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# Exposing the “shadow”: an empirical scrutiny of the “shadowing process” of private tutoring in India

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## ABSTRACT

A growing body of research shows that private tutoring is a globally pervasive phenomenon. A common way in which tutoring provisions are defined is with the use of the metaphor “shadow education”, signifying that tutoring centres “shadow” formal schools. Despite the popularity of this metaphor in the field, how “shadowing” occurs as a process and what implications this process has for formal schooling and society have seldom been put through empirical scrutiny. To redress this gap in the literature, this article draws on the data produced through an ethnography of schooling in Dehradun (India) between 2014–15. The discussion on specific ways in which the institutional arrangement of private tutoring aligns with that of formal schooling reveals the socio-educational embeddedness of private tutoring within the mainstream schooling experience in India. The article argues that “shadowing” is not a neutral process, it is executed tactically and strategically with an aim to provide private tutoring a valued, legitimised, and competitive space in an increasingly marketised education sector. Importantly, this analysis of “shadowing” exposes problematic practices within formal schooling and suggests that by mirroring these practices in its structure, private tutoring reproduces social inequality. The insights into understanding the “shadowing process” that this article offers may be of value to the analysis of the organisational arrangements of tutoring businesses within India and in other societies. Through demonstrating that tutoring is part of everyday schooling, this article makes a case for recognising it as integral to mainstream education in India.

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Private tutoring; India; shadowing process; schooling; institutional arrangement

## Introduction

Private tutoring has been increasingly recognised as a globally growing system of education delivery. Despite the variety of forms that tutoring provisions take across different empirical contexts, they are commonly defined by the metaphor of “shadow education”. This metaphor gained popularity after its appearance in the 1999 report on private tutoring by Mark Bray. Since then, as Zhang and Bray (2020) argue, the research on “shadow education” has expanded in focus from mapping its nature and prevalence globally to analysing the ecosystems it inhabits. Drawing on the findings of several empirical studies in this field, Zhang and Bray show how the relationship between formal schooling and “shadow education” – mediated through the “interactions with schooling,

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parenting and socio-economic development” – has shaped the dynamics of power and class across societies (Zhang & Bray 2020, p. 325). A key debate that the authors engage with throughout this article is the ways in which the label “shadow” is contested in the scholarship and how scholars use it variously to define the phenomenon of contemporary private tutoring internationally.

Contributing to this debate, this article puts the term “shadow” under empirical scrutiny, and, in doing so, it delineates the ways in which private tutoring mirrors formal schooling. By using an Indian form of private tutoring as an empirical case, this article outlines the significance of using this term to understand the social processes underlying its structural dispositions. In so doing, this article renders visible the often-hidden practices within formal schooling and surfaces the potential of private tutoring in shaping the educational landscape, thus illuminating the dynamic relationship between education and society within the empirical context.

Furthermore, this article makes a significant contribution to understanding the organisational arrangement of private tutoring in India. In India, tutoring features in the everyday schooling experience of millions of students at various educational levels. Despite the pervasiveness of private tutoring and frequent reporting on this in national and local media, this topic is often side-lined in mainstream scholarly discussion and policy debates. Breaking this tradition, the 2020 Indian National Education Policy (henceforth, NEP-2020) acknowledges private tutoring in the form of “coaching culture” and actively problematises it for adding extra pressure on students for exam preparation and dissuading students from “true learning” (Government of India, 2020). The solution NEP-2020 suggests for eradicating this “problem” is changing the appraisal system, and lowering the stakes of certain high-pressure assessments, in formal schooling. While indeed doing this might be effective, at least to some extent, in alleviating the pressure on individual students, the question arises, whether this would lead to private tutoring completely disappearing from the Indian schooling landscape? I argue that despite the proposed changes to the formal schooling system, private tutoring will continue to gain popularity among students and families in India.

To support this argument empirically, this article explores the ways in which private tutoring centres institutionally arrange themselves in relation to formal schooling practices within India. It draws on ethnographically produced data – fieldwork for which was carried out in Dehradun between 2014–15. By operationalising “shadow” as an analytical tool, this article unveils the socio-educational embeddedness of private tutoring in the Indian schooling system. Furthermore, it shows that the “problems” that are often considered to emanate from private tutoring provisions are in fact incubated in the formal schooling practices themselves. This article also discusses policy implications and makes a case for studying mainstream schooling from the vantage point of private tutoring to comprehend its nature and practices in the empirical context. While the article offers critical insights into the structure and practices of private tutoring in a specific context of contemporary India, the arguments it puts forth and the discussions it generates will contribute to the scholarly understanding of the “shadowing process” more globally.

In what follows, I will first outline “shadow” as an analytical tool and then briefly introduce the Indian form of private tutoring to provide a background of the empirical case this article is presenting. Subsequently, I will describe the research methodology

before delving into the key themes concerning the institutional arrangement of private tutoring, which emerged from the data. Finally, I will synthesise key research findings and discuss their research and policy implications.

