

Merit

The appearance of the concept of merit in relation to education is thought to have accompanied the decline of patronage in the civil service in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, eventually spreading through Western countries to create what Michael Young (1958) described as a new form of oligarchy. 'Meritocracy' would displace nepotism and the inheritance of social position more generally, and schooling would provide the technical means of producing a hierarchy of distinction based on educational achievement. Thus there are historical links between the rise of meritocratic thinking and the provision of popular schooling, as well as a conflation of merit with the requirements and outcomes of schooling. These associations between merit and formal education provision meant that educational distinction came to be understood as merit more readily than other kinds of achievement (Bourdieu 1986).

In some countries, completion of the compulsory years of schooling was recognised with the awarding of the 'Merit Certificate'. But larger numbers wanted to proceed to advanced education that promised increased merit and greater rewards, driving an expansion in secondary school provision along with attempts at educational selection to allow efficiencies in sorting those with merit. For the most part, selection regimes were underpinned by a political doctrine of 'equality of opportunity' that ratified particular conceptions of merit. Proponents of schooling for democracy argued that no reasonable complaint could be made in circumstances where educational arrangements allowed full opportunity for merit to express itself and be registered.

In England and most of the colonies, however, institutional provision ratified pre-existing assumptions about the social distribution of merit (or different kinds of merit). In England, for example, the 1895 'Bryce' Royal Commission recommended three grades of secondary school to prepare distinct groups for their life's calling. The three grades corresponded to the life trajectories of a cultured and literary class, a commercial or industrial class, and an artisan class. In Australia, many private school headmasters opposed the establishment of state secondary education on the grounds that it would soil an 'aristocracy of culture', and science began to spell out the implications of natural limits on merit, particularly as these applied to the working class and women (McCallum 1900)

Advances in the science of measurement and individual differences during the early-twentieth century shaped new ways in which merit came to be conceptualised, as well as new techniques for achieving efficiencies in educational selection. Educational psychology sought to develop tests that would measure the capacity of children to succeed in further education, leading to the recognition of merit. Whereas its origins may lie in more general notions of excellence, honour and reward – as in the Prussian Order of Merit – now merit became specifically enmeshed with ideas about the distribution of intelligence.

One of the central organising assumptions of educational theory on selection was the belief that educational resources should be allocated to those 'best fitted' to receive them. If nature had decreed that there was a certain fixed distribution of ability throughout the population, the mission of psychological testing was to uncover it. Natural ability groups would replace social groups as the repositories of merit.

But psychological theories on intelligence also provided the groundwork for the erection of a suitable institutional structure and for the interpretation of patterns of achievement resulting from the induction of the expanding school population. On this terrain, psychology was not simply an apologetic discourse for current arrangements. The science of individual differences had scope to record the appearance of merit or talent lying in any social group. Yet psychology drew on the school system itself to sustain the fiction that there was sufficient commonality of experience in schools to permit differences to be determined as pre-social or 'natural'. It should be remembered that an existing differentiated school system was in place well before its population became an object of intelligence testing.

Current moves to produce a differentiated education system in a period of mass tertiary participation owes part of its rationale to systems of power and knowledge that underpinned stratification of the secondary school system and the determination of limits on the distribution of merit in the population (Collins 1977).

See also: ability; equality of opportunity; intelligence; intelligence tests; psychology of education; selection; test/testing

Further reading

- Bourdieu, P. (1986) *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [trans. R. Nice], London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Collins, R. (1977) 'Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification'. In J. Karabel and A.H. Halsey (eds) *Power and Ideology in Education*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp.118-136.
- McCallum, D. (1990) *The Social Production of Merit*, London: Falmer.
- Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

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