

CLASS ACT: SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Research in India and on an international level has shown a clear correlation between socio economic status and academic achievement. It is the most influential factor in determining academic achievement among children, and their access to quality education in the country. Although there has been legislation to this effect and reservation policy, the rationale and enforcement mechanisms are unclear, often leading the benefits not in fact reaching those of a lower socioeconomic status. This paper will examine theories of academic achievement and studies conducted on the relationship between socio economic status and performance. The paper will then pose policy recommendations in order for the government to adequately address the needs of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Keywords: Class Act, Socio Economic Status, Academic Performance, Tertiary Education.

INTRODUCTION

As of data available in 2018 from the Brookings Institution, 70.6 million people in India live in extreme poverty (World Poverty Clock, Brookings Institution). National poverty estimates during the period 2011-2012 show that 21.9 percent of people in India live below the poverty line (Government of India, 2018). With such a vast number of people in poverty, there is a large disparity in opportunities for education between people of higher and lower socioeconomic status, especially in the sphere of tertiary education. It is widely acknowledged that children's academic performance is influenced by their home and family background, and therefore, it is crucial to examine the effect of socio economic determinants in order to formulate effective policy, and level the playing field for children of different backgrounds. This paper will examine the theories of academic performance influences, and the key factors that lead to disparities in access to education and academic performance. The paper will then pose certain policy recommendations to tackle these issues in a more holistic manner.

BACKGROUND

As per the bio-ecological theory of education coined by Stafen Ceci, IQ and academic achievement is dependent on context. Intelligence is a biological disposition which develops within an environment. Therefore, children from a low socio economic status due to malnutrition and environment (Chandra, 2019).

The definition of socio economic background or status itself differs widely, across educational research that has been conducted around the world. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development conducted a large scale assessment of more than 70 countries over 15 years, which was the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The factors considered were the highest level of education of the student's parents, converted into years of schooling; the index of family wealth, home educational resources and possessions related to 'classical' culture in the family home (OECD, 2017).

The OECD has concluded that 'while many disadvantaged students succeed at school, socio economic status is associated with significant differences in performance in most countries and economies that participated in PISA. Advantaged students tend to outscore their disadvantaged peers by large margins' (OECD, 2016). The strength of the relationship between socio economic status and academic achievement varies from very strong to moderate across the countries which participated in the study, but the relationship and correlation exists in each country. Over the 15 years of PISA data currently available, the size of this relationship has changed very little, on average. The gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students remains.

Some researchers have argued that the relationships between socioeconomic background and educational achievement are small, when one takes into account factors such as cognitive ability or higher achievement (Marks, 2017). However, much of the body of research, particularly those generated from large scale international studies, contradicts this reasoning.

International studies have found over the years that books in the home is one of the most influential factors in student achievement (Thomson et al, 2017). Parents with higher socioeconomic status are able to provide their children with financial support and home resources for learning outside the classroom and school environment. Since such parents have a higher level of education, they are also likely to provide a more intellectually stimulating environment in the home, along with more psychological support through environments that allow children to develop useful interpersonal skills (Evans et al, 2010).

Socioeconomic status has been a contentious issue in India, especially with respect to quotas for minorities and socio economically disadvantaged groups of society. There has been significant

conflict with respect to reservations for minority and backward communities, as there have been several instances of those with higher socio economic status taking advantage of falling into the category of a scheduled caste or tribe to avail of higher education and scholarships. Therefore, there have been calls to make the reservations and quotas based on socio economic status rather than based on caste, class or religion. Recently, the government has announced a 100% quota for forward castes in the 124th Amendment of the Constitution, 2019.

This amendment deals with a classification called 'economically weaker sections of citizens other than the classes' currently mentioned in the Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution, namely, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. These economically weaker sections are to be determined from time to time on the basis of family income and other indicators of economic disadvantage. However, this move by the government has been criticized heavily in the media for pandering to the general category, which does not constitute a class collectively entitled to reservation, and therefore the conflation of caste identity and socio economic status is erroneous and a political play (Chatterjee, 2019).

There is a 25% reservation under the Right to Education Act, 2009 in both government and private schools for children from poor families. Within the framework of the RTE Act, weaker sections are those who are deemed to be below a certain cut-off indicating poverty, with no reference to caste or social identity (Chatterjee, 2019).

Therefore, it is evident that there are greater political considerations at play with respect to socio economic status in India. The rhetoric and conflict surrounding legislation should be further focused on the academic performance of the children concerned. In the following section, studies from India on the relationship between socio economic status and academic performance will be highlighted.

DISCUSSION

There have been studies conducted in India on socio economic determinants and their role in academic performance.

In line with the aforementioned international studies, it has been found that educated parents from a higher socio economic background in India are able to provide more facilities with respect to education, which increases academic achievement in children (Duhan et al, 2001). Further, a study found that there was no significant difference between cognitive developments of rural and urban children of high and low socio economic status. This indicated that cognitive development as a determinant of academic performance was not as significant as socio economic status (Nigam et al, 2001).

