

THE QUIET STRUGGLE: EXAMINING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF SHADOW EDUCATION ON STUDENTS IN INDIA

Deeksha Sharma*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of shadow education and its psychological impact on students in India, with a focus on psychological well-being. Conducted in Chandigarh City, India, our research involved questionnaires and interviews with 200 12th grade students preparing for All-India entrance examinations. Through stratified random sampling and descriptive survey methods, it was aimed to uncover hidden aspects of this educational landscape. The study examines how the commercialization of education in India has influenced the prevalence of shadow education, its key contributing factors, and the hidden costs associated with its psychological impact. Findings reveal alarming levels of anxiety, stress, and isolation among students, with a majority opting for shadow education programs over regular schooling. Financial burdens and socio-economic disparities further exacerbate the situation, affecting access to these services for many students. The paper advocates for a balanced approach prioritizing academic excellence while safeguarding student well-being. It calls for regulatory scrutiny of shadow education institutes and emphasizes the importance of mental health support services within educational institutions. Failure to address these issues not only jeopardizes individual students' futures but also undermines broader goals of sustainable development in India's educational landscape. Collaboration between educators and policymakers is essential to strike a balance between academic rigor and student well-being, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all.

Keywords: shadow education, psychological well-being, commercialization of education, student well-being

Introduction

Private supplementary tutoring conducted outside of formal schooling hours is commonly referred to as shadow education (e.g., Bray, 1999, 2009; Buchmann et al., 2010; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). This phenomenon is contingent upon the presence of mainstream education. The content taught in shadow education often mirrors that of formal schools, and the shadow sector expands in tandem with the growth of the formal education sector. The rise of private tutoring in South Asia can be attributed to the competitive nature of evaluations (Borkowski, et al., 2021) and the desire for upward social mobility (Joshi, 2019). The implications of shadow education are diverse: it is

acknowledged for enhancing learning effectiveness and fostering a constructive societal environment (Manzon and Areepattamannil, 2014). Conversely, it detracts from children's leisure time (Choi and Park, 2016) and exacerbates inequality gaps, imposing financial burdens (Bray, 1999; Jokic et al., 2013). The tutoring industry has seen a boost in demand from consumers, namely parents and students, which could stem from rational motives or unfounded anxieties. It has gained noticeable prominence across various regions globally, with East Asian nations like South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan demonstrating notably high rates of student participation in such supplementary education, as highlighted by Bray and Lykins (2012). The

* Junior Research Fellow, Department of Education, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

phenomenon of shadow education has experienced significant expansion in former Soviet countries and Eastern Europe following the political transitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moreover, many African nations have observed a notable uptick in shadow education, as documented by Antonowicz et al. (2010). Similarly, tutoring participation rates are notably high in parts of Southern Europe, while its significance is growing in North and South America. In India, it has been reported that approximately 83% of high school students are attending coaching classes (Asian Development Bank, 2012). This data of ADB is supplemented by a recent report of National Statistical Office (NSO, 2020), which states that “One in three high schoolers gets private coaching”. The report based on the 75th round of National Sample Survey, India, highlights that 19.8% of students at all levels from pre-primary to graduate students, take some form of private coaching. The need of shadow education arises due to intense competition for college admissions, educational inequality and students’ lofty aspirations for higher education. Kim and Jung (2019) identified five prevalent shadow education practices in South Korea, namely home-visit private tutoring, private tutoring in institutes, subscribed learning programs, internet-based private tutoring, and after-school programs. Additionally, Zhang and Bray (2020) categorized shadow education into three modes: providers, forms, and seasons, where providers encompass both individuals and institutions, forms include online, dual-tutor, and offline modalities. The implications of shadow education vary; while it enhances learning efficacy and fosters a constructive societal environment, as highlighted by Manzon and Areepattamannil (2014), it also diminishes playtime for children and exacerbates inequity by imposing financial burdens, as noted by Choi and Park (2016). Shadow education has thus led to emergence of several research issues, including curriculum, policymaking, and determinants, identified as key themes by Kim and Jung (2019) and Takashiro (2021) respectively. Educating parents and students to make informed decisions, discerning when tutoring is necessary and when it’s not, becomes essential. They should also be made aware of the potential

risks and benefits associated with different choices. Tutoring serves various purposes, such as addressing missed classes through remedial work, providing enrichment for further advancement, and customizing lessons to individual needs. However, tutoring can also impose additional pressures on young individuals, and the teaching and learning methods employed in tutoring sessions may not align with those used in schools.

