

Title

Shadow Education, Enabler or Barrier: Assessing Educational Equity and Social Stratification through the Insights of Malaysian Secondary School Students

Research Overview

This qualitative study investigates Malaysian secondary students' perceptions of shadow education (SE). Findings reveal that while SE is perceived as essential for academic success, it remains inaccessible to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to cost. This suggests SE functions as a barrier to educational equity, perpetuating systemic social and academic stratification.

Purpose of Study

The global expansion of shadow education (SE) – private supplementary tutoring – has transformed the educational landscape, with researchers noting its role as a parallel system that mimics the mainstream (Bray 1999, 2025; Marimuthu et al. 1991). However, its implications for equity remain under-examined from the perspective of learners. This study bridges this gap by exploring how Malaysian secondary school students perceive the role of SE in their academic journeys.

The primary purpose is to evaluate whether SE acts as an “enabler” of academic potential or a “barrier” to equitable education. By examining motivations for enrolment and the lived experiences of both users and non-users, the study highlights the socio-emotional and financial pressures placed on families. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide evidence-based insights into how SE disrupts the “ecology of education” (Zhang & Bray 2020) in Malaysia, advocating for policy interventions that protect meritocracy and ensure that educational success is not predicated on a family's ability to pay.

Research Methods

Adopting an inductive qualitative framework, this study represents the initial phase of a larger mixed-methods investigation. Data were gathered through eight semi-structured focus group discussions involving a purposive sample of 47 Form Four students (aged 15–16) in Kuching, Sarawak.

The participant pool was strategically divided into SE users ($n=24$) and non-users ($n=23$) to capture a comparative range of experiences. To ensure a holistic perspective, researchers balanced ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds during recruitment. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed both inductively and deductively. The coding process was refined through inter-rater reliability checks to ensure the validity of the thematic analysis, focusing on student agency and the marketisation of learning.

Results and Discussion

The results reveal a stark dichotomy in the Malaysian educational experience, where SE has evolved from a remedial tool into a mandatory “cultural norm” for competitive success.

- **The Financial Barrier and Unequal Access:** The most significant finding regarding equity is the disparity in access. Among the non-users, 20 out of 23 participants expressed a strong desire to attend SE but were prevented solely by financial constraints. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported feeling “educationally disadvantaged” because they could not afford the fees. This confirms that SE acts as a “gatekeeper” to the academic capital necessary for social mobility, effectively creating a “two-tiered” quality of instruction (Loi et al. 2025).
- **SE as a Mechanism for Social Reproduction:** The data suggests that SE facilitates a system where social privilege is converted into academic advantage. Users reported that SE provides them with specialised exam techniques and personalised attention often perceived as superior to mainstream schooling. This marketisation of merit allows middle- and upper-class families to maintain their edge, challenging the egalitarian promises of the public education system.
- **The Psychological and Lifestyle Toll:** The study also highlights the hidden costs for those with access. Users described a gruelling “double-schooling” routine, leading to a severe “time deficit”, chronic exhaustion, and limited opportunities for holistic development. While users believed the academic benefits outweighed these negatives, the findings suggest that the drive for equity in results comes at a significant cost to student wellbeing (Loi, Quinn & Badiozaman 2025; Loi et al. 2025).

Discussion

These findings suggest that SE in Malaysia is widening the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. When access is dictated by family income, the educational system risks becoming an engine for social stratification rather than mobility. To achieve true equity, the study aligns with calls for SE to be better utilized as a means for sociocultural reproduction that addresses gaps in classrooms and society alike (Loi et al. 2025). Centring student voices emphasises that “equity in education” cannot be achieved as long as academic success is tied to the market value of private tutoring.

Keywords

Shadow education

Malaysia

Socioeconomic

Inequality in education

Private supplementary tutoring

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