

The Double Contradiction

- Education Gospel and Education Penalty

Ran Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom*

a. stnzz6@ucl.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The wishful thinking of education-jobs-development promise has formed within the emergence of the trinity of the knowledge economy, meritocracy and human capital theory embedded in education ideology. The take-for-granted promise is idealized and deceptive, which largely ignores the interplay of other variables. The education arms race, credential inflation, overeducation, the dilemma of liberal arts and humanity subjects, and education penalties for employees, especially student workers, have exposed another side of the seemingly promising trinity. In this sense, the absolute goodness of education has gradually tilted toward relative or positional goodness, suggesting an alienated structure which simultaneously constrains individuals. Focusing on the paradoxes of the trinity specifically, allows people to not only scrutinize the overall picture and interconnection of those educational settings but also how education shapes and reshapes different stakeholders. This essay expounded the traps of the trinity, indicating meritocracy reproduces inequality and its premise on ability-based placement is also flawed. Heavily human-capital-based-ideology alienates education. People with knowledge do not necessarily gain high-income jobs. The paper suggests a reconnection and review on education purposes for education stakeholders and the construction of a working environment legal protective framework to embrace the increasing student workforce.

Keywords: Knowledge economy, meritocracy, credential inflation, education penalty

1. Introduction

With the prevalence of mass education in the past two centuries, it is argued that a "school society" has evolved. More than one-third of the global population aged between 25 to 64 years old has held a higher education degree by 2019, almost double compared to two decades ago [1]. Such remarkable expansion is attributed to a variety of global education market transformations, but most distinctively is the influence of the gradual human capital rationale embedded in education and its association with development [1]. Education and economy are prevalently believed with tight correlations, and the revolution has led to the concept of a "knowledge economy", which holds the belief that increased education opportunities have created a society with great reliance and significance on knowledge and information to promote economic advancement for nations in the global stage and companies as well as individuals in the labour market. Meritocracy has played a vital role in fitting the transformation of the labour market not only in work but also in education. Meritocracy underscores the fairness of

one's position through the judgement of an impartial-ability-based system. It has become a well-acknowledged system to filter, stratify, credentialize and reward persons to where they "deserve" according to their merit, which, usually refers to achievements and abilities [2]. Meanwhile, merits are believed can be cultivated through efforts under the neoliberal discourse. Thus, education has been seen as a tremendously emancipatory means that facilitates not only individual but also societal advancement by attaining knowledge to gain financial rewards through the consistent logic of meritocracy, knowledge economy, and human capital theory, forming the "gospel" of Education-Jobs-Development promise. Yet, the inconsistency of the logic lies in its consistency; signalling an inside emptiness of the take-for-granted education gospel. The trinity has created an ostensibly bright picture of education utopia either at the individual or societal level, granting an ever-growing vision of wealth and equality by pathing the trinity, using wishful and oversimplified thinking to veil the vision of the masses to believe the take-for-granted promise of education gospel without noticing the emergence of education penalty. Based on the trinity assumption, this essay looks into the reasons behind the formation of the promise and analyses aspects in which internal and external factors intertwine that disappoint the people's expectations of the education gospel.

2. Analysis of the Double Contradiction

2.1. The first Layer of the Double Contradiction- the Meritocracy Equality Ideal and the Unequal Construct

The first layer of the paradox lies in the corrupted nature of meritocracy, which predetermines the internal vulnerability in the realisation of the Trinity. Meritocracy does not advance social mobility but serves as a new form of plutocracy that reproduces social inequality. It is an ideal and belief famously contended in Plato's "Republic", which operates in opposition with hereditary aristocracy and promotion of social equality and justice by rewarding people based on their merits rather than taking personal attributes such as race, class, and gender into account [3]. Meritocracy has been comfortably placed as a social system along with neoliberalism, inculcating the idea of self-responsibility and self-enterprising to work hard in the matrix of the hierarchical social ladder [2]. Eventually, due to fair merit-based placement, everyone would find a social position where they are properly fitted and rewarded [2]. However, people tend to ignore the fact that the meritocratic regime is established with a reality based on inequality. How can the system function fairly with the exposure to unequal variables?

To be more specific, one of the significant external variables interplay is social class. Personal dispositions, etiquette, education qualification, interpersonal networks, accents, aesthetic tastes, and socioeconomic status are all common classified traits that are constantly consciously or unconsciously being examined by the external world. Numerous studies have discovered that children from lower hierarchies are often under oppression and exclusion both from classmates and teachers, and teachers tend to favour those middle-class and above children, let alone those students whose identity intersects with other educational issues such as race and gender. Besides, capitals can be "manipulated" to cultivate merit, indicating a latent resource gap between children with capitals and those with few capitals. Moreover, a more evident issue with the "egalitarianism" of meritocracy is that it neglects the variation of teacher quality, funding, policies, pedagogies, school facilities, and practices in K12 education institutions. Gender, race, ethnicity, class and other individual attributes continue to play a role in inequality, largely endangering the education attainment of those minorities.

