

IMPORTANCE AND IMPEDIMENTS OF EDUCATION IN INDIA: PROPOSITION OF A MERIT-BASED AND SOCIAL-STRATIFICATION INSENSITIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Social stratification is a severe impediment for education in India and the current approach with reservation quotas is not effective and even diminishes the quality of education. The complex system of social stratification in India poses a sensitive context for education and requires particular consideration. Social stratification in India exerts its effect through both economical as well as social-psychological pathways, so a possible remedy needs to consider both of these mediators and their possible interactions. To counteract the possible detrimental effects of the social stratification in India, we propose that the current reservation systems should be revised from being merely grounded on class or caste affiliation to being merit- as well as income-based. Also, actions to foster social connections and the sense of belonging should be considered as a feasible and important measure to overcome psychological consequences of social-stratification in Indian education and to foster caste/class-insensitive education.

Introduction

One of the most important factors for societal and economic development is education. But while the assumption that “Education is a Nation’s Strength” (Shaguri, 2013) in general is undisputed, a mere equation of education or school attainment with development might seem unwarranted. In this regard, Hanushek (2013) stresses the importance of the schooling quality, which is harder to achieve than the provision of schooling infrastructure and access. From a historical perspective, the establishment and expansion of schooling is driven and influenced by the ideological as well as political context (Easterlin, 1981). Thus, not only do determinants of school quality and performance play a crucial role for education to drive societal and economic development – especially in countries and regions with improved school provision and attainment in face of a lagged economic development – but it can furthermore be assumed that there is a mutual dependency between education and societal development. Here, a focus on India is informative.

The Indian education system has a long tradition, which dates back to the Gurukula tradition and which was limited to the higher social strata of the society and was primarily focused on learning the sanskrit language and matters of religion. However, its current form is framed after the model of European education system (Kumar, 2017). From the colonial days, English language gained importance along with other languages and became, in the contemporary India, the single most important factor in higher education. At present, education is being governed by both central and the state boards in a parallel fashion. While India is considered a fast developing country despite its efforts to improve the education system, progress is still laming due to a number of facts like poor infrastructure, inadequate faculty, poor quality of teachers and lack of financial resources (Government of India, 2015). Furthermore and importantly for India, a major issue that India faces today in the field of education has been the inequalities based on caste, ethnicity and gender (Shaguri, 2013). Thus, we argue that attempts to enhance the development of education in India is on the one hand substantially impeded by the detrimental effect of caste and social stratification, while on the other hand attempts to shelter its students from these influences would substantially enhance schooling quality. Therefore, the current scenario of Indian education system is examined in the light of the caste and class stratification and alternative pathways to handle their impeding effects on education are proposed. This entails an exploration of the influence of education on the sustainable development of the nation and the impact of social stratification and the current system of reservation on this process through the review of available empirical studies, position papers, newspaper articles and the education policy of the Government of India and United Nations. This is followed by the proposal of a merit based and caste/class insensitive approach as an alternative to overcome the impediments of the current system of education in India. Finally, limitations of the findings and implication for future research are discussed.

Socio-economic stratification in India

The Indian caste system can be defined as a system of social stratification, which divides the society into groups based on its members occupations and is closely associated with Hinduism (Berreman, 1972; Singh, 2009). For uplifting these disadvantaged groups the Government of India has transformed the traditional caste system into three classes, i.e. General Class, Other Backward Class (OBC) and Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST). The major differences between caste and class are that the membership in the caste is given by birth and that caste is a closed group characterized by endogamy whereas class is an

