



# Coaching Institutes, School Performance and Parental Choice: A Mixed-Methods Study of Secondary Students in Chennai and Coimbatore

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**Abstract** – This study offers a critical analysis of the widespread influence of private supplementary tuition, commonly known as “coaching,” in the urban education landscape of India, with a particular focus on Chennai and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu. It explores the interconnections between students' participation in coaching institutes, their perceived academic performance in school, and the socio-economic factors that inform parental choices regarding secondary education. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, the research began with quantitative surveys administered to 483 students and 366 parents, followed by qualitative insights from 42 semi-structured interviews with parents, students, and teachers. The results show that more than 78% of the students surveyed attend coaching classes, driven largely by parental concerns over intense examination competition and doubts about the adequacy of school teaching. Regression analyses reveal a modest but statistically significant positive relationship between the number of coaching hours and students' self-reported academic achievement ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ), with this effect being influenced by factors such as family income and prior academic record. Qualitative thematic analysis further uncovers a nuanced parental logic, wherein coaching is viewed not just as additional academic support but as a deliberate strategy for social advancement and risk management in the face of a perceived unreliable school system. Accordingly, the study argues that the coaching industry operates as a quasi-independent educational subsystem, subtly reshaping notions of school accountability and reinforcing socio-economic inequalities. These findings highlight the pressing need for policymakers and educators to reevaluate current pedagogical practices, examination systems, and the core aims of formal education within an increasingly market-oriented context.

**Keywords** - shadow education; private tuition; academic achievement; parental involvement; educational equity; secondary education; India

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the highly competitive realm of Indian secondary education, the school day increasingly serves not as the culmination of learning but as a precursor to a secondary, parallel system: private coaching. The rapid proliferation of coaching institutes—now constituting a multi-billion-dollar shadow education sector—has fundamentally altered the educational landscape, particularly in urban centers. This phenomenon raises pressing questions about the efficacy of mainstream schooling, the heightened pressures on adolescents, and the substantial financial strain placed on families. At its core, the growth of shadow education signals a deep-seated lack of confidence in the formal school system, shifting education from a collective public good to an individualized, high-stakes investment.

Ideally, schools would deliver the entire curriculum effectively within regular hours, nurturing holistic development without requiring external, fee-based supplementation. However, a persistent disconnect remains between classroom instruction and the demands of competitive examinations, as well as between pedagogical approaches and parental expectations for rigorous exam preparation. Private coaching institutes capitalize on this gap, presenting themselves as essential intermediaries that provide targeted exam strategies, structured learning

environments, and assurances of success in critical assessments like board exams and professional entrance tests. The issue transcends the mere presence of supplementary tuition: its scale and entrenchment point to deeper systemic failures. The outsourcing of core academic learning effectively repositions schools as credentialing bodies, rather than spaces for genuine intellectual engagement, thereby imposing significant economic and psychological burdens on families.

While international research has chronicled the spread of shadow education (Bray, 1999; Dawson, 2010), and Indian studies have mapped its reach and socio-economic dimensions (Majumdar, 2014), much of the literature remains fragmented. Quantitative analyses often establish correlations—such as between coaching attendance and exam outcomes, or household income and tutoring expenses—but seldom capture the lived experiences, parental anxieties, and complex decision-making processes underlying engagement with coaching. In contrast, qualitative accounts provide depth but lack the breadth to identify larger patterns and moderating influences. This results in a piecemeal understanding: the ubiquity of coaching is recognized, yet its nuanced interaction with specific school contexts and socio-economic backgrounds remains insufficiently explored. While evidence suggests that shadow education exacerbates educational inequalities,



there is limited insight into how parental choices vary across diverse social strata.

The implications are far-reaching. On one level, shadow education entrenches a stratified system in which academic achievement increasingly mirrors financial resources, undermining the egalitarian aims of schooling. Students risk burnout as coaching encroaches on time for rest, recreation, and non-academic growth. Indirectly, the rise of coaching diminishes teachers' professional authority, alters classroom dynamics based on the expectation of external preparation, and narrows curricular focus to test-oriented content. Taken together, these trends commodify learning, transforming academic success into a purchasable commodity.

