are being compromised. This paper emphasizes the need to address the complex interplay of shadow education, student well-being and the changing system of education where profit becomes the top priority for educational institutions.

Keywords: Shadow Education, Coaching, Commercialisation, Quality Education, Psychological Well-being

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Introduction

Education stands as a fundamental right, empowering individuals and serving as a potent means for economically and socially marginalized children and communities to transcend poverty. It is a cornerstone of human rights, crucial for the fulfillment of other rights and the advancement of sustainable development. Education nurtures personal well-being and propels societal advancement (UNESCO, 2023). However, the educational landscape has witnessed a significant transformation in recent years, marked by the proliferation of for-profit educational institutions. In the global arena, the rise of neoliberal ideologies has been instrumental in molding socio-economic policies, exerting a notable influence across multiple sectors, including education. David Harvey described the profound effects of neoliberal ideologies on diverse aspects of society, including education. It is underscored that the neoliberal agenda, marked by its promotion of free-market principles and minimal governmental interference, has left a substantial imprint on education policies worldwide (Harvey, 2005).

Over the decades, India has experienced remarkable growth in both its education system and economy. The Economic Reforms of 1991 laid the groundwork for the swift expansion of private educational institutions throughout the country. This expansion was particularly evident in the proliferation of privately funded schools, colleges and universities (Tilak, 2014). A significant aspect of this development was the emergence of private coaching classes, initially conceived as supplementary education aids, such as private tuitions, to enhance students' performance in schools. What began as one-on-one tutoring gradually evolved into one-to-many interactions, eventually evolving into coaching classes aimed at boosting academic performance in school subjects. Over time, these coaching centers expanded their scope beyond school tutoring to prepare students for national-level entrance exams in coveted professions like engineering, management, or medicine (Bray and Silova, 2006). This prevalence of private tutoring and coaching outside the formal schooling system is called shadow education. It is defined as “educational activities, such as tutoring and extra classes, occurring outside of the formal channels of an educational system that are designed to improve a student’s chance of successfully moving through all the allocation process” (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010). Highlighted by Bray for the first time in 1999 as a service provider agency giving educational services, this industry has become a large-scale business in the recent years only, now growing bigger than ever with their franchises established all across India (Zhang W., 2023). The emergence of the "Shadow Education System" has become a silent force shaping the academic destinies of countless students, promising brilliance but often concealing a set of hidden costs that jeopardize the very fabric of the nation's education framework. As India's students increasingly turn to parallel systems of private coaching, supplementary classes, and intensive exam preparation, the consequences of this trend are becoming more pronounced, impacting not only the individual learner but also the broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the nation.

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quest for brilliance, this study aims to spark a crucial dialogue on the future of education in India, urging stakeholders to address these issues and forge a more inclusive and sustainable learning environment for the generations to come. The study explores the phenomenon of shadow education and its implications for equity within India's education system, particularly focusing on its impact on disadvantaged students who are unable to afford such additional support.

