

# Educational Inequality: Meritocracy trap in the 21st century

Yunjie Xiong \*

Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

\*Corresponding author: hc11191@um.edu.mo

**Abstract.** In the past few decades, social scientists have paid more and more attention to the relationship between the accomplishments and advantages people gain from the education system and socio-economic inequality. However, few studies try to explore that in real practice, when people acquiesce to the rules of meritocracy, they will still respect the left behind and discuss these inequalities. Neglecting the significant influence of outside factors and placing the blame on people's hearts can result in a variety of harms to a person's physical and mental development, including symbolic violence and loss of concern. In this paper, the origin and market basis of performance excellence will be discussed, which makes performance the standard on which people live. When meritocracy claims to provide equal opportunity, family-based inequality issues still come into play. Reviewing the inequality of social and economic status helps to clarify the human capital, cultural capital and other factors in the growth process. Mirroring the literature, several solutions include improving the evaluation strategy or coming up with a fresh approach to achieving growth-oriented education.

**Keywords:** Educational inequality; meritocracy; elites; social economic status; schooling; cultural capital; human capital.

## 1. Introduction

The merit doctrine attributes individual achievements in school to individual efforts. The merit selection standard of performance-oriented schools boasts equal opportunities because it is a social standard with more class mobility space than just looking at birth status. However, relevant measurements show that the family background of a person's origin, including the role of structure and the role of experience, continues to affect people's educational returns. Therefore, if people believe in the narrative of meritocracy and simply appreciate the efforts of individuals or blame individuals for not working hard enough, people will rationalize educational inequality, cover up problems and damage the practice of educational equality.

In the short term, people may not be able to abandon the merit selection criteria of meritocracy. Meritocracy still has practical significance. However, by discussing the factors that affect equality, builders can help improve school education, minimize the impact of family background factors on performance, and establish a more relevant social culture. There should be attention to the fate of the unfortunate, to reshape reality, and to bring the self-esteem, self-confidence and autonomy of choice of young people in their growth.

The demonstration of merit doctrine will be carried out from two aspects: its realistic soil and existing problems. Performance excellence advocates equal opportunities. The market relies on the operation of performance and tends to make decisions quickly, while individuals default to the rules of the game. After analyzing the social status quo based on merit, the literature review on the impact of socio-economic status in the field of education will be carried out. Social family status directly shapes people's resources and status in the education system. At the same time, more profoundly, the individual's experience of growing up in the family shows significant class characteristics. Moreover, personal habits and characteristics are more difficult to change. These external masters, independent of personal efforts, also prove the wrong point of merit doctrine. More constructive methods are still being measured and studied and are still being practised by politicians. Through strict discussion, it is expected to explore a more vigorous value advocacy and a structural solution to the problem. How to optimize meritocracy and serve social equality based on it will become the core of future research.

## 2. Why Meritocracy: the Choice of Modern Society

The belief in meritocratic as an ideology is the belief that, in a given system, success is an indicator of personal deservingness—namely, that the system rewards individual ability and efforts [1]. The idea, with the characteristics that associate internal with external greatness, is often linked with elitism and thus contests mobility.

Researchers have argued that faith in school meritocracy (BSM) is a system-justifying belief, and consequently, people may be particularly inclined to support this faith, especially when merit is the only possible path to success and upward mobility. For students who regard themselves as having low social and economic status (SES), threatening selection information increases their insistence on BSM. From different degrees, for those high-status students, when they read that the university policy goal is to achieve success for all students without opportunity exception, they seemed to stand up for BSM to a greater extent. In practice, the ideology of elitism leads to the fact that members of both groups with low and high status believe that their status in the hierarchy is fair and legitimate.

Compared with children who give explanations of the environment or facts (such as tendency or family background), teachers' pay more attention to children who explain their problems or behaviors with internal explanations (such as their efforts) [1]. From the perspective of promoting social equity, meritocracy is less decisive than traditional family decisions. Because individuals have the opportunity to rise on equality (at least the surface of it), intrinsic and relying on personal efforts, the rule makers and those who abide by it acquiesce that the rule creates an equal opportunity. At least within the scope of intuition, appointing people on their merits is a good way to replace the standard of family backgrounds, economic strengths, race and other selection criteria in human conception.

People in society normally tend to judge those innate factors as fixed unfairness, while for outcomes by reason of acquired variables, there might be more sentences for "opportunity equality".