### Conceptualising “shadow” as an analytical tool

Using “shadow” as an analytical tool requires conceptual clarity on three factors: 1) the core characteristics of private tutoring, 2) the context that produces and promotes the need for tutoring support and 3) the social processes that support and nurture tutoring provisions in contemporary society. Each of these is discussed here in turn.

As a globally differentiated phenomenon, private tutoring is recognised with a multitude of labels and a diverse set of locally produced terminologies – while each of these explains the phenomenon to some extent, none clearly outlines the scope and boundaries of private tutoring, as such. The most common way in which tutorial enterprises are referred to in the literature is with the label, “shadow education”. Mark Bray – a global leader in “shadow education” research – reinforced this term while usefully compiling the evidence of private supplementary education across countries over the years (Bray, 1999, 2017). In doing so, Bray suggested that private tutoring is primarily an exercise of mimicking the formal schooling system and used three parameters to identify the “shadow” nature of private tutoring services: supplementation (of the school curriculum), privateness (tutoring in exchange for a fee), and academic subjects (the subjects that are assessed in the formal education system) (Zhang & Bray, 2020). These parameters, which this article complies with, exclude outside-school practices that are part of concerted cultivation – such as extra-curricular language competency services, parental support, and skill enrichment training programmes – among privileged social groups (Ball, 2010; Gupta, 2020). This allows for the focus to be only on tutoring businesses that strictly relate their services to the formal education system.

Besides understanding the criteria that define private tutoring, it is crucial to appreciate the larger context that produces and promotes these practices. Many studies – that focused on private tutoring in East Asia – construe it, in varying extent and form, as a cultural phenomenon. This view has been revised, and in some cases rectified in the scholarship. For example, in their analyses of education patterns across societies, Baker and LeTendre (2005) note that private tutoring is prevalent even in many economically well-funded education systems. Indeed, commenting on their earlier work on tutoring provision in Japan, which suggested that “shadow education” emerges from Japanese societal norms and values, David Baker (2020) clarifies, “shadow education is neither some sideshow from particular cultural traditions nor from national variation in access to advanced education – it arises out of the heart of the global institution of education” (p. 312). Indeed, studies across societies have shown private tutoring “as a school choice by default” made by many parents to boost their children’s performance in schooling, as doing so is deemed necessary for realising intergenerational social advantage (Davies, 2004; also see, Dawson, 2010; Gupta, 2020).

Furthermore, the desire for private tutoring is supported and nurtured by social processes, such as commercialisation and privatisation of education in neo-liberalising societies and assertion of parental agency in their children’s schooling. For example, in the Australian case, Doherty and Dooley (2018) note that many parents purchase tutorial services as they

are systemically nudged by the government's measures that "responsibilise" families to ensure their children's educational success. In other contexts, parents may invest in tuition to provide their children with a competitive edge (see the Hong Kong case in Kwo & Bray, 2014) or to supplant the poor quality of education delivered in formal schools (see the case of Bangladesh in Hamid et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers have been reported to offer private tutoring in instances of de-professionalisation of educators' role in formal schools (see, Popa & Acedo, 2006) or in the form of the neo-liberally produced entrepreneurialism among schoolteachers (Gupta, 2019).

The above discussion alludes to the evident homogeneity in the demand for private tutoring and a discernible pattern in its supply worldwide. The everyday educational practices involving tutorial support nonetheless tend to be globally differentiated. To a large extent, this variety in private tutoring stems from the diversity of the formal education systems across societies. It is imperative, therefore, to view the tutoring sector's structure and practices in relation to the mainstream education that it aims to mimic. This article focusses on a specific case of private tutoring in India – the section below will outline the relevant policy and trends in the tutoring landscape in the context in which this article is empirically grounded.

### **Private tutoring in India: a backdrop**

In 2020, the Government of India introduced a new National Education Policy. This policy is publicly commended for its sharp critique of the contemporary education system – in ways none of the previous policies (the latest was introduced in 1992) did – and makes suggestions to fundamentally reconfigure the aims, the processes, and the practices of teaching and learning, in order to prepare India for realising its potential to becoming "a global superpower" (Government of India, 2020). When discussing the current assessment patterns, the policy openly acknowledges the growth of private tutoring (referred to in the policy document as "coaching culture") and its implications for students' learning experiences. The following excerpt is particularly illustrative:

The current nature of secondary school exams, including Board exams and entrance exams – and the resulting coaching culture of today – are doing much harm, especially at the secondary school level, replacing valuable time for true learning with excessive exam coaching and preparation. (Government of India, 2020, p. 16)

As shown above, the policy regards private tutoring as an outcome of the current assessment system that "force[s] students to learn a very narrow band of material in a single stream, rather than allowing the flexibility and choice" (Government of India, 2020, p.16). It also notes the wider implications of the proliferation of "coaching culture" in reinforcing excessive exam preparation and deviating students from investing their time in "true learning". The policy subsequently proposes to change the appraisal system – by promoting formative, rather than summative, assessments – and lowering the stakes of exams at the secondary educational levels. The nature of the tangible steps taken in this direction is yet unclear, but the extent to which the policy discusses the need to change the system to combat the popularity, and severe effects of tutoring enterprises on schooling experiences, signifies its ubiquity in the Indian context.

