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NEWSLETTER

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## **Meritocracy in Education: Bridging or Widening Educational Inequality**

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**M**ERITOCRACY emphasizes that reward for and advancement of the individuals should be based on their effort and talent. It finds a strong echo in the Chinese educational tradition, which places high value on the notion that “hard work pays off.” Nevertheless, in the context of the exacerbation of structural social inequalities, a sizable number of studies find that meritocracy, in practice, is unable to promote fairness, but instead obscures the issue of uneven distribution of education resources, further widening the disparities in educational opportunities between students with different socioeconomic status (SES). Based on data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), this study is an empirical analysis of the effects of the meritocratic belief on access to educational opportunities in Chinese adolescents, as well as its heterogeneous effects among students with distinct SES backgrounds.

### Research Findings:

- The vast majority of the adolescents surveyed held a strong belief in meritocracy.
- The meritocratic belief had significantly positive effects on access to educational opportunities in the adolescents.
- There were class differences in the said effects between the adolescents.
- The positive effects were the most substantial in high-SES teenagers.
- The availability of education resources remained the pivotal factor in the disparity in educational opportunities.

The study’s findings suggest the necessity of recognizing the heterogeneous impacts of meritocracy on various social strata and avoiding generalization of its role in educational equity. Individual examples of low SES students achieving successful educational outcomes should not divert attention away from the educational challenges faced by this underprivileged group across the board. The optimization of the effect of the meritocratic belief on academic advancement in adolescents is contingent on structural improvement in education resource distribution.

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