

Elite Formation in the Educational System: Between Meritocracy and Cumulative Advantage

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INTRODUCTION: THE MERITOCRATIC THEORY OF ELITE FORMATION

In modern, democratic societies, elite formation can only be legitimised through recourse to a meritocratic discourse. The internalisation of elite formation does not change this precondition of the acceptance of elites in society. From this viewpoint, access to an elite education in national and international terms should be open to everyone irrespective of their social origin and it should be organised in such a way that everyone has the opportunity to achieve at school, higher education and within his or her occupational career. This contribution offers a critical analysis of the meritocratic narrative so prevalent today, from a conflict-theoretical perspective (Young 1958; McNamee and Miller 2004; Kreckel 2004). A conflict-theoretical viewpoint argues that educational achievement of students and competition between schools are driven by strategies of

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status reproduction within and between the more highly resourced classes, a process leading to the stratification of schools.

Within a competitive educational environment, schools are under continual pressure to achieve measurable annual progress for their students, which further exacerbates the stratificatory effects within an educational system. Usually, those institutions that come out “on top” are schools that are able to recruit the “best” students on the basis of a school’s existing competitive advantages (evidenced in the physical resources—classrooms, sporting grounds, laboratories—but also teachers recruited, student demography, links to other schools and alumni networks). Existing advantages such as these are converted into further advantages in a cumulative manner. Hence, if the aim to improve the overall educational outcomes of a population is pursued through the introduction of competitive mechanisms, a conflict-theoretical perspective would suggest that such systems cannot be understood to be meritocratic in the true sense.

This contribution will examine this theoretical position more closely, and the evidence supporting it, through a focus on how the narrative of competition is being fuelled at a global level. In particular, it will consider the increased attention paid to international comparative performance assessments, and especially the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), organised and administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) every three years since 2000. Against this backdrop, the basic features of the narrative of competition as a tool for raising educational achievements are considered compatible with establishing a meritocratic approach to education worldwide. I take the USA as a case study, where the utmost significance is ascribed to the competition narrative. Based on this case study, I highlight how competition within education does not foster meritocracy, and that taking an international and global perspective on education obfuscates the continuing dominance of leading American and English elite universities in educating and facilitating the paths of those who will become the next generation of the global elite.

PISA AS REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HEGEMONIC COMPETITION PARADIGM

PISA has made international competition an inevitable reality in the field of education (Grek 2009). According to the OECD, knowledge and competences are the crucial factors of growth in the knowledge-based

economy (OECD 1996, 1999). One PISA study even predicts the percentage of economic growth possible following a proportionate improvement of PISA test results (OECD 2010). Critically, proponents of PISA argue that through international league tables, and the competition this generates, this will directly drive a rise in test results. Thus PISA is an example of an instrument which drives what has become a hegemonic discourse advancing competition as the overriding solution to problems of perceived low educational “quality” or “standards”. I would suggest that the assumption that one approach alone might solve such an entrenched issue is rather unrealistic. However, because within the international field of education the OECD educational directorate possesses a monopoly position with regard to the definition of education and its role in managing education governance (Sellar and Lingard 2013) at an international level, it is relatively easy for the OECD to obfuscate the ways in which this approach may be skewing the promotion of educational opportunities for all.

To help consider this issue further, I draw on theories which use economics as a core concern within the field of social sciences. In particular, New Public Management (NPM) is a framework which explains the approach taken by the OECD, as founded on theories of public choice and agency. public choice theory changes public matters or “public goods” into the articulation and meeting of individual preferences. From this viewpoint, “education” is not a public good whose meaning should be decided upon through the public formation of opinion and whose quality the state must act as a guarantor for. Instead, education is considered a private good that can be shaped in different ways depending on consumer preferences. From this viewpoint, the best possible education will be provided in an educational market where public and private suppliers compete with each other for consumer preferences. Economics’ globally dominating hegemonic position as a discipline and prism through which to understand the world also fuels the competition paradigm we find within the field of education, and has had the effect of ensuring that different national traditions of public education have lost their legitimacy to a large extent.

A second theoretical foundation that helps to make sense of the competition paradigm found within education is agency theory (Eisenhardt 1989). This theory envisions the relationships between clients and contractors as a relationship between a principal and an agent. It is characterised by an “information asymmetry” in that the principal depends on the agent’s largely independent activity, but cannot immediately monitor the latter’s actions. Actors can be principals and agents at the same time.

