

Toward an Affective Critique of Educational Meritocracy

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Abstract

This article investigates the affective structure of meritocracy in education. An analysis of meritocracy is carried out in terms of the feelings that surround academic success and failure as it is produced in educational settings. The article first offers a review of various educational perspectives on meritocracy including the Marxist critique highlighting 'legitimation.' Next, the limitations of these perspectives on merit is discussed. Thereafter, the affective theorizing of Sarah Ahmed is used in order to describe ways in which teachers and students might challenge meritocracy through transgressive, 'alien' performances of affect. Finally, an affective critique of educational meritocracy is provided in order to create empowering educational opportunities for both teachers and students.

Keywords: Meritocracy; Education; Affect; Feminism; Equity; Legitimation.

Introduction

Educational theorists have long critiqued the workings of meritocracy in schools and universities, and from various research perspectives. Yet, the merit structure of schools and universities has not diminished and has in fact flourished (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p.487; Milner, 2010, p. 118; Biesta, 2017, p. 316). Within such a context, it is helpful first to understand the nature of such critiques and then to ask: Have critiques of meritocracy been sequestered to academic research? Are such

critiques meant to engage with educational institutions? What can be done to bridge the gap between academic critiques of meritocracy, on the one hand and, on the other, ways that students and teachers might change their engagement with meritocratic practices? In this paper, we survey the landscape of educational research on meritocracy and we add to this landscape an affective dimension. We engage the way that feelings structure how students and teachers encounter merit ideology. By looking at affect, we offer a tangible means to counter detrimental aspects of meritocracy.

To set the stage for a consideration of affect and merit, consider the following scenario: Most North Americans have probably read bumper stickers saying something like this: *Proud Parent of an Honor Student at Westlake High School*. Some have read bumper stickers that answer with: *My Kid Kicked Your Honor Student's Ass*. To put these slogans in terms of merit, the former is a celebration of those who succeed in a meritocratic system, while the latter can be construed as a rejection or criticism of the same structure. But more than celebration and criticism of educational merit, one can also read in these phrases subtle statements about affect, a matter that is often overlooked in discussions of merit. The first statement is happy and proud while the second statement is angry to the point of violence. We take the affective sentiments of these bumper stickers—affect about merit—more seriously than might usually be done and ask the following question. What does affect have to do with merit in education?

The Problem of Merit and Its Educational Iterations

Meritocracy remains somewhat of an elephant in the living room in current educational discourse. This is to say, while most progressive, critical educators would no doubt condemn the inequities of meritocracy in schools and universities, the ideal of meritocracy seems to have a unique staying power (Cochran-Smith, 1995, p. 504; Bartolomé, 2007, p. 102; Milner, 2010, p. 123). So while critical educators carry on important practical and theoretical work to promote and sustain equity in education, one of the primary methods by which inequitable relations are sustained in education—namely meritocracy—is rarely taken to task.

We are reminded here of well-intentioned, critically-minded university colleagues who, while carrying out strong theoretical and practical work in social justice education, nevertheless fall back on a discourse of merit when talking about their own graduate students. We have repeatedly witnessed social-justice oriented colleagues who want to attract the “best and brightest” graduate students to their programs. Ironically, the

metric by which these “best and brightest” are gauged too often turns out to be a meritocratic metric. Thus even early scholars who are canvassed to ameliorate the inequities of meritocracy are judged by merit. Indeed, day-to-day exigencies of teaching in schools and universities are so deeply ensconced in meritocratic paradigms that it is sometimes difficult to imagine a way out. For example, teachers and professors are required to give grades even though the very requirement to give grades is loathsome to many critically minded educators. In our experience, some critical educators inflate grades as an act of resistance to meritocracy. Some critical educators advocate for non-competitive forms of education. Some critical educators try to work within a meritocratic system to make meritocracy more equitable. In all cases, the standard of meritocracy remains.

