

# Economics of Private Tutoring in Sri Lanka: A Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

Private Supplementary Tutoring (PST) or shadow education is defined as fee-based tutoring that provides supplementary instruction to children in academic subjects that they study in the mainstream education system. In Sri Lanka, free education is provided for all students from the primary stage to the first degree level of university. Fuelled by the extremely high competitiveness in main national examinations, private tutoring in the country has recorded a tremendous growth and it is widespread phenomenon in both urban and rural sectors. The main purpose of attending PST is to increase academic performance in national level examinations; however, the impact of PST on educational achievement is still in dispute. However, literature confirms the net negative gains may influence in shaping socio cultural norms in a country. Thus it is critical in understanding the economic burden and socio-cultural distortions made by this phenomenon beforehand in formulating or amending education policies yet a little attention is paid specially on the indirect cost of PST. Therefore the main objective of this study is to explore the roots and the indirect costs of PST in the country. The data for the current study has obtained from focus groups that were conducted in both rural and urban sectors in three districts: Colombo, Kalutara, Galle and Matara. Data were analyzed using qualitative approach. It was found a consensus among the participants on the negative economic impact of private tutoring on family income. It was well established that the majority of the students who attend PST are not able to get a balanced diet, sufficient sleep, active lifestyle and stress free mind which are needed for a healthy life. Conventional student teacher relationship is shown to be deteriorated by the PST bias cultural change and reduced level of social capital fall t is risk of fall the families into vulnerability. At the macro level, PST affects female labour force participation, vehicle fuel consumption, road congestion, risk of non commutable diseases among the young. Remedial measures to address the weakness of the formal education system; effective government interventions such as improving teacher qualities, providence of necessary resources to the schools and more specifically sufficient increase of teacher salaries, reducing the class size in public schools, adjusting school syllabuses into manageable level and regulating of PST are recommended.

**Keywords:** Private tutoring; School education; Phenomenological method; Sri Lanka

## 1. Introduction

Private Supplementary Tutoring (PST) which is widely known as shadow education can be mainly defined as fee-based tutoring that provides supplementary instruction to children in academic subjects that they study in the mainstream education system (Bray, 1998; Dang & Rogers 2008). PST has become a global phenomenon (Liu & Bray, 2017; Bray, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Dang & Rogers, 2008; Diskin, 2010; Manzon & Areepattamannil, 2014) consuming a substantial portion of household income and it is a massive industry that earns billions of dollars (Dang & Rogers, 2008; Kim & Park, 2010 ) while providing billions of employments (Kim & Park, 2012). It is spreading sharply throughout the world regardless of development status. As in Dang (2011), in Vietnam 32 percent of primary, 46 percent lower secondary and 63 percent upper secondary students were receiving PST as for the study conducted using 9,189 households in year 2006. 39 percent of private school children and 27 percent of government school children were receiving paid tutoring in Pakistan (South Asia Forum for Education Development, 2013). In Bangladesh 31 percent of primary students receiving private tutoring while 90 percent of the respondents consider private tutoring as a necessity (Nath , 2008). Students in senior secondary level (grade 12 and 13) tend to attend private tuition classes rather than attending the formal school sessions during the terms of tertiary education entrance exams in many countries (Bregvadze, 2012). PST has become a critical component of the emerging global education industry (Verger et al, 2016). The main objective of private tutoring can be seen as raising academic grades for higher education, ultimately for university admission in almost all the countries. Further, it has been widely recognized as a remedy for achievement gaps between different groups of students (Diskin, 2010). Although the achievement in these objectives is inconclusive ((Cole, 2016; Hof, 2014), parents spend a billions dollars a year on giving PST for their children especially in Asia marking a huge direct financial cost (Tansel & Bircan 2006; Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016; Hamid, Khan & Islam, 2017). Except this immense and increasing direct cost, PST is reported to be prevalence at a huge indirect cost in economic, social and health terms (Bray & Kwo, 2013). Given the context that PST is informal, hence not subject to program, learning environment or time supervision by public or private regulatory agencies, the benefits may be far exceeds by the implicit as well as explicit cost. Hence net negative gains may influence in shaping socio cultural norms in a country. Further, these implicit

costs tend to be context specific. Even though it is critical in understanding the economic burden and socio-cultural distortions made by this phenomenon beforehand in formulating or amending education policies, a little attention is paid specially on the indirect cost of PST. Therefore the main objective of this study is to explore the roots and the indirect costs of PST in the country.

