Fostering agency and inclusion in schools through recognition and reflection: evidence from India[1]

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Adolescent mental health and social exclusion pose persistent challenges for human capital formation, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. While schools play a central role in shaping adolescents' beliefs, behaviours, and aspirations, many education interventions focus narrowly on academic inputs or material incentives. These often overlook the role of identity and recognition, social inclusion, and institutional climate. This paper studies whether a low-cost, non-monetary (reputation-based) incentive combining public recognition with structured collective reflection can improve students' psycho-social outcomes, perceptions of school climate and academic performance.

I evaluate a school-level intervention using a randomized controlled trial conducted in 71 government secondary schools in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Schools were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. The intervention consists of two components: (i) public recognition of teachers, principals, and schools through certificates and visible acknowledgment, intended to activate reputational and intrinsic motivation; and (ii) structured student–teacher and principal–student–teacher councils that facilitate guided reflection and discourses on classroom climate, mutual respect, empathy and shared expectations. The intervention is delivered over two days and targets collective norms and perceptions rather than individual traits or incentives.

I collect baseline and follow-up data on students in Grades 8 and 9 (average age of 15 years) between 2024 and 2026. Primary outcomes capture students' internal states and perceptions, including hope, feeling of belonging, reflective capacity, and perceived stress. Secondary outcomes include pro-social attitudes, classroom engagement, and academic indicators. Besides standardised instruments and Likert scales, I include vignettes and also quantify children's self-portraits. I estimate intention-to-treat effects using ANCOVA and OLS specifications to detect the impact of the intervention after 3 months, with standard errors clustered at the school level. Moreover, I run multiple pre-registered robustness checks.

The results indicate statistically significant improvements in several (pre-registered) psychological outcomes related to agency and mental well-being. Treated students exhibit higher levels of hope, alongside gains in reflective capacity, and report lower perceived stress. Behavioural and classroom-related outcomes move in the similar direction. I observe meaningful and significant improvements in the feeling of belonging in school and classroom interactions. Early academic outcomes show smaller but statistically significant short-run improvements after 6 months in Mathematics. I also document heterogeneity in treatment effects. Improvements in psychosocial outcomes are larger among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including first-generation learners and students with lower parental education. I do not observe strong heterogeneity by age or gender.

Overall, the findings provide causal evidence that symbolic recognition combined with collective reflection can meaningfully affect students' psychological and behavioural outcomes. The intervention is low-cost, scalable, and embedded within existing school structures, highlighting institutional recognition and school climate as underutilized policy levers in resource-constrained public school systems.

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