In the educational system, the education lead for a local/national area is the agent of the local government but also the principal of the school and its management team. Meanwhile the school principal/management team is the agent of the education lead for the national/local area and the principal of the teachers within that particular school. To remedy the information asymmetry between principals and agents, we find, on the one hand, competition between agents for achievement and, on the other hand, the measurement of their performance. In the educational system, this applies particularly to the competition between schools and the measurement of their achievements by regular performance tests. Both public choice and agency theory can be found within NPM ideas. In the wake of NPM's global diffusion (Hood 1991), competition and efficiency controls by performance tests play an ever more crucial role for education, too.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE COMPETITION PARADIGM: SOLVING PROBLEMS BY COMPETITION

For the protagonists of NPM, competition in education means a learning process that leads to improved performance across the system. From their perspective, more competition results in better schools, better schools produce better students, and better students go on to take on better employment; this in turn raises incomes, which then increase an economy's affluence. Such is the narrative of the competition paradigm. In terms of the OECD agenda, economic growth in the knowledge society very much depends on the mobilisation of cognitive competences both at the top and among the broader masses (OECD 2010). McKinsey's "global war for talents" and George W. Bush's programme "No Child Left Behind", which was established in the USA in 2002, speak to this agenda.

But how can competition be introduced into a public/state-funded school system? In the framework of the competition paradigm the following measures are aimed at guaranteeing this:

- Autonomy: more power of decision-making and responsibility on the part of the school management
- Free choice of schools
- Regular central performance tests
- Publication of the test results in rankings to inform the parents with regard to their choice of schools
- Allocation of resources and reputation according to test achievements

A meritocratic interpretation of the introduction of such system changes might be the following: schools producing better achievements are rewarded with money and rank; more highly ranked schools can make higher performance demands on their students and attract better-performing students and those ready to perform; better-performing students attend better schools where they are offered greater challenges and more support; better schools and better students serve as models for the previously weaker schools and students. The competition supplies stimuli (resources and prestige) for the weaker schools and students to improve their performance. As a result, all schools and all students improve. The top has to improve to stay at the top, the midrange wants to approach the top, and the schools and students on the lower ranks strive to reach the midrange level. The end result is that all move to a higher floor, meaning all are better off.

The theoretical background justifying the ranking of schools and people according to performance levels is the functionalist stratification theory of Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, found in an essay they published in 1945 (Davis and Moore 1945). The theory's hypothesis is that for a society to achieve its goals certain tasks and jobs are necessary. Stimuli and rewards must be provided to motivate people undertake the required tasks and to have acquired the necessary competences to do so, through education and further training.

From this viewpoint, elite schools are functionally necessary to prepare students for leading positions. Nevertheless, elite schools must be open to all high-enough performing and eager students if meritocratic ideals are being pursued. This is required, first of all, to ensure an "elite selection" and, secondly, to offer equal opportunities for all. "Elite selection" and "equal opportunity" are two sides of the same coin. They are the two legitimating principles of meritocracy. To comply with both principles, special efforts are needed to make access to the best schools as independent as possible from a student's social origin (family). All efforts of competition-based educational policy as evidenced in the USA are geared towards providing stimuli to raise performance and motivating all students, but also towards reducing the effect of social origin on attainment. It is schools that are expected to support initiatives aimed at promoting social mobility. From the perspective of the competition paradigm, competition is understood as the most effective tool for enhancing the outcomes of weaker students from less-privileged families, who are not inherently advantaged by their families' resources.

The politically endorsed mechanism for improving students' performances through competition in the USA has been the generous licensing

of so-called charter schools (Lubiensky and Weitzel 2010). These are privately managed schools with public funding that are, however, not subject to the same regulations as publicly managed schools. To justify their greater autonomy, charter schools are arguably more invested than regular public schools to prove their “quality” in terms of student performance. The idea behind charter schools is that they can identify what is needed and most relevant for improving student performance.

Ray Buddle, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, was the first to promote this idea in 1974. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, called for the establishment of charter schools for reforming public schools in 1988. The first state to pass a charter school law was Minnesota in 1991. In 2015 this had risen to 42 states. The number of charter schools in a school district is limited, meaning that public schools still constitute the main type of provision. However, across the USA, the number of charter schools has grown steadily, particularly since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. More than 400 new schools opened in 2015, for instance, though another 270 were shut down. Overall, there are currently approximately 6800 charter schools serving about 3 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2015).

