EDUCATION'S HIDDEN CURRICULUM- WHO GETS TO LOOK BRILLIANT?

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Abstract - Educational meritocracy is typically dismissed as a casualty of unequal schooling. I want to suggest something more pernicious. Inequality is not a bug in the system; it is the hidden curriculum that decides who will succeed before the lesson even begins. I argue meritocracy fails because different schools teach students fundamentally different relationships to success. Elite education does not simply teach students how to be excellent; it teaches students how to make excellence visible and legitimate to institutions. Meritocracy therefore does not reward merit; it rewards the ability to perform merit in ways institutions already recognise. Drawing on an auto-ethnographic perspective motivated by a transition between an under-resourced state school in southwest England to one of the world's most elite universities, alongside Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this paper examines how educational trajectories are shaped not only by financial constraint but by the uneven distribution of cultural capital.

These logics are reproduced within Canada's school system, where institutional recognition is systematically produced through the unequal distribution of institutional fluency. Indigenous degree attainment is less than half that of the national average. Evidencing that educational inequality is produced by intergenerational restriction of the institutional literacy that dominant institutional structures both produce and demand. Yet, if targeted intervention like Indspire's Rivers to Success programme can create change by connecting underrepresented people to networks that teach institutional fluency. I therefore consider how the curriculum might be reimagined to integrate the teaching of institutional fluency as formal curricular content, rather than leaving it to be informally acquired through participation in elite educational environments, thereby making such fluency accessible to all. This requires not only making institutional fluency structurally accessible, but also redefining merit such that achievement produced under unequal conditions remains institutionally legible and legitimate even in the absence of elite origins.

Keywords - Cultural Capital, Meritocracy, Pedagogy, Performativity.

CONCLUSION

The hidden curriculum operates as a pedagogy of recognition, distributing the styles, dispositions, and institutional literacies through which achievement becomes readable as merit and promise. Meritocracy is not inherently flawed. But until we reimagine our educational literacies to be made teachable to all, education will continue to reproduce advantage as a mechanism that decides who gets to look brilliant.