According to the 2016 report on “Education in India”, published by the National Sample Survey Office of the Government of India, nearly 26% – estimated to be 71 million – students solicit paid tutoring support annually (Varma, 2016). A more recent government report on social consumption (based on the 2017–18 National Sample Survey) notes that “private coaching” is one of the key components of household expenditures on education, alongside school fees, stationery and uniform cost (Government of India, 2019).

Private tutoring in India is not a new phenomenon, but the popularity of the contemporary form of tutoring provision has grown gradually over the years. By comparing national sample surveys, Azam (2016) notes 19% of students aged 6–24 years attended private tutoring in 2007–08 as compared to 15.3% in 1986–87. In this study, Azam also reported that: 1) in 2007–08, private tutoring comprised nearly 43% of total private education expenditure (which is equivalent to about 16.5% of the total household per capita expenditure), and 2) there are crucial variations in students’ subscription to private tutoring services (by educational levels, region, school type, and social class). In 2007–08, nearly 28% of students (aged 6–24 years) solicited tutorial support in urban regions as compared to 16% participation rate in rural areas; students from higher socioeconomic status, especially in households with formally educated parents, were most likely to solicit tutoring support. Another crucial finding in Azam’s work was that while only 13% of primary level students attended tutorial sessions, the corresponding proportion at secondary levels was more than 30%.

The prevalence of private tutoring at secondary levels is noted in other studies, too. For example, in Maharashtra, Bhorkar and Bray (2018) found that students enrolled in Grade 11 and 12 consider private supplementary tutoring as “absolutely essential, with students depending on it for regular lessons as well as examination practice” (p. 153). The authors argued that private tutoring, although supplements the formal curriculum at elementary levels, it supplants it at higher secondary levels. The authors noted rising competition in the Indian schooling system as the primary contributor to the demand for private tutoring – this was the key finding of another study conducted in Bengaluru by Ghosh and Bray (2018). Hence, private tutoring appears to be pervasive across Indian states. However, as Azam notes, it is prevalent among mostly urban children at secondary educational levels who come from financially well-off families.

Another cross-states study by Sujatha (2014) – based on a random sample survey, conducted in 2005–06, with 4,032 secondary level students in four Indian states (Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh) – offered similar evidence to Azam’s work regarding the popularity of, and diversity in, the private tutoring landscape. This study noted an additional two points regarding the demand for and supply of tutorial support. First, Sujatha found that the demand for subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and English was much higher than for other subjects. The explanation Sujatha gave for this, noting its particular relevance to rural areas, was “the poor handling of these important subjects in schools” (p. 10). Dissatisfaction with the school system is also noted as a reason for the growth of private tutoring in a smaller scale study by Ghosh and Bray (2020) in West Bengal. While Sujatha suggests that in some cases, private tutoring compensates for the poor quality of education in state schools, others have shown the popularity of private tutoring even among students who attend perceivably better quality of formal schooling, i.e. students enrolled in private schools (see, Gupta, 2021).

Another important observation in Sujatha's study was that nearly one-fifth of the students who participated in the survey received paid tutoring support "from the same teacher who teaches in their school, despite this being banned in many states" (p. 9). Later, the 2009 Right to Education Act – which was subsequently implemented across all Indian states – prohibited teachers to provide paid tutoring support to their own students (Government of India, 2009). Importantly, teachers provide tutorial support not just to the students they teach at school, but also beyond. As I argue elsewhere, many private schoolteachers become tutors in response to their precarious work conditions (poor pay and the lack of job security). Tutoring, in significant ways, offers these schoolteachers an avenue to realise their entrepreneurial potential, a disposition that aligns with the ethos of the neo-liberalising education landscape (Gupta, 2019).

These studies reflect a new form of cultural dynamic emerging in the Indian schooling landscape due to the popularity of private tutoring. This appears clearly in the form of: changing teacher-culture, parents' involvement and their choice politics, and the reproduction of socio-economic privileges. Many of these studies condemn formal schooling for their underperformance to argue for the rise of tutoring provision in the Indian context. This article offers another angle to this discussion – by critically analysing schooling practices from the vantage point of private tutoring. The ethnographically produced data, presented here, bring to the fore voices of many social actors such as educators, parents and students themselves – collectively, they offer "the messiness of social life" (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008) in everyday schooling in Dehradun, India. In doing so, the article illuminates the "shadowing" process within the structure of private tutoring in the empirical context. This discussion provides novel insights into appraising the nature and scope of "coaching culture" – as referred to in the NEP-2020 – in the contemporary Indian society.