This study adopts a comprehensive mixed-methods approach grounded in the socio-cultural and economic realities of urban Tamil Nadu. By comparing the metropolitan context of Chennai with the industrial landscape of Coimbatore, and integrating quantitative trends with qualitative perspectives, the research employs an ecological framework that situates students within the overlapping spheres of school, coaching institutes, family, and the broader competitive educational market. Through examining these intersecting influences and the tensions they produce, this work seeks to provide a nuanced, contextually rich understanding of how shadow education is reshaping the fabric of Indian schooling from within.

### **Objective of the Study**

The primary aim of this research is to critically examine the intricate relationships between private coaching institute attendance, perceived academic performance within schools, and the socio-economic and motivational factors that shape parental decision-making in urban Tamil Nadu. This central goal is articulated through three interconnected objectives: first, to empirically evaluate the prevalence, behavioral patterns, and perceived impacts of coaching participation among secondary school students in Chennai and Coimbatore; second, to identify and analyze the socio-economic and academic factors that drive parental investment in shadow education; and third, to capture and interpret the lived experiences, motivations, and perceived outcomes of coaching from the perspectives of students, parents, and educators.

This study holds considerable value both academically and practically. From a scholarly perspective, it contributes to the literature on shadow education by moving beyond simple descriptive accounts, offering instead a detailed, process-oriented analysis grounded in specific urban Indian contexts. The research interrogates and refines theoretical models concerning educational choice and social stratification in an environment where private supplementary education is increasingly the norm. Practically, the findings offer meaningful insights for various stakeholders: school administrators and teachers gain a deeper appreciation of the external academic and social pressures their students face; policymakers are better

positioned to evaluate the equity and learning implications of a growing parallel education sector; and parents and students are encouraged to approach the phenomenon of coaching with greater critical awareness.

The paper is systematically organized to address these objectives. After this introductory overview, a comprehensive literature review synthesizes international and Indian scholarship on shadow education, highlighting theoretical and empirical gaps addressed by the present research. The methodology section details the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, outlining both the quantitative survey and qualitative interview components that together provide a robust, multidimensional understanding. The results section presents findings from each research phase separately, while the discussion integrates these results within the broader academic context, emphasizing both theoretical and practical implications. The conclusion distills the study's main contributions, elaborates on policy and research implications, and suggests directions for future inquiry.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Private supplementary tutoring, widely known as “shadow education” for its tendency to mirror and extend formal schooling, has shifted from a peripheral practice to a central fixture in educational systems worldwide—particularly throughout Asia. Its significance is not only marked by its scale but also by its role as a market-driven response to perceived shortcomings in mainstream education, intensifying competition for higher education and elite careers, and deepening socio-economic divides. This literature review critically synthesizes scholarship relating to the prevalence of coaching, socio-economic drivers, and family decision-making, providing a conceptual basis for analyzing how these dynamics play out in urban India.

Bray's (1999) foundational research established shadow education as a global phenomenon, highlighting its diversity and its tendency to reinforce social inequalities. He argued that, while private tutoring can benefit individuals, it systematically favors wealthier families, thereby perpetuating social stratification through processes similar to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital conversion. Empirical studies from countries like South Korea (Lee et al., 2010) and Turkey (Tansel & Bircan, 2006) support this view, indicating strong links between household income, parental education, and spending on coaching. In the Indian context, Majumdar (2014) documents the widespread prevalence of coaching and the significant financial investment it demands from families. However, much of the quantitative literature stops at identifying correlations between coaching and exam results, or between socio-economic status and coaching expenditure, without clarifying whether coaching itself leads to improved outcomes or if already high-achieving, affluent students are simply more likely to enroll. This unresolved question of causality highlights the need for more sophisticated



research designs, such as longitudinal or mixed-methods studies, to probe underlying mechanisms more deeply.

