

***The Psychological Cost of Academic Excellence:
Shadow Education and Student Well-being***

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of education, the shift towards an industry model fueled by commercial interests has diminished the traditional status of education as a public good (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. Shadow education, defined as private supplementary tutoring running parallel to regular school hours, has become a prominent force. The objective of the paper is to understand the impact of shadow education on students' psychological and emotional well-being. Conducting empirical research in Chandigarh City, India, the study focuses on 200 students of 12th-grade concurrently preparing for All-India level entrance examinations in Medicine and Engineering streams. Utilizing stratified random sampling and descriptive survey methods, the findings reveal alarming trends, with shadow education institutes enrolling students in two-year programs, by collecting huge fees for tuition and hostel/transportation facilities. Consequently, a significant number of students skip regular school and attend coaching centers, The study witnessed that majority of the students had heightened levels of anxiety, stress, isolation, and diminished emotional resilience. This study underscores the critical need to address the intricate dynamics between shadow education, student well-being and the evolving educational system where profit becomes the topic priority for educational institutions. The implications are far-reaching, compromising key indicators of sustainable development such as quality education, reduced inequalities, and social justice.

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

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right that empowers individuals and offers a powerful means for economically and socially marginalized children and communities to overcome poverty. It serves as a cornerstone of human rights, essential for the realization of other rights and the promotion of sustainable development. Education enhances personal well-being and drives societal progress. Nevertheless, the landscape of education has undergone significant changes in recent years, characterized by the proliferation of for-profit educational institutions. Globally, the ascent of neoliberal ideologies has played a crucial role in shaping socio-economic policies, exerting a significant influence across various sectors, including education. According to David Harvey, neoliberal ideologies have profoundly impacted diverse aspects of society, including education. The neoliberal agenda, which advocates for free-market principles and minimal governmental intervention, has strongly influenced education policies worldwide (Harvey, 2005).

Since the advent of economic reforms in India, the country has witnessed significant growth in both its education system and economy. A notable development has been the rise of private education in the form of coaching classes, initially conceived as supplementary aids like private tuitions to enhance students' performance in schools. What started as one-on-one tutoring has evolved into one-to-many interactions, expanding into coaching classes aimed at improving academic outcomes in school subjects. Over time, these centers broadened their focus to prepare students for national-level entrance exams in fields such as engineering, management, and medicine (Bray and Silova, 2006). This phenomenon, where private tutoring and coaching occur outside the formal schooling system, is known as shadow education. Defined as "educational activities, such as tutoring and extra classes, occurring outside of the formal channels of an educational system designed to improve a student's chances of successfully moving through all the allocation processes" (Buchmann, Condrón, & Roscigno, 2010), shadow education has emerged as a substantial industry in recent years, surpassing expectations with its widespread franchises across India (Zhang W., 2023). The proliferation of this "Shadow Education System" has quietly influenced the academic paths of countless students, promising academic success but often concealing hidden costs that challenge the integrity of India's educational framework. As more Indian students turn to private coaching, supplementary classes, and intensive exam preparation, the ramifications of this trend are increasingly evident, impacting not only individual learners but also broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics within the nation.

In India, the prevalence of private coaching among high school students is strikingly high, with 83% enrolled in coaching classes according to the Asian Development Bank (2012). This statistic is reinforced by recent findings from the National Statistical Office (NSO, 2020), which indicate that one in three high school students receives private coaching. The NSO report, based on the 75th round of the National Sample Survey, reveals that across all educational levels, from pre-primary to graduate studies, 19.8% of students engage in some form of private coaching. For students in Classes 9 and 10, preparing for critical board exams and admissions tests, this figure rises to over 30%. Urban upper-class students notably have greater access to private coaching, with more than half of boys from urban upper-class backgrounds attending coaching, compared to only 13.7% of rural boys and girls from minority communities. Private coaching comes at a significant financial cost, constituting over 18% of the average annual education expenditure for secondary school students, a pattern similarly observed among higher secondary school students. In states like West Bengal, students allocate a substantial portion, around 27%, of their education expenditure to

private coaching (NSO, 2020). The phenomenon of private tutoring is increasingly recognized as integral to India's education landscape, addressing educational needs across the achievement spectrum—from high-achieving students aiming for top marks to struggling students seeking support (Majumdar, 2014). These coaching centers operate with varied service packages tailored to student needs and parents' financial capacities, often including accommodation options. Fees range significantly, from ₹50,000 to ₹1 lakh annually for year-long coaching, underscoring concerns about the commercialization and potential exploitation within the education sector.

