

EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL AND GENERATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AMONGST BRITISH ASIANS

This study examines intergenerational dynamics amongst British South Asians regarding education and family life. It explores the perspectives of grandparents, parents and young people to establish how family attributes and education are perceived by these groups, and how family values regarding education are transmitted by the first generation and received, adopted, or modified, by the second and third generations. The study forwards the notion of educational capital, as a high emphasis on the acquisition of education as a capital leading to upward social mobility is found amongst all generations.

KEY POINTS

- 1 All three generations perceive a clear correlation between educational achievement and economic success.
- 2 Parents and grandparents stress the importance of hard work and education; use positive reinforcements; and allude to negative scenarios.
- 3 Steps taken to ensure success include verbal motivation; asking friends and family for advice; preparing children for school tests; private tuition; and afterschool lessons.
- 4 University fees are viewed as inimical to social justice and likely to dissuade able young people from low socioeconomic status (SES) families from proceeding to higher education.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

- 1 We should stop focusing on the 'bright' or the 'high achieving', as young people of 'average' and 'below average' ability can also continue into further and higher education.
- 2 Parent-school partnership and regular communication between them is crucial to improve the education and life chances of young people.
- 3 Government policy needs to focus on improving educational provision at all schools rather than repackaging older policies which do little to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 4 More scholarships and bursaries should be made available to underprivileged young people, so that they are able to enter higher education without the anxiety of paying off a huge loan.

THE RESEARCH

Concerns have been raised by policy-makers, researchers and practitioners about the poor educational performance of children from specific minority ethnic backgrounds. Many ethnic minority children in British schools come from lower SES groups. While pupils of Indian and Chinese origin achieve at the expected or a higher level, those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and African Caribbean heritage perform less well than other ethnic groups, and are most likely to leave school without any qualifications. Yet, research in the UK also notes the educational and career aspirations of ethnic minority families and demonstrates that working class parents have middle class aspirations for their children, and view education as a route to upward social mobility.

This research examined the intergenerational dynamics amongst British South Asians, from various ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds, through an in-depth study of young people aged 15-16 years, their parents and their grandparents. The ultimate group of participants consisted of British Asians who were exclusively from a working class background in the grandparents' generation, despite education credentials attained in their country of origin.

Focus groups were followed by digital ethnography whereby each young person was given a disposable camera to photograph significant people, places and things that had an impact on his or her education. The young people were then interviewed individually and presented with digitalised versions of their photographs on a screen to help them reflect on their educational experiences and how these people, places and things influenced their education.

The study showed that free and compulsory education in Britain until the age of 16 was viewed by all three generations as a blessing, and many in the older generations compared it with the situation in their countries of origin where this facility was not available, resulting in low literacy rates and poverty.

Digital ethnography revealed that the parents had provided their children with an environment at home which was conducive to the accomplishment of the young people's educational goals. Almost all young people had their own room; had a desk, a bookshelf with books, a computer with internet and so forth. This was complemented by an expectation of diligence on a regular basis. Even parents who were unable to help with academic matters expected their children to work hard.

Despite ethnic, social class, religious and educational disparity amongst the participants, the perceptions of the parents and grandparents regarding the young people's education were very similar. The young people appeared to receive encouragement and advice about education from different sources within the family. It was believed that education gives you options in life, opens doors for you, and cannot be stolen or taken away from you. It was strikingly clear that education was viewed as a capital which would transform the lives of the younger generation.

This educational capital was considered to be the most significant asset a young person could acquire, and the families provided a range of support mechanisms to enable the young people to realise this aspiration.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH

Educational capital was viewed as a catalyst that could enable young people to convert from being 'nothing' to 'something'; and from being 'somewhere' as opposed to being 'nowhere'. A three-dimensional strategic approach was adopted by the parents and grandparents, through which they inculcated the value of education in the minds of the younger generation in the following three ways:

- The importance of hard work and education was emphasised by the older generations by narrating their own negative occupational history of exceedingly hard work or unemployment due to lack of education.
- Positive reinforcements about the value of economic success were used by the older generations by making references to role models, jobs with high remuneration, large houses, big cars, annual holidays and a better life.