To incite competition, a central purpose of the charter school movement, school management are given greater decision-making power. Annual tests in English and Maths assess the students’ performance level, which are then published in a league table, which is aimed at informing parents’ decisions around schooling for their children. Performance tests are meant to mirror the annual progress of the students’ performances according to the Value Added Measure (VAM) that lead to bonus payments for both school management and teachers. School management and teachers who are unable to demonstrate success in the form of expected levels of performance can be dismissed and replaced. In line with the disciplines of the market, schools can be quickly opened and closed. Large schools are subdivided into several smaller schools. Parents and students frequently do not know whether their school, school management or teachers will still be there at all in the coming term. A driving force behind the embedding of these market dynamics within the school system are wealthy foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which supports this policy through its advocacy work and philanthropic activity (Kovacs 2011).

According to the rationale of the competition paradigm weak schools are placed under competitive pressure to ensure that their weak students achieve at least average levels of attainment. The incentives here are rewards for the school management and the teachers for improving the students' achievements in performance tests and punishments for those who do not, potentially leading to their dismissal. In the meritocratic narrative, all this is justified in the name of equal opportunities and promoting economic growth in society.

What achievements can such an articulation of meritocratic policy in education demonstrate, if any? We turn to this question next by assessing the research evidence, using the USA as our case study.

THE REALITY OF COMPETITION IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: EVIDENCE FROM THE USA

Following the publication by the Reagan administration of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), concerted efforts were made by successive governments to bring about substantive improvements to the American education system. Based on the principles of competition, reform efforts have included George W. Bush's 2002 initiative "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), as well as Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" programme. VAM is the central feature of both programmes. VAM exerts substantial pressure on the teachers in disadvantaged school districts to achieve improved results for their students. Given this pressure, there is some evidence that schools resort to practices such as exempting the weakest students from tests or even falsifying test results, illustrating the strategies engaged with by actors to survive in the competition-driven education context.

The Atlanta Public School Scandal highlights the lengths to which institutions can go in order to successfully navigate the demands of such a regime of governance. In 2011, surveys revealed that the annual progress attained, as reported, in 44 schools in black neighbourhoods in Atlanta appeared to be falsified. A total of 178 people—principals and teachers—were identified who were proven to be involved in the manipulation of results. In April 2015, three of the persons accused were sentenced to serve seven years in prison, which was reduced to three years two weeks later. Another 35 people were punished, but less severely. The district's superintendent had exerted massive pressure on the schools to comply with the NCLB programme, issuing the expectation that the disadvan-

taged black students should make annual progress to approach the average performance level of the white middle class across the country.

These developments, as found in the USA, have prompted commentators to describe them as having fallen prey to a test-industrial complex or an education-industrial complex (Picciano and Spring 2012). This in part refers to a network of powerful actors who have a strong influence over the USA's, but also global, educational policy. Diane Ravitch (2015) outlined how such a network operates. Ravitch states that some of the key nodal policy actors are: Pearson PLC, the world's largest educational company offering various educational materials and resources, including technology and tests for teachers and students; Salmon River Capital, an equity and venture capital company based in New York, which invests into the profitable business of charter schools—a growth market covering around 500 new schools every year; New Leaders, national non-profit organisations that develop “effective” management models for school management; New Classrooms, non-profit organisations offering teaching technologies for personalised learning; and Common Core State Standards, a national initiative for the development of educational standards in which the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers are involved. Crucial advocates and sponsors in this policy network include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation (Walmart), and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation (finance, real estate, insurance).

Besides allowing certain business enterprises to flourish, such competition-oriented measures are often not supported by the research evidence. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 2016), a long-term assessment in reading and mathematics, conducted regularly since 1971, shows only minor progress between 1971 and 2012.

The scores of high school graduates on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) have decreased from 507 to 496 in the period between 1986 and 2012 (SAT 2016). Furthermore, falling average performance was recorded in the PISA test in reading competence in the period from 2000 to 2012, with a small improvement for those students at the lower end of the scale but a decline of performance at all levels above.

