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Meritocracy as a policy tool

An enabler and legitimizer of policy makers' inactions

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to offer a critique of the meritocratic speech, looking at the contradiction between Meritocracy and Equality of Opportunity in Brazil, regarding access to education. The analysis is divided in two sections. In the first, it goes through the pillars of the meritocratic discourse, which informs narratives about ascension and prestige in our society. The paper continues with the pillars of the theory of Equality of Opportunity, which assumes the same treatment to all individuals, pointing to a contradiction in the theory and practice considering the Brazilian context. The article then explores the effects of the Knowledge Society and the importance of education in this society. Reflecting on the effects of the meritocratic discourse as opposed to the lack of access of vulnerable populations, the article confronts the narrative of equal opportunities and discusses how it produces the invisibility of structural social inequalities, internalizing them in individuals as success or failure.

Keywords: Meritocracy; Education; Equality of Opportunity; access; inequalities;

1 INTRODUCTION

Inequalities are present everywhere in the world, but they are more visible and present in specific countries. Sometimes, even within one and the same country there are major discrepancies. In a lot of those countries, such as Brazil, inequalities are present in the daily routine since birth – like in the education area. Depending on the neighborhood a person is born in, or the color of the skin, access to education varies enormously. Not only because some people in Brazil can afford private schools that offer better education or have more available time to study, but also because in some neighborhoods classes are cancelled because of shootings, there is a lack of public transport, between other reasons. The fact that only the already vulnerable part of the population faces those difficulties makes social mobility an even harder thing to achieve.

It seems central to me to explore this dynamic with special attention, insofar as it concerns the core of what we have come to know as "meritocracy" - that is, the idea that individual success is proportional to that individual's dedication to pursuing a goal. The way meritocracy analyzes such scenarios is directly aligned with the imaginary of a competition fought on an "equal footing", as if the opportunities and experiences of individuals were on the same level.

In this country with high level of complexity and disparities, a meritocratic discourse is often used both by elites and underprivileged social strata. Moreover, this discourse is so pervasive, it has become common sense. This discourse has a high level of ideological and political relevance because it can be used as a tool to maintain the existing system, an inequitable and unjust 'status quo'. And by using it as a tool, it can be used both by allowing inaction regarding social affirmative policies but also by passing to individuals problems insufficient services distribution provided by the government.

However, the discourse used in the country that is based in effort and merit as if all had the same chances, cannot be applied to the reality. That is because the country still does not fulfil the Human Opportunity Index, as it is explained by the World Bank Report: "Do Our Children Have a Chance? A Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean". The HOI is a coverage corrected for equity, and it "focuses on seven personal circumstances: parents' education, family income, number of siblings, presence of both parents in the house, gender,

gender of household head, and location of residence”¹. The intention with this index is to isolate the problem of the differentiation between effort and choice, since we will also look at individuals that are not able to make well thought decisions, like children – they cannot be responsible for their lifestyle before they had any action over it. In that sense, all inequalities present in a children’s life can be accounted as a circumstance.

Consequently, although it is not possible to say that all individuals deserve to be in the social and economic position they are, it is also not possible to say that individuals that are less privileged have no impact in their own fates. For that reason, it is important not only to look critically at the meritocratic discourse but, in addition, to offer a new vision on how a merit-based society could be fair. And, to achieve the fairness in a society that is purely based in effort, it is necessary to understand the Equality of Opportunity.

Nowadays, education is considered to be one of the most important aspects for obtaining jobs that offer higher wages, because those jobs require higher levels of education. This situation makes the lower classes, which have lesser access to education, less susceptible to gaining access to those jobs, which ends up becoming a cycle of inequalities. My goal with this article is to understand how the meritocratic discourse naturalizes the high inequalities, using the case study of Brazil – making it clear, with the help of the theory of Equality of Opportunity, that if there is no effort in achieving this equality, there will always be a cycle of inequalities that is incessant.