## **2. Formal Education System and Private Tutoring in Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, free education is provided for all students from the primary stage to the first degree level of university. The education span is about thirteen years and students who completed all thirteen years successfully can join for universities and tertiary institutes to continue with their higher education. However, from age 5 to 16 years education is compulsory and students are provided with a range of welfare services attached to the education such as, free text books, free school uniforms, midday meal for primary students at disadvantaged schools, free healthcare services, and subsidized transport. At present, there are 9931 government schools and 98 recognized private schools. Among the 9931 government schools, 342 schools are governed by the Central Ministry of Education and others from the provincial council. Further, government schools are classified according to the terminal grade of the school and complexity of the courses offered by the school. Schools which offer all subject streams (namely, Science, Arts and Commerce) for GCE AL with or without primary section as type 1AB, schools which offer Arts and Commerce subjects for GCE AL with or without primary section as type 1C, schools which have classes up to GCE OL as type 2, and schools which terminate at grade 5 or 8 as type 3. Primary education in SL includes grades 1 to 5. Secondary education has two stages, junior secondary education (from grade 6 to 9) and senior secondary education (from grade 10 to 13). Tertiary education consists of university undergraduate education, other professional education and postgraduate education. There are three public examinations conducted by the Department of Education, scholarship and placement examination at grade 5, GCE OL examination at the end of grade 11, and GCE AL examination at end of grade 13 which is the school leaving examination and selection examination for the local universities. However, availability of free first degree level university education is limited due to the high cost involved with the tertiary education and only 6% of the students who sit for the GCE AL examination get an opportunity to admitted to the local universities creating excessive competition. Fuelled by this extremely high competitiveness, private tutoring in the country has recorded a tremendous growth. As Pallegeara (2012) posited, the proportion of households that spend money on private tutoring has increased 23% in 1996/97 to 64% in 2006-2007. Further, it has been pointed that not only the richer but also the poor households dish a considerable household budget on children's private tutoring recently.

## **3. The Data**

The data for the current study has obtained from focus groups that were conducted in three districts: Colombo, Kalutara, Galle and Matara. Four focus group interviews were conducted in the urban sector while other four in the rural sector in each district. Accordingly, three separate discussions were arranged for teachers, parents and for the students who were studying in grades 7 to 11 in each sector with a semi-structured interview protocol. The average number of participants in the focus groups was fifteen. This study utilizes mainly the information obtained from the parents to achieve the intended objectives.

## **4. Literature review**

It is identified that PST is prevailing in countries which have high-stake exams for the entrance of universities. Further, deficiencies in the education system of developing countries have led to the increase in PST (Tansel & Bircan, 2006). Silova (2010) has conducted an explorative study to examine the driving forces of PT and government responses to PT in 12 countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. His findings conclude that factors like poor quality in mainstream schools and deprived pay structure led to the increase demand of PST in Eastern European and Central Asian countries. However, the volume of PST is not always correlate with absolute level of quality of formal education system where there is a massive demand for private tutoring in developed countries with the education system is at a higher level (Bray & Kwok, 2003; Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014). For example, regardless of the strong education system and dedicated teachers in Japan, the stake of private tutoring is very high (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014).

Several studies have considered students' academic achievement as a factor which determines the demand of tutoring and have not found any clear relationship among academic achievement and tutoring (De Castro & De Guzman, 2010; Liu, 2012; Zhang, 2013). Students' level of education or grade, parents' income are another relevant factors that create demand for PST (Bray et al. 2014; Pallegeara, 2012; Liu & Bray, 2017). Among the available studies, Dang (2007), have examined the determinants of expenditure on private tutoring and impact of private tuition expenditure on students' performance in Vietnam. His findings suggest that private tuition expenditure is a necessity among the primary and lower secondary students of Vietnam and further the study reveals that there is a positive impact from private tuition on students' academic performance. Ha and Harpham

(2005) have found that private tutoring does increase the reading ability although it does not have an impact on the writing and numeracy skills of the grade 8 students of Vietnam. Another study by Byun and Park (2012), have found that take commercial SAT preparation courses have positive effect on SAT scores of East Asian American students. Dongre & Tewari (2015) have found positive effect on learning outcomes. Further, Zhang (2013), has observed on the effects of private tutoring and identified it has mixed effects on mathematical, Chinese language and English language in China. Conversely, Cole (2016), a study on the effect of private tutoring on grade 5 scholarship exam performance in Sri Lanka reveals that there is no effect of private tutoring on students' scores.