As we see in Fig. 3.1, the USA shows average performance in reading competences compared to other countries, with weaker performance in 2012 compared to 2000, while Poland and Germany have demonstrated improved performance in the same period without putting so much emphasis on competition between schools. Interestingly, Sweden has

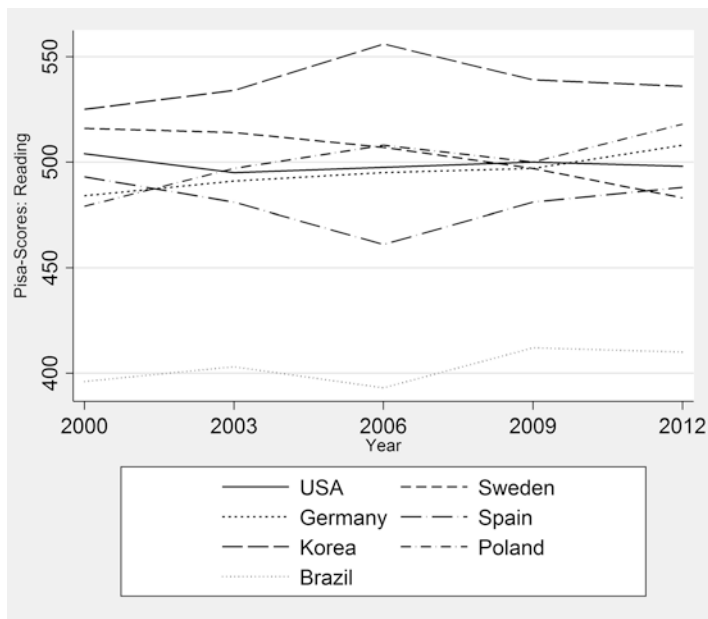


Fig. 3.1 PISA Score Reading 2000–2012

experienced a substantial decline in PISA reading scores since introducing choice and competition in its education system (Fig. 3.1).

Cognitive competences are arguably overvalued in such performance measures, as PISA represents, at the expense of social competences, although research suggests that social competences are far more important for professional success (e.g., Heckmann et al. 2006). At the same time, it is suggested that the dominance of mass and standardised testing regimes in education leads to questionable but perhaps inevitable school level practices such as teaching to the test. Moreover, Jones (2015) argues that the emphasis on standardised tests in schools consumes a disproportionate amount of time over the course of the school year, to the detriment of providing a broader educational experience for students. This also has implications for teachers, with some suggesting that they are increasingly de-professionalised as their work and expertise is oriented towards facilitating acquisition of approved knowledge. Teachers and schools are made responsible (or accountable) for raising standards by ensuring that

students achieve or exceed their expected levels of achievement, while the social, cultural and economic factors affecting this are sidelined. Ravitch (2010) argues that “[t]he best predictor of low academic performance is poverty—not bad teachers”, and, with regard to VAM, The American Statistical Association points out that:

teachers account for about 1—14% of the variability in test scores, and that the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in the system level conditions. Ranking teachers by their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality. (ASA 2014: 2)

Furthermore, Lubienski and Lubienski (2014) conclude:

In fact ... education may be unique in that it embodies essential elements that resist the easy application of simple structural remedies from the private sector, and it may corrupt the competitive incentives thought to promote improvements in schools. Indeed, despite the bipartisan popularity of choice and charter schools with policymakers, it appears that the major reform movements promised on the assumption of school sector remedies may be misguided. (Lubienski and Lubienski 2014: XVIII; Lubienski 2005, 2007; Lubienski et al. 2009; Lubienski and Weitzel 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández and Garlen-Maudlin 2015)

THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE: STRATIFICATION AND CLOSURE OF CHANCES BY COMPETITION

Melvin M. Tumin (1953) formulated the classic criticism of the functionalist theory of stratification. He argued that the higher social classes determine the goals to be pursued by a society. They also have privileged access to the acquisition of competences for better-paid jobs. Their efforts to secure the acquisition of approved and valuable competences—knowledge and skills—for their children make it more difficult for those less-privileged groups to gain access to the acquisition of such competences. Inclusion policies introduced by the state and nominally designed to guarantee equal opportunities are undermined by the higher classes’ capacity to secure advantages for their children (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015).