It has been found that factors within Indian government schools itself contribute to poorer children, who attend these schools, performing poorly as these schools are not properly funded. There is a lack of trained teachers, non accountability of teachers, and a lack of remedial classes for slow learners. It has been found that there is a clear disparity between the performance of children in government and private schools (Chandra, 2019).

In a study conducted on a random sample of two hundred children from twenty villages in two districts of Andhra Pradesh, it was found that socio economic status had a significant impact on educational opportunities and consequently, academic performance. The study found that children from a lower socio economic background had lesser access to educational supplies and basic sanitary facilities in the home. In addition, children from these backgrounds often live at a further distance from sources of drinking water. These factors negatively influence academic performance and have an impact on the level of schooling that the child might complete before dropping out. The study further found that the child's age, gender, age at enrollment, reason for dropping out, parents' income, literacy and caste do not have a significant influence on academic performance (Desai, 1991).

In another study conducted on higher secondary school children in Lucknow city, it was found that male students with a higher socio economic status scored higher than those of a lower economic status. This is because of a higher access to the necessary facilities, supplies, health facilities and a larger understanding among more educated parents of the issues faced during the period of adolescence (Ahmar & Anwar, 2013).

This study was in line with similar findings from an earlier study conducted on boys in Patiala city (Kaur, 1971). It is also common for male students of a lower economic status to receive more direct forms of punishment from teachers, sometimes in the form of corporal punishment. This further adversely affects their academic performance (Havighrust, 1964). When the data in this study was analyzed for female students, similar results were found with respect to females from a higher socio economic status vis-à-vis a lower one. Girls belonging to a lower socio economic status are generally put towards housework and other domestic duties, which impairs their academic performance. The study, along with previous studies, also showed that gender itself is not a factor that influences the academic achievement of students, more than socio economic status (Kaur, 1971; Havighrust, 1964).

Another study conducted in Andhra Pradesh also found that there are significant differences between upper class and middle class, upper class and lower class, middle class and lower class, and urban upper class and rural upper class in academic performance. In line with the previous

studies mentioned in this section, it was found that there were no significant differences between class and gender, or gender and academic performance (Raju, 2016).

A study conducted on 200 secondary school students in the Aligarh district of Uttar Pradesh in 2015, showed that there was a positive significant correlation between socio economic status and academic achievement. However, this study also found in its conclusions that male students performed better than their female counterparts (Islam, 2017). Sex differences in academic achievement have also been supported by other research (Rather and Sharma, 2015).

Therefore, although there is some disagreement on the role of gender, and caste, for example, it is widely agreed that socio economic status is crucially important variable in examining academic performance, and is arguably the most important determinant.

In the All India Survey on Higher Education (2017-2018), it was found that 78% of colleges are run in the private sector. These private universities cater to only 67.3% of the total enrolment. From the data available, it is estimated that enrolment from the Scheduled Caste category is around 14.4% of total enrolment, and Scheduled Tribes are 5.2% of total enrolment. 35% of total students belong to Other Backward Classes. Given these statistics, it is likely that most of those from a lower socio economic status are not enrolled in private universities, but in government run universities with more subsidized education.

Therefore, it is clear that socio economic status also affects access to education and such division of class would likely be perpetuated over generations. It is however pertinent to note that such studies come with certain limitations, as they are mostly conducted within the confines of a particular geographic area. Therefore, more studies that are conducted across India are required to formulate effective policy in this sphere.

CONCLUSION

In addition to further and more comprehensive studies, individual instruction and institutional tuition would improve the academic performance of students from a low socio economic status. There could also be measures in legislation for more counsellors to be appointed in schools, to cater to the needs of children who may not have adequate resources at home (Raju, 2016). There needs to be a larger awareness created amongst parents of a lower socio economic status of the benefits of educating their children instead of sending them to work at a young age or engaging them in domestic tasks. Incentives need to be created by the government in order to encourage parents to send and keep their children in school, and to encourage good academic performance. These incentives could be in the form of provision of basic sanitary facilities to households,

ensuring sources of water supply, subsidized educational supplies, free uniforms, text-books and mid-day meals (Desai, 1991).

While there has been research across the world which shows a clear effect of socioeconomic background on educational achievement, it is still not entirely understood as to how the effect is transmitted (Science of Learning, 2018). In the Indian context, there is little research on the interplay between various determinants.

Provisions by the State and Central Government should be made for parents to avail of better paying jobs, which would have an impact on the academic success of their children (Chandra, 2019).

A clear reservation policy which is not politically motivated would also contribute to creating a level playing field for students of different backgrounds. The provisions of the RTE Act must be enforced to ensure that private school fulfil their obligations of admitting students from poor backgrounds (Ray, 2012). The government must also improve their own schools in order to ensure that the goal of a level playing field and universal access to quality education is met (Chandra, 2019).

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