In this research I will start by explaining the topic and its complexities. To make the research clear, I will explain the methodology used to get to my conclusion. After that, I will address the concepts and literature I used to complete this study. Following, I will start by explaining the Meritocratic Discourse to which I am referring to, with the definition of the concept and how it affects different aspects of the daily routine, followed by the introduction and explanation of the Equality of Opportunity theory, which will help to give a different vision about the meritocratic discourse with a more updated version. Following that, I will explain the concept of Knowledge Society that we live in, which will help understanding the importance of education in this century, especially regarding getting jobs and higher incomes. After that, I will explain my objectives with this research, presenting my case study with the Brazilian

¹ Vega, J.R.M., R.P. Barros, J.S. Chanduvi, M. Giugale, L.J. Cord, C. Pessino and A. Hasan. 2012. *Do Our Children Have a Chance? A Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington DC: The World Bank, page 2.

situation short after. Additionally, I will explain why it seems relevant what I am addressing throughout the article, not only for me, but for complex public policy problems that affect a big part of the population nowadays and most of Brazil's population. The conclusion will come right after. My aim is to understand how the meritocratic discourse enables policy makers to ignore salient issues such as lack of access to basic goods.

2 BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this research, I will focus on the concepts of Meritocracy, Equality of Opportunity, and the lack of access to the most vulnerable population. The meritocratic theory – that I will first explain its meaning and use mainly authors that criticize it – talks about the merit-based reward, meaning that individuals should gain proportionally to the effort they put into the action. In addition to that, I will also use the theory of Equality of Opportunity, that makes it clear that individual should, indeed, gain proportionally to the effort they put into the action they are taking, with the condition that public policies should be implemented to fix the circumstances that unable individuals to have the same starting positions to succeed in life. To illustrate the combination of both theories, I will consider the scenario of the Brazilian access to primary education.

Brazil is marked by inequalities that perpetuate the country for historical reasons. The country was a Portuguese colony, and its natives had a big cultural shock because of the invasion – the population present in the continent was indigenous and they were rapidly taught the Portuguese etiquette. The indigenous population was considered uncivilized by the colonizers – and that was why they were put in a position of submission and extermination by the Portuguese. Later, there was an attempt of the colonizers to catechize and to pacify the indigenous population.

However, this was not the only population that was present in Brazil historically that made the country as complex as it is today. Brazil, being a country with a proper climate for different kind of plantations, was very promising to the colonizers. Nevertheless, there was not enough people to work in the big farms – and the colonizers were not fit for the hard work in the fields. Consequently, the other possible option at the time was to bring black workers from Africa – who the Portuguese though were inferior, so they were not treated as human beings but as a work tool. As it is possible to imagine, this had very big consequences, and those consequences are still ongoing on the countries that used this forced labor, such as Brazil. With that, even after the abolition in 1888, the inequalities between the black and the white people were still

being reproduced – they became structural – and they also reproduced in social classes, gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and religiousness. Brazil is one of the countries with the higher rates of social inequalities in the world² and these inequalities make themselves noted since birth. According to research from IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)³, around 16,5 millions of households in Brazil gain less than one minimum wage to survive, what is very far from the average national household.

Nevertheless, 2,7% of the homes in the country get an income that is around 26 times higher than the minimum wage⁴. That scenario already proves by itself that Brazil is a very unequal country. Consequently, it is very hard to imagine that in a country with such circumstances, an equity of opportunities would happen.

In the scenario of access to education, which is what I aim to talk about, things did not unravel differently – the access is extremely differentiated depending on the racial profile and social background. Since the periods Brazil was a colony, rich young man were sent by their families to Europe – specially Portugal – to study⁵. However, later when the Portuguese Court arrived to Brazil, there was a change and an expansion of education in the country – this was the time when some higher education institutions started to appear. Those institutions had the goal of both forming professionals that were needed for a functional society but also as a tool to disseminate the prevailing doctrines⁶. Another important point is the fact that higher education institutions in Brazil had no freedom or autonomy during the 21 years of the military dictatorship in the country. Nevertheless, since the 90s that changed drastically – with the end of the dictatorship in 1985 – and with the incentives coming from the state towards the expansion of the private institutions as well⁷. The incentive came, nonetheless, with a decrease in the incentives aimed at the public sector. It was also during this period where the demands “created strong connections between the education of the individuals in the country and their

² De Souza & Medeiros, 2017 in Nações Unidas Brasil. 2018. Brasil está entre os cinco países mais desiguais, diz estudo de centro da ONU. UNIC Rio. <https://nacoesunidas.org/brasil-esta-entre-os-cinco-paises-mais-desiguais-diz-estudo-de-centro-da-onu/> (last access: December 3, 2019).