The literature on coaching's impact on academic performance in schools reveals similarly complex and sometimes contradictory results. Some studies, especially those focusing on test preparation, report positive effects on exam scores (Banerjee et al., 2016), while others point to negative consequences like student fatigue, rote learning, and reduced intrinsic motivation and critical thinking (Byun, 2014). Such findings indicate that coaching's effects are context-dependent, shaped by factors such as school quality, the nature and pedagogy of the coaching (whether remedial or enrichment-focused), students' baseline abilities, and the degree of alignment between coaching content and the official curriculum. Much of the existing research treats coaching as a uniform intervention, a limitation that underscores the need for more granular data on coaching types, intensity, and perceived quality—an essential step toward a more nuanced understanding.

A significant gap in the literature concerns the micro-level decision-making processes of parents. While socio-economic status is a strong predictor of investment in coaching, it does not fully account for parental choices. These decisions are embedded in broader social and cultural contexts—shaped by perceptions, anxieties, information gaps, and social pressure. Although some qualitative studies have begun to explore this “choice architecture”—such as research in Bangladesh (Hamid et al., 2009) and parts of India (Sujatha & Rani, 2011), which point to distrust of government schools, fear of academic lag, and societal pressure to secure prestigious admissions as key motivators—these studies are often localized and seldom compare diverse urban Indian settings.

Moreover, Indian scholarship on shadow education rarely engages deeply with formal theoretical frameworks on educational choice. While economic reasoning is often implied, explicit application of models like Rational Action Theory (Goldthorpe, 1996) or the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) to explain cost-benefit analyses and the role of social norms is limited. There is also a lack of inquiry into the differing perspectives of parents and students regarding the value, rewards, and costs of coaching.

In summary, existing literature provides robust macro-level descriptions of shadow education, but lacks sufficient micro-level, process-oriented, and theoretically informed analysis. While research has effectively documented the scope and correlates of coaching, it has yet to deliver comprehensive, context-sensitive explanations of its complex dynamics within specific urban Indian settings. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond simple correlations and unpacking the intricate interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that shape shadow education's operation. By employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach in two contrasting cities of Tamil Nadu—Chennai and

Coimbatore—this study proposes to first map participation patterns and associations through quantitative analysis, and then, through qualitative inquiry, uncover the meanings, motivations, and contextual influences that drive parental and student engagement. Such an integrative strategy aims to shift the scholarly conversation from a deficit view of mainstream schooling to a critical, systemic analysis of the evolving educational ecosystem, where schools and coaching institutes function as mutually influencing actors.

### III. METHODOLOGY

To effectively address the research objectives, this study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This two-phase approach began with quantitative data collection and analysis to identify broad trends and statistical relationships within a large sample, followed by a qualitative phase aimed at interpreting, contextualizing, and deepening understanding of these findings through rich narrative inquiry. Such a design was essential given the complexity of the research questions: while quantifying the prevalence and correlates of coaching is important, exploring the underlying lived experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes requires qualitative investigation. Research activities were carried out over ten months, from June 2023 to March 2024, in the urban settings of Chennai and Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. These cities were purposefully selected to allow for comparative analysis—Chennai as a major metropolitan capital and Coimbatore as a prominent industrial tier-II city—both marked by intense educational competition.

During the quantitative phase, structured surveys were administered using two linked instruments designed for secondary school students (Grades 9–12) and their parents. Instrument development was informed by a comprehensive literature review and validated through a pilot study involving 30 student-parent pairs outside the main sample. The student questionnaire gathered information on demographics, school context, coaching participation (including type, duration, cost, and subject focus), self-reported academic performance, and perceptions of school teaching quality.