open group. Also, in the class system vertical mobility is possible, such as a person can move higher and go down, whereas in caste there is no such mobility. Finally, a given class can be distinguished from another class on the basis of economic criteria such as income, occupation whereas caste are based on religious and mythical traditions and may have hereditary and traditional occupation (Laskar, 2010). But although the governmental classes are thought to replace castes and in consequence to eradicate caste-related discrimination, classes still represent basically the caste system, since class assignment is based on sub-caste affiliation instead of individual socio-economic status (De Zwart, 2000). Thus, the so-called untouchables (Dalits) are assigned to SC/ST, other socio-economically unprivileged castes, such as shudras are grouped into OBC (De Zwart, 2000) while members of the highest caste being assigned to General or Forward class (Chauhan, 2008). The OBC and General Class are assigned on the basis of socio-economical and education criteria from Hindu religion and the groups in other religions are also assigned to these classes. Accordingly, the Mandal Report noted that “in the traditional Indian society social backwardness was a direct consequence of caste status” (Government Of India, 1980 p.22, as cited in De Zwart, 2000).

As the result of Indian Constitution’s interference in 1950 higher caste lost the privileges they enjoyed and the lower caste gained more attention from the government in favor of their right for equality (Chaturvedi, 2007; Galanter, 1963). Historically, caste affiliation determined the legal rights and obligations as well as secured the power of caste system to make rules for itself and constitute tribunals to enforce these rules, without being controlled by the government. However, the 1950 constitution of India put forward a new order with regard to castes in Indian society and the role of law for regulating it by personal law with law of uniform civil code, which assures equality in the society and made enforcement of disabilities a crime, punishable by imprisonment or fine.

In consequence and in order to reduce inequality in Indian society, the Government of India introduced counteracting or alleviating policies, such as the reservation system. Being basically a quota-based affirmative action, the objective of the Indian reservation system is to uplift social and educational opportunities for underprivileged communities. But although governmental policies set out to reduce the inequality and discrimination by reservation, it did not fully met its incentive (Mili, 2016). For example, The Times Of India (2014) pointed out that only 10% of eligible students have access to higher education in India and that the poor and deprived are still trapped in low quality of education. Also, according to the UNICEF report, lowest-caste children in India experience severe discrimination in education; which in turn has negative impacts on self-esteem and academic performance (Nambissan, 2009). Accordingly, the India Exclusion Report (2013-2014) states that “children who spend a greater part of the day in school, experience discrimination, neglect, active biases and prejudices, and ill-treatment from teachers and peers, (which) often results in a decision to drop out or frequently absent themselves from the schools” (India Exclusion Report 2013-2014) and a study conducted in Karnataka, south India on low class female students shows that they often face exclusion on the bases of caste and their poor academic performance (Bhagavatheeswaran et al 2016).

In India – and especially in urban areas – education has led to economic growth, created job opportunities and increased income and by thus helped people to rise above their birth and background. But in spite of all hopeful development, still the social order remains immutable and low caste are locked firmly into place by birth and governed by the rigid structure of social rules or as the New York Times put it: Caste is not past (The New York Times, 2013).

Education is humanity’s best hope and most effective means in quest to achieve sustainable development (Pramling Samuelsson, 2008).

According to the UNESCO, education is at the root of sustainable development, impacting diverse areas of global importance, such as biodiversity, poverty reduction, gender equality, health promotion as well as peace and human security (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014). Therefore ensuring and improving education has been and still is a main stake in the United Nations Millennium Developmental Goals (Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education, 2000-2015) and the current Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). But how does education lead to development in developing countries? In the following, examples of its wide effects are given.