To underscore this ambivalent position of educators vis-à-vis meritocracy, one can look to the difference between sociological critiques of meritocracy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the critiques offered by sociologists of education. Sociologists such as Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller have long debunked the notion that any given society *can* or *should* function as a meritocracy (2004). Speaking from an American context about meritocracy, McNamee and Miller note (2004) that “Americans not only tend to think that is how the system should work, but most Americans also think that is how the system does work.” The work of such sociologists aims to challenge the validity of commonly held assertions with regard to merit and meritocracy. Interestingly, sociologists consider educational institutions as one of the *barriers* to meritocracy. As McNamee and Miller put it, “There are a variety of social forces that tend to suppress, neutralize, or even negate the effects of merit in the race to get ahead” (2004). And education institutions are considered one of these ‘nonmerit’ forces.

Educational sociologists, on the other hand, tend to have what might be called an “ameliorative critique.” Educational scholars validate meritocracy by working to ameliorate the circumstances of those who are not equally served by such a system. They tend to take the optimistic view that merit can be made better. As an example, consider Jonothan Kozol’s important work exposing impoverished schools in the United States (2012). Kozol clearly demonstrates the need to restructure educational funding so that children from impoverished circumstances are afforded their constitutional right to equal protection under the law in the form of publicly funded education. The work of Kozol is cited by sociologists as proof that education is a nonmerit aspect of society (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Scholars of education, in contrast, interpret such work as proof that funding allotments must be redistributed in order for schools to ap-

proach the ideals of a meritocratic system (Ognibene, 2012). Educational scholars indeed validate meritocracy itself by working to ameliorate the circumstances of those who are not equitably served by such a system. They tend to take the optimistic view that merit can be made better. Educational sociologists tend to see meritocracy in education as a viable paradigm, albeit a thwarted one.

The Marxist Challenge to Meritocracy

One stark exception to the trend of ignoring the negative impacts of meritocratic ideology in educational sociology is the research of Bowles and Gintis, and the broader tradition of “reproduction theory” which is in line with Bowles and Gintis’ analysis (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Ginsburg, 1986). For the purposes of the present article, Bowles and Gintis provide the most in-depth and relevant analysis of meritocracy itself, while housed within the umbrella term of reproduction. Not only is meritocracy insightfully and accurately analyzed as an ideology in their work, but also, statistical data is incorporated to show that the meritocratic ideal does not, in reality, offer the pathways that it purports to offer. Meritocracy following this research can be best understood as an enactment of legitimation carried out by specific ideological practices.

Legitimation

Legitimation concerns the ways in which meritocracy covers up a number of societal inequalities, creating the idea that inequalities are both to be expected and are part of a natural order: “An efficient and impersonal [educational] bureaucracy, so the story goes, assesses the individual purely in terms of his or her expected contribution to production,” note Bowles and Gintis (1976, p.105). As students progress through school, meritocracy as a system offers itself up as an efficient way to cull those who work hard and learn a lot from those who do not work as hard or learn so much. The apparent efficiency derives from large schools and large classrooms, and from bureaucratic systems that assign hierarchical roles to these variously achieving students. These roles purport to link with “an ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individuals to unequal economic positions after graduation” (Bowles & Gintis 1976, p. 103). Through legitimation, students, and adults including the families of students, rationalize that they got what they got because they either did or did not work hard enough. Further, since meritocracy and its results are based on individual results, the idea that social change might come from collectives—indeed must necessarily

come from collectives—is occluded. Legitimation fosters the “generalized consciousness among individuals which prevent the formation of the social bonds and critical understanding whereby existing social conditions might be transformed” (1976, p. 108).

In contrast to the messages promoted by legitimation, Bowles and Gintis prove that meritocratic practices do not serve the interests of economy *per se*, nor do they serve the interests of individuals (Rosenberg, 2003). In longitudinal studies extending over 20 years, it is shown that hierarchical attainment in schools and universities has very little effect on economic attainment compared to the simple act of attending school: “Only a minor portion of the substantial statistical association between schooling and economic success can be accounted for by the school’s role in producing or screening cognitive skills” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 110). More, the intellectual skills needed for most workforce occupations are much less rigorous than the competitive regimes fostered in schools. Legitimation therefore covers up something else, in addition to insinuating that social conditions are natural and immutable. It covers, or hides, the fact that schools and universities create circumstances whereby elites benefit from a competitive oversupply of skilled-enough workers (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 114).

