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Examination-Oriented versus Competency-Based Pedagogy: A Theoretical Perspective on Private Coaching and Secondary Schools in Jamshedpur

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Abstract

Private coaching has become a routine companion of secondary schooling in urban India, yet it is usually discussed as a market or equity problem rather than as a distinct pedagogical system. This theoretical paper examines the pedagogy of private coaching and of formal secondary schools through the contrast between examination-oriented and competency-based approaches to teaching and learning. Drawing on Bernstein's performance and competence models, Bourdieu's theory of capital, Vygotskian and constructivist learning theory, Biggs's constructive alignment and Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge, the paper builds a conceptual framework in which a high-stakes examination system shapes both settings but pulls them in different directions. Coaching is analysed as an ideal-typical expression of examination-oriented pedagogy, while formal schools are positioned between the competency-based aspirations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the pressures of examination washback. The framework is read against the context of Jamshedpur, an industrial city with a dense coaching ecosystem. The paper argues that the two settings are best understood as complementary but unbalanced components of a single learning system, offers six propositions for empirical testing, and outlines implications for teacher education, school practice, coaching regulation and assessment reform. No primary data are reported.

Keywords: examination-oriented pedagogy; competency-based education; private coaching; shadow education; NEP 2020; secondary education; Jamshedpur

1. Introduction

In many Indian cities the school day no longer ends at the school gate. Secondary students move from classrooms organised around a prescribed curriculum to coaching centres organised

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around an examination. The two settings are rarely planned together, but students live in both. Research on this phenomenon, usually called shadow education or private supplementary tutoring, has documented its growth, cost and links with social inequality (Bray, 1999, 2009; Bhorkar & Bray, 2018; Azam, 2016). Far less attention has been given to the pedagogical logic that operates inside coaching, and to how that logic differs from the one that national policy now asks schools to adopt.

The difference matters because Indian education policy has moved decisively towards competency-based learning. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 argued for learning that reduces rote memorisation and connects knowledge to life (NCERT, 2005). NEP 2020 goes further, calling for a shift from rote learning to the development of core capacities, critical thinking and application, supported by formative and holistic assessment (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 translates this direction into curricular guidance (NCERT, 2023). Yet students and families continue to organise their time around board examinations and competitive entrance tests, and coaching is the sector that has organised itself most completely around those tests.

This paper therefore asks a conceptual question: what happens when a competency-oriented school system and an examination-oriented coaching system operate side by side on the same learners? Jamshedpur is used as the contextual setting. It is a planned industrial city in Jharkhand with a large professional and service-sector population, a mix of private and government-aided schools, and a visible coaching sector serving board and entrance-examination preparation. The paper does not claim to describe Jamshedpur empirically. It uses the city as a bounded setting in which the proposed framework can be examined and later tested.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it separates examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy into analytically distinct constructs. Second, it proposes an integrated framework (Figure 1) that treats the examination system as the common driver of both settings. Third, it derives propositions and implications that can guide empirical work and policy discussion.

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2. Purpose and Methodological Approach

The study is a conceptual and analytical review. It is guided by the following objectives:

- To conceptualise examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy and clarify their theoretical foundations.
- To analyse private coaching and formal secondary schooling as expressions of these two pedagogical orientations.
- To situate the analysis in the context of Jamshedpur and in the policy direction of NEP 2020.
- To derive propositions, implications and directions for empirical research.

The method is a critical reading of peer-reviewed literature on shadow education, pedagogy and assessment, together with national policy documents. Sources were selected for their theoretical relevance and for their bearing on the Indian context. The paper relies on ideal-typical reasoning in the Weberian sense: examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy are presented as contrasting tendencies, not as descriptions of every coaching centre or every school. Real institutions mix both orientations in varying proportions.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Shadow education as a pedagogical system

Bray (1999) described private tutoring as a "shadow" that mimics the formal system: its content changes as the school curriculum changes, and it grows where examinations carry high stakes. Mori and Baker (2010) argued that shadow education has become an institutionalised feature of education systems worldwide, not an aberration. In India, Bhorkar and Bray (2018) traced a movement from supplementation, where tutoring helps weaker students, towards supplantation, where tutoring takes over functions of the school. Sriprakash, Proctor and Hu (2016) showed that tutoring in India is also a form of visible parental work through which families seek educational advantage. Jayachandran (2014) raised the possibility that, where teachers can also tutor privately, incentives may weaken classroom teaching. These studies establish that coaching is a structured educational practice with its own logic, and not a neutral extra.