First, education has profound effects on productivity. For example, Lockheed et al. concluded on the basis of a survey study in 18 low-income countries that four additional years of elementary education increases farm productivity up to average 7.4% (Lockheed, Jamison, & Lau, 1980). Also, a study conducted in Lao PDR indicates that primary or lower secondary education increases the chance of accessing the market of up to nearly 20% in farmers (Onphanhdala, 2009). Education also benefits equal distribution. Analyzing an international data set covering the last 30 years, it was shown that high educational attainment and equal distribution of education are important determinants of equal income distribution (Gregorio & Lee, 2002). In this regard, education has to be considered as a necessary social capital as the economic and social development is closely linked with higher education (Beissenova, Duisenova, & Muslimova, 2013). Again, this is of particular relevance for developing countries, since countries investing in higher education are associated with higher increases in labor productivity and long-term economic growth (Bank, 1994). To illustrate this, a study combining longitudinal data on changes in infrastructure and enrolment in Kazakhstan with qualitative focus group interviews showed that the education of a person is seen to be significantly related to future level of income and social status (Beissenova, et al., 2013). Furthermore, education exceedingly is interrelated to democracy through civic participations, such as voting and organizing (Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007). Education also impacts on reducing poverty. For example, a study conducted in India showed that post-elementary education has a significant role in reducing absolute and relative poverty by increasing agricultural development in rural areas that in turn boosts economic growth (Tilak, 2007).

But with regard to these positive effects of education, it needs to be acknowledged that although education requires a certain basic quantity in terms of infrastructure and numbers of teachers, it is quality of education that is essential for the economic

development of a country (Barro, 1996 ; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007). For example, a study conducted in Madhya Pradesh (India) shows that the effects of schooling strongly depends on teachers skills and behaviors, such as the frequent use of black-board when teaching, an interaction-focused teaching style, giving and checking class and home works regularly as well as the revision of the previous lessons (Govinda, Varghese, & Carron, 1993). This is also reflected in current debates on quality-based education in India, such as teacher training and better learning facilities. In this regard Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India stated "So far, the government's focus was on spreading education across the country. But the time has now come to shift the focus on the quality of education. Now, the government should emphasize more on learning rather than schooling" (The New Indian Express, 2016). Considering that the Indian economy strongly depends on number of education-sensitive factors, such as macro economic environment, quality of public institutions and technology, use of information and communication technologies, and innovation and technological adaption (Sreenivasulu, 2013), education needs to be considered a powerful and available instrument to shape a knowledge-based society in India (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2008).

Determinants of education in developing countries

Considering that both the quantity and quality of education is important for development, what are the determinants of education, especially in developing countries? According to the United Nations, there are a number of decisive factors that influences education in developing countries, such as poverty, gender equality and health issues (United Nations, 2005). The importance of these factors will be exemplified with respect to the educational as well as the students' characteristics in the following.

First, there is a substantial relationship between the provision of adequate educational facilities and academic achievement. For example, a study conducted at Zimbabwe University reported that access to Internet is positively related to educational performance (Nyikahadzo, Matamande, Taderera, & Mandimika, 2013). Furthermore, a study conducted in Sokoto, Nigeria on the relationship between the school environment and academic achievement in higher secondary school shows that the teacher's experience enhances the competency in teaching and increases the output quality of the student (Aruwaji, not dated). Accordingly, a study conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India also points out that the facilities in the school and the quality of teaching, can have effects on the academic performance only when the students are effectively engaged in learning activities (Govinda, et al., 1993). Also, the ability to accommodate students according to their needs is another important factor in the academic achievement, as students placed in the age-appropriate class performed better in a study conducted in Nigerian schools (Abdullahi, Mlozi, & Nzalayaimisi, 2015).

Furthermore and especially relevant for India, the question arises whether socio-economic factors have an influence on academic achievement. Farooq et al (2011) reasons that with regard to characteristics of the students and his background, socioeconomic as well as psychological factors exert a strong influence on education (Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq, & Berhanu, 2011). This is exemplified by a study conducted in Nigeria, showing that parent's visits to schools, pocket money, education of the parents, parent's occupation, residential type and family feeding positively affected student's academic performance (Abdullahi, et al., 2015). A study in private colleges in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan further provides evidence for the importance of familial education, with communication skills such as fluency in English as well as support and guidance of students by their parents having an impact on academic performance of the students (Mushtaq, 2012). These results are in line with reports that the size of the family negatively influences the female attendance in schools in India, because as family becomes larger, elder daughters have to stay at home and carry out household matters (Jaychandran, 2002).