An Ideology of Practice

Bowles and Gintis further describe meritocracy as a complex ideology of practice (Rosenberg, 2003). In contrast to a number of social justice minded educators who are critical of the “myth” of ideology (McNamee & Miller, 2004), meritocracy is construed as a practice with lived consequences in this work: “The day-to-day contact of parents and children with the competitive, cognitively oriented school environment” provides a lived orientation to, a belief in, meritocracy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 106). People attend school for many years. Such a long apprenticeship heightens “the apparent objectivity and achievement orientation of the stratification system” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 106). And educational attainment is “dependent not only on ability but also on motivation, drive to achieve, perseverance, and sacrifice,” thus linking positive personal habits with an ideology that is not just a myth (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 106). Educational meritocracy “is largely symbolic,” but it is not symbolic in the sense of being a false myth. It is symbolic in the sense that a symbol provides the basis for rituals and practices (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 103). Successes and failures alike are part of this symbol system, with the former affording evidence that meritocracy benefits the individual, and the latter proving that other individuals fail at the same enterprise.

We favor this element of practice in Bowles and Gintis's research, because it provides concrete data in support of the argument we make in the next section with regard to affect and meritocracy. Specifically, we argue that habits based in ideological practice and affect are lived, practiced elements of educational meritocracy. As such, it is not enough to know that meritocracy is wrong and that it is a myth. One must also be able act on such knowledge in specific ways, in relation to ideological and affective systems, if meritocracy is to be subject to social change. Aligned with this idea is meritocracy's status as an ideology. As Bowles and Gintis relate, "Ideologies and structures which serve to hide and preserve one form of injustice often provide the basis of an assault on another. The ideology of equal educational opportunity and meritocracy is precisely such a contradictory mechanism" (1976, p. 103).

In historically democratic countries equal educational opportunity is construed as a good. Ironically, this particular good is fervently accessed through a system—meritocracy—that serves as a form of injustice. This is what we observed above, noting instances when even early scholars who are canvassed to ameliorate the inequities of meritocracy are judged by merit. Meritocracy is an ideology insofar as it provides a common sense understanding, a set of common sense practices, that actually preclude their own interrogation. Meritocracy is a myth only insofar as it explains something erroneously. It is an ideology of practice, insofar as it hides its own explanation under a cloak of common sense. In the next section, we consider meritocracy as operating within the circulation of affect.

Affect and Its Relation to Meritocracy

In contrast to the above educational accounts of meritocracy, affective relations to meritocracy have been heretofore neglected in educational theory. We thus insert the lens of affect. This is with an understanding that affect informs the extended apprenticeship that students undergo in meritocracy, and with an understanding that affect is not the only, nor perhaps even the primary, place to intervene during the apprenticeship. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, as well as that of Megan Boler, Herbert Kohl and others, we explore how affective relations structure and reinforce educational merit (Ahmed, 2004, p. 101; Boler, 1999; Kohl, 1992). While it is not our intention to blame educators for validating an unjust educational and social system (Hytten, 2017), our analysis calls for a deeper appreciation of affective relations within classrooms as distinctive, significant educational and sociological phenomena.

Examining feelings and affect, we find not an easy way to abandon the discourse of meritocracy in education, nor an easy solution to the

amelioration of non-merit inequities. Rather, by exploring affect we aim to gain some insight into how merit operates at the level of inter-subjectivity to bind students, teachers, and academics to its powerful paradigm. How do affective relations of individuals sustain and reinforce educational optimism and support for meritocracy in schools and universities where there is abundant evidence of inequitable opportunity? How does meritocracy function through affective education—that is, through the way expectations around student affect reverberate, as instructors give subtle and unsubtle lessons about achievement and excellence in meritocracy?