Review of Literature

While existing research has extensively explored the relationship between private supplementary education (PSE) and academic performance, its influence on psychological health remains relatively unexplored. The study uncovers a concerning finding – while students categorized as always-takers experience improvements in academic performance during high school, they also exhibit elevated levels of depression symptoms compared to their peers. This suggests a complex interplay between PSE participation, academic achievement, and mental well-being, with certain participation patterns exacerbating the risk of psychological distress among students (Chen and Kuan, 2021). Similarly, another study suggests that hope, as a positive disposition, fosters perceived social support, which in turn mitigates perceived stress. Reduced perceived stress subsequently alleviates depression among shadow education tutors. This sequential mediation model not only highlights the independent contributions of perceived social support and perceived stress but also underscores their cumulative impact on mental health outcomes (Zhang et. al., 2022). While private tutoring can offer benefits such as helping struggling students catch up with their peers and providing additional challenges for high achievers, it also imposes pressures on young people and may not always yield desired outcomes (Bray, 2013). Continuous research has been paving its way in the field of educational psychology, focusing on parental anxiety and the mental well-being of students in relation to shadow education (Park et al., 2011; Carr and Wang, 2018).

Methodology

The sample was composed of 200 12th grade

students concurrently preparing for All-India level entrance examinations in Medicine and Engineering. Stratified random sampling was used and the research was carried out in two distinct phases to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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.

Phase 2 - Qualitative: The second phase of the research adopted a qualitative approach. This phase involved in-depth interviews or focus group discussions 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.

Research Questions

1. How has the commercialization of education in India influenced the prevalence and growth of shadow education?
2. What are the hidden costs associated with shadow education in terms of students' psychological well-being?
3. What are the socio-economic disparities in access to shadow education in India?

Objectives

1. To explore how the commercialization of education in India has influenced the prevalence and growth of shadow education.
2. To examine the hidden costs associated with shadow education in terms of students' psychological well-being.
3. To investigate the socio-economic disparities in access to shadow education in India.

Findings

1. **Exploring how the commercialization of education in India has influenced the prevalence and growth of shadow education.**

- (i) **Privatization Policies:** The neoliberal era has witnessed a surge in for-profit educational institutions prioritizing profit over quality education, leading to the commercialization of education (Tilak, 2011). The study indicates that the emergence of shadow education in India can be attributed, in part, to privatization policies in the education sector. With the liberalization of the economy and the promotion of private investment in education, there has been a proliferation of private schools and coaching institutes offering supplementary education services outside the formal schooling system. The rise of private capital in the education sector has raised apprehensions about compromising educational quality for profit maximization, wherein education is seen as a commodity which can be bought and sold (Patnaik, 2005). This concern is compounded by the demand for shadow education, which involves supplementary tutoring outside formal school hours, serving as a contemporary manifestation of privatization within the educational sphere. It operates because competitive entrance examinations drive students to seek specialized assistance beyond what traditional schools offer (Singh, 2019).
- (ii) **Market Dynamics:** The study reveals that the commercialization of education in India has created a competitive market environment where private tutoring and supplementary education services thrive. With the emergence of for-profit educational institutions and coaching centers, there has been a proliferation of options for students and parents seeking additional academic support beyond traditional schooling. Competition among providers, both individual tutors and coaching institutes, further shapes market dynamics, driving differentiation in teaching methodologies and service offerings (Lundstrom and Holm, 2011).
- (iii) **Flexibility:** Findings suggest while traditional schooling may be constrained by factors such as location and affordability, shadow education services offer flexible scheduling, diverse learning resources, and personalized instruction,

catering to the needs and preferences of students and families. This is substantiated by Alam and Zhu (2022) that shadow education providers, including individual tutors and coaching institutes, capitalize on the demand for supplementary learning by offering specialized courses and personalized tutoring services.

- (iv) **Perceived Quality of Education:** Findings indicate that the perceived inadequacies of the formal education system, including issues such as overcrowded classrooms, outdated curriculum, and limited teacher-student interaction, have contributed to the rise of shadow education in India. Private tutoring and coaching institutes are seen as offering

personalized attention, tailored instruction, and access to specialized resources, appealing to students and parents seeking alternatives to mainstream education (Singh, 2019).