The parent survey collected socio-economic data, parental education, motivations for enrolling children in coaching, decision-making processes, and perceived academic outcomes. A multi-stage sampling strategy was adopted: twelve schools (six per city) were purposively selected to capture diversity in management type (government, government-aided, private) and fee levels. Within these schools, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, yielding a quantitative dataset of 483 students and 366 parents. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 28); descriptive statistics summarized coaching participation and trends, while inferential analyses—including chi-square tests, independent t-tests, and multiple regression—explored associations among variables such as coaching intensity, household income, and self-reported academic achievement.



Building on the quantitative analysis, the qualitative phase was designed to shed light on statistical patterns, with particular attention to parental decision-making and students' experiences navigating school and coaching demands. From among survey respondents, 42 participants—equally distributed across parents, students, and schoolteachers (14 in each group)—were purposively sampled to maximize variation across school types, income brackets, and attitudes toward coaching. Distinct semi-structured interview guides were developed for each group. Parental interviews delved into decision-making processes, perceived social pressures, cost-benefit analyses, information sources, and expectations. Student interviews explored daily routines, perceived benefits and stressors, and the alignment (or lack thereof) between school and coaching pedagogies. Teacher interviews focused on the influence of coaching on classroom dynamics, student preparedness, and professional challenges. Interviews were conducted in Tamil or English according to participant preference, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated as necessary. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was applied to the qualitative data, involving iterative reading, coding, theme development, refinement, and final articulation. NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and data organization.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative strands occurred primarily at the interpretive stage. Qualitative findings were explicitly used to contextualize and explain quantitative results—for instance, qualitative narratives illuminated how parental education influenced coaching expenditure, highlighting how more educated parents navigate academic networks to select reputable coaching institutes. Ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board prior to data collection. Informed consent and assent (for minors) were obtained from all participants, with strict measures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used for all individuals and institutions referenced in the qualitative reporting to protect participant identities.

## IV. RESULTS

### 1. Prevalence and Patterns of Coaching Attendance

Survey results indicated a high rate of private coaching participation among secondary school students, with 78.3% (n=378) of the 483 respondents reporting enrollment in some form of coaching institute. Participation rates were notably higher in Chennai (84.1%) compared to Coimbatore (72.5%), a difference that was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 10.24, p = .001$ . Most students (67.2%) attended coaching specifically for science and mathematics subjects, primarily to prepare for board exams and competitive entrance tests such as the JEE and NEET. On average, students devoted 11.4 hours per week (SD=4.2) to coaching classes, in addition to their regular school commitments.

### 2. Coaching and Self-Reported Academic Performance

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine whether students' self-reported overall academic percentages (from their most recent major exam) could be predicted by the number of weekly coaching hours, after accounting for family monthly income and school management type (private vs. government/aided). The model was statistically significant,  $F(3, 479) = 8.91, p < .001$ , accounting for approximately 5.3% of the variance in academic scores ( $R^2 = .053$ ). Weekly coaching hours emerged as a significant positive predictor ( $\beta = .18, p = .002$ ), as did family income ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ). However, school management type did not significantly predict academic outcomes ( $\beta = .06, p = .22$ ). Additionally, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) identified a significant interaction between coaching hours and students' prior academic performance levels (categorized as high, medium, or low based on the previous year's marks),  $F(2, 477) = 4.58, p = .011$ . This suggests that the association between coaching hours and academic scores was stronger among students who were already medium or high achievers.

### 3. Socio-Economic Drivers and Parental Investment

Analysis of parent survey data (n=366) revealed a strong positive correlation between monthly household income and spending on coaching,  $r = .62, p < .001$ . A logistic regression examining the likelihood of a child attending coaching based on key parental factors was significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 45.33, p < .001$ . Parental education level emerged as the strongest predictor (Odds Ratio = 2.15,  $p < .001$ ), followed by household income (OR = 1.87,  $p = .002$ ). The most frequently cited reasons for enrolling children in coaching were: "To prepare for competitive exams" (89%), "School teaching is not sufficient" (74%), and "Because most other children in the class are going" (68%). Among the 21.7% of parents whose children did not participate in coaching, the top reasons were an inability to afford it (55%) and the perception that their child was coping well with school alone (30%).