³ In Garcia, Alexandre. 2019. Quase um quarto das famílias vive com menos de dois salários mínimos. R7, October 4. <https://noticias.r7.com/economia/quase-um-quarto-das-familias-vive-com-menos-de-dois-salarios-minimos-04102019> (last access: November 28, 2019).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Aprile, M.R. and R.E.M. Barone. 2009. Educação superior: políticas públicas para inclusão social. *Revista Ambiente Educação* 2 (1): 39-55.

⁶ Trindade, Hélgio. Universidade em perspectiva: sociedade, conhecimento e poder. In: REUNIÃO ANUAL DA ANPED, 21. Trabalho apresentado. Política de Educação Superior. Caxambu, set. 1998.

⁷ Aprile, M.R. and R.E.M. Barone. 2009. Educação superior: políticas públicas para inclusão social. *Revista Ambiente Educação* 2 (1): 39-55.

capacity of insertion and permanence in the labor market, as well as their productive performance”⁸. This need coming from the labor market pressured educational systems such as schools and universities to change some of the content that was taught to the children, so they could fulfil the needs of the market. Those needs were, between others, to be more productive, have more quality and more competitiveness in the global economy. Within this complex framework, I will look into different policies that try to change this legacy that are in the structure of the country already.

3 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article is to understand the power of the meritocratic discourse when it comes to the long-lasting cycle of inequalities and lack of social mobility in Brazil – and how this affects the lower income population in their opportunities. Therefore, I will use the concepts of meritocracy, equality of opportunity and the case study of Brazil. Observing the policies in different governments and the general data from the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), I will try to answer how the meritocratic discourse can have a power in the actions – or lack of action – taken by governments in this regard, considering the social policies addressed to education. My hypothesis consists in the fact that the discourse is used by government and broadly accepted – and also used - by the population in general, making it possible for the Brazilian government to ignore the problem of the difficult access of vulnerable populations to education. The lack of access is concentrated to both poor and black Brazilians.

Additionally, the lack of policies regarding the access to education makes it harder for people in already vulnerable positions to rise their social position. Therefore, since I am using Brazil as the case study and the country is one of the most unequal countries in the world, it would be an illusion to affirm that the starting point is the same to every individual. Consequently, my hypothesis is that the meritocratic discourse is an enabler for the status quo and to maintain the cycle of inequalities, what makes the lower income class unable to increase their social class – and the higher income to keep their social position. In addition to that, I will also base my hypothesis on the fact that the meritocratic discourse is used based on the Equality of Opportunities, but that it does not consider the facts individuals are not responsible for. With

⁸ Aprile, M.R. and R.E.M. Barone. 2009. Educação superior: políticas públicas para inclusão social. *Revista Ambiente Educação* 2 (1): 39-55, page 45.

that contradiction, it will be easier to understand the fallacy behind the attempt to see the country as fulfilling equality in opportunities.

To be able to explain the circumstances in Brazil, I will use the literature review over the topic that, allied to the data I collected from the World Bank, from the Ministry of Education from Brazil and from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, can back up the essential arguments to the realization of my conclusion.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of “meritocracy” arises together with the ideology of the “American Dream”, that makes the United States a main reference to democracy. It is based on ideas that individuals have success or not depending on their own choices and actions; that success is based in the moral virtue and that opportunities are equal for everyone, independently of the social class or the individuals’ origin. Back in 1794, Thomas Walker, a cotton producer, already pointed out for this aspect, as Kramnick⁹ puts:

“We do not seek an equality of wealth and possessions, but an equality of rights. What we seek is that all may be equally entitled to the protection and benefit of society, may equally have a voice in elections... and may have a fair opportunity of exerting to advantage any talent he may possess. The rule is not ‘let all mankind be perpetually equal’. God and nature have forbidden it. But “let all mankind start fair in the race of life”. The inequality derived from labour and successful enterprise, the result of superior industry and good fortune, is an inequality essential to the very existence of society”.