### **Methodological considerations**

This article draws on a larger ethnographic project, for which I carried out the fieldwork for a year between December 2014 and December 2015. During this extended period, I lived in Dehradun city in northern India, learned about everyday social life in the city, while focusing particularly on its relationship to the educational landscape. Discussions in this article are nonetheless informed by my interactions with students themselves, tutors at tutorial or coaching centres, teachers at schools, and parents at their homes. I will discuss each of these in turn.

The analysis presented here focuses primarily on the interviews with 22 tutors from 12 tutorial centres. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. During the course of the fieldwork, I visited two of these tutorial centres more frequently, and these visits opened up avenues for informal exchanges with 5 of the 22 tutors and many students who solicited educational services at these centres. These exchanges produced a more nuanced account of participants' experiences in the education sector. I also observed 10 tutoring sessions for Grade 10 mathematics (students aged 15–16 years) in one of these two centres. These data are supported by the reporting of publicly displayed advertisement materials of tutorial centres at the field site.

Fieldwork with tutorial centres was combined with my yearlong engagement with two private schools (locally known as "unaided" schools that receive no support from the government in their day-to-day running). Both schools supported secondary level

education until Grade 12 and their fees ranged from INR 40,000 to INR 78,000 (equivalent to USD 549 to USD 1,070). I also spoke with 38 schoolteachers from both schools – I first interviewed them (lasting approximately 60 minutes) and subsequently interacted with them on numerous occasions during my daily visits throughout the fieldwork period. In this period, I also observed parent-teacher meeting sessions, interacted with the students and their parents informally, and observed 10 sessions of classroom teaching of Grade 11 Economics (students aged 16–17 years).

Alongside speaking to educators – in schools and tutorial centres – I interacted with parents in 53 middle-class families whose children were studying in either of the schools that were part of this study. The annual household income of participant-families ranged between INR 300,000 and 500,000 (equivalent to USD 4,115 and USD 6,858 respectively). In most families, the fathers had college-level education, and most mothers had completed 12 years of schooling. Some mothers had gone on to graduate from college and very few were illiterate. Most mothers were homemakers, whereas fathers were either professionals or businessmen. All parents were interviewed in their homes (these interviews lasted for approximately 90 minutes); I also interacted with some of them more informally during their visits to their children's schools.

The use of multiple methods – interviews, informal conversations, and observations – with a range of participants was crucial for triangulating the data and capturing the intricate relationship the social actors had with both formal and informal (“shadow”) education systems. This approach to data production *and*, importantly, my trusted relationships with participants of this study were instrumental in maintaining validity and reliability of the data produced and the analysis. For example, my rapport with the participants facilitated open and candid conversations about several topics that are potentially controversial (for example, schoolteachers discussed in detail why they tutor after schooling hours) and sensitive (parents' anxiety concerning their children's education and their future, for example) in nature within the empirical setting.

All the interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded, and the materials displayed in public spaces were captured as images. The data generated from participant observations and informal conversations were recorded as field notes. Data also included visual-textual materials in the form of newspaper clippings, pamphlets, syllabi, and information booklets. This material was digitalised and subsequently analysed inductively (from the data) and deductively (using extant literature) with NVivo software. A considerable proportion of the data was coded as “the process of shadowing”. This code involved a variety of data, which were subsequently thematised. The specific themes related to the code – each of which are discussed in the next section under sub-headings – all together provide a nuanced understanding of the specific ways the structure of private tutoring in the empirical context mimics the formal education system.

### **Differentiated formal schooling and shadowing in the tutoring market**

This section discusses four elements of formal schooling that private tutoring mirrors in its structure and related practices. These are: education *board* (henceforth, board); schooling *level*, academic *subject* and the school *fees*. Each of these elements of the formal schooling system are discussed in this section, offering a *narrative* specifying the ways in which these are mirrored in the private tutoring provision in the empirical

context. This discussion on the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of the “shadowing process” reveals: 1) the intricate, tactical, and strategic ways in which tutorial centres carve out space for themselves alongside formal schooling as centres of education delivery, and 2) the often-hidden practices in formal schooling from the vantage point of private tutoring.

### ***Board-based classification and diversified tutorial services***

As market-driven enterprises, tutorial centres that were part of this study offered curricular support in accordance to the regulation of various boards with which schools in the city were affiliated. This support, however, was not distributed for all boards equally. In important ways, this unequal distribution mirrored the inequality in the formal schooling landscape.

Formal schooling in India is highly differentiated. One significant way in which this differentiation can be understood is through the classification of the public education system by board. Boards offer a framework for operation – including guidelines for school management, curriculum and assessment for different educational levels. Affiliation with a board, therefore, offers schools social and legal legitimacy as formal institutions of education. In Dehradun, most secondary schools were affiliated with one of the three boards: CISCE (Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations), CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), and the state board (Uttarakhand Board of Secondary Education). Correspondingly, tutorial centres tended to specify the board/s to which their services were directed. For example, “Perfect English Tutorials” offered curricular support in accordance with the guidelines of CISCE and CBSE, and “Ankur Success Classes” for CISCE, CBSE and state board.