To approach meritocracy from an affective perspective, it is useful to first offer a relational theory of affect. As scholars who theorize affect note, we feel emotions not simply “inside” ourselves as individuals, but we develop and experience them in relations to others in the world (Wetherell, 2012). That is, the experience of emotional feelings involves affective movement between a person and another person or object. This view contrasts with what Sara Ahmed calls the “dumb view” of emotions, where emotions are seen as being functional responses of individuals to experiences or events (Ahmed, 2004, p. 7). As Ahmed notes, in the dumb view if a child sees a bear she will feel fear, which tells her to run. She argues there is more to this story, however. It is not that the bear is essentially fearsome but it “is a matter of how child and bear come into contact...shaped by past histories of contact... Another child, another bear, and we might even have another story” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 7). Rather than simple cause and effect, emotions are shaped by experiences of individuals in particular relations. One might be happy to see a rarely spotted bear in a national park on the roadside from the safety of a moving vehicle, but less happy to see that same bear follow her into her tent that night.

Because particular relations of individuals with historical and culturally framed subject positions shape emotional experiences, Megan Boler argues that power relations impact how people feel (1999). In *Feeling Power*, she elaborates how schooling involves teaching of emotional self-discipline:

For example, children are increasingly taught not to express anger, not to question authority, and not to resist those who have power. These rules are taught through differing forms of emotional discipline...depending on their gendered, raced, social class standing. (Boler, 1999, p. 32; see also Boler, 2013)

Psychological work on “emotional intelligence” in the 1990s has fueled a conflict resolution discourse particularly in schools serving disadvantaged

youth, that, Boler argues, individualizes and dumbs down understanding of how affect circulates dynamically. The discourse of emotional intelligence, as just one example of emotional theory in positive psychology, obscures important questions about power relations in education, and why some schoolchildren might want to express some (resistant) emotions deemed undesirable by their teachers (Boler, 1999).

Different kinds of emotional performances are often required by students in school settings. Today many schools have a version of what might be called an “emotional curriculum,” where an attitude of teamwork, friendliness, caring, sympathetic behavior, acceptance of failure without anger or sadness, positivity and optimism, and impulse control are encouraged, monitored, and positively recognized by teachers. Yet as Barbara Applebaum points out in examining Judith Butler’s work on performativity, within relations, performances of self are not voluntarily and autonomously authored, but are rather shaped and restricted by social norms and conventions (Applebaum, 2005). Whether or not we can uncover a “transcendental, prediscursive subject,” a child typically learns very quickly how to perform affectively as a student (or as a daughter or son, etc.), and learns as well how to respond emotionally to events and interactions that touch the surface of himself or herself, based on reactions by others to his or her expressions (Applebaum, 2005, p. 152). The child learns how and what to feel within specific identities and relations.

Meritocratic discourse is used in schools to encourage students to excel academically and to excel socially. For example, students receive awards for good citizenship, or for being the most caring student, or the friendliest student. Such discourse is also used to remind those who don’t succeed to act in deference to those who do. Teachers who employ this discourse in this common way expect that students affectively perform acceptance if not enthusiasm in events that are designed to reflect meritocracy, such as when students receive grades, awards, or other forms of recognition. Honor students should feel proud of their achievements. They should not cry or feel ashamed, but they should smile and in others ways indicate that they feel happy and good to be recognized as hard working, talented, responsible, etc., by peers and their teacher. (And as our bumper sticker suggests, the honor student’s parents should feel equally happy and proud.)

The other students who stand beside those recognized are also expected to accept the meritocracy of their school or classroom community. They should neither cry, sulk, and show angry feelings, nor demonstrate a kind of carefree nonchalance or elation as their achievements are deemed unexceptional or worse. Any of these expressions could be policed by a well-meaning teacher as detrimental to sustaining the culturally

and socially appropriate affective atmosphere of the occasion. After a grueling football game, all players must shake hands across teams, the losers treading a line between honoring the significance of the winners' victory, on the one hand, and, on the other, feeling angry and resentful by rehashing close calls and chance plays.