That way, meritocracy offers lenses to explain the social inequalities, when it proposes that we interpretate this frame as a result of different paths and individual efforts, that resulted in different positions in society, as Kramnick affirms¹⁰. More than that: meritocracy individualizes the responsibility that a citizen has for his own social position. In that way, it removes any other possible connection between society as a whole and the individuals’ social condition.

⁹ Kramnick, Isaac. 1990. *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*. London: Cornell University Press, page 57.

¹⁰ Kramnick, Isaac. 1990. *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*. London: Cornell University Press.

Nevertheless, there is a discourse that also counterposes these concepts because it puts in evidence the circumstances on which individuals are born and grow up in, relating it to the status they acquire in society socially and economically. The status acquired throughout the individual's life is also a product of the services that are 'offered' by the governments. However, there are some governments that do exceed others when it comes to the matter of giving equal opportunities to different situations – this is not the case of Brazil. Not only the legacy from the past makes a big difference but also the present. In this case, the fact of having a wide-spread educational system makes both political elites and other economic actors use it as the reasoning to justify personal achievements by merit, therefore, to be inactive regarding social policies that aim to decrease social inequalities.

I will use the definitions of Meritocracy given by Isaac Kramnick in "Equal Opportunity and 'The Race of Life'"¹¹; Isaac Kramnick's "Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America"¹²; to explain the concept, so it would allow me to analyze how this concept is important for the explanation of the cycle of inequalities and lack of social mobility in Brazil.

To a better understanding of how the governments use they action – or inaction to provide basic services, like education, I will use "The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism" by Gøsta Esping-Andersen¹³, where he talks about three types of modern regimes: Liberal Regimes, with modest and means-tested assistance and it encourages market solutions to social problems; Conservative Regimes, which are shaped by traditional family values; and Social Democratic Regimes, that promote equality of high standards. Additionally, I will also use Jo Littler's *Against Meritocracy*¹⁴ to understand how the speech of politicians about meritocracy can also be used as a "form of legitimation for contemporary neoliberal culture, creating new forms of social division". The author uses a conceptualization of the meaning of meritocracy, making it easier to use it and to understand it in our culture and modern society.

¹¹ Kramnick, Isaac. 1981. Equal Opportunity and 'The Race of Life'. *Dissent*, 28: 178-187.

¹² Kramnick, Isaac. 1990. *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*. London: Cornell University Press.

¹³ Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge.

In addition, I will also use Marie Duru-Bellat and Élise Tenret's article "L'emprise de la méritocratie scolaire: quelle légitimité?"¹⁵; Célio Tiago Marcato and Celso Luiz Aparecido "Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia"¹⁶; Karine de Silva Soares and Alexandra Vanessa de Moura "A Meritocracia na Educação Escolar Brasileira"¹⁷ to illustrate how the meritocratic concept can have an effect in other areas other than the discourse – like education and, from that, access to social mobility.

I will also use "Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility"¹⁸, where it is argued that meritocracy is also a way of legitimation for contemporary neoliberal culture, because it promises equal opportunity but in reality, it creates new form of social division. To better understand the connections between education and merit in the educational system, I will use Maria da Graça Jacintho Setton and Danilo Martuccelli's "A escola: entre o reconhecimento, o mérito e a excelência"¹⁹.

Moreover, to contrast the fallacy of the merit, I will also use the fourth chapter of "The Handbook of Income Distribution" by John E. Roemer and Alain Trannoy²⁰, where there is a comprehensive explanation of the concept of Equality of Opportunity. It does not go against the critiques on meritocracy, but it presents, considering a modern and democratic society, the ways fair equality of opportunity can be achieved, also considering individual's efforts and preferences. The concept of Equality of Opportunity is important for the development of my thesis because it would exist in a scenario where, as it is explained by the authors, policies can compensate the different circumstances on which individuals suffer from inequalities. Thus, the concept of Equality of Opportunity does not counterpose the critique on the meritocratic discourse, but it presents a different vision: people are responsible for their choices and how they make use of the services provided – and are not responsible for things that are nondependent of themselves.