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3.2 Examination-oriented pedagogy

Examination-oriented pedagogy is defined here as an approach in which the teaching sequence, content selection, practice activities and feedback are designed primarily to maximise performance on a defined assessment. Three theoretical strands help explain its character.

The first is Bernstein's (2000) distinction between performance and competence models of pedagogic practice. In a performance model the emphasis falls on a specific output, a text or product that can be evaluated, and the acquirer is shaped by what the assessment rewards. In a competence model the emphasis falls on procedures the learner already possesses and can develop, with greater learner control over process. Bernstein's "competence" is a sociological term and is not identical to the "competency" of competency-based education, but the contrast usefully shows how a pedagogy can be organised around products rather than processes.

The second is the educational literature on assessment backwash and surface learning. Marton and Säljö (1976) distinguished deep and surface approaches to learning, noting that the learner's perception of what is demanded shapes the approach adopted. Biggs (1996) argued that when assessment tasks reward recall or technique, students adjust their learning to match, whatever the stated objectives. Black and Wiliam (1998) showed that frequent, well-used assessment can raise achievement, which indicates that the testing intensity found in coaching is not inherently harmful. What matters is what is tested and how feedback is used. Hattie and Timperley (2007) similarly found that feedback is among the most powerful influences on learning when it addresses task, process and self-regulation.

The third is the critique of performativity in education. Biesta (2009) cautioned that the pressure to measure what is easily measured can displace discussion of the purposes of education. Examination-oriented pedagogy is a rational response to a measurement-driven system, and its strengths (clarity, practice, speed, feedback) should be acknowledged alongside its limits (narrow purpose, risk of surface learning, stress).

3.3 Competency-based pedagogy

Competency-based pedagogy is defined here as an approach that organises teaching around the development of integrated knowledge, skills and dispositions that learners can apply in

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unfamiliar situations. Its theoretical roots lie in constructivism and sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is mediated by social interaction and language and proceeds most effectively within the zone of proximal development, where guided activity extends what the learner can do alone. Biggs's (1996) constructive alignment holds that intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks should be aligned so that the learner constructs meaning through activities that match the outcomes. Deci and Ryan (2000) add a motivational dimension: learning that supports autonomy, competence and relatedness is more likely to be sustained and self-directed.

Shulman (1986) contributes the idea of pedagogical content knowledge, the blend of subject knowledge and knowledge of how to make it learnable. This concept is important for the comparison because the two settings differ in where teacher expertise lies. Coaching instructors are often selected for subject mastery and examination insight, whereas school teachers are formally prepared in pedagogy and child development. Each profile covers part of Shulman's knowledge base.

At the policy level, NEP 2020 explicitly favours competency-based learning, reduced content load, experiential and inquiry-based approaches, and a move towards formative, holistic assessment. It also expresses the intention to redesign board examinations so that they test understanding and application, in part to reduce the perceived need for coaching (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy therefore recognises the link between the examination system and the coaching economy, which is the link at the centre of the framework proposed here.

3.4 Capital, advantage and access

Bourdieu's (1986) account of economic, cultural and social capital explains why pedagogy and inequality cannot be separated. Coaching converts economic capital into academic credentials: families with resources purchase additional preparation, and its benefits appear as examination performance. Sriprakash et al. (2016) documented how Indian middle-class families mobilise this conversion. A pedagogical comparison that ignored access would therefore be incomplete. If examination-oriented preparation is purchasable while competency-oriented teaching depends on the school a child happens to attend, the two pedagogies are distributed unequally across families.