- (v) **Pressure for Performance:** The study suggests that the commercialization of education contributes to a culture of academic competitiveness and performance pressure among students in India. With an emphasis on achieving high grades and securing admission to prestigious institutions, students and parents increasingly turn to shadow education services as a means of maximizing academic outcomes, perpetuating the cycle of reliance on commercialized educational support (Zhang and Bray, 2016).

2. Examining the hidden costs associated with shadow education in terms of students' psychological well-being

| Domain | Sub-domain | Percentage of students | Factors |
|------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| Enrolment | Enrolment in shadow education | 78% | Indicates a widespread recognition of the benefits offered by supplementary education programs. |
| | Students opting for shadow education over regular school attendance | 57% | To meet their personalized learning needs, seeking tailored instruction and support to address their academic challenges and goals. |
| 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 |
| Isolation | Social withdrawal | 71% | Social anxiety, trauma or stress |
| | Reduced communication | 45% | Low self-esteem, academic pressure |
| Stress | Emotional exhaustion | 88% | Academic pressures, workload or peer pressure |
| | Unhealthy competition | 59% | Pressure to outperform others, or a hypercompetitive academic environment. |
| 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 |
| Self-esteem | Social comparison | 82% | Peer influence, social media, academic environment |
| | Fear of failure | 61% | Perfectionism, evaluation anxiety |

The findings from the study shed light on the multifaceted experiences of students engaged in shadow education, revealing significant insights into the challenges and complexities associated with this phenomenon. Enrollments in shadow education programs are notably high, with a substantial proportion of students opting for supplementary instruction over regular school attendance, indicating a perceived need for personalized academic support. However, alongside the benefits, students face considerable academic anxiety, with concerns ranging from uncertainty about future career prospects to the pressure of meeting academic standards and gaining admission to desired educational institutions. Moreover, feelings of

isolation and stress are prevalent among students, reflecting the social and emotional toll of intensive academic pursuits outside of traditional schooling. These challenges are compounded by attentional difficulties and memory-related issues, further underscoring the complexities of students' experiences with shadow education. Additionally, self-esteem concerns are widespread, with students grappling with social comparison and fear of failure in academic settings. Overall, the findings highlight the interplay of academic, social, and psychological factors in shaping students' experiences with shadow education, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support and intervention to address the diverse needs of students navigating supplementary educational pathways.

3. Investigating the socio-economic disparities in access to shadow education in India.

| Socio-economic factors | Sub-domains | Percentage | Interpretation |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------|---|
| Income disparities and accessibility | Availability of financial resources | 40% | 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. |

The discussion on socio-economic factors in shadow education underscores the profound impact of economic circumstances, parental influence, geographical disparities, and perceived returns on investment. Income inequalities significantly shape access to shadow education, with higher-income families enjoying greater resources, while affordability poses a barrier for economically disadvantaged households. Parental education levels and awareness play a crucial role, as educated parents prioritize supplementary education, fostering a supportive learning environment. Urban-rural disparities exacerbate educational inequities, with limited access to coaching centres and transportation hindering rural students' participation. Parental occupational status influences financial stability and time availability, shaping access to shadow education services. Despite financial constraints, families perceive shadow education as instrumental for securing better educational and career opportunities, emphasizing its role in socio-economic mobility. Addressing these socio-economic factors is essential for promoting equitable access to shadow education and fostering inclusive educational environments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex relationship between shadow education and its psychological impact on students in India. The findings reveal a concerning reality where the commercialization of education has led to the proliferation of shadow education institutes, enticing students with promises of academic success but at the cost of heightened levels of anxiety, stress, and isolation. The prevalence of enrolment in shadow education programs, with a significant number of students opting for these over regular school attendance, underscores the pervasive influence of this phenomenon. Socio-economic disparities further exacerbate the situation, with financial constraints hindering access to shadow education resources for many students. The intense academic pressures imposed by shadow education programs significantly impact students' mental well-being, raising questions about the sustainability of key developmental indicators such as quality education, reduced

inequalities, and social justice. Commercial interests often take precedence over educational priorities, fragmenting the educational ecosystem and compromising the holistic development of students. To address these challenges, a balanced approach is advocated, prioritizing both academic excellence and the mental and emotional health of students. This requires regulatory scrutiny of shadow education institutes and prioritization of mental health support services within educational institutions. Collaboration between educators and policymakers is essential to strike a balance between academic rigor and student well-being, ensuring a holistic approach that nurtures the development of students while upholding the broader goals of sustainable development in the educational landscape of India. Failure to address these issues not only threatens the well-being of individual students but also undermines the collective pursuit of equitable and inclusive education for all.

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