# Meritocracy in Education: An Implicit Theory Perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper tries to look at the relation between intelligence and meritocracy where the concept of intelligence has legitimized the concept of meritocracy. Viewing intelligence as a stable or fixed entity, the concept of intelligence has legitimized the concept of 'meritocracy'. In the name of merit based society, a large number of intelligence tests are being developed, thus, categorizing and labeling the individuals on fixed traits. The paper tries to give a unique perspective to meritocracy which has largely stood for long on the entity theory of intelligence which says that intelligence is a fixed trait and that it cannot improve through effort. Borrowing the concept of incremental theory from the implicit theory perspective (Dweck and Leggett, 1988) which posits that intelligence is not a stable entity and can improve through effort, this paper contributes a critic to the concept of meritocracy which stands on the construct of intelligence which is superficial and still struggling to reach a consensus on its definition. The paper provides useful insights to the field of education, psychology and sociology.

*Keywords: Meritocracy, Incremental theory, Entity theory, Intelligence*

**T**raditional theories of intelligence have largely focused on what intelligence is and many theories have been developed in this regard giving different constitutions of the construct of intelligence ever since Binet's initial work (Binet, 1905) in the field of intelligence and these theories have changed over time explaining what constitutes intelligence in an individual. For instance, the 'g' factor theory (Spearman, 1927) looked at intelligence as containing two factors whereas the theory of Primary mental abilities (Thurstone, 1938) viewed intelligence as comprising of seven different abilities. The hierarchical model of intelligence proposed yet another dichotomy named Level 1 (indicating associative learning) and Level 2 (indicating cognitive competence) intelligence (Jensen, 1969). The recent theories like the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) viewed intelligence as not a single entity. Rather, it claims that there exist multiple intelligences each working independently and yet are interdependent of each other and the Triarchic model (Sternberg, 1985) explains intelligence as constituting three functions i.e. analytical, practical and experiential.

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Based on these distinct theories, innumerable number of intelligence tests have been formulated screening 'less intelligent' individuals from 'more intelligent' ones. The use of intelligence tests in schools has grown exponentially since the first scaled tests by Binet and Simon (1905) were used to classify French school children in 1905 (Chapman, 1988; Minton, 1988; OÕDonnell, 1985 cited in Richardson and Johanningmeier, 2012). However, Binet himself did not believe that his psychometric instruments could be used to measure a single, permanent and inborn level of intelligence (Kamin, 1995). Binet stressed the limitations of the test, suggesting that intelligence is far too broad a concept to quantify with a single number. Instead, he insisted that intelligence is influenced by a number of factors, changes over time and can only be compared among children with similar backgrounds (Siegler, 1992).

Ignoring the aim and purpose of the context in which the first test of intelligence was made, psychologists have been blindly developing standardized measures to assess one or the other aspect of intelligence. Currently, over 100 million standardized tests are given annually in the United States and 44% of those tests are intelligence tests (Richardson and Johanningmeier, 2012). This shows how different intelligence tests are widely used classifying young students into categories ranging from "mental retardation" to "intellectually gifted" students which has led to many negative consequences. One of these consequences is that these tests have been helpful in classifying and categorizing individuals legitimizing the existence of a meritocratic society. A meritocratic society is the one in which individuals are valued because of the traits they possess i.e if they possess the so called "*intellectual traits*", they get all the benefits which are valued by the society. The next section provides a detailed account of how one perspective of intelligence legitimizes the existence of a meritocratic society.

**Intelligence as legitimizing meritocracy**
By categorizing people on the basis of the intelligence tests into 'more intelligent' and 'less intelligent' category, intelligence tests propagate the notion meritocracy. It becomes important here to introduce the concept of meritocracy. The term "meritocracy" was first coined by Michael Young in his book "*The rise of Meritocracy*" (1958) where as a sociologist in 2034, he looks back at the meritocratic system in Great Britain sees how it grows chronically and finally how it falls. Since the book was written in the post war scenario where merit as a means of gaining social position was getting increased importance, meritocracy as a system was being viewed positively in the early 20th century where there was the dominance of positive sociology. Thus, according to this view, meritocracy by giving equal opportunity to individuals can lead to true egalitarianism in society. But these positive sociologists did not realize that Young in his book had coined the word critically. It was later in 20th and early 21st century that the sociologists were gaining deeper understanding of the critical nature of the merit based society.

Meritocracy is a system in which we base our judgments to choose and select people on the basis of their intelligence. The term "merit" is hard to define as it has had a changing connotation over

time and space. For instance Webster (1913) defined meritocracy as "a form of social system in which power goes to those with superior intellects". According to Amartya Sen meritocracy regards individuals who have certain talents as deserving of power, influence, or wealth. Others think of meritocracy as one's class status in society which is based on social achievement, not social ascription. One of the most widely used and accepted measurement of social achievement in modern societies today is educational qualifications or academic achievement. Krauze and Slomczynsky (1985) in their paper "*How far to meritocracy? Empirical test to controversial thesis*" explain that the concept of meritocracy refers to a large-scale social system in which a positive relationship exists between "merit" and such commonly desired values as income, power, and prestige. Merit is usually indicated by IQ and other tests of cognitive skills, or by educational attainment. Some writers (e.g. Bell, a; Boudon; Halsey; Thurow) explicitly define meritocracy by means of the relationship between education and special rewards-income and prestige. Others, who consider "IQ meritocracy," treat formal education as a key variable. For example, Olneck and Crouse write:

"*In the IQ meritocracy, formal education is assigned the task of sorting, selecting, and channeling individuals according to their cognitive competence. If employers in the meritocracy were interested primarily in cognitive skills, we ordinarily would expect educational attainment to affect occupational status". Since allocation criteria unrelated to formal schooling have been neglected in both theoretical and empirical work on meritocracy, we examine the consequences of using education as the sole criterion of merit-selection.*"

Green points out that the "meritocratic model is of an ordinal ranking process, in which the 'best' person (according to some single, qualifiable scale) is fitted to the 'highest' position, the next best to the next highest, and so on" Therefore, this paper argues that since meritocracy is based on the concept of intelligence and what constitutes intelligence is not universally acceptable, the criteria of merit is not stable. For instance an engineer who was an expert in earlier times may be incompetent in today's time. But broadly, social scientists have defined merit as the effort and ability of a person which can be measured by giving IQ tests.

In the education sector, Intelligence tests were created as, and are, efficient sorting mechanisms in schools that reflect dominant values and contribute to social stability by justifying unequal educational outcomes as a natural and objective process. In spite of their seemingly meritocratic potential, intelligence tests are a primary mechanism for the reproductive role of schooling in society as reinforcing class, race, and ethnic biases. Therefore, it's a high time that schools should recognize these testing tools which are stigmatizing students and labeling them (Richardson and Johanningmeier, 2011).

This stigmatization and labeling of different individuals classify people into different categories. Educators, psychologists and other social scientists considered these tests as a legitimate tool for

creating a social structure. For instance, Terman (1919) argued that intelligence tests should be administered to all children to identify innate differences among them so they could be sorted objectively into classes geared to their special needs and abilities. He recommended that schools be reformed to include five homogeneous tracks for students: "gifted", "bright", "average", "slow", or "special". He also indicated what percent of the student population could be expected in each track: 2.5% were gifted, 15% were bright; 65% were average; 15% were slow, and 2.5% were special students who were to be assigned to ungraded classes. These categorizations thus become a part of an individual's identity. This identity is taken as a stable category of the individual.

This stable perspective of intelligence has been talked about Dweck and her colleagues where she has thrown light on the beliefs people hold about their intelligence. These beliefs have been referred as Implicit theories of intelligence.

## Implicit theories of intelligence

Starting a new debate in the field of intelligence, Dweck and Legett (1988) focused on the belief people hold about their intelligence. Dweck and Bempechat (1983) suggested that school children's implicit theories of intelligence can be divided into Entity and Incremental view. The former is the belief that intelligence is a fixed entity, affected only modestly by effort. In contrast, the latter is the belief that intelligence is changeable because it is a set of knowledge and skills that improve with practice and efforts. When students hold an entity theory, believing intelligence to be fixed, they become more concerned with demonstrating their 'fixed' level of ability. These students make low-ability, helpless attributions quickly when faced with failure (Henderson & Dweck, 1990; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin & Wan, 1999 cited in De Castella and Byrne). In contrast, the belief that intelligence is malleable (an incremental theory) typically orients students towards 'growing' their abilities. These students move towards challenges and are more likely to attribute setbacks to their own efforts or strategies (Hong *et al*., 1999). Because they believe intelligence can be cultivated, incremental theorists become less defensive about their shortcomings and show greater engagement, persistence and resilience in the face of setbacks with a focus on learning from their mistakes (Mangels *et al*, 2006; Hong *et al*., 1999). A great deal of theoretical and empirical support exists for the impact of implicit theories on students' academic motivation and performance in school (Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1999; Robins & Pals, 2002).

Looking at intelligence from an entity view, the society has accepted and legitimized the merit based society where individuals are evaluated on a trait which is assumed to be stable and fixed. Meritocracy as an ideology has always conceived of the entity view of intelligence. Incremental view has no place in it. This inherent assumption that intelligence is fixed and stable is in itself a faulty conception. Literature on implicit theories has given an alternate perception which has been ignored by the system of meritocracy. Therefore, the categorizations which meritocratic

system has provided assuming the entity view of intelligence as the sole criteria for identifying the intelligent can now be blurred by having an insight into the incremental view of intelligence. The question which arises next is whether a system based on incremental view would be considered meritocracy or something else? Intelligence, a notion which has been debatable ever since the word was coined, can be looked at through a new perspective where meritocratic system would look more just and fair. This proposition of looking at meritocracy through a new perspective i.e. incremental view can give future researches a new direction and thus will help changing the meritocratic system. This would also help bringing a social change where the society could be viewed as more just and fair. This perspective has far reaching implications for many disciplines like education, psychology and sociology.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, a truly meritorious society is an illusion since we can never realize what constitutes real intelligence. Also we should appreciate individual differences in terms of the hard work and persistence they put in. This is how by appreciating individual differences; we can look at larger social issues. Each individual possesses a different kind of merit. The strife to achieve equality on a base which is still not defined properly is not at all a good option to consider. In order to create a more egalitarian society, we have to look at new ways of understanding our society so that we can develop more appropriate tools of assessing individuals and groups.

*Conflict of Interests*

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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