The Affect Alien

The bully who beats up the honor student, as in the bumper sticker, takes on the role of what Ahmed calls an "affect alien" in an educational environment that cultivates meritocratic discourse and its anticipated affective relations (2010, p. 167). The affect alien is a person who does not feel in an easy or natural way the feelings that are normally attributed to objects or events. The sad bride on her wedding day, or the bride who even feels a bit uneasy, that she doesn't feel as happy as it seems she should, and Ahmed's more oft-cited "feminist killjoy," are affect aliens. The feminist killjoy, for example, is an affect alien insofar as she does not affectively acquiesce to happiness in the face of sexist remarks or sexist actions. Affect aliens do not feel the way that others expect them to feel (or how they perceive they ought to feel). And this mis-match risks disturbing others. It risks emotionally upsetting others.

When it comes to educational meritocracy, the affect alien is the student who feels an uncanny sense of loss even as she is seen broadly as earning positive recognition. Or it is the successful scholar who is hurt because scholarship is not fulfilling to him or her. It is the unexceptional or failing student who mocks another's award out of rage, jealousy, envy, self-pity or ambivalence, or who shows a complete lack of interest. As Ahmed points out, the affect alien threatens the mood and sense of affective and ideological security of the group and thus appears to others as a "sore point" of the community. As she puts it, it is not easy to be the affect alien, for "to become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one's being has been stolen...alienation is already, as it were, in the world" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 167). Yet Ahmed also sees this as the start of what she calls revolutionary consciousness, a transition that occurs as one moves from "false consciousness [that] sustains an affective situation" to "feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 168).

Not-Learning and the Affect Alien Student

A timeless example of the affect alien student can be found in the work of Herbert Kohl (1992). As Kohl convincingly argues, there are myriad intelligent, capable students who, for various reasons, choose not

to participate in the requirements laid out by educational institutions. They “act out” instead. Kohl puts it this way: “I have encountered willed not-learning throughout my 30 years of teaching, and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or the inability to learn” (1992). His experience with those who act out, who “not-learn,” leads Kohl to the accurate assessment that a refusal to learn is not necessarily connected to an inability to learn. We have had the same experience after many years of teaching in public schools. It is not unreasonable to say that most students who “not-learn” have social reasons for not doing so—rather than intellectual reasons for not being able to do so. These students, while perhaps incomprehensible to an educational institution believing that everyone “of course” desires to learn, are acting in rational, agentic ways (Garner, 1998, p.228).

For Kohl, the student who not-learns is an individual who senses, and defies, the biases and inequities of educational institutions that continue to underserve groups of students because of endemic racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. As Kohl puts it,

not-learning was a strategy that made it possible for them to function on the margins of society without falling into madness or total despair. It helped them to build a small safe world in which their feelings of being rejected by family and society could be softened. Not-learning played a positive role and enabled them to take control of their lives and get through difficult times. (1992)

We would like to argue here that it is possible, and essential, to augment Kohl’s understanding of the not-learner to include a social model of affect. For Kohl, the not-learner is an individual who responds to learning in a negative way. As Kohl points out, many students feel that their dignity is threatened in institutions such as schools that are classist, racist, sexist, and homophobic. As Kohl notes with regard to student dignity, the concept of not-learning, “helped me understand the essential role will and free choice play in learning and taught me the importance of considering people’s stand towards learning in the larger context of choices they make as they create lives and identities for themselves” (1992).

With Ahmed’s social model of affect in mind, we must not simply question the individual’s affective response, according to the “dumb view,” that people have feelings and react to certain events in light of those feelings. Instead, we must ask whether such feelings aren’t primarily lodged in the social circumstances that set precedent for them. The system we are particularly interested in is meritocracy. This system, as noted above, has been critiqued repeatedly by social scientists who point out the extent to which meritocracy continues to fail because of factors

such as classism, sexism, homophobia, racism, and related material inequities. At the same time, observations such as Kohl's remind us that individual students often perform affective responses to repudiate the workings of merit. It is possible, then, to identify an affective register for merit that implies a deeper critique than educational solutions based on affirmative action and school funding (for example). Student actions such as not-learning are not only a phenomenon to be understood in order to help students learn. They are as well an "affect alien" phenomena. They signal dynamic inter-subjective relations within meritocratic regimes. They are affective articulations as to how students can be agentic in the world.

