

Hidden obstacles in education for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds

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6.2 Implications, Knowledge Valorisation, and Recommendations

We found indications for hidden barriers in math-tests for low-SES students. Applying context such as money or social interaction seems to work against low-SES students' performance. When future research would replicate these findings and show that applying this context impedes low-SES students' performance, these barriers should be addressed with policy interventions. It may be recommendable for test developers to pay attention to the risk of biasing effects from context in math tests. Omitting context such as money and social interaction from standardized math-tests may lead to a reduction of the SES-gap in math performance.

In addition, we found indications that when low-SES students display high levels of Openness, this may positively influence teachers' evaluations about their abilities, compensating for their background disadvantage. Policy implications of this study are twofold. First, when this relationship turns out to be causal, strengthening beneficial personality traits during childhood, in particular Openness, may help to elevate teachers' expectations toward low-SES students, perhaps reducing the gap in educational achievement between low- and high-SES students. Second, although speculative, these results may imply that Openness especially influences teachers' evaluations, rather than students' objective performance. Therefore, it may be recommendable to investigate more thoroughly how both SES and personality play a role in the formation of teachers' expectations.

This dissertation also suggests barriers for low-SES students in higher education. The finding that students from low-SES backgrounds who enter highly selective institutions in higher education experience a mismatch with the social environment, rather than with academic matters, may have implications for policy in higher education institutions. Policy interventions aimed at preventing dropout and promoting equal opportunities for low-SES students in highly selective institutions, could focus on these experiences of mismatch with the social environment. It is recommendable to consider whether highly selective institutions can do more to reduce these barriers for low-SES students. In addition, whereas undermatching is generally considered as undesirable because of the long-term consequences for job status and salary, this thesis shows both beneficial and unbeneficial

consequences of undermatching during students' time in higher education. Undermatching may contribute to the social integration of low-SES students in higher education during their first year in higher education. A better social integration may in turn reduce the risk on college dropout in their early years in college. However, whereas undermatching seems to promote well-being with the social environment during their first year in higher education, on the longer term, undermatched students become less satisfied with both the academic and social environment than matched students. Therefore, counselors that advise and help students during the transition from secondary to tertiary education should be aware that undermatching might not help low-SES students on the longer term. Therefore, during the transition into higher education, a careful tradeoff has to be made between the advantages of undermatching (better integration during their first year in college and reduced risk of drop-out in the early phase of higher education) and the advantages of matching (more satisfaction and better academic match on the longer term).