The foundation of meritocracy in the modern economic society, sprouting in the production market, can be seen as what forms itself to be stable in schools.

Abundant empirical studies have shown the impact of education on labor market outcomes. People with higher education certificates or a better horizontal scale of education gain higher income in the professional market. However, the question comes to -- why does education expand people's income? Traditional explanation argues that education enhances graduates' cognitive skills and thus their main competitiveness of productivity in the market. The statement, mostly named human capital theory, hastened another theory of the opposites. The counter side, signaling theory, believes that postsecondary education would not bring about actual job-relevant knowledge, but the credentials offer observable characteristics of innate IQ. At least, the common point of these two theories is that people in the market believe that education can really represent some good things, and "the good" concerning ability will bring productivity in the name of profits [2]. By contrast, Credentialism and cultural matching offers a new dimension of psychological effect inside human nature and movement, which is that employment is often driven by selection on cultural capital rather than technical proficiency and that is used for exclusionary purposes rather than to increase productivity. People, or the committee of a company, tend to seek out commonalities in knowledge, experience, and status, enabling educational credentials to be seen as meaningful cultural capital, status, and social background [3].

The proofs altogether show that the performance of the market in the stratification of schools is used to judge what people can do for them and is used as the criteria for selecting people (including consideration of realistic economic and social benefits or just driven by cultural intuition). The modern market is hanging on the operation of meritocracy.

By asking the question of whether what one does can determine one's destiny, the philosopher answered "yes" from the simple moral intuition of human beings (the way people are more inclined to believe). China has had the theory of "retribution" since ancient times, trusting that a supernatural force in the nether world will reward people for their good deeds and punish them for their evil deeds in a reasonable way. There is also a saying in the Bible that "everything has a cause". Good weather and good harvest are rewards for good deeds, while drought and plague are God's punishments for

evil human deeds. Sandel believes that this moral intuition is the origin of the supremacy of excellence, which reflects the belief that virtue brings success, and vice, will lead to suffering, and this belief is not far from the contemporary values maintaining that wealth indicates talent and hard work, and poverty represents defect and laziness.

However, people gradually figure out that a person's achievements are also determined by birth, family background, race and many other factors, which still count continuously to hurt education equality. When meritocracy is being developed, the factors that people with the idea have been trying to exclude still exist and would play the role of invisible shaping. On the one hand, based on the simple fairness intuition of humankind, the trust in meritocracy is rationalizing inequality. On the other hand, the consequence of rationalization is that people may turn a blind eye to the inequality factors that are still playing a role, thus blocking the practice of educational equality today. Furthermore, if it is reasonable that the wrong belief will hurt the strong's empathy for the weak, the weak's own self-esteem, and the virtuous circle of independent choice in the growth of people, then our social benefits will also be impaired. Therefore, it is aimed that the unequal factors should be measured within the trap of meritocracy.

### 3. SES-Characterised Institution

The institutional effect of education as a legitimation system aims to probe the function of allocation of education and selection. It is observed that particular schools often make little difference [4]. The horizontal dimension of stratification is more notably derived from the choices of the field of study among individuals and participation in knowledge and expectations, but not school as a socializer [5]. By means of the structure, the research on the effect of IQ and genes on people's educational output shows that the difference in IQ cannot explain the historical mode of intergenerational transmission of economic and educational inequality. Inequality under capitalism is not a result fundamentally from individual defects but of the structure of production and property relations. This is not only the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status explained by the reproduction theory but also the reproduction function of education far exceeds the symbolic legitimacy [6]. Thus, on a macrosystem scale, education is more like a system of allocation, legitimating the chartered adoption of different positions, where growers-up tend to adopt a due position and expectation according to their educational statuses.

In the model, the maximally maintained inequality (MMI) suggests that in a society where the quota and access of people assigned to enter university are limited, only when the rich get all they want about the educational position can the poor have an approach to these places and opportunities for admission. Along with the effectively maintained inequality (EMI) explains that even though everyone can attend college, high SES families will ensure their children go into elite universities. Moreover, even if everybody could be admitted to elite universities, the rich should also ensure that their children have better majors and higher social and economic status. Since the ideology of technocratic meritocracy gradually destroys the open form of discrimination, which divides the labor force into different parts of race, gender, and ethnicity. In pace with these forms of discrimination becoming increasingly irrational, the reasons for inequality must increasingly rely on educational inequality and IQ [6]. Meritocracy, as a legitimate status, is a discrimination deeply rooted in human hearts.