These coaching institutes, now operating as corporate entities, participate actively in educational policy advocacy, influencing policies that align with their commercial interests. Their clientele spans not only the middle class but also economically disadvantaged families who invest heavily in coaching fees to fulfill their children's educational aspirations (Spren & Kamat, 2018). This scenario highlights emerging disparities in access to quality education and underscores the need for reforms that promote a more inclusive and equitable education system. Addressing these issues requires shedding light on hidden disparities and advocating for policies that ensure all students, regardless of socio-economic background, have equal access to high-quality educational opportunities. This approach is crucial for fostering a more just educational landscape in India. This study seeks to illuminate the concealed tolls on students' well-being linked to the relentless pursuit of academic excellence. Its aim is to initiate a critical discourse on the future direction of education in India, urging stakeholders to confront these challenges and establish a more inclusive and sustainable learning environment for future generations. Central to this investigation is the exploration of shadow education and its ramifications for equity within India's educational framework, with particular attention to how it affects disadvantaged students who lack the financial means to access supplementary educational support.

Research Questions

1. What are the hidden psychological costs associated with shadow education among students in India, and how do these impact their overall well-being?
2. How does the prevalence of shadow education in India contribute to the psychological stress and well-being of students striving for academic excellence?

Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the hidden psychological costs associated with engaging in shadow education among students in India.
2. To assess the impact of participating in shadow education on the overall psychological well-being of students in India, focusing on stress levels, anxiety, and other related factors.

Methodology

The study comprised 200 12th-grade students preparing for national entrance exams in Medicine and Engineering streams in Chandigarh, India, focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this specific demographic. The research unfolded in two distinct phases to offer a comprehensive insight into their experiences.

Phase 1 – Quantitative

In the initial phase, a quantitative approach was employed. A structured questionnaire was crafted to gather data from the sample, encompassing various dimensions to delve into the challenges and opportunities encountered during the students' educational journey. These dimensions included:

- i) Socioeconomic Background: Gathering information on the economic status, occupation, and household conditions of the students' families.
- ii) Access to Education: Investigating factors such as school proximity, availability of educational resources, and transportation access.
- iii) Parental Involvement: Assessing the level of parental engagement in their child's education and their aspirations for their children.
- iv) Educational Challenges: Identifying specific academic hurdles, socio-economic barriers, psychosocial challenges, gender disparities, and access issues faced by students.

Phase 2 – Qualitative

The second phase adopted a qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with a subset of the sample. This approach facilitated a deeper exploration of the students' and their parents' experiences and perspectives. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share personal experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

This dual-phase methodology aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the educational landscape and socio-economic dynamics impacting students preparing for competitive exams in Chandigarh.

Results

1. Demographic Details of the Sample

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

Table 1: Demographic details of the sample

The demographic profile of the sample offers valuable insights into the characteristics of students engaged in shadow education, particularly those focusing on subjects like Medicine and Engineering. The chosen age range of 16-19 years reflects the typical use of shadow

education among students preparing for crucial entrance exams or seeking to enhance their academic performance in their final years of high school. The selection of subjects, specifically Medicine and Engineering, underscores the competitive nature of shadow education, as these fields often require intensive preparation and high academic standards for admission to prestigious institutions. Students aspiring to careers in these fields frequently opt for coaching to improve their chances of success in entrance exams. The significant average fee paid to coaching institutes, totaling INR 8 Lakh over a two-year period, highlights the substantial financial commitment associated with accessing shadow education services. This investment reflects the importance parents and students place on achieving academic excellence in competitive domains. The annual income range of parents, between INR 8-9 Lakh, provides context regarding the economic background of the sample. While moderate, this income level indicates a significant allocation of household resources towards coaching fees, emphasizing the prioritization of education within these families. The average number of siblings, at 3, suggests additional financial responsibilities and competition for resources within the household. This aspect underscores the socio-economic dynamics influencing students' participation in shadow education. Understanding these demographics is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their socio-economic background.