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4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 integrates the above ideas. The examination system sits at the top as the common driver. It exerts washback on both settings, but with different force. In coaching, the market rewards institutions that deliver examination results, so pedagogy converges towards the examination blueprint. In schools, the curriculum, policy and teacher education pull towards competency-based goals, while parents, students and examination boards pull back towards the examination. Schools are therefore described as a contested site and not as a pure case of competency-based teaching.

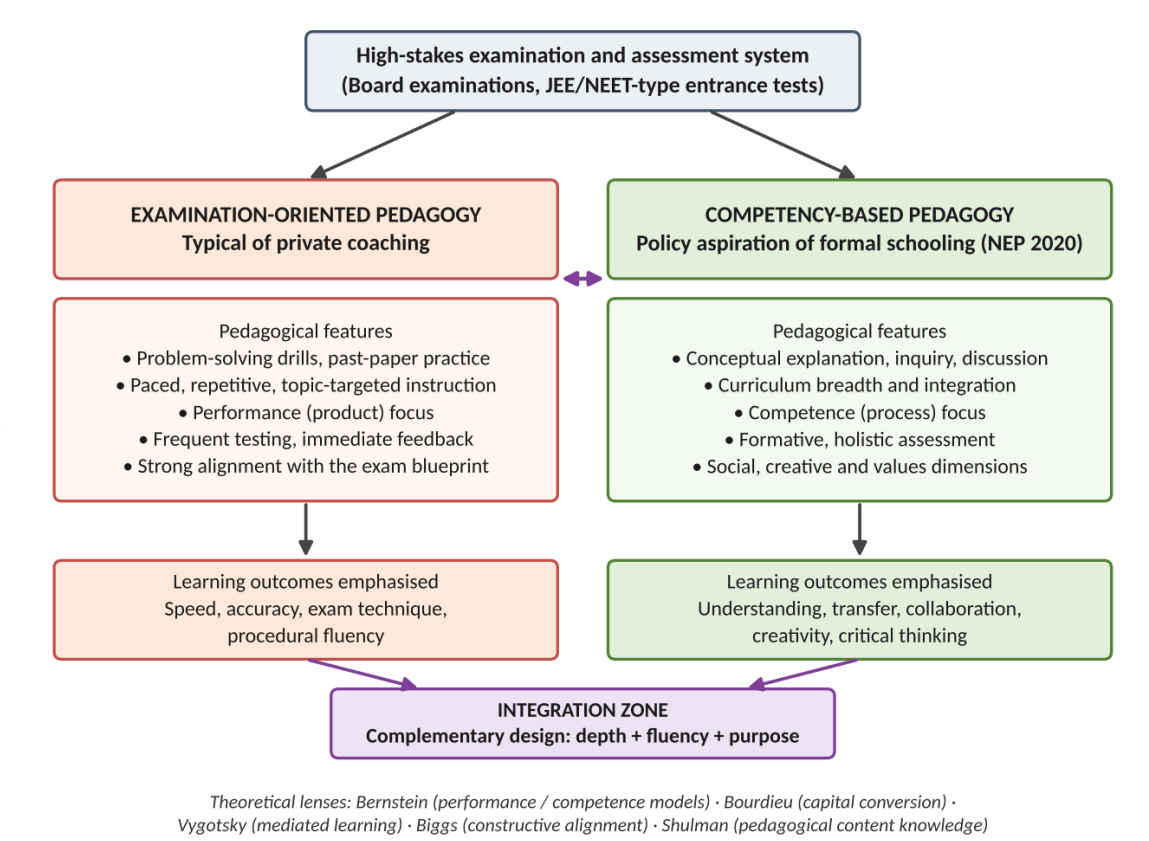


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy under a common examination system.

The framework generates the following propositions, offered for empirical testing.