Consequential to these socioeconomic factors, psychological factors also play an important role on academic performance. Here, the relationship between self-esteem and school performance has been addressed in many studies, however with mixed results (Huang, 2011). While on the one hand the relationship between low self-esteem and poor school performance in general has been confirmed repeatedly (Bankston & Zhou, 2002 ; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998), others have questioned causal role of self-esteem (Pullmann & Allik, 2008). For example, a study conducted among 10th grade high school students in United States noted that self-esteem only had a small effect on academic achievement (Bachman & O'Malley, 1986). However, recent studies conducted in developing countries highlight the reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and academic performance. For example, a study conducted among pre-university students of Qaemshahar, Iran shows that level of self-esteem is an important factor for academic performance as students developing high self-esteem also increase their academic performance (Aryana, 2010). Also, in another study conducted in Pakistan, Lahore shows that socioeconomic status has a significant impact on the students' performance in school, with higher self-esteem leading to higher study performance (Farooq, et al., 2011). Noteworthy, Vishalakshi et al. (2012) reported that high level of self-esteem brings a high level of confidence, which in turn improves academic performance among standard IX students from government and private schools in Mysore, India. Furthermore, they observed that self-esteem itself is strongly influenced by the socio-economic status of parents as well as a friendly and beneficial atmosphere of the schools (Vishalakshi & Yeshodhara, 2012). Another empirical study conducted in Kualampur, Malaysia shows that self-esteem is one of the key factors that influence students' academic performance with students displaying higher self-esteem performing better in their academic matters (Rosli et al., 2012). This is supported by a study conducted in Haryana, India among 175 higher secondary students, study shows that there is a positive and significant relationship was existing between self esteem and family environment and found no significant relationship between self-esteem and socio-economic status (Singh & Bhatia, 2012) Also, a study conducted in Raipur, Utter Pradesh, India reported that students from low-income families, i.e. with less than 50'000 Rupees per year, have less self-esteem in comparison to those from families with higher, i.e. .1'00'000 Rupees and above (Mahapatro, 2016) and a study conducted in Rajkot, Gujarat, India among college students found that students with high economic status have higher self esteem than students with low economic status (Parmar, 2014). Also, a quantitative and qualitative study conducted in India among college students between 18 to 23 years of age shows that academic pressures, understood as expectations of the parents, teachers and the students themselves, exert a negative influence on self-esteem (Jain & Dixit, 2014). These findings reflect the context-dependency of self-esteem, which is often formed around familial, work-related and organizational experience (Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Pool, Wood & Leck, 1998).

With regard to the statement that “self-esteem occurs not simply as a result of knowledge of one’s location in a status hierarchy but, more important, as the result of the frequency with which one is reminded of that location” (cited from Faunce, 1989, page 378), the relevance of social stigma needs to be addressed. The Indian Express, considered the leading Indian newspaper, reported that – 66 years after officially banning caste discrimination – the Indian school education system still is in the clutches of caste discrimination as SC/ST children are often discriminated from other students (The Indian Express, 2012). To complete this picture, The Hindu (2012) reports that high-caste Hindu students are often seated separately from low-caste students in classrooms, which creates an intimidating atmosphere among low caste students, and a recent report in NDTV (New Delhi Television Limited) concludes that caste discrimination happens even in higher education as well as in PhD studies (Press Trust of India, 2016). As a consequence, Geetha Nambissan, Professor of Sociology and Education in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi argued in a UNICEF report that “(...) these experiences are detrimental to children’s self-esteem and self-worth (...) and likely to have serious implications for their interest and motivation in studies (Nambissan, et al., 2009).

Reservation: An effective way to improve education?