The “Matthew effect” identified by Robert K. Merton (1968a) is an apposite concept for making sense of the continued dominance of the most privileged groups in the education game. This refers to the idea that advantages are transformed into further advantages through an

accumulation process. In the context of the increasing use of national and global testing regimes, which produce rankings, these should theoretically remove any “information asymmetry” (as coined by economists) among families when making choices about education. However, although information about a school’s performance is widely available if you know where and have an inclination to look for it, not everybody has the same capacity to use such information to their advantage. For instance, even with informed knowledge of schools’ relative positions in the quasi-market, some parents still experience economic, social and cultural barriers to realising their choice.

Furthermore, the latent function and effect of rankings are characterised by a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby approved knowledge of the status of an institution contributes to the maintaining of its status (Merton 1949/1968b). Parents in turn compete to get their own children admitted to high-performing schools, who are therefore more likely to gain additional funding for most “value-added” to their students’ performance, which secures the necessary finances, reputation of the institution, the ability to attract the best teachers and so forth. All this, in turn, is likely to further improve student performance. Hence, the Matthew effect is apparent in the ways in which existing advantages are transferred into further advantages. Such an analysis supports Bourdieu’s (1996: 285–299) findings of social reproduction within the French education system.

Perhaps most powerful in justifying the continued social reproduction of advantage through a discourse promoting competition within the education market, is the emphasis within these policies that they seek to improve educational standards, and especially the educational performance of disadvantaged children. Clearly, the US education policy “No Child Left Behind” rhetorically focused on the inclusion of the most disadvantaged children legitimises continued and growing inequalities with regard to educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The meritocratic narrative that underpins today’s focus on competition within education—“more competition → better schools → better students → more welfare for all”, based on the evidence presented in this chapter, has failed to meet its stated goals. Taking a conflict-theoretical position, I would argue as follows: “More competition → higher inequality in the access to educational opportunities → earlier differentiation of

life courses → higher inequality of incomes → (leading to further) inequality in the access to educational opportunities”.

The competition paradigm assumes that for all parents it is most important to know which school can guarantee the best advancement of their children, so as to ensure their placement in the best colleges of the nation. This information is provided by rankings. These rankings do, however not simply provide information on the ranking position of a school or college. Their official information function is complemented with their unofficial function of fixing status differences in the long run and securing returns in income and status of educational investments. In this way, the state’s inclusion efforts are countered by the exclusion strategies of society’s better-off strata.

Even the most comprehensive efforts to raise equal opportunity through the education system by more competition does not appear to change anything in the discrepancy between ideology and reality of an elite formation according to meritocratic principles (as data from the USA and Sweden testify). The increasing internationalisation of education and employment feeds this competition for certain schools and universities to work towards claiming a global elite position, which make it almost impossible for national governments to influence and attempt to promote a commitment to equality. Universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Yale and others are no longer exclusively committed to the nation in which they are located, but seek to enrol the best students from everywhere in the world and contribute to the formation of a new global elite.

Because of the worldwide hegemonial position of Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Princeton, Stanford, Cambridge, Oxford, and the likes, the internationalisation of elite formation means that enrolment in these colleges is the high road to global elite positions. Typical careers of the global elite lead from these globally dominant elite colleges to Goldman Sachs and the likes, or to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and so forth. This is meritocracy as envisioned by Michael Young (1958), because the global elite can claim legitimacy of its leading role in handling world affairs according to the narrative of competition. According to this narrative, increasing international enrolment in the globally established elite colleges has freed access to elite formation from any prejudice and national privilege to select the very best in their profession.

International rankings of universities like the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) or the ranking of the Times Higher Education

Supplement (THES) are powerful forces of the internationalisation of higher education and elite formation. As explained with national rankings of schools, they provide people interested in internationally leading education institutions with information on universities which can claim to offer such an education. From the perspective of the competition paradigm this is necessary information to make the market of higher education transparent for investors in human capital. From the perspective of the conflict paradigm, international rankings turn the coexistence of universities side by side serving different national student populations into a unitarian hierarchy in terms of academic prestige. The higher the rank of a university the higher the value of its academic degrees and the higher the returns of investments in their bachelor, master or Ph.D. programmes in terms of achievement in the labour market. Rankings consolidate created hierarchies like a self-fulfilling prophecy, so that they make sure that investors in an educational programme can expect a high stability on the returns to their investments. As access to the highest ranking universities is bound to preceding achievement, which depends highly on social origin and available capital—nowadays, more than in the time of educational expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, rankings help forcefully to reward the privilege of higher social origin. In this way the idea of a global meritocracy is corrupted by the emergence of a kind of global aristocracy.

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