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- *P1.* The more an examination rewards recall and procedural technique, the more the pedagogy of coaching will converge on drills, past-paper practice and paced repetition.
- *P2.* Schools will show greater curriculum breadth and conceptual explanation than coaching, but the gap will narrow in grades closer to high-stakes examinations because of examination washback.
- *P3.* Students exposed to both settings will report higher perceived gains in examination technique from coaching and in understanding, discussion and creativity from school, provided school teaching is competency-oriented in practice.
- *P4.* Alignment between school assessment and competency goals, in Biggs's sense, will reduce students' reliance on coaching for conceptual understanding but not necessarily for examination practice.
- *P5.* Higher coaching intensity will be associated with greater time pressure and lower leisure and wellbeing, regardless of the pedagogical quality of coaching.
- *P6.* Access to examination-oriented coaching will be stratified by household income, so the pedagogical advantage it confers will reinforce existing socioeconomic gradients.

5. Comparative Theoretical Analysis

Table 1 compares the two orientations across nine analytical dimensions. The comparison is of ideal types. Figure 2 shows the same contrast as positions on continua. The placement of points in Figure 2 is conceptual and illustrative and does not represent measured data.

Table 1. Examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy: analytical comparison.

Dimension	Examination-oriented pedagogy (coaching, ideal type)	Competency-based pedagogy (policy-oriented school, ideal type)
Primary aim	Maximise performance in a defined examination	Develop applicable knowledge, skills and dispositions
Theoretical anchor	Performance model (Bernstein); assessment backwash (Biggs)	Constructivism and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky); constructive alignment (Biggs)

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Curriculum	Selective; depth on tested topics; pattern recognition across question types	Broad and integrated; connections across subjects and to life
Instruction	Drills, worked examples, paced repetition, past papers	Explanation, inquiry, discussion, projects, collaborative tasks
Assessment	Frequent summative tests; rapid score feedback	Continuous, formative and holistic assessment
Learner role	Practising performer; speed and accuracy valued	Active constructor of meaning; reflection valued
Teacher knowledge	Strong subject and examination insight (cf. Shulman's content knowledge)	Broader pedagogical and developmental preparation (cf. Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge)
Main risks	Surface learning, stress, narrowing of purpose, unequal access	Implementation gaps, examination washback, uneven teacher capacity
Main strengths	Clarity of goals, practice, feedback, efficiency	Depth, transfer, creativity, social and ethical learning

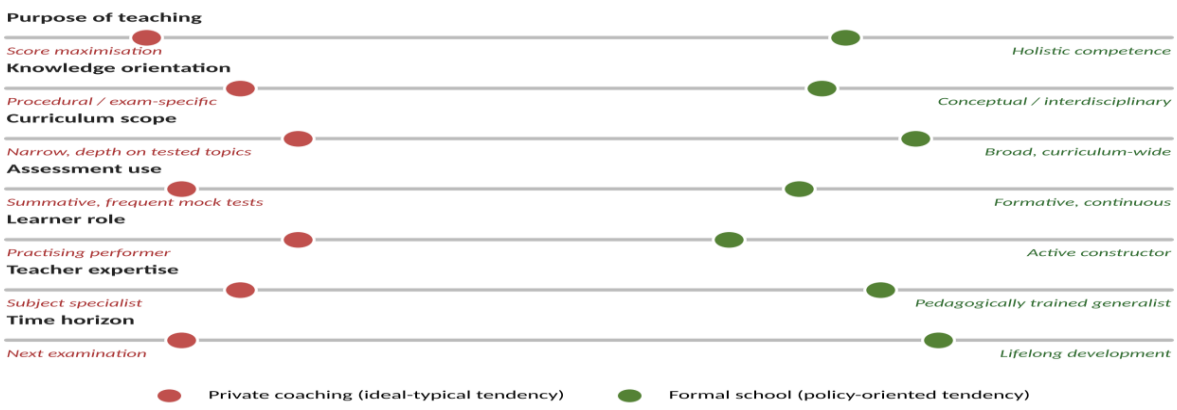


Figure 2. Conceptual positioning of coaching and formal schooling on seven pedagogical continua (illustrative, not empirical).

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Two observations follow. First, the orientations are complementary in a precise sense. Examination-oriented practice builds procedural fluency and speed, which competency-based learning also requires, while competency-based teaching supplies the conceptual understanding that makes procedures meaningful. Second, the imbalance between them is structural. Because examinations reward the former more visibly than the latter, the examination system tends to pull the whole learning system towards examination-oriented practice, and coaching is the setting that follows this pull most completely.