Despite the enactment of policies to facilitate equality, such as Affirmative Action and Free School Meals, these differences still significantly influence student experiences and, consequently, their societal successes [4]. So, although merit under meritocracy is seen as a fair criterion to access one's position, it is indeed unfair in essence due to contrasted schooling experiences resulting from

classified habitus, different accumulation and utilisation of capitals, and teaching quality differences. Thus, despite putting in extra effort, many, especially those from the bottom of the hierarchy, may still suffer trapped where that is not incompatible with their endeavours. This is where the bubble of the take-for-granted promise starts to burst. However, the vicious circle of social reproduction does not end here. The capitals and habitus of a family tend to be maintained and reproduced. In the long run, this would lead to social closure, which prevents less-educated people from upward mobility under the knowledge economy discourse [5]. Thus, discussions upon meritocracy should be grounded with its basis of construction, which is more than a purely independent structure but entangles various variables in real-life operation. Non-meritocratic elements are still always within the meritocracy. The idea that individuals can always win compatible returns is idealised and beyond secular reality. Cases have also demonstrated that underachievement is not self-inflicting, as the match between capabilities and rewards can be altered, trained, and even faked through capitals. Meritocracy is rooted in an unequal ground, and it legitimises class differences by giving people a plausible reason for merit [6]. The existing inequality has made the idealised meritocratic system tilt and deviate from the sound utopia of equal opportunities where everyone will "climb" to where they belong based on their ability, reversely posing the threat of positional conflict.

2.2. The Second Layer of the Double Contradiction-Education Penalty

The knowledge economy has a significant impact on the formation of students' participation in temporary, part-time and beginner-level jobs that fit in their educational period. However, their extended education exerts as a penalty to diminish working power and good working conditions. Under the knowledge economy, entry-level student employees tend to be defined as "learners" in the workplace rather than workers, excluding them from the legal protective system other workers enjoy [7]. Employees' student and learner identity exposes them to deteriorated pay, unfavourable working circumstances, harassment and discrimination. Nonetheless, this is not to entirely deny the occurrence of learning in a working environment and to speak in favour of the student party, but what to doubt is the actual happening of learning and training. For instance, it is reported that real learning experience is scarce in internships, placement, or temporary jobs but instead loaded with repetitive routine supportive tasks [7]. It is a fact that the welfare of the student workforce is insecure, leaving pupils to undertake the penalty ostensibly resulting from their education, but which at root is not their problem. Consequently, the reshaping of workplace discourse due to the knowledge economy has harmed the rights and welfare of young workers, and the trinity bubble eventually bursts completely.

2.3. Credential Inflation, Education Arms Race and Return

Align with the meritocratic system are the Human Capital Theory (HCT) and knowledge economy, both play nonnegligible roles in the formation of the Education- Jobs- Development promise. With HCT's wide application in education, it is believed that schooling is an investment for individuals because it is a form of empowerment to higher economic productivity and monetary returns, as well as contributions to the national economy. Thus, knowledge and education as absolute goods have always been essential in the production of human capital and economic development, given their close linkage based on HCT.

2.3.1. Capitalistic Labour Market Shift

Nevertheless, the paper contends that education does not necessarily bring economic capital, but the heavily human-capital-oriented education has caused an educational arms race to secure one's position in credential and occupational queues. In the logic of Education- Jobs- Development promise built upon the trinity, demands for knowledge-intensive employees should increase in growing global

economic competition and knowledge-based economy. Nonetheless, the take-for-granted premise is, to some extent, an opportunity trap since the knowledge economy market was not in tandem with the higher education expansion to provide an appropriate number of high-skilled positions. Rather, to increase efficiency and cut labour costs, the emergence of less-able workers and unstable jobs has escalated [8]. This circumstance further leads to the second layer of contradiction. Besides, an excessive supply of highly educated people resulting from education expansion decreases the scarcity of education premium. Thus, the credential candidates hold simultaneously devalued and transformed into an information-rich signal which employers speculate the trainability and skills of employees [9]. To fulfil the market and ensure the positional advantage, students are getting longer years of schooling and striving for higher levels of credentials to resist the effects of credential inflation, termed with the terminology of studentification and often studied with the issue of overeducation [10]. Thurow explains the disillusion, coined as the Job Competition Model (JCM). It proposed a different explanation of credential inflation as opposed to the HCT. It elucidates credential depreciation as a short-term event in which individuals would adjust the circumstance along with the market accordingly, such as postponing or reducing education. However, the reality seems to favour the other. As a result, the capitalistic labour market has shifted unexpectedly, forming an education arms race and resulting in credential inflation. It has largely disillusioned the idealistic assumption of the knowledge economy and human capital theory and deepened the trinity paradox.