- The exposition of negative and alarming scenarios by the older generations who used the examples of council houses, second-hand cars, and manual or unskilled jobs, to impress upon the young people that lack of education may lead to a life with poor prospects, and even poverty.

PEDAGOGY OF CONTRADICTION

A pedagogy of contradiction was evident in the interaction of the parents and grandparents with the younger generation. This was conveyed in two ways:

- They advised the young people to, 'Be like me; and don't be like me'. While the older generations wanted the young people to be like them as moral and religious human beings, they did not want them to emulate the older generations and remain uneducated with limited career options.
- They believed in both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of educational capital. On the one hand, education was viewed as making them a good human being and something that could not be taken away from them; on the other, education was seen as a means to an end, leading to economic success and upward social mobility.

ASPIRATION AND COST OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A consistent theme amongst all three generations was that education was viewed as higher education, and there was a strong belief that it would lead to a career. However, every participant commented on the requirement to pay fees at university which they believed was inimical to social justice and meant that able and aspiring young people with low income would not be able to proceed to higher education. While all the parents and grandparents verbally encouraged their young generation to aspire to higher education, some went further, in spite of limited means, by taking concrete steps to realise this aspiration in the following ways:

- By asking extended family members and friends about the choice of schools and subjects, thus mobilising the intangible and invaluable resource of social capital, based on social networking and interactions.
- By preparing their children for selective entry

to grammar schools, with the rationale that in comparison to a comprehensive, admission to a grammar school would ensure studying with peers who were highly motivated and hardworking.

- By arranging private tuition in subjects in which the young people needed academic support. Most young people also attended the afterschool provision of additional tutoring.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

The research study advances the notion of educational capital, which was viewed as the most significant asset a young person could acquire. All three generations perceived a clear correlation between educational achievement and economic success, with the acquisition of educational capital as a catalyst for upward social mobility. Regardless of the gender, social class, ethnic and religious affiliation of the parent, grandparent and the young person, education was viewed as equally valuable for boys and girls.

The British Asian students in the study came into school with a high regard for education; constant pressure from not just the parents, but also from siblings, grandparents and other members of the extended family to excel in education; religious values; and respect for teachers not only as people older than them who had to be respected anyway, but furthermore as individuals who were imparting something of tremendous value to them, i.e. knowledge, to achieve their aspirations. Such aspirations can be realised with the strong and constant support of the family as well as the school. A partnership and continuing dialogue between the two is therefore crucial to improve the life chances of our young people.

Schools, higher education institutions and families can be largely helpless when successive governments implement a range of new and repackaged policies ostensibly aimed at equitable practices in education leading to social justice, as these do little for those who start from a position of disadvantage because of their minority ethnic or working class status. Contradictory policies such as Every Child Matters and the Widening Participation agenda on the one hand, and the recommendations of the Browne Report on the other hand, show that the earlier policies claiming →

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to espouse social justice were mere rhetoric. The requirement to pay fees at university is viewed as a policy that is likely to hinder young people from going into higher education.

We have to recognise that ability and potential are not static and permanent. In order to improve the life chances of our young generation, we ought to stop focusing on the 'bright' or the 'high achieving'. The vast majority of young people of 'average' ability and achievement, and

many young people of 'below average' ability are perfectly capable of continuing into further and higher education, followed by a successful career. This research shows how young people of all abilities are encouraged by their families to aspire to higher education. The mainly working class minority ethnic parents and grandparents in the current study have very clear notions about the education of their young generation. Working in partnership with families and having high expectations of them can lead to improving their life chances. The kind of support we provide them will determine whether they turn out to be an asset or a nuisance not just to their country, but to global society. ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

FULL ARTICLE

Basit, T.N. (2013) Educational capital as a catalyst for upward social mobility amongst British Asians: A three-generational analysis. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(4), 714-732.

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