Notably, though, most tutorial centres in the city appeared to cater to the educational needs of students who attended the schools which were affiliated with either CISCE or CBSE. Some offered tutoring for all three boards, but very rarely would I come across tutorial centres that provided educational support for only the state board. When speaking to tutors about this predisposition, an inherent social class bias was revealed. This emerges clearly in an interview excerpt below:

Author: most tutorial centres offer services for CBSE and CISCE boards, but not many for the state board. Your centre does the same. Why?

Tutor: CISCE schools are a bit high profile – they charge high fees. CBSE has always been popular among middle-class. Most of our students attend CBSE schools and a few are in CISCE schools. They are all from well-off families.

Author: how about the state board?

Tutor: We don't get many [students who attend government schools]. Only very few [students] come along, but the numbers are usually too low to form a tutorial group, and many of them struggle to pay fees.

This interaction alludes to the intricate way in which the “choice politics” in formal schooling is mirrored in the structure of private tutoring businesses. Specifically, the limited options in the tutorial landscape for supporting the curriculum of the state board reflects a much broader social dynamic within the increasingly marketising formal education sector in the empirical case. In Dehradun, CBSE and CISCE schools tended to be

privately run with either partial or no support (more often the case) from the government, whereas state board-affiliated schools were likely to be government funded- and run-schools. Many studies have shown that Indian parents, irrespective of their social class background, prefer private school over a government school for their children's education. This is despite heavily incentivised government schooling (with fee-free primary education and a highly subsidised fee structure at secondary schooling). The main reason given for this choice is the common belief that private schools offer a better quality of education than government schools (Gupta, 2020; Srivastava, 2013). Given this, it is often the parents of economically disadvantaged groups, who cannot afford private schooling, who send their children to the state board-affiliated government schools (see, for example, Härmä, 2011). Many of these children, who lack "choice" in the formal schooling system, consider tutoring as unviable simply because their families cannot afford the fees. The experiences of social actors associated with private schools in this study were, however, different.

Teachers in both private schools that were part of this study – one affiliated with CBSE and another with CISCE – believed that most, if not all, of their students, solicited tutoring support alongside formal schooling. Most middle-class parents I spoke with considered private tutoring as an investment in their children's education, alongside education offered in private schools (Gupta, 2020). For many of these parents, formal education in a private school not only meant, as one parent puts it, "a better [quality of] educational support [than public school]" but it also symbolised their social status. Nonetheless, parents spoke about the lack of support at school for meeting the needs of an individual child (this is discussed at length in the next section). While parents recognised this gap, they felt unequipped to make up for it themselves – they were either too busy to give their children the time or they did not have adequate resources (in the form of cultural capital – discussed in Gupta, 2020). Private tutoring for these parents was a solution – a proactive strategy to fill the gap between what they thought their children needed for educational success and what they found to be on offer at schools. For example:

... I mean I am spending nearly half of my monthly income on school fees ... costs of petrol and transportation, uniform, study materials, books, stationery and so on. But the changes I would want to make in schools cannot happen overnight, and I don't have time for this. As far as I am concerned, I would rather pay for something that can be of immediate help. (A parent/father of Grade 10 student)

Tutors in this study spoke about very proactively engaging with and offering solutions to these concerns, expressed by middle-class parents. Tutors would always comply with the board-based classification – even though pedagogically and content-wise they deemed this differentiation unnecessary (see, Gupta, 2021) – because parents and students often find this desirable. Hence, in significant ways, all tutors in this study found the board-based classification of their services crucial to secure social legitimacy of their tutorial centres.

Thus, "shadowing" the board-based classification of formal schooling is a tactic adopted by the tutorial sector to secure its place in the education market. Notably, as shown above, this classification in the Indian schooling landscape serves as a proxy for social class differences in accessing valuable educational resources. By adhering to this classification system in its structure, tutoring centres maintain the exclusivity in supplying their perceivably useful academic services to those who can afford it. This "shadowing

process” privileges the already advantaged groups, which, in this case, represent the families who choose private schools and also have access to extra-school educational support through private tutoring centres. In contrast, socio-economically disadvantaged populations are not only deprived of choosing the school they think would offer a better quality of education, but they are also unable to avail the outside-school “shadow” educational resources. Therefore, by complying with the board-based differentiation of formal schooling, tutoring businesses solidify the socially ingrained perception of differences across boards and reproduce social inequality within the educational landscape in the empirical setting.

### ***Assessments and learning support across educational levels***

The tuition market offers services to prepare students for assessments at all educational levels. All the parents who participated in this study maintained that the main reason for them to solicit tutorial support was to ensure that their child is provided with all the resources they would need to excel in the school appraisal system. Many of these parents held the view that instead of asking schoolteachers to give their child “special treatment” – which they considered was unlikely in the school setting – they should solicit such treatment through private tutoring.