As shown above, education is an important factor for developing countries, impacting on growth of the economy, agriculture and equal distribution of the income (Shaguri, 2013). This is especially true for India, where education has been identified as one of the main contributors of economy development (Sreenivasulu, 2013). However, while quantitatively India is inching closer to universal education, the quality of its education is still questioned and by large influenced by socio-economic factors, such as education of the parents, income of the family and healthy, safe, protective and gender sensitive school environments (Sadig, 2000). Thus, these socio-economic factors are both impediments as well as possible stepping-stones for the improvement of education in India.

As mentioned above, the Indian caste system is a system of social stratification, which is closely connected with Hinduism and which divides society into groups based on its members’ occupation (Berreman, 1972). But even though the Government of India in 1950 has abolished the traditional caste system and introduced governmental classes (see above), the caste system still acts as a hidden separator, since class assignment is based on sub-caste affiliation instead of individual socio-economic status (De Zwart, 2000). To counteract the negative discrimination and to uplift the social status of the lower castes – which is especially dire for those considered as born out of the Varna (Sanskrit for caste) scheme, i.e. the Dalits or untouchables – the Indian government began to implement protective measures through reservation quotas in higher education such as university studies and in government jobs for socially, educationally and economically backward castes (Department of Higher Education, 2016) This measure is anteceded by cost free education for the low-class students from 1st to 12th class, thus from 6 to 14 years of age (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). Along with these reservation quotas, the Government of India also offers education loans and full financial support for the low-caste students (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2016). But is this positive discrimination effective and/or sufficient?

The recent report in The New Indian Express states that only a small percentage of SC/ST and OBC members are enjoying the provisions of the reservation system, while the majority of the low caste members still suffers the consequences of their low social status (The New Indian Express, 2014). With regard to education, positive discrimination does not appear to make a substantial impact for members of lower class or caste. For example, a survey study conducted in India showed that Dalits and Tribes do not benefit from this positive discrimination, with no improvement on education and even a decline of college graduation rates among Dalits (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). Also, a study on the the impact of positive discrimination in India in targeted groups found that the reservation system does not help students from low governmental classes, but that improvements in education is rather more a consequence of a general improvement of the supply of schooling (Cassan, 2011).

To ensure the exclusive provision of affirmative actions for those in need, the Government of India introduced the so-called creamy layer in 1992, stating that the relatively wealthy (i.e. 1'500'000 Rupees per annum) and better educated members of the OBC and ST/SC castes are not eligible for the government sponsored educational and professional benefit program. However, this restriction of benefits might only be consequential for the recipients, but not for the aim itself, since there is no evidence that the creamy layer disproportionately benefits from the affirmative action program of the government at the cost of their lower counterparts (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Besides the lack of benefits on educational outcome, the reservation system has wider consequence on education. In order to ensure access for reservation group in colleges and universities, marks needed by eligible students are lower than those of higher classes (Robert, 2013). With regard to this, Mehbubul Hassan Laskar – Advocate at the Supreme Court of India – assumes that "to sympathize whimsically with the weaker sections by selecting sub-standard candidates, and that also in the higher level of education, is to punish the society as a whole by denying the prospect of excellence" (Laskar, 2010).

Consequently, it has been argued that reservation quotas in the long run affect the quality of Indian education. For example, reservation neglects people’s ability and intellect directly as it allows people with lesser marks and lesser quality to get admission for higher education. The admittance of students with lower quality thus reduces quality of education, since higher education needs high skills, proficiency and excellency. According to Laskar (2010) the demerits of the reservation system are twofold. First, it impedes of the development intellectual abilities of the low caste, because it creates a less competitive spirit among the students from backward class. Second, the reservation system prevents the progress of the nation, since it pulls away the meritorious students from higher education. Thus, the reservation system dishonours the right of the meritorious people to get admission for higher education or job because reservation system does not recognize fair competition (Anita, 2014).