From a micro perspective, the education system can indeed implement some practical measures to promote education equality. However, in this dynamic comparison of fairness, the existence of family factors cannot be ruled out. Research clarifying how schooling affects inequality with the comparison of family environment found that inequality in cognitive skills mostly arises when it is not in the semester. In the matter of socio-economic status, the main sort of inequality rests with students' different non-school conditions, functionalized from family and neighborhood experiences [7]. The equalizing effect of schools may be the consequence of teachers' efforts to achieve more children in the class meeting the minimum skill ability rather than urging those with high-level skills. The latter

is the logic of family education -- seeking the optimal solution that an individual can reach with different equipment and acceleration. The vision of the future is to provide learners with a more harmonious atmosphere through equal curriculum and equal manners of teachers to alleviate injustice rooted in family differences.

The debate on equality reform in schools is a debate with defects. Studies have shown that the failure of egalitarian school reform reflects the fact that inequality under capitalism is not rooted in personal defects but in the structure of production and property relations. The unequal social status of education cannot be eradicated. It may still be a mystery about the role of school in changing cognitive ability and even in the system of reproduction.

#### **4. SES Control over the Experience**

The belief in cultural capital and human capital provides such an explanation: the ability and thinking developed by youngsters in the family environment is the decisive factor leading to their success in schools; specifically, cultural capital fostering skills in children. For those economically prosperous families, parents have more resources and can gather more knowledge. Through extensive reading, these children improve their knowledge and vocabulary and enhance their verbal proficiency. More exposure to music and art means improving analytical ability. Abundant extracurricular activities exercise children's intellectual creativity, comprehension, communication, and social skills. It is believed that cultural capital can help to improve cognitive and non-cognitive abilities.

In the comparison between the middle class and the lower class, it is found that there are differences between the two training modes of concerted cultivation and natural growth. Middle-class parents raise their children together through efforts to cultivate their children's talents through organized leisure activities and extensive reasoning. Whereas working-class and poor parents engage in natural growth and provide conditions for children's growth but leave relaxation to the children themselves. These parents also use instructions as opposed to reasoning. Middle-class children, whether white or black, could obtain a new sense of entitlement from their growing environment [8]. Whether talking with parents or interacting with other adults sprung from their parents' resources, they constantly communicate, negotiate and cooperate. This empowerment has greatly increased the ability of middle-class children to educate themselves. The personal growth of middle-class children has accumulated to form important advantages because the working class and poor children do not show the same sense of rights or advantages. Their parents lack resources, flexible work schedules, and poor demonstration of language and habitus. It is observed that middle and lower-class children who grew up in the environment of watching TV and playing by themselves day after day will feel much pressure and discomfort in a one-on-one conversation with a professor who symbolizes authority. In addition, the intergenerational closure mode of social capital could also keep middle-class parents having a close eye and information on their children, which is a collective and qualified action but not an individual or aimless one. Middle-class parents exchange information with each other and fight for rights and interests in schools. Because minors are not always on the right track spontaneously, such assistance will also become significant.

In the shadow of human capital, students with better quality, such as hardworking students, can persevere in their pursuit of academic success, while students lacking thinking ability and precious quality would fall behind and even be eliminated. In school education, the rich get richer, and the poor become poorer. Therefore, the accumulation of advantages is a common model, and less ideal skills and habits will lead to a greater gap in performance at a higher stage, which in turn will have a huge impact on future education, employment, and income [9]. Similarly, the employment market adopts the same logic. Employers expect students to have the necessary cognitive skills, as well as work habits, that promote efficient personal operation. Within the limited information, employers speculate that students with better grades have better human capital, whether gifted or acquired [5]. The students who are trained by elite families to meet the requirements successfully enter higher education and achieve success in life.

## 5. Evaluation: is the Picture Flat?

All our previous assertions are based on a consensus that exam results and post-graduation income represent some good things and have become fixed standards for measurement and evaluation. However, the question is: is it possible that it is unfair in itself? Standardized test results often fail to reflect students' true level of preparation for college entrance. Compared with a single record, such as a college entrance examination, high school grades can better measure students' academic level [10]. It can be seen that sometimes what is chosen to examine one's success plays a role. A single standard is not enough to comprehensively measure human capabilities and values. With the same logic, people more often find that society does not respect vocational education and skilled workers enough, and there is a lack of moral and quality indicators in visual evaluation. The former represents that the existing evaluation system is not diversified enough, while the latter represents the lack of an important link. These vital parts of life may make significant contributions to education equity. The poor do not lack the ability of blue-collar but also can develop their own special qualities.