Every child has different needs; schools, however, operate under the assumption that everyone is at the same level in terms of intelligence and aptitude. I can see the difference in my own kids, although maybe I should not say this (laughs) – the elder one is sharper; he can understand difficult things easily, even in day-to-day life; but the younger one has the attention span of a fly. Both go to tuition – for the older one it is mostly to practise more challenging questions and for the younger one to revise schoolwork. (A parent/mother)

This excerpt indicates the parental perception of the pedagogical limitation in formal schools, which was also echoed in schoolteachers’ narratives. Many teachers mentioned that, indeed, the way they approach teaching is premised on the assumption of the homogeneity of their student population – that is, their pedagogical approach seldom leaves room for factoring into account the differential needs of each student.

I know that not every student would benefit equally from how we teach. We are often rushed to finish the syllabus and ensure that assessment exercises are in place. We do our part but how students perform in tests depends on the students’ own ability and the extent of parental support they receive. (A schoolteacher)

Teachers’ work in the current neo-liberalising education context is prescribed and performance-oriented (measured through their efficacy to deliver lectures and conduct exams), which, in both schools that were part of this study, inadvertently resulted in the perceived teaching – and therefore learning – deficits (Gupta, 2019). Addressing the impact of these deficits was deemed by parents as the main purpose of private tutoring (as briefly discussed above). Parents, therefore, considered investing in tutoring support as a part of their effort to ensure that their children had access to useful educational resources that met the academic needs of their children.

What parents thought their children needed varied, and so did the nature of the usage of private tutoring. For example, similar to the interview excerpt of a parent mentioned above, while some parents spoke about using private tutoring for remedial purposes (“he

is a little weak in maths”), others discussed enrichment needs (“teachers do the basics but that is not sufficient for cracking competitive exams, is it?”).

Importantly, the perceived academic deficit at Grade 10 and 12 was felt more significantly than in any other grade by parents and children I spoke with. This was also spoken about by most tutors. For example,

It is okay to have tuition (support) from the beginning (elementary educational levels), but in all fairness, it is needed more later when students prep for Boards. (A parent/father, with children in Grade 7 and 11 both attending after school tutorial classes)

Schoolteachers set the exams at all educational levels, except for Grade 10 and 12. Assessments at these two levels are centralised. Teachers rely on the notes that they provide in regular classes in school to design all regular tests. However, Board assessments are more unpredictable and are notoriously difficult. (A tutor)

Parents believed that while academic achievement at all educational levels is important, the stakes are fairly low at elementary levels and quite high at Grade 10 and 12. The marks obtained at Grade 10 were often used as a criterion for streaming students into groups (Science, Arts and Humanities, and Social Sciences, for example) and students’ performance at Grade 12 assessments often shaped their transition to higher education. Not only are these assessments high stake, the exams conducted at these levels (locally referred to as “board exams”) are also perceived as more difficult than at other grades, primarily because setting up these tests and evaluating students’ performance in these are considered to be beyond the discretion of schoolteachers. Importantly, “board exams” in the empirical context are often characterised by high rates of failure. With a 50–60% success rate, these assessments are viewed “as a sign of rigour and quality” (Kumar, 2005, p. 17). Aware of this dynamic, parents in this study expressed a greater need for soliciting tutoring support for their children to prepare them to excel at these centralised assessments, than that they felt for other educational levels.

In response, most tutorial centres in the city focused on providing academic services for these high-stake assessments – even those tutors who taught junior grades claimed to “train” students at a young age for a relatively easy transition to high-stake grades and thereafter. Many tutors also spoke about capitalising on the nature of this perceived market demand. For example, the tutoring cost for secondary educational level was higher than that for elementary level. To maximise the profit through managing the market demand, many tutorial centres offered services to Grade 9–12 students only and charged varying fees (discussed later) for their benefit.

Hence, the tutorial practices of offering coaching for excelling in exams and the popularity of private tutoring at secondary educational levels is not merely a “cultural trend”, or solely a result of parental aspirations for their children’s education. Instead, these emerge from the shadows of the way in which the public education system is set up in contemporary Indian society. The perceived teaching deficits in school, which tutoring sectors aim to make up for in their services, are a direct result of the methodical pedagogical approaches adopted in formal education. In significant ways, therefore, private tutoring complements formal schooling, making it possible for both systems to co-exist within the same educational landscape.

### ***Subject-based hierarchy and parental aspirations***

Most tutorial centres in Dehradun offered private tutoring for academic subjects, with only very few exceptions for broader cognitive development (for example, abacus – or mental arithmetic – training). Notably, though, not all academic subjects were in equal supply in the tutorial market – while many centres offered their services for Science and Mathematics, almost none supplied academic support for Hindi and History. This is a globally recognised feature of private tutoring (Zhang & Bray, 2020) and it is also noted in the Indian context (see, Sujatha, 2014). Participants of this study associated this feature with the perceived hierarchy of subjects, articulated in terms of parental aspiration for their children to pursue careers in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) field and the construction of “hard” and “easy” subjects.