¹⁵ Duru-Bellat, M. and E. Tenret. 2009. L'emprise de la méritocratie scolaire: quelle légitimité?. *Revue Française de Sociologie* 50 (2): 229-258.

¹⁶ Marcato, C.T. and C.L.A. Conti. 2017. Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia. *Devir Educação* 1 (1): 66-74.

¹⁷ Soares, K.S. and A.V.M. Baczinski. 2018. A Meritocracia na Educação Escolar Brasileira. *Revista Temas & Matrizes* 12 (22): 36-50.

¹⁸ Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge.

¹⁹ Setton, M.G.J and D. Martuccelli. 2015. A escola: entre o reconhecimento, o mérito e a excelência. *Educação e Pesquisa*, 41 (especial): 1385-1391.

²⁰ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

Finally, I will use Peter Drucker's "Knowledge work and knowledge society. The social transformation of this century"²¹, to have a better understanding of the importance formal education has nowadays. Formal education is necessary to gain access to work, jobs and social positions – and it can only be acquired by formal schooling according to the author. He points out throughout his text the importance of education – as the center of the knowledge society and, therefore, formal schooling as the most important institution in this society.

As a result, I will base myself in those definitions of Meritocracy, Democracy to first understand what those two concepts mean in modern society. The definitions of meritocracy and democracy crossover each other because, in a democratic world, everyone should have the same rights and opportunities, independent of social class, color of skin, gender or sexuality. I will link both concepts to the 'Equality of Opportunity' theory because it unites them both: in a democratic society, it would be expected for people to have the same opportunities and to be able to be judged by their own effort and merit. However, when we look to a democratic modern society, if every individual has the same rights – which are also guaranteed by the state – everyone in fact does have the same opportunities. However, this is not how we see the modern society in practice. Although the governments usually attempt to guarantee the same rights to the population as a whole, this is not what happens in reality in different places and scenarios. With that, I will be able to attempt to give an explanation on how these concepts can affect the society and its policies, since sometimes what is said in theory is not really what is applied in practice. This would lead me to try and understand how the elites, political elites and other stakeholders use the same discourse – the meritocratic one, based on the equality of opportunities – to arrange the policy making process. My focus will be on the education policies; therefore, the main point of the research will be on how the meritocratic discourse is considered by the policy makers whenever there is an education policy making process – even if the outcome is a lack of action.

5 THE MERITOCRATIC DISCOURSE

It is very important to shed a light on the dynamics in between the meritocratic discourse, the knowledge society and the equality of opportunities. Now, the case we are looking at in this article reveals a clear contrast between the conditions under which the daily life of a vulnerable individual operates, on the one hand, and the daily life in the other more privileged backgrounds

²¹ Drucker, Peter F. 1994. Knowledge work and knowledge society. The social transformation of this century. *Godkin Lecture at J.F. Kennedy School of Government*, May 4.

individuals all over Brazil. It is striking, in this sense, that these contrasts are erased in the discourse of meritocracy. In this sense, the obstacles to the physical mobility of the vulnerable population – such as people that live in slums - are simultaneously obstacles to the social mobility of this population. However, to understand how this affects the cycle of inequalities or social mobilities, we must first take a step back and investigate how meritocracy came to be related to schooling in modern societies. Only in this way can we understand the assumptions and expectations that underpin the meritocratic discourse.

The main problem with the meritocratic discourse is that it shifts the responsibility of offering decent services to all population away from the government and it ends up internalizing the problem by those who are most directly affected. If the logic behind the lack of access in the education area results in problems to find better jobs, there is a connection that can be made. That is, given that these inequalities are also a result of the lack of access to the more vulnerable population regarding education. Therefore, although the meritocratic discourse is already embedded in society and makes individuals feel guilty for their own social position or failures, it is also possible to see that it cannot be applied