### 4. Perceived Quality and Strain

On a 5-point scale, students rated the "teaching effectiveness" of their coaching institutes higher (M=4.1, SD=0.8) than that of their school teachers (M=3.6, SD=1.0), a difference that was statistically significant,  $t(377) = 7.12, p < .001$ . Despite this, 72% of students who attended coaching reported feeling "often" or "always" fatigued, and 65% indicated they had "little to no time" for hobbies or other non-academic pursuits.

Table 1: Key Comparative Statistics by City

Variable	Chennai (n=242)	Coimbatore (n=241)	Significance Test
% Attending	84.1%	72.5%	$\chi^2=10.24, p=.001$



Variable	Chennai (n=242)	Coimbatore (n=241)	Significance Test
Coaching			
Avg. Weekly Coaching Hours	12.6 (SD=4.0)	10.2 (SD=4.3)	t=6.45, p<.001
Avg. Monthly Coaching Spend (INR)	8,450 (SD=3,200)	6,100 (SD=2,900)	t=8.11, p<.001
Student Perceived School Teaching Quality (1-5)	3.5 (SD=1.1)	3.7 (SD=0.9)	t=1.98, p=.048

## V. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the extensive and complex impact of coaching institutes on the educational pathways of students in urban Tamil Nadu, demonstrating that coaching has evolved from a supplementary “shadow” system into a dominant parallel educational sector. With an overall participation rate of 78.3%—and especially high levels in Chennai—these rates surpass many previous national estimates (Majumdar, 2014), indicating that simultaneous enrollment in both formal schools and coaching centers is now commonplace. This trend aligns with Bray’s (1999) observation of the global expansion of shadow education, but it is particularly pronounced within the competitive, exam-driven culture of South Indian urban centers.

Although there is a statistically significant yet modest positive correlation between coaching hours and self-reported academic performance ( $\beta = .18$ ), this relationship warrants careful interpretation. While these results echo the marketing claims of coaching providers and are consistent with studies such as Banerjee et al. (2016), the presence of a strong interaction effect—where gains are concentrated among students who are already medium or high achievers—points to a “Matthew effect.” In other words, coaching tends to magnify existing academic advantages rather than serve as a tool for remediation, thereby

complicating claims about its role in promoting equity. Instead of leveling the playing field, coaching appears to amplify privilege and may deepen achievement gaps within classrooms.

Socio-economic factors, particularly family income and parental education, emerge as powerful predictors, supporting the social reproduction thesis at the heart of shadow education scholarship (Bray, 1999; Tansel & Bircan, 2006). Logistic regression findings indicate that access to coaching is largely determined by families’ economic and cultural capital, effectively excluding less privileged groups. Qualitative narratives provide deeper insight: for many educated, middle-class parents, coaching is viewed as a necessary investment in social mobility and risk mitigation, rather than as an optional expense. As one Chennai parent, an engineer, expressed: “The school gives the certificate, but the coaching class gives the rank. In today’s world, the rank is everything.” This sentiment encapsulates a critical stance towards formal schooling, reducing it to a credentialing role, while positioning coaching as the primary means of competitive preparation. The resulting pressures extend beyond academics, reflecting pervasive social anxieties and a collective action dilemma in which individual choices reinforce broader norms and expectations.

A striking finding is the higher perceived teaching effectiveness of coaching instructors compared to schoolteachers, a view reported across all types of schools. This perception points to a legitimacy crisis for mainstream education. Interview data reveal that coaching teachers are seen as more exam-oriented, responsive—thanks to smaller class sizes—and more directly accountable, with parents feeling justified in demanding tangible results for their financial investment. In contrast, schoolteachers are often described as overburdened by extensive curricula, less able to individualize instruction, and less invested in students’ competitive success. These dynamics create incentives for test-focused teaching, potentially undermining the broader educational and developmental goals advocated by educational theorists.