Merit-based and social stratification-insensitive education: A proposition

Given that social stratification is a severe impediment for education in India and that the current approach with reservation quotas appears not to be effective and could even diminish the quality of education, there is need for improvement. Therefore, we propose a different approach. Social stratification in India – regardless of being based on governmental or religious classifications – exerts its effect through both economical as well as social-psychological pathways, so a possible remedy needs to consider both of these mediators and their possible interactions. In the following, our proposition will be described, borrowing on the experiences and approaches in similar settings.

First, we consider reservation quotas to ensure educational access for members of lower social strata to be ineffective with regard to its aims as well as counterproductive for the improvement of the quality of the Indian education system. Here, a merit-based approach with income-sensitive financial support seems warranted. This merit-based approach has empirical support. For example, a study conducted among nursing students between 15 to 25 years of age in Karachi (Pakistan) finds that entry qualification was significantly related to academic performance (Ali, 2008). While this supports a merit-based admission approach, it raises the question whether this would systematically exclude students of low-income families from the educational system in India. In support of this concern, (Sadana, 2009) points out that in India, 13% of the children from rural areas do not attend school due to the lack of affordability. Furthermore, a study conducted in rural Indian states (Bihar, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) indicated that schooling costs for students are too expensive for low-income families and in consequence, poor families either fail to register their children or withdraw them prematurely from primary schools (Jayachandran, 2002). As described above, in India cost-free education is provided for all students until 12th class, so that primary education as well as the first part of the secondary education are provided at no schooling costs. However, from higher secondary, thus 11th and 12th classes, as well as for higher education, i.e. university and college, reservation quotas exist for students based on their socio-economic backwardness, but not on school marks or academic performance. In order to tackle both the social as well as the economic aspect of aforementioned problem, we agree with Laskar (2010) and propose a restructured reservation system in higher education which would be based on the backwardness, i.e. family income, geographical accessibility for schooling, and the academic quality of the student, i.e. her or his school marks and academic performance. Importantly, there are examples that this is possible and effective. For example, The Indian Express – a leading newspaper in India – reported that the State of Maharashtra, India provides scholarship to low-caste/low class students for higher studies based family income and school marks of the student, empowering members of lower castes/class and in turn increasing the quality of education (The Indian Express, 2016).

Second, the Indian education is very sensitivity to social stratification. As Jiloha – a psychiatrist in New Delhi – stated, “deprived caste students who are in want of social approval and acceptance, carry high levels of social anxiety as compared to general population students. This anxiety interferes with their work efficiency resulting in poor performance” (Jiloha, 2007). Thus, although the caste system was officially abolished in 1950, Indian education still appears to be under the bondage of the caste system. But since it needs to be acknowledged the overcoming the social-stratification in India appears a rather elusive goal, we propose a social-stratification insensitive education system for India as a mean of meanwhile mitigation. Here, recent research on social connections and its application are highly informative.

The basic assumption in this regard is that social-stratification insensitive education thrives on social connections and when the sense of belonging is encouraged in schools. This is exemplified by studies among young and adolescent students in Australia and India, showing that social support, belongingness, friendship and optimism are important determinants of well-being and happiness in adolescent students (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010 ; Sharma & Malhotra, 2010). Also and importantly for the focus of this proposition, positive social interactions, such as a birthday party with peers, enhances the achievement motivation (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). Thus, measures to foster social connectedness or belongingness are possible cornerstones of a caste/class-insensitive education system.

A series of large and prospective studies in US-American universities are highly informative in this regard. Based on the observation that the stress arising from the feared confirmation of as well as the affiliation to negative stereotypes comprises the academic performance in minority students, Cohen et. al. (2006) conducted two controlled double-blind prospective studies conducted among African and European American university freshmen. The intervention under investigation was based on the reaffirming the self-integrity. Therefore, students were given a list of values such as relationship with friends or family and asked to choose their most important values and to write a brief paragraph about why these were important to them. In order to reinforce their choice, students were furthermore asked to state their level of agreement with the declaration regarding their chosen values such as “I care about these values”. Noteworthy, this brief writing-assignment intervention improved academic grades in African-American students and considerably reduced the racial achievement gap in the short as well as in the long-run (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). The major finding indicates that lessening the psychological threat of being confirmed as a member of a minority is possible by a circumscribed psychological intervention.