Reports indicate that approximately 83% of high school students in India are enrolled in coaching classes (Asian Development Bank, 2012). This data from the ADB is corroborated by a recent study from the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2020), revealing that one in three high school students receives private coaching. The NSO report, based on the 75th round of the National Sample Survey in India, highlights that 19.8% of students across all levels, from pre-primary to graduate studies, engage in some form of private coaching. Among students in Classes 9 and 10, who are gearing up for crucial board exams and admission tests, this percentage surpasses 30%. Notably, urban upper-class students have significantly higher access to private coaching, with over 52% of boys from urban upper-class backgrounds attending coaching compared to just 13.7% of rural boys and girls from minority communities. Private coaching comes at a cost, constituting over 18% of the average annual expenditure on education for secondary school students. Similar expenditure patterns are observed among higher secondary school students. Certain states in eastern India, such as West Bengal, allocate a larger proportion of their education expenditure to private coaching, with students spending an average of 27% of their annual education expenditure on such coaching (NSO, 2020). This prevalent trend of private tutoring is increasingly recognized as a significant component of the public education crisis. Students across the achievement spectrum, both high-achievers and low-achievers, seek private tutoring to address their unmet educational needs (Majumdar, 2014). As a result, shadow education has become an integral and inseparable component of the mainstream schooling. Upon closer examination of the functioning of shadow institutes, it becomes apparent that coaching centers offer a range of packages tailored to meet the needs of students and the financial capabilities of parents, often including residential accommodations. These packages cater to students from both State and Central boards, with fees ranging from ₹50,000 to ₹1 lakh for year-long coaching (The Hindu, 2023). This underscores serious concerns regarding the exploitation of educational opportunities for profit. The capitalist mindset thrives on the prospect of significant earnings, even within markets serving the poorest populations, often referred to as the 'bottom billions' market. These coaching institutes, now operating as corporate entities, not only sell products and services in open markets but also actively lobby for educational policies that align with their interests. Consequently, their profits are not solely derived from the middle-class consumers but also from fees paid by economically disadvantaged families, who are compelled to invest everything they have to afford the fees associated with these coaching institutes, all in pursuit of fulfilling their children's aspirations (Spreeen & Kamat, 2018). It is crucial to address these concerns, shed light on the hidden and emerging disparities in education, and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable education system that ensures every student, regardless of their socio-economic background, has equal access to high-quality educational opportunities.

Research Questions

1. What are the unseen costs and pitfalls of shadow education in India?
2. How is the psychological and cognitive well-being of students engaged in shadow education practices?

Objectives

1. To determine the unseen costs and pitfalls of shadow education in India.
2. To understand the psychological and cognitive well-being of students engaged in shadow education practices.

Methodology

The sample composed of 200 students in the 12th grade preparing for All-India level entrance examinations in Medicine and Engineering streams in Chandigarh, India, providing a focus on the challenges and opportunities faced by this specific demographic. The research was carried out in two distinct phases to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences.

Phase 1 - Quantitative: In the first phase, a quantitative approach was adopted. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect data from the sample. This questionnaire included multiple dimensions to explore various aspects of the challenges and opportunities in the educational journey of the students, such as:

- i) **Socioeconomic Background:** Gathering information about the economic status, occupation and household conditions of the students' families.
- ii) **Access to Education:** Investigating the distance to schools, availability of educational resources and access to transportation.
- iii) **Parental Involvement:** Assessing the extent to which parents are involved in their child's education and their aspirations for their children.
- iv) **Educational Challenges, socio-economic and psychosocial challenges, gender disparities and access:** Identifying specific difficulties faced by students in their academic pursuits, including financial constraints, learning environments and peer influence.

Phase 2 - Qualitative: The second phase of the research adopted a qualitative approach. This phase involved in-depth interviews with a subset of the sample, allowing for a deeper exploration of the experiences and perspectives of students and their parents. In this phase, open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share their personal experiences, challenges and aspirations.

Results

1. Demographic Profile of the Sample

S. No.	Demographic details	
1	Age	16-19 years
2	Subject enrolled for shadow education	Medicine and Engineering
3	Average fee paid to coaching institute (for 2 years combined)	INR 8 Lakh
4	Annual income of parents	INR 8-9 Lakh
5	Average number of siblings	3

Table 1: Demographic profile

The demographic profile of the sample provides valuable insights into the characteristics of students engaged in shadow education practices, particularly focusing on those pursuing subjects like Medicine and Engineering. Firstly, the age range of 16-19 years was selected since shadow education is predominantly utilized by students preparing for crucial entrance exams or aiming to enhance their academic performance during their final years of high school. Secondly, the choice of subjects, namely Medicine and Engineering, highlights the competitive nature of shadow education, as these fields typically require rigorous preparation and high academic achievement to secure admission to reputable institutions. Students aspiring for careers in Medicine or Engineering often opt for intensive coaching to improve their chances of success in entrance exams. The substantial average fee paid to coaching institutes, totaling INR 8 Lakh for a combined two-year period, underscores the financial investment involved in accessing shadow education services. This considerable expense indicates that shadow education is often perceived as a significant investment by parents and students alike, reflecting the high stakes associated with academic success in competitive fields. The annual income range of parents, falling between INR 8-9 Lakh, provides context regarding the economic background of the sample population. While this income level suggests a moderate financial standing, allocating a significant portion of the household income to coaching fees indicates the prioritization of education within these families. Lastly, the average number of siblings, standing at 3, may indicate additional financial responsibilities and competition for resources within the household. This context underscores the importance of understanding the socio-economic dynamics that influence students' access to and participation in shadow education. Understanding these demographics is essential for designing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for all students.