6. The Jamshedpur Context

Jamshedpur's industrial history, associated with the Tata Steel works, has produced a population in which many families are employed in or connected to industry and services, and place a high value on education. Such a profile is often linked to strong demand for examination preparation, particularly for engineering and medical entrance tests. The city's schools include government-aided institutions, private unaided schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE), and schools following the Jharkhand state board. The coaching sector ranges from small home-based tuition to organised franchises. These descriptions are drawn from general knowledge of the city and are offered as context, not as findings.

Three features of this context make it suitable for examining the framework. First, the coexistence of several boards gives a natural variation in examination pressure and curricular approach. Second, the presence of both low-fee and high-fee coaching makes the access dimension (Proposition 6) visible. Third, the city is large enough to sustain organised coaching while small enough for a single-city comparative design, which suits the future empirical testing outlined below.

7. Implications

7.1 Teacher education

Because school teachers carry pedagogical preparation and coaching instructors carry examination insight, teacher education programmes should treat assessment literacy as a core

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competency. Prospective teachers need to learn how to design assessment that is aligned with competency goals while still preparing students for the examinations they will face. Exposure to the strengths of drill and feedback practices, treated critically, may help new teachers avoid the false choice between "teaching for understanding" and "teaching for the exam".

7.2 School practice

Schools can reduce their dependence on external preparation by building structured, high-quality practice and feedback into regular teaching, so that competency-based instruction and examination readiness reinforce each other. Aligning classroom assessment with intended outcomes, as Biggs (1996) recommends, is the most direct lever.

7.3 Coaching practice and regulation

Coaching institutions are unlikely to disappear, and bans are widely regarded as impractical (Bray, 2009). A more productive path is to encourage quality standards, transparency about fees and teaching methods, and attention to student wellbeing, including limits on weekly hours and the use of non-examination activities. Academic stress among Indian adolescents is a documented concern (Deb et al., 2015), which supports a wellbeing component in any regulatory discussion.

7.4 Assessment reform and equity

The framework implies that reform confined to teaching methods will have limited effect unless the examinations that drive demand also change. NEP 2020's intention to redesign board examinations towards understanding and application is therefore central to the argument. If examinations come to reward competencies, coaching would have an incentive to teach them, and the pedagogical gap between the settings could narrow. Equity considerations require that any improved preparation be accessible beyond families able to pay (Bourdieu, 1986; Sriprakash et al., 2016).

8. Directions for Future Research

The propositions in Section 4 can be tested through mixed-methods designs combining structured classroom observation, student and teacher surveys, and analysis of assessment tasks. Useful extensions include comparing institutions across boards, tracking the same students across

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grades 9 to 12 to observe the effect of approaching examinations, measuring learning directly alongside perceived gains, and examining how teacher education and in-service training affect the integration of practice and understanding. Comparative work across cities with different coaching cultures would indicate which features are specific to Jamshedpur and which are general.

9. Limitations

As a theoretical paper, the study offers no empirical evidence and its propositions are untested. Its ideal types simplify a diverse reality, since many coaching centres teach for understanding and many schools drill for examinations. The Jamshedpur context is described in general terms and not through primary data. The reading of policy documents is interpretive. These limitations point to the need for the empirical work described above.

10. Conclusion

Examination-oriented and competency-based pedagogy are not rival teaching styles that students must choose between. They are two logics that operate on the same learners under a shared examination system. Coaching expresses the first most fully, schools are asked by policy to embody the second, and the examination system pulls both towards the first. The framework developed here explains why the two settings look different, why they can be complementary, and why the balance between them is unequal. For Jamshedpur and for similar cities, the practical task is to design arrangements in which practice, feedback and conceptual understanding reinforce one another, and in which access to such arrangements does not depend on a family's ability to pay. Assessment reform, teacher education and thoughtful regulation of coaching are the levers through which this can be pursued.

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