There is an updated selection system named the top 10% solution, which is used to measure the diligence and effort in non-cognitive ability, regardless of the absolute level of performance. The top 10% of students in each high school would have the opportunity to enter elite universities, both in elite high schools and normal high schools. The action would indeed improve the diversity of learners' backgrounds at the same time, even though this rule will cause some winners to lose opportunities. The power class may say the best position is what they deserve with their strength. The tension based on achievement confrontation still exists.

At present, an optimization direction that is considerable but needs social resources and awareness is to respect the special talents of each individual so as to avoid the elite system and its education based on serving the people who created it. Starting with resource inequalities, especially those related to social class, schools can abandon rigid grouping policies and make them improved to include a wide range of human intelligence. Regarding respect for recognition, what is called for is a more inclusive process that respects differences, not only in the organizational culture of the school but also in the curriculum, pedagogy, as well as assessment systems. For power inequality, promote equality of love, care and solidarity in the teacher-student relationship and in the democratizing part of the organization of schools and universities. Schools need to pay attention to moral education and cultivate the teaching and learning of emotions. Schools should provide a space for students and teachers to talk, accommodate their feelings and concerns, and design educational experiences that allow students to develop their emotional skills or personal intelligence as a separate domain to develop human capabilities [11].

More research indicates that the evaluation system should minimize the influence of family background elements on individual accomplishments, but the appropriate rapid implementation strategies may be only to appeal to and advocate. Appeal to the value of positive personality traits from the market's selection criteria or from the school encourage the populace to rebuild their confidence. Exploration of the institutional structural approach is ongoing. Altering the selection criteria for academic performance in schools is a significant undertaking. People are still waiting for visionary practice in conflict with the current meritocracy.

## 6. Conclusion

Through measurement, it is obvious that in schools, structural achievements are determined by family capital, and in families, cultural capital and habits are affected by the class experience. Some directly affect cognitive ability, and some only reflect the status in the structure. Believing in the narrative of meritocracy means ignoring these external functions, attributing all achievements to personal efforts, and fixing unreasonable performance measurement standards, resulting in symbolic violence. Younger people can always think that only students with good grades are good students. If a person's performance is not good, it is entirely self-inflicted. It goes reasonably that men are less

likely to worry about the destiny of individuals who are less fortunate around the more the public believes that people are self-made and self-sufficient.

The relevant debate firmly believes that performance appraisal standards cannot be replaced, just as capitalism and the market cannot be replaced. Therefore, what people can do is constantly optimize rather than fundamentally overthrow meritocracy. In order to alleviate the pressure brought by educational inequality, it is imperative to call for the reduction of symbolic violence advocated by social culture. At the same time, people must improve the curriculum and evaluation standards in schools, make them more diversified, and eliminate prejudice in non-cognitive skills.

## References

- [1] Warikoo NK, Fuhr C. Legitimizing Status: Perceptions of Meritocracy and Inequality among Undergraduates at an Elite British University. *British Education Research Journal*, 2014(4): 699-717.
- [2] Bills D. Credentials, Signals, and Screens: Explaining the Relationship between Schooling and Job Assignment. *Review of Educational Research*, 2003(73(4)):441-449.
- [3] Rivera LA. Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms. *American Sociological Review*, 2012(77(6)):999-1022.
- [4] Meyer JW. The Effects of Education as an Institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1977(83):55-77.
- [5] Gerber TP, Cheung S Y. Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2008(34):299-318.
- [6] Bowles S, Gintis H. *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Haymarket Books, 2011.
- [7] Downey DB, Hippel P T V, Broh B A. Are Schools the Great Equalizer? Cognitive Inequality during the Summer Months and the School Year. *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, 2004(69):613-635.
- [8] Lareau A. *Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families*. *American Sociological Review*, 2002(67):747-776.
- [9] Farkas G. Cognitive Skills and Non-cognitive Traits and Behaviors in Stratification Processes. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2003(29):541-562.
- [10] Soares JA. For Tests that are Predictively Powerful and Without Social Prejudice. *RESEARCH & PRACTICE IN ASSESSMENT*, 2011(7):2012.
- [11] Lynch K, Baker J. Equality in education: An equality of condition perspective. *Theory and Research in Education*, 2005(3).