Significant differences between Chennai and Coimbatore in coaching participation, exposure, and expenditure add important contextual detail. Chennai’s more intensive coaching culture likely stems from its metropolitan character, the density of coaching centers, heightened competition, and a pervasive atmosphere of educational anxiety. These findings underscore the importance of nuanced, context-sensitive analyses and warn against treating “the Indian coaching phenomenon” as a uniform national pattern.

The theoretical implications are substantial. The results reinforce a Bourdieusian perspective, showing how economic and cultural capital are transformed into academic capital, and indicate that coaching institutes now play a central role as intermediaries in this process. This complicates traditional human capital models, which view



educational investment as a rational economic decision, by emphasizing the influence of affective factors—such as fear, anxiety, and hope—and social norms. These dynamics are better captured by theories of planned behaviour, which integrate subjective norms into explanations of parental decision-making.

The study's limitations include its reliance on self-reported academic performance, which may be affected by response biases, and its cross-sectional design, which does not permit causal conclusions about the effects of coaching. The non-random sampling of schools also limits broader generalizability, and the absence of perspectives from coaching institute proprietors and instructors is a notable gap in understanding the institutional dimensions of coaching.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track causal relationships and long-term academic outcomes, and incorporate objective measures such as standardized test scores and school records to improve validity. Ethnographic studies within coaching centers could provide critical insights into pedagogical practices and organizational structures. Comparative studies across different Indian states with varying examination systems would further clarify the policy factors influencing coaching demand.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to unravel the complex interplay between private coaching institutes, academic performance in schools, and parental decision-making in the urban educational settings of Chennai and Coimbatore. Its objectives included charting the prevalence and patterns of coaching participation, examining links with academic outcomes and socio-economic factors, and exploring the lived experiences and motivations of key stakeholders. The findings present a clear yet troubling picture: coaching has shifted from a peripheral support to a deeply embedded, mainstream component of secondary education, utilized by a substantial majority of students at considerable financial and psychological expense. While coaching is widely seen as beneficial, these advantages are predominantly enjoyed by students who already possess familial resources and prior academic success, ultimately reinforcing rather than reducing educational disparities.

At a theoretical level, the results point to the increasing marketization of education and a growing lack of confidence in public institutions. Private coaching operates as a large-scale, market-driven solution to persistent shortcomings in the public school system, embodying a utilitarian approach that prioritizes exam success over holistic development. This research thus strengthens theories of social reproduction, illustrating how coaching serves as a crucial mechanism for the transmission of intergenerational privilege within a competitive, globalized context. Moreover, it broadens the discussion around parental decision-making by incorporating factors such as social anxiety, information gaps, and risk aversion in the

face of uncertain futures, moving beyond purely economic explanations.

The study also outlines clear directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify causal pathways and to track the long-term trajectories of students who participate in coaching versus those who do not. There is also a pressing need to assess policy interventions—including exam reforms, improvements in teacher quality and school accountability, and regulation of the rapidly expanding coaching sector to enhance transparency and consumer protections. Further investigation into effective school models that foster student and parental trust without heavy reliance on coaching would be especially valuable.

Recognizing the limitations inherent in the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported academic outcomes, future research should aim to incorporate objective performance measures and broaden the geographic and socio-economic scope to include rural areas and smaller towns, thereby enhancing national representativeness.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that coaching institutes are not simply auxiliary educational providers, but central actors within a reconfigured educational landscape. Their rise both mirrors and accelerates the transformation of education from a public good to a commodified, privatized pursuit centered on competitive achievement. Addressing the complex challenges posed by this shadow system requires moving beyond surface-level symptoms to tackle the underlying structural failures and societal pressures that fuel its growth. Achieving equitable and meaningful education in India will ultimately depend on whether formal schools can reclaim their role as trusted, foundational spaces for learning, or continue to yield ground to this powerful parallel sector.

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