Parental aspiration for their children to pursue STEM fields was rooted in their personal life trajectory. Most parents I spoke with had migrated from hill-side regions to Dehradun and had switched their occupation from farming to salaried jobs. They imagined that securing a professional career – often in the broader field of STEM (especially in medicine and engineering) – would “pave the way for a better future” for their children. Such career paths, for many of these parents, were perceived to be “secure” and symbolised the “middle-class status” in the rapidly transforming socio-occupational structure in Indian society (see, Gupta, 2020 for discussion).

I want my son to become an engineer and work for a multinational company. Our neighbour’s children did the same (looks at his son). They worked hard and got through the entrance test ... in the final year of the BTech, many companies come on campus for placement. It is easy to start a steady job that way. He (neighbour’s son) did the same and now he is based in Mumbai. That, to me, sounds like a success in current times. We cannot go back to the village, so somehow they [children] will have to move up from here [the current situation]. (A parent/father of a Grade 10 student)

The aspired career paths in STEM within middle-class families also led many parents and students to believe that excelling in Science and Mathematics until Grade 10 and in Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Mathematics (depending on the subject stream) during Grade 11 and 12 was “essential” for competing successfully for entrance tests to reputed higher education institutions. Academic excellence at these two educational levels (Grade 10 and 12) was, therefore, high in stakes for all students and parents in this study. However, many students spoke about being “pressurised” (by their parents and society more broadly) to secure high grades in these specific subjects throughout their schooling. For parents, especially those who aspired for a career in engineering for the next generation in the family, it was important that their children showed interest in and aptitude for maths and sciences from an early age and gradually expand their knowledge in these fields to succeed in highly competitive college entrance examinations.

[I]t is absolutely essential to keep up with grades in Science and Mathematics. My parents compare my grades with my brother’s when he was in school. He got through the entrance test of the Pantnagar engineering college [a reputed University]. He was always good at Maths. I am not. But my parents always tell me to be more like him. I have had Maths tuition from a very young age. These days I practise solving questions for several hours every day – in tuition and later at home by myself. (A student, Grade 10)

Moreover, intense competition to excel in these subjects (borne from common aspirations among middle-class families for STEM careers) created a distinct hierarchy of subjects within school settings. Many schoolteachers would use students' performance in a selected range of subjects, mostly Mathematics and Science, as a marker of their intelligence and future success. All participants said that Literature and Social Science subjects were "easy" and, in comparison to these subjects, Mathematics and Science were "hard" and "more challenging". These perceptions signify relative value and hierarchy of academic subjects – and the students who pursue them – within the formal educational system. This hierarchy was further bolstered by the perceptions of many parents and all tutors, who often referred to Science and Mathematics as subjects in need of "more practice" and "persistent tutoring support" from a young age.

Operating on these societal perceptions of the subject hierarchy in the formal education system, many tutorial centres in the city offered academic support for Science and Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. As shown here, the perceived need for tutorial support for specific subjects, aligns with the social actors' views on the level of effort needed to understand the contents of these subjects. This also reflects parents' desire (and associated anxieties) to prepare their children for the future competition, and subsequently securing a place in a reputed engineering or medicine college programme. This dynamic of parental aspirations and the corresponding schooling practices meant that the subjects that were undermined in the formal education system, in the empirical setting, were also virtually absent in the tuition market.

### ***Pricing and education commodification***

The formal education system – its practices and norms – not only offers private tutoring businesses with a structure to operate on and diversify their services (as discussed above), but it also provides tutorial centres with a framework to monetise their services. This was spoken about by many tutors I interviewed, as discussed below.

Tutorial centres that were involved in this study often charged fees in response to the market demand for educational levels and different subjects. For example, for the elementary level education, tutors charged a monthly fee of INR 1,000 (equivalent to USD 14) for tutoring a combination of two subjects, and INR 2,500 (equivalent to USD 34) for tutoring all the subjects. Tutoring for elementary levels was very rare, and my interview with one of these tutors revealed that mostly upper-middle-class families, who had enrolled children in very high-fee private schools, solicited supplementary and/or enrichment educational support at these levels. This has even been found to exist at the pre-school level (see the case of West Bengal in India in Majumdar et al., 2021).

Mirroring the market demand produced through the gap between parents' aspirations and the perceived educational deficits in formal school (as discussed above), the majority of tutorial support was offered for secondary educational levels and for specific subjects. Many tutors I spoke with also mentioned that the fees they charge were calculated as per the Grade and subject they teach. For example, monthly fees for teaching one subject for an hourly class, six days a week, for Grade 6 to 10 students, ranged from INR 500 to 800 (equivalent to USD 7 and 11 respectively), and the corresponding charges for Grade 11 and 12 students were between INR 800 and 1,000 (equivalent to USD 11 and 14 respectively).

Notably, this fee-range in tutorial centres was indicative of the shadowing of the fees structure of schools across boards. The school fees tended to be lowest in schools affiliated with the state board, slightly higher in CBSE schools and highest in the CISCE schools. Similarly, the lower range private tutoring cost was often for teaching the state board curriculum, whereas the upper range tended to be for CISCE and CBSE curricula.