Following a similar approach, Walton and Cohen (2011) expanded their previous findings with an intervention aiming to enhance belongingness in otherwise socially stigmatized students, who are unsure of their social belonging in mainstream institutions. Again, using African-American and European-American college students, the participants in the intervention underwent an intervention to increase the sense of belonging. Therefore, students were provided with the perspective that the experienced social hardship in the academic setting is of short duration and shared amongst all students. Thus, the aim of the employed intervention was to encourage students not to attribute experienced personal and social problems to stable deficits of themselves or their ethnic group but to shared, short-lived and passing consequences of starting their university studies. In the intervention process participants were asked to read a report of seemingly true results of a survey amongst senior students. Most of the students in the survey stated that they had worried about whether they belonged in college during the difficult first year,

but gradually grew confident in their belonging as the time passed. The concerns they had about belonging were thus characterized as common at first and as momentary because of the challenging nature of the college. The participants were asked to internalize this perspective and to write an essay describing how their own experience in college resounded the experiences summarized in the survey report. Their essays were further read and captured on video as participants were informed that it would be publicized to future students so that it may help them to ease their transition to college. This short and well-accepted intervention helped students to reframe their social self-perception and not only raised academic performance of the African-American students steadily and persistently over the 3 years assessment period – cutting the race gap in academic performance by 79% in the final year – it furthermore also improved health in African-American students to the point of eliminating the otherwise observed race gap in self-reported health (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Although it needs to be noted that these results were obtained in the US-American university setting and thus the employed interventions still need to be tested in different settings and circumstances, we assume that similar strategies could be of use to facilitate a caste-insensitive education system in India. Already, the Indian education system and its academic curriculum offers extracurricular activities such as vocational class, personality development and motivational classes and Government provides financial support to aided and Government-run schools, which could provide a suitable setting for similar approaches (Cheney 2005).

Conclusion

A functional and effective educational system is of crucial importance for the economic as well as societal development of India. The present study explored Indian education system with regard to possible effects of governmental class and caste stratification. Our analysis on the basis of a differentiated discussion of various resources shows that the success and quality of education is impeded by India's culturally imbedded social stratification. The current strategy of the Government of India to tackle the issue is based on a reservation system, which is basically a quota-based affirmative action and thus grounded on backwardness of the caste rather than the quality and family income of the student. With regard to the aspired and actual effects, an unwelcomed mismatch of low benefits for members of low-castes and the risk of reducing the quality of education for all has to be noted (Laskar, 2010).

The cultural richness of India and its complex social stratification poses a very sensitive context for education and thus requires particular consideration. To counteract the possible detrimental effects of the social stratification in India, we propose both structural as well as psychological measures. With regard to the former, the current reservation systems should be revised from being merely grounded on class or caste affiliation to being merit- as well as income-based. Second and with regard to the latter, approaches and actions to foster social connections and the sense of belonging should be considered as a feasible and important measure to overcome psychological consequences of social-stratification in Indian education and to foster caste/class-insensitive education. Our proposition of a merit-based and social stratification-insensitive education thus covers academic, economic as well as psychological perspectives. We humbly acknowledge that these ideas are far from new. Mahatma Gandhi, spiritus rector of modern India, himself reframed the denied dignity of the low-caste by naming them Harijan (Child/People of God), a word coined by Gujarati Poet Narasimha Mehta. Also, Gandhi pointed out that "by education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in the child and man in body, mind and spirit" (M. K. Gandhi, Harijan, July 31, 1937), so the Gandhian vision on education was clearly focused on quality. If India is to become a developed country, it needs to temper and abrogate the sensitiveness its educational system for social stratification.

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