Empirical results indicates that more hours spent on private tutoring has negative impact on overall well being and on satisfaction with family relationship, self esteem, study related stress, depressive feeling and self reported physical health. Bray and Kwo (2014) has commented that private tutors deliberately let students feel that they need more extra lessons/they are inadequate in order to increase the demand for tutoring. Consequently, students are excessively engaged in private tutoring without having time for leisure activities (reading books, gardening, watching movies/stage plays, listen to music and etc.) and after school activities (extra-curricular). As a result social life of the students is deteriorating at a higher rate. There has been a growing interest on students' perceptions of their well-being as an indicator of mental health over the last few decades (Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2007). It is widely accept that PST put households an extra economic burden and social issues related to social stratification, social roles among family members, social status, and social relations (Ali,2013; ). According to Mehtabul, (2015) the cost of tutoring constitute about 43 percent of the entire private expenditure on education , and about 16.5 percent of household per capita expenditure in India.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Drivers

The parents in the focus groups responded that private tutoring is widespread both in the rural and urban sector in the country. However, compared to the urban sector more than 80%, Only 60 % of the students take private tuition in the rural sector. According to the parents view, poor teaching quality due to the lack of updated teaching methods and knowledge, lack of improved skills and especially the neglecting of formal teaching responsibility is the main reason for huge surge in private tutoring in the country. Majority of the students highlighted that they take tuition mainly because of three reasons; get the syllabus covered, desire to obtain more information on the course subject and get more practiced for the tests/exams. From the teacher's perspective, they don't have enough time allocation to cover the respective syllabuses while individual attention to the weak students and marking/ examining of students' books are not possible due the large number of students in a class. It was pointed that the extra burden coming from the clerical works assigned to the teachers further constrained the class room teaching. Lack of facilities and resources especially in rural schools and lack of quality training opportunities have been mentioned as the main obstacles of improving knowledge and skills. [It is implied that the main drivers of PST are from the formal school system from which the parents, students and also teacher are not satisfied in achieving their intended goals].

### 5.2 Direct economic cost:

Student from educational stages demand PST but this share is highest among students in grade 11 while there is a high demand among students in grade 8 to 10 as well. Even though the least demand for PST is from the grades 6 and 7 on average, this share is considerable in the urban sector. However, the phenomenon of private tutoring is not restricted to higher grades, and urban areas.

Hence, regardless of the stage and the sector, the majority of parents in the sample agreed that financial cost on PST put an additional burden on the household budget. According to them tuition fee in the rural sector is high compare to the urban sector. In this regard, a student spent Rs.300 to Rs.600 for a group tuition class while urban sector student spend on average Rs. 600 to Rs. 1500 for similar type tuition. Accordingly, a rural parent spends Rs. 900 to 1800 for a child while this amount varies 1800 to 4500 for an urban child. Other than the fee various other costs such as food, stationary and travelling cost is considerable for the urban parents. Urban parents revealed that around 5 to 20 percent of their earning have to dedicate to give their children PST. It was clearly stressed that the cost incurred is very high for a family which has two or more school children.

### 5.3 Indirect cost

*Student Wellbeing:* Students in the focus group claimed that they don't have enough freedom either to choose their leisure activity or extracurricular activity. Majority of the students have chosen physically inactive extracurricular activities and the frequency is limited to one time for a week. 80 percent of them attend PST three or more days a week including weekends. Further, for a considerable number of students stated that they returned home around 7 in the evening. Some students from the grades 10 and 11 leave home around 4 o'clock in the morning for morning PST and return home around 8 o'clock in the night after participating to an evening

tutoring class. Parents claimed that their children has no time to have proper breakfast or lunch. Hence, they tend to have a big dinner which is unacceptable for a healthy life. Further, late home arrival forces them to sleep less and work on home works increasing stress levels. All these issues are very critical for the students who study in grades 10, 11.