Besides these common patterns, tutors also spoke about using various marketising strategies to entice more clients and reap a greater profit. Many larger tutorial centres offered a reduced price to students who enrol for a combination of subjects. For example, one tutor charged INR 2,000 (savings of INR 400) [equivalent to USD 27 (saving of USD 5)] for tutoring Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics (or Biology) to students who followed CBSE syllabi and INR 2,500 (savings of INR 500) [equivalent to USD 34 (saving of USD 7)] to students enrolled in CISCE-affiliated schools for tutoring services for the same three subjects.

Hence, the “shadowing process” not only guides the organisational structure of private tutoring, but also shapes the processes of commodification and marketisation of educational resources within mainstream schooling more broadly. The discussion here also suggests that mimicking of the formal education system is not a neutral process. Instead, it is a strategic attempt of the tutoring sector to capitalise on – rather than passively copy – the features of the formal education system for monetary advancement. Thus, the nature and scope of privatisation in India expands from the formal schooling system – discussed in the literature in terms of the heterogeneity of private schools, with varying school fees (see, for example, De et al., 2002) – to private tutoring. The discussion presented here shows the “informal” privatisation through private tutoring businesses that operate outside the realm of formal schooling, in the Indian context.

Notably, since private tutoring is subscribed to by students in addition to formal schooling, the rise in tutoring businesses indicates the emergence of “double privatisation” – i.e. privatised formal schooling along with “shadow” education, which many of the parents who participated in this study chose for their children. This has serious implications for social equity, as while those with economic capacity will be doubly advantaged (with access to perceivably better quality of education in schools *and* through private tutoring), those without economic capacity would be doubly disadvantaged (with access to perceived inadequate educational resources in formal educational institutions *and* without access to “shadow” education).

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the specificities, and nuances, of the “shadowing process”, and, in so doing, it has revealed: the institutional structure of private tutoring, often-hidden facets of formal schooling practices, and the implications of both of these for the contemporary educational landscape in the empirical context. Conceptually, the article also shows how “shadow” as an analytical tool offers two distinct opportunities. Firstly, the understanding of how tutoring businesses align themselves with the formal education system institutionally, exposes the nature and organisational logic of the otherwise seemingly diverse and disparate private tutoring sector. Secondly, the scrutiny of the “shadowing process” provides a unique vantage point to examine the formal schooling practices and processes, revealing problematic but typically concealed features of formal schooling.

This article has shown that private tutoring centres organise themselves in close alignment with formal schooling norms and practices, even though as private organisations – functioning

outside the purview of the public education system – they are free to choose their own institutional framework. When adopting the school-like features, tuition centres respond strategically and selectively to the market demands that are structurally produced from formal schooling practices and their relationship to society. This selection process offers private tutoring a socially accepted standardised logic that it then manoeuvres to craft its own organisational framework. At the same time, though, by revealing that it is the prevalent teaching and learning regimes in schools that guide the structure of the tutorial sector, the analysis of the “shadowing process” surfaces the problems inherent in the formal schooling system itself.

This is demonstrated in this article through the discussion on the “shadowing” of: “education boards” with which schools were affiliated (and inequality underlying the related dynamic); “educational levels” (social significance of higher-stake assessments), “academic subject” (some being more valuable and popular than others), and “costing” (commodification of educational resources). This signifies how private tutoring does not “shadow” the formal education system as it is; rather, it does so in order to offer tutoring businesses a valued, legitimised, and competitive space in the broader education market. This article also suggests that tutoring services are not distributed to all equally. Instead, they are often aligned with social differentiation in the empirical context, distinctly supporting the educational needs and aspirations of middle-class families, while maximising their profit. Therefore, private tutoring in India contributes to compounding educational inequality.

The discussion in this article also indicates the relationship between private tutoring and wider social processes – specifically, credentialism, competitiveness, and marketisation – that are on the rise in the increasingly neo-liberalising educational landscape. By situating their services within these processes, private tutoring becomes embedded in the everyday schooling experience. Tutoring provision, in this way, emerges as a socially entrenched phenomenon. Hence, mere changes to the assessment patterns in formal schooling – as the NEP-2020 suggests – are unlikely to eradicate the structurally produced demand for private tutoring in the empirical context.

This article makes a case for further investigation of private tutoring as an educational phenomenon. Private tutoring is indeed integral to the larger social institution of education – as Baker (2020) argues and this article provides evidence for – and, as such, it has implications for the changing dynamics between education and society at large. Up until now, most studies on schooling and society have focused their explorations only on formal schooling, leaving private tutoring outside the scope of scholarly scrutiny. This exclusion is problematic, especially in contexts such as India, where tutoring is a vital part of the everyday schooling experience for many students at various educational levels. This current paucity in research, in conjunction with the critical exposure offered in this account, signals the need for much greater attention to be paid to private tutoring in future research.

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