Those Who Act Out, and Those Who Experience Shame

There is a dual structure of affect situated within educational regimes of meritocracy. On the one hand, there are students (and parents) who purport to be happy and cheerful with the results of meritocracy. This includes the proud parents of an honor student and the honor student herself or himself. Then there are others whom meritocracy does not benefit in such a direct way. These educational recipients, too, can be expected to act in ways that are deemed affectively appropriate. Indeed, the meritocracy myth in educational institutions is shored up by "losers" as well as "winners." When losers act happy for winners—for example when all students are asked to show school pride even when not all students benefit from goods allotted at school—it is loser affect just as much as winner affect that upholds the guise of fairness. Or, looking to a non-educational example: The success of a billionaire US president from 2016 to 2020 drew largely on a base of supporters who were not as "successful" as the president, but who, nevertheless, leant cheerful support to his success. Thus the supporters of a billionaire president were more important than the cheers of merit-successful individuals to solidify the misplaced notion that anyone can become rich with enough hard work.

In contrast to those who acquiesce to normative affective expectations associated with the ideal of meritocracy, the affect alien student such as Kohl's not-learner, or the kid who beats up an honor student—those who are affectively deviant with regard to meritocracy—offer a heuristic for critique of meritocracy. Importantly, this critique is neither the dismissive theoretical stance of the general sociologist nor is it the idealistic ameliorative recommendation offered by the sociologist of education. As decades of academic research offer few solutions to rectify educational meritocracy, students continue to act out in ways that, as Kohl astutely points out, foster agency and dignity.

There is, of course, more to meritocratic affect than the tidiness of losers who acquiesce versus losers who act out. While Kohl's analysis highlights the acting out of those who "not-learn," an affective analysis of merit also sheds light on the affect alien who succeeds in a meritocratic system. Richard Rodriguez in his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*, describes the shame he experienced being the recipient of an affirmative action scholarship (1983). Describing himself as what he calls a "scholarship boy," Rodriguez notes:

To many persons around him [the scholarship boy], he appears too much an academic. There may be some things about him that recall his beginnings—his shabby clothes; his persistent poverty; or his dark skin... but they only make clear how far he has moved from his past. (1983, p. 65)

In his trenchant autobiography, Rodriguez identifies himself as an affect alien who has a third perspective on the happy/angry binary resulting from merit. Rodriguez is successful yet experiences shame nevertheless.

Ahmed notes that shame requires a negative kind of recognition of oneself in relation to another "whose view 'matters' to me" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 105). Regret, which Ahmed describes as a kind of polite shame, a disappointment regarding the past that deemphasizes any personal responsibility, is typically insufficient. Shame requires that one see oneself in a negative light in relation to others, that one take personal responsibility for the shameful feeling and its associated interpersonal or social relation or event (what might normally be called its "cause"). Shame thus circulates to discourage and punish particular behaviors. A teacher may reasonably teach or expect students to express or feel shame if they cheated or were deceptive in a harmful way, for example.

In Rodriguez's case, however, shame derives from positive recognition deriving from a legitimate program that ostensibly aims to rectify the social inequity of meritocracy. Importantly, here, the affective circumstances for shame describe once again a blind spot in both the sociologist's wholesale condemnation and the educationalist's optimism. Reconsider Ahmed's bear: Let meritocracy be the bear. It is possible to be disturbed by the bear and to act out in order to drive the bear away. That is what a not-learner does. It is also possible to enjoy the bear because one feels as if the bear is safe and exists for the benefit of the onlooker. That is what the honor student and his or her parents do. It is further possible to realize that the bear is safe and exists for the benefit of the onlooker, but also feel shame because of the way an institution such as a zoo actually separates human beings from nature rather than bringing them closer to nature.

