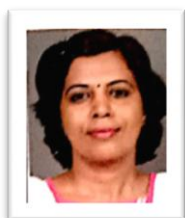


First-Generation Higher Education Students In India: How Do They Break The Intergenerational Cycle?



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Abstract

There has been massive expansion of higher education in India in the past few decades and the number of first-generation higher education students is increasing as people are recognising education as a passport for social mobility. Studies have shown a strong link between education levels of parents and their children. This paper tries to identify the factors that lead to breaking of the intergenerational cycle- as to how those higher education students manage to achieve higher education after generations of their family having been deprived of college education. Is family a facilitator or does it impede this process and what do the first-generation higher education students think about how they managed to break this intergenerational cycle? This is largely an unexplored area in the Indian context and this study will help identify strategies to bring disadvantaged groups into the fold of higher education.

Keywords: First Generation, Higher Education, Intergenerational, Family.

Introduction

Students who are the first generation in their families to join higher education are first generation students. It is common in India to come across students in colleges/ universities whose parents never went to college or even school. They generally belong to lower income groups and come from lower socio-economic strata and often there are students who are the first to receive higher education in their entire village or group of villages. They may come from families having varied attitudes towards higher education ranging from desperately wanting the child to attain higher education to being obstructive towards the child's effort to pursue higher education.

Objectives of the Study

This research focuses on finding out how first –generation higher education students break the intergenerational cycle by attaining higher education.

Review of Literature

Studies have demonstrated that, in general, the offspring inherit the educational levels of their parents. Evidence from these studies indicates that educational levels of parents and that of their children are strongly linked (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Hauser, 1998; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Solon, 2002). First generation students, by attaining higher education break the pattern of inheritance of educational level which may have been the norm since generations. This breaking of the inheritance of educational level makes families of these students an exception to the norm since breaking this intergenerational cycle is not an easy task. First generation students perceived lesser support from families as compared second generation students for attending college (Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Much is known about the pre-college and college life of first generation higher education students but hardly anything about the factors that lead to breaking of this intergenerational cycle of inheritance of educational level (Gofen, 2009). As education is the key to several aspects of well-being, the educational breakthrough of first generation students leads to their social mobility, hence the importance of first generation students (Cohen & Geske, 1990; Haveman & Wolfe, 1984).

There are various motivators for pursuing higher education and the major motivator is economic (Wadhwa 2017). The area of first generation higher education students has been largely unexplored in the Indian context and probably no study has been done on the factors that

lead to the breaking of this inter-generational cycle of not attaining higher education.

Research Question

Subsequent to the accepted conception that parental education level is inherited on one hand, and on the other, both of their parents did not attain college, how do first-generation students explain their higher education attainment?

Research Design/ Methodology

People who have attained higher education despite their parents not attending college were identified amongst teachers of higher education attending courses at HRDC, BPS Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan, Haryana and face to face interviews were conducted. Qualitative design was used and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten volunteers who agreed to participate in the study. Ten first generation higher education students, five men and five women were interviewed. The participants were asked open ended questions as to how they managed to attain higher education and how do they explain their success. A list of questions was prepared beforehand and depending upon the response to one question, the next question was asked.

The data obtained from the in-depth interview was analysed to arrive at the factors that contributed to the respondents attaining higher education.

Data Analysis

All five female respondents attributed their success to parental support and four of them said that their father's motivation and inspiration was instrumental. All these female respondents also reported that they were not required to perform household chores and two of them said that their father inspired them by examples of educated professionals like doctors, officers and motivated them to study. The fathers explained their own inability to study due to financial problems or other constraints and also shared their hard life experiences due to lack of education. These participants were never pressurised for early marriage by their parents while most of their classmates were married off at school levels.

One male respondent reported his elder brother as being instrumental in his success- the elder brother convinced their father to let him pursue higher education so that he would not have to face the hardships that he himself was facing. The family supported his continuing of higher education at a distant town despite discouragement of village elders.

Three male respondents primarily attributed their success to self motivation and desire to pursue higher education. Out of these, one participant pursued higher education while in active service of the Indian Navy. Two of the male participants had failed their 10+2 examination but later through self motivation attained higher education.

One respondent mentioned that his peers contributed in a major way for his success in attaining higher education. One of his classmates at school was responsible for his not dropping out from school. The first turning point identified by the respondent was

a suggestion given by the grandfather to join the nearby agriculture university. The respondent attributed the successful completion of his higher studies to the college environment and friends at college. The healthy competitive atmosphere at college and the subsidised fee structure at college also helped.

The parents of the respondent were not concerned about his studies and so did not give attention in this area. They did not oppose the respondent studying but discouraged studies by taking the position that it was better to work in own fields rather than studying and serving 'sahibs' to which the respondent responded that he would not serve 'sahibs' but become a 'sahib' by studying.

Findings

The attitude of the family towards education plays an important role in the achievements of first generation higher education students. In case of females, the broad social outlook of parents is the major factor that helps them achieve higher education. Children who are inspired at an early age develop ideas of role models which help in achieving success and self motivation was identified as a major success factor by most participants. Peers also have a role to play in certain cases. It was found that family condition was not an impediment but rather a facilitator in the stories of these first generation higher education students.

Conclusion

We can conclude from this study that the family, especially parents, self motivation and the peer group play an important role in influencing whether a person can become a first generation higher education student. This study shows that families of first-generation students were the key resource for their success.

Implications and Suggestions

Government educational policies targeted at reducing inequality and bringing education to the disadvantaged groups disregards the importance of family influence, peer group and inspiring children through role models. Appropriate changes in governmental policies e.g. getting educational counsellors to administer tests to identify interest area of school students, involving and counselling parents, getting role models to interact with and inspire children at school can go a long way in helping students to break the inter generational cycle.

Limitations

This exploratory study was conducted on a very limited scale. The study will be expanded and data analysed more systematically and rigorously. Further studies in the area can be conducted to identify more factors that lead to first generation higher education students breaking the intergenerational cycle.

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