2. Psychological Costs Associated With Shadow Education Among Students in India and Their Impact on Students' Overall Well-being

While shadow education is often praised for its role in supplementing academic learning and improving students' performance, it is imperative to scrutinize its hidden costs, particularly regarding the psychological and cognitive well-being of students. This discussion seeks to delve into the complex relationship between shadow education practices and their potential effects on the psychological and cognitive aspects of students in India. By exploring these hidden costs, we aim to develop a deeper understanding of the broader implications of shadow education and its influence on the holistic development of students.

Domain	Sub-domain	Percentage of students	Factors
Burnout	Emotional exhaustion	88%	Academic demands, workload, or peer expectations
	Unhealthy competition	59%	Pressure to excel beyond peers, or a hypercompetitive academic atmosphere
Self-esteem	Social comparison	82%	Peer influence, digital platforms, and the academic milieu
	Fear of failure	61%	Perfectionism and anxiety related to assessment
Attention	Selective attention amidst distractions	73%	Clarity of purpose and mindfulness

	Attentional bias towards exam scores	76%	Preexisting expectations and the significance of coaching
Memory	Short term memory and rote learning	82%	Insufficient comprehension and focus on curriculum
	Long term memory encoding and sustainable learning	69%	Engaged learning and active participation

Table 2: Psychological costs associated with shadow education

Burnout is a prevalent consequence, marked by emotional exhaustion due to academic demands, workload, and unhealthy competition. Chen and Kuan's (2021) findings indicate that consistent engagement in private supplementary education (PSE) correlates with increased symptoms of depression, particularly among students deeply involved in such activities. This suggests that while regular participation in PSE may enhance academic performance during high school transitions, it also heightens the risk of depression compared to peers. Memory becomes a critical aspect influenced by shadow education, where there is often a focus on short-term memory and rote learning, sometimes at the expense of meaningful and sustainable learning approaches. This observation aligns with the literature which highlights that excessive after-school tutoring and parental intervention can have detrimental effects on students' physical and mental well-being.

Interview With Candidate I: Academic Struggles and Resilience

"I've been preparing for the NEET exam for the past two years, aiming to secure admission to a top medical college. It's been a rollercoaster journey filled with highs and lows. Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the vast syllabus and the pressure to excel. There were times when I doubted if I could ever achieve my dream of becoming a doctor. I've made significant sacrifices along the way. I spend most of my waking hours studying, often skipping social events and family gatherings. It's isolating at times, but I remind myself of the long-term goal. The pressure is intense, especially as the exam date approaches. There are days when I feel confident after performing well in practice tests, but then there are moments of anxiety and self-doubt. My family has been supportive but they too understand the importance of this exam for my future. They encourage me to stay focused and maintain a healthy balance despite the challenges. I've learned to prioritize self-care and manage stress through meditation and exercise. What keeps me going is the determination to make a difference in people's lives through medicine. The thought of helping others motivates me to push through the tough times. I know success isn't guaranteed, but I'm willing to give my best effort and persevere. Each setback is a learning opportunity, and I'm committed to staying resilient on this journey to achieving my dream."

Interview With Candidate II: Pursuing Excellence in Competitive Exams

"I've been preparing for the NEET exam for the past 2 years, aiming to secure admission to a prestigious MBBS program. It's been a challenging yet rewarding journey so far. Every day is filled with intense study sessions, mock tests, and strategic planning. The pressure is palpable. I've had to make significant adjustments in my lifestyle. I've cut down on social outings and personal hobbies to dedicate more time to preparation. It's isolating at times, but I remind myself that short-term sacrifices are necessary for long-term success. The fear of failure is

always lingering in the background. The NEET exam is highly competitive, and the stakes are high. There are days when I feel confident after scoring well in mock exams, but there are also moments of self-doubt and anxiety, especially when I encounter challenging topics. My family reminds me that setbacks are part of the process and that resilience is key to achieving my goals. The thought of gaining admission to a top college motivates me to keep pushing forward."