*Student teacher relationship:* According to the responses received, most of the tuition teachers in the rural sector are government school teachers while private teachers represent the majority in the urban sector. However, a considerable percentage of the students stated that they are attending tuition classes conducted by their own school teachers. Some of the mothers admitted that it is unavoidable in attending the tuition classes when it is conducted by the respective school teacher. Hence, children are forced to study under such teachers although they dislike them. This implies that that there are signs of student blackmailing. Hence, conventional student teacher relationship is shown to be deteriorated by the PST bias cultural change.

*Social and family relations:* The results of the focus groups show that there is a consensus among the participants in the focus groups that private tuition makes a considerable social distortion in terms of social and family relations. Student participants claimed that they are unable to have sufficient discussions frequently with the parents mainly because of PST participation. Most of the young students complained that their elder siblings are very studious, come home in the night and very strict because of their workload. Most of the students from higher grades claimed that they have not gone on a trip for two years. They have not experienced even a family gathering for several years because of the tuition classes. This implies that there is risk of falling the people into vulnerability by loosing family and social relationships as a consequence of PST.

*Inter generational effect:* more than 15 percent of the participants in the parent focus group were grandparents who deal with PST related matters of the student concerned. Majority of the participants from this group blamed to the exiting education system which has given them a stressful and busy life style. They claimed that they have worked for the country for decades and now are in need of enjoying the retirement life. However, now they have to accompany grand children to tuition class even in religious days. Repercussions of PST have deteriorated elder's religious life which may reduce the stress.

*Female labour force participation:* More than 80 percent of the mothers in the focus group are A/L qualified while only 10 percent of them are employed. There were several graduates who have resigned from the job. Employed mothers stated that they are frequently blamed by the tuition teachers because of the higher absence rate of the child. Almost all the unemployed mothers stated that they do not do jobs, resigned from the jobs to provide their children a good education. Provision of so called "good education" meant the taking them to tuition. Further, respondent mothers claimed that they have to wait at the tuition to take child back. Although they worry about the waste of productive time, they admitted that it is essential for their children's future success. This clearly implies that the mothers' absence from labour force participation, which is a critical issue in the country, has been reinforced indirectly by PST.

*Other costs:* parents in the focus group especially in the urban sector pointed out that the vehicle cost including fuel cost, increased vehicles which may increase road traffic as some of the other unavoidable negative effects of PST.

## 6. Conclusions

Private supplementary tutoring is widespread phenomenon in both urban and rural sectors in Sri Lanka. The main aim of getting PST is to increase student performance in national level examinations; however, the impact of PST on educational achievement is still in dispute. In contrast, the repercussions in the forms of direct financial cost which includes fees and other related material costs and indirect costs in terms of students' wellbeing, student blackmailing and student teacher relationship, social and family ties, inter generational effect, macro level negative effects such as decreased female labour force participation, road traffic congestions etc have been found in the literature was confirmed by the present study. It was found a consensus among the participants on the negative economic impact of private tutoring on family income. Further, it was well acknowledged that the need of balanced diet, sufficient sleep, active lifestyle and stress free mind for a healthy life. If so, the preceding features of current student's life is highly questionable in terms of producing a healthy workforce for the country. It was found that children are forced to study under school teachers even in PST although they dislike them. This implies that that there are signs of student blackmailing. Hence, conventional student teacher relationship is shown to be deteriorated by the PST bias cultural change. In addition, study findings clearly show PST is one of the main causes that reduce that level of social capital. This implies that there is risk of falling the people into vulnerability by loosing family and social relationships as a consequence of PST. PST at the contextual sense is considered as a substitution for formal education system. Hence the extra burden posed by PST on household budget could be a waste of scarce resources. Remedial measures to address the weakness of the formal education system are recommended firstly to lessen the burden of PST rat race. Especially these shortcomings are the drivers of PST. In this regard, effective government interventions such as improving teacher qualities, providence of necessary resources to the schools and more specifically sufficient

increase of teacher salaries, reducing the class size in public schools, adjusting school syllabuses into manageable level have to be taken. Further, systematic regulation of PST sector is needed. Findings of the present study have to be replicated utilizing quantitative methods for a large sample.

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