2. Hidden Costs Associated With Shadow Education in Terms of Students' Psychological and Cognitive Well-being in India

While shadow education is often lauded for its potential to supplement academic learning and enhance students' performance, there exists a compelling need to delve deeper into its hidden costs, particularly concerning students' psychological and cognitive well-being. This discussion aims to explore the intricate interplay between shadow education practices and their potential ramifications on the psychological and cognitive aspects of students in India. By

examining these hidden costs, we can gain a nuanced understanding of the broader implications of shadow education and its impact on students' holistic development.

Domain	Sub-domain	Percentage of students	Factors
Academic stress	Coursework and assignments	85%	Tight deadlines, complex assignments, or difficulty managing multiple requirements simultaneously
	Exam preparation	96%	Pressure to perform well, fear of failure, or the volume of material to review within a limited time frame
Academic anxiety	Career goals	68%	Uncertainty about future job prospects, societal expectations, or fear of not achieving desired career outcomes
	Educational attainment	72%	Meeting academic standards, gaining admission to desired educational institutions
Burnout	Emotional exhaustion	88%	Academic pressures, workload or peer pressure
	Unhealthy competition	59%	Pressure to outperform others, or a hypercompetitive academic environment
Self-esteem	Social comparison	82%	Peer influence, social media, academic environment
	Fear of failure	61%	Perfectionism, evaluation anxiety
Emotional resilience	Positive attitude towards academic setbacks	32%	Growth mindset, self-efficacy, mindfulness
	Sustaining motivation and perseverance	58%	Clear goals, self determination
Nervousness	Fidgety	52%	Performance pressure, self-doubt, time pressure
	Restlessness	58%	Excessive energy, attention difficulties
Attention	Selective attention amidst distractions	73%	Clear focus, mindfulness
	Attentional bias towards exam scores	76%	Preconceived expectations, importance of coaching
Memory	Short term memory and rote learning	82%	Lack of understanding, curriculum emphasis
	Long term memory encoding and sustainable learning	69%	Meaningful learning, active learning

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Table 2: Hidden costs of shadow education

Academic stress emerges as a dominant factor affecting students, with tight deadlines, complex assignments, and the pressure to manage multiple requirements simultaneously contributing to heightened stress levels. This is corroborated by Alam and Zhu (2022) in their findings that shadow education in Bangladesh is characterized by intense competition, stress and a heavy emphasis on examinations. Additionally, the intense pressure associated with exam preparation, including the fear of failure and the volume of material to review within limited time frames, exacerbates academic anxiety among students. This academic anxiety is further compounded by concerns about future job prospects, societal expectations, and the pursuit of desired career outcomes. The pressure to meet academic standards and gain admission to preferred educational institutions also weighs heavily on students, impacting their emotional well-being and self-esteem. Burnout is a prevalent issue, characterized by emotional exhaustion due to academic pressures, workload, and unhealthy competition. This is supported by the findings of Chen and Kuan (2021) which revealed that consistent participation in private supplementary education (PSE) correlates with heightened depression symptoms, especially among those who consistently engage in such activities. This suggests that while consistently participating students may experience improvements in academic performance during their transition to high school, they also face elevated risks of depression compared to their peers. Furthermore, the present study reveals that the hypercompetitive academic environment fosters a culture of comparison and perfectionism, leading to self-doubt and fear of failure among students. Emotional resilience plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of academic stress and anxiety. Cultivating a positive attitude towards setbacks, sustaining motivation and perseverance are essential factors contributing to students' ability to cope with academic challenges. Nervousness and restlessness are common manifestations of the underlying psychological strain experienced by students, reflecting performance pressure, self-doubt and attention difficulties. Attentional issues, such as selective attention amidst distractions and biases towards exam scores, further impact students' cognitive functioning and academic performance. Memory also emerges as a critical aspect influenced by shadow education, with an emphasis on short-term memory and rote learning often overshadowing the importance of meaningful and sustainable learning approaches. This is in consonance with the findings of Yu