2.3.2. Valuation of the Market

Nevertheless, whether high credential signals high skills and whether all kinds of skills that schools teach are valued are also doubtful. Some scholars argue that actual skills are not necessarily reflected by credentials and schooling, meaning both educational attainment and skills should be considered when examining the education returns [11]. Evidence has suggested the correlation between high skills and monetary benefits, except for the connection between tertiary education [12]. However, regardless of the level of credential, certification does matter in the labour market as it has been seen as a threshold. Thus, the advantages of tertiary education credentials remain despite inflation because at least it secures the relative positionality in the overall population. Only those with a nominal degree (without high skills) and those with high skills but without credentials are severely penalised due to higher education expansion and credentialism [13]. This conclusion aligns with the social closure theory, in which the hierarchy has excluded those with low or without credentials from enjoying commensurate economic returns. The market returns to skills also vary according to the major. For example, skills fostered in science, technology, engineering, and Math (STEM) and Business subjects are more likely to be appreciated by the market, making higher education cost-efficient while social sciences, arts, and humanities are often undervalued in society [14]. Under such recognition, HCT has heavily reshaped education discourse with an economic rationale. However, as long as the market continues to stick to the JCM, the credentials will continue to inflate, and education will continue to be prolonged. As a result, the HCT is also an idealised and oversimplified construct in the trinity rhetoric.

3. Suggestion

3.1. Go Back to the Origin of Education

Scholars, education institutions and societies should look into existing education systems and discourses and go back to the starting point: What is the purpose of education, and what should good education be like? Education does not only serve human capital but also fosters democratic citizens to cultivate personal autonomy to spur self-actualisation and self-flourishing. Every stakeholder of the market, as well as education itself, needs to be reconnected to the very first question on education

purposes if education now has become alienated as self-torturee just to win a ticket in the ferocious "arms race" to enter the job market and an identified market that penalises those inside. As Biesta suggested, people need to be cautious about outcome-based education in the gradually datafied education arena filled with measurements and league tables [15]. Good education should encompass its qualification value to equip students with skills that can be used in the market, the socialisation value that enables pupils to engage and socialise in society as individuals and citizens, and finally, subjectification to empower them to be autonomous whole beings to think and act.

3.2. For the Welfare of the Student Workforce

Employers and the labour market should try to commit the following to offset the penalties that student workforces receive. First, students should not be constrained in their learner identity. Employers should see student workers the same as regular employees, implying that all workers, including students, should have identical rights. Second, employers need to provide more training to all employees, regardless of age, seniority, or position. It should not be necessary to mistreat young people or view them as a highly exploited, inexpensive, and disposable labour force to provide chances for them. Third, there should be an end to the incessant invocation of education as status, method, and promise. Education should be transferred from an overemphasised qualification to a tool for empowerment. Education should never be exercised as a form of penalty, and the rights of students in the identified market should be secured.

4. Conclusions

The paper elaborates on the double contradiction of the prevalent trinity of meritocracy, human capital theory and knowledge economy. The take-for-granted promise that education investment will lead to monetary repayment and absolute individual benefits is an oversimplified tale in reality. Meritocracy reproduces social inequality, the human capital theory does not secure people a bright prospect, and the changing discourse of the knowledge economy on student employees has led to the penalty of a deteriorated working environment. The paper proposed a systematic review of going back to the origin of education to reconstruct and reconnect the key issues in the education sphere today and calls for the construction of a workplace rights framework for student workers.

References

- [1] OECD. (2020). *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [2] Littler, J. (2017). *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. Routledge.
- [3] Plato. (2009). *The Republic*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] OECD. (1996). *The knowledge-based economy*. Paris: OECD.
- [5] Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage Publications.
- [6] Young, M. (2001). *Down with meritocracy*. The Guardian.
- [7] Sukarieh, M., and S. Tannock. (2009). Putting School Commercialism in Context. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24 (6), 769-786.
- [8] Kariya, T. (2011). *Credential inflation and employment in "universal" higher education: enrolment, expansion and (in)equity via privatisation in Japan*. *Journal of Education and Work*, 24(1-2), 69-94.
- [9] Araki, S. (2020). *Educational Expansion, Skills Diffusion, and the Economic Value of Credentials and Skills*. *American Sociological Review*, 85(1), 128-175.
- [10] Bills, D. B. (2016). *Congested credentials: The material and positional economies of schooling*. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 43, 65-70.
- [11] Hanushek, E. A., Guido, S., Ludger, W. and Zhang, L. (2017). *General Education, Vocational Education, and Labor-Market Outcomes over the Lifecycle*. *Journal of Human Resources*, 52(1), 48-87.
- [12] Vogtenhuber, S. (2018). *The Institutional Conditions of Inequality in Credential and Skill Attainment and Their Impact on Occupational Placement*. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 55, 13-24.

- [13] Araki, S. and Kariya, T. (2022). *Credential Inflation and Decredentialization: Re-Examining the Mechanism of the Devaluation of Degrees*. *European Sociological Review*, 38(6).
- [14] Webber, D. (2018). *Is College Worth It? Going Beyond Averages*. *Third Way*.
- [15] Thurow, L. C. (2017). *A Job Competition Model*. 17–32.