All of these analogies are strained of course. But the point is not that a bear is like merit. It is rather that meritocracy elicits various affective positions. The educationalist especially can learn much from Rodriguez's feelings of shame and misrecognition. Namely, even supposed remedies like affirmative action and socially cognizant scholarships entail complex affective resonances given the historical exclusivity of institutions that have aspired to give reward based on merit. As Ahmed notes, blind happiness often leads to a lack of criticality: "to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force"—that something historically mournful remains in the present, despite justified steps to ameliorate deep inequities (2010, p. 132).

Conclusion: The Alien in Ourselves

In this paper we have argued that since meritocracy is alive and well in education, critically minded educators have a precarious relation to merit. Working in an educational institution puts one in a position to both loathe and kowtow to educational meritocracy. Loathe, because, as sociologists rightly point out, meritocracy is not equitably viable nor *will it likely ever be* equitably viable. Kowtow, because schools and universities are by and large governed by policies that reinforce and indeed celebrate merit. It is important as a conclusion to acknowledge the important work in education that has already been done around merit and the problems with merit. Especially in the research on teacher education, merit has been problematized to a great extent. A number of teacher education researchers such as Richard Milner (2010), Lilian Bartolomé (2007), Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995). And social-justice oriented researchers have pointed out important links between affect and social-justice teaching more broadly (Schutz and Zembylas, 2009).

This paper has offered an analysis of affect and meritocracy, particularizing the broader scope of research on affect in social-justice education. One must acknowledge that whatever this paper contributes will certainly not stop the ongoing inequity of meritocracy. This is precisely because merit has a steadfast quality that derives from its attendant affect. Students, parents, social-justice minded educators—all will continue to struggle with the affective expectations of merit until such a time when education is universally embraced as a non-competitive endeavor. This paper will thus not solve the problem of merit in education. It is rather an injunction for educators to acknowledge and to critically respond to the role affect plays in merit.

One possible implication of our analysis might be that educators should *do something* with enhanced awareness of how affect structures

experiences of meritocracy in the classroom. We should, as educators, support rather than reject affect aliens in our midst. Furthermore, we should reject merit as a structuring principle of affective relations in schools and universities. In other words, we should reject discourses that demand the happiness of all for the benefit of the few who excel at educational meritocracy. More, educators might encourage in educational spaces that there is never one right way for their students to feel in relation to merit. From happiness to pride to shame to anger, various merit feelings will continue to be performed. Teachers, rather than policing emotions, would do well to look for emotional cues especially in relation to merit. Kohl's example of teaching the not-learner is one such example of picking up on affect cues. A teacher who is aware of merit's affect will no doubt be more able to follow Kohl's important lead. Kohl does not police the affect of the not-learner. Nor does he simply celebrate the affect alien. Rather, he lets affect be a clue as to how to proceed. He lets affect unfold, waiting patiently for the possibility that affect will contribute to student agency.

And finally, it is essential to remember that the affective experiences of the teacher, too, are dynamic, complex, and relational. Teachers are also historical subjects caught up in affective structures of meritocracy (see Hytten, 2017). As meritocracy frames groups in terms of winners and losers, an educator inevitably must face affect aliens as well as students who affectively bolster the merit ideology—as students express joy or uncertainty in victory, and anger, shame, dismissal, and rejection of meritocratic discourse in failure. In a normal classroom the critically-minded teacher no doubt experiences a double-bind in supporting the affective experiences of students and expressing coherent views about meritocracy, in choosing whether to exuberantly celebrate or more plainly announce achievements, whether to stiffen one's upper lip, ignore, or give a thumbs up to the affect aliens in class.

Paying attention to the affective aspects of merit ideology enables a broader view of the moral and ethical challenges educators face today, as emotional educators, historical subjects, and representatives of complex social structures. To battle the power and problems of meritocratic discourse one should consider both its material-ideological and affective-relational dimensions. Recognizing merit's structure as not just material and ideological but also affective, educators can intervene when it comes to meritocracy in a different way, critically interacting with merit's affective circulation, while being cognizant of the affective challenges to retooling the system (as in the case of affirmative action shame). Rejecting meritocracy has affective implications for both teachers and students. In sum, educators demanding equity might buy the

scathing bumper sticker and nurture the affect alien in themselves and their students.

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