and Zhang (2022) that excessive after-school tutoring and parental intervention have adverse effects on students' physical and mental well-being. Thus, the hidden costs associated with shadow education extend beyond financial considerations to encompass profound implications for students' psychological and cognitive well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that prioritizes not only academic achievement but also the mental and emotional health of students.

Interview With 'Candidate A': Drop Out

"I took the JEE exam last year but could not score a good rank in order to study in my dream college – IIT Bombay. I was **disappointed** as my dream seemed shattered. But I refused to give up and dropped out for a year after Class 12. Now, I have **isolated** myself in a room to study, I don't meet my family or friends, neither go to any birthday parties or events. The **pressure is suffocating**. Every moment is filled with a mix of **hope and fear**. The thought of **facing failure** again is **terrifying**, yet the desire to succeed at all costs drives me forward. Each day is a **rollercoaster of emotions** – when I secure good marks in mock tests, I become confident but the next moment, bouts of self-doubt and despair come. I'm willing to sacrifice anything to make it to IIT Bombay."

Interview With 'Candidate B': Peer Pressure

"I took non-medical under **peer pressure**, but now, the engineering coaching is **overwhelming**. My parents live in remote areas of Punjab and have sent me 250 kms away to Chandigarh for coaching. I am **not able to cope up**, but I can't admit it; my family will become a topic of **shame in the society**. I feel trapped, suffocated by **expectations**. Every day is a struggle, and I don't know how to escape this cycle of **stress**. I'm torn between my **own well-being and societal pressures**. It's a **lonely** battle, and I feel **helpless**."

Interview With 'Candidate C': Financial Constraints

"I hail from a village in Punjab, I want to be a doctor. But coaching for the NEET exam is expensive, and my parents, who are farmers, can't afford it. I study a lot, hoping to get a scholarship. I feel nervous and excited as the exam gets closer. I know it's hard, but I won't stop trying. I will do my best and hope for good results."

Thus, the interviews offer poignant insights into the multifaceted challenges that students encounter in their pursuit of academic aspirations. These narratives highlight the intense pressure, societal expectations, and financial constraints that often intersect to shape students' educational journeys. From unwavering determination to overcome setbacks to struggle with balancing personal well-being and external pressures and resilience in the face of financial obstacles, these narratives underscore the socio-economic, psychological and societal factors influencing student experiences.

3. Socio-Economic Factors Influencing the Participation of Students in Shadow Education

Socio-Economic Factors Influencing the Participation of Students in Shadow Education

The participation of students in shadow education, such as private tutoring and coaching outside of regular school hours, is influenced by a variety of socio-economic factors. These factors play a significant role in shaping access to and engagement with supplementary educational opportunities, with implications for academic achievement and social mobility. By understanding these factors, we can identify strategies to promote equity and inclusivity in access to educational resources and opportunities.

Socio-economic factors	Sub-domains	Percentage	Interpretation
Income disparities and accessibility	Availability of financial resources	56%	Higher income families have greater access to resources for shadow education, such as private tutors or coaching centers.
	Affordability of Educational Expenses	60%	Lower-income families may find it challenging to afford the costs associated with shadow education, limiting their participation.
Educational Background of Parents	Influence of Parental Education	87%	Parents with higher levels of education may prioritize academic success and invest more in supplementary education for their children.
	Parental Awareness and Support	91%	Educated parents are more likely to recognize the benefits of shadow education and provide support or encouragement to their children.
Urban-Rural Disparities	Proximity to Educational Facilities	92%	Urban areas typically have more access to coaching centers and educational resources compared to rural areas, influencing participation.
	Transportation Accessibility	85%	Limited transportation options in rural areas may hinder students' ability to access shadow education facilities, reducing participation.
Occupational Status of Parents	Financial Stability	59%	Families with stable employment and higher occupational status may allocate more resources towards shadow education for their children.

	Time Availability	62%	Parents in high-status occupations may have limited time to support their children's education, leading to reliance on shadow education services.
Perceived Return on Investment	Expectations for Future Opportunities	96%	Families perceive shadow education as a means to secure better educational and career opportunities for their children, driving participation.
	Economic Mobility	94%	Investing in shadow education is seen as a pathway to upward social mobility, motivating families to participate despite financial constraints.

Table 3: Socio-economic factors influencing participation of students in shadow education

It is observed that income disparities and accessibility significantly impact participation, with higher-income families enjoying greater access to resources for shadow education, such as private tutors or coaching centers. Conversely, lower-income families may find it challenging to afford the associated costs, limiting their participation in these supplementary educational opportunities. This is supported by Tasti and Engin (2022) that this trend has worsened pre-existing educational disparities in Turkey, while also amplifying the disparity in performance on the university entrance examination among students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The educational background of parents plays a pivotal role, with higher levels of parental education correlating with a greater emphasis on academic success and investment in shadow education for their children. Educated parents are also more likely to recognize the benefits of such education and provide support or encouragement to their children, further influencing participation rates. Urban-rural disparities further compound the issue, as urban areas typically offer greater access to coaching centers and educational resources compared to rural areas. Limited transportation options in rural areas may hinder students' ability to access shadow education facilities, thereby reducing participation rates among rural populations. These findings are in consonance with the findings of Kumar and Chowdhury (2021) that participation in shadow education is significantly influenced by various factors, including households' socioeconomic status, educational level of the household head, urban residence, current schooling levels, and the type of educational institutions managed. Moreover, it was found that the occupational status of parents also factors into participation, as families with stable employment and higher occupational status may allocate more resources towards shadow education. However, parents in high-status occupations may have limited time to support their children's education, leading to increased reliance on shadow education services. Perceived return on investment serves as a significant motivator for participation, with families viewing shadow education as a means to secure better educational and career opportunities for their children. This perception, coupled with aspirations for economic mobility and upward social mobility, drives participation rates despite financial constraints. The findings are in consonance with other scholarly literature that in several countries, students from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are found to engage in shadow education more frequently compared to their counterparts from lower SES backgrounds (Buchmann et al., 2010; Davies, 2004; Park et al., 2016; Smyth, 2009; Stevenson and Baker, 1992). Thus, socio-economic factors exert a profound influence on students' participation in shadow education, highlighting the complex interplay between financial considerations, parental influence and perceived

benefits. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive interventions aimed at enhancing access and affordability while also addressing systemic inequalities in education.

Conclusion

The present study of shadow education in India reveals a landscape both illuminated by opportunity and obscured by challenges. As students seek to excel academically through shadow education, they traverse a terrain fraught with unseen costs and pitfalls. While shadow education presents opportunities for academic enhancement and supplementary learning, it also reveals systemic challenges and inequities inherent in the formal education system. The unseen costs and pitfalls of shadow education, including financial burdens on families and the exacerbation of educational inequalities, highlight the need for comprehensive reforms to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students. Additionally, our exploration of the psychological and cognitive well-being of students engaged in shadow education practices emphasizes the importance of prioritizing student welfare and holistic development. Strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of shadow education on mental health, such as promoting work-life balance, fostering critical thinking skills, and addressing academic pressure, are essential for creating a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Ultimately, addressing the complexities of shadow education requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to foster an educational system that prioritizes equity, excellence, and student well-being.

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