3. Contribution of Shadow Education to the Psychological Stress and Well-being of Students Striving for Academic Excellence

Domain	Sub-domain	Percentage of students	Factors
Academic stress	Coursework and assignments	85%	Stringent timelines, intricate assignments, or challenges in juggling multiple requirements
	Exam preparation	96%	Pressure to excel, anxiety about failure, or the extensive content to cover within tight deadlines
Academic anxiety	Career goals	68%	Ambiguity regarding future career opportunities, societal pressures, or apprehension about not reaching desired career goals
	Educational attainment	72%	Achieving academic benchmarks and securing admission to preferred educational institutions
Nervousness	Fidgety	52%	Pressure to perform, feelings of self-doubt, and time constraints
	Restlessness	58%	Hyperactivity, difficulty maintaining focus
Emotional resilience	Positive attitude towards academic setbacks	32%	Mindset focused on growth, self-confidence, and mindfulness
	Sustaining motivation and perseverance	58%	Well-defined goals and self-driven motivation

Table 3: Contribution of shadow education to psychological stress and well-being of students

Academic stress is a predominant issue among students, exacerbated by tight deadlines, complex assignments, and the pressure to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously. Alam and Zhu (2022) highlight that in Bangladesh, shadow education intensifies competition and stress, placing a heavy emphasis on exams. Students also face intense pressure related to

exam preparation, including fears of failure and the daunting task of reviewing extensive material within limited time frames. These academic pressures are compounded by concerns about future career prospects, societal expectations, and the pursuit of desired professional outcomes. The drive to meet academic standards and secure admission to preferred institutions significantly impacts students' emotional well-being and self-esteem. Moreover, the hypercompetitive academic environment fosters a culture of comparison and perfectionism, contributing to students' self-doubt and fear of failure. Emotional resilience emerges as pivotal in mitigating the adverse impacts of academic stress and anxiety. Cultivating a positive attitude towards setbacks, maintaining motivation, and persevering through challenges are crucial factors enabling students to cope effectively with academic pressures. Students commonly exhibit nervousness and restlessness as outward signs of the psychological strain they experience. These symptoms often stem from the pressure to perform, feelings of self-doubt, and difficulties in maintaining focus and attention.

Interview With Candidate III: Academic Pressure and Societal Expectations

"I opted for Non-Medical in college under immense societal pressure, despite my passion for the arts. Now, I find myself overwhelmed by the demands of competitive exams and the expectations placed upon me. My family lives in a small town in Himachal Pradesh, and they've sacrificed a lot to send me to a coaching center in Chandigarh, nearly 180 kilometers away. The pressure to perform is immense, and I feel trapped between my own aspirations and societal expectations. Every day is a struggle to keep up with the rigorous study schedule and maintain my mental health. I can't admit to my family that I'm struggling; they've invested so much in my education, and I fear disappointing them. The thought of failing after all their sacrifices is daunting. The coaching environment is competitive, and there's a constant fear of not measuring up to my peers. It's isolating to be so far from home, navigating this journey alone without the emotional support I need. I often feel suffocated by these expectations and unsure how to break free from this cycle of stress."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of shadow education in India unveils a landscape characterized by both promise and challenge. As students pursue academic excellence through shadow education, they navigate a terrain fraught with hidden costs and obstacles. While shadow education offers opportunities for academic enrichment and supplementary learning, it also exposes systemic issues and disparities embedded within the formal education system. The unseen costs and challenges associated with shadow education underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms aimed at ensuring equitable access to high-quality education for all students. Furthermore, our exploration into the psychological well-being of students engaged in shadow education practices underscores the critical importance of prioritizing student welfare and holistic development. Implementing strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of shadow education on mental health—such as promoting a balanced approach to study, nurturing critical thinking abilities, and addressing academic pressures—is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Ultimately, addressing the complexities of shadow education demands collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, and stakeholders alike. By working together to cultivate an educational system that values equity, excellence, and student well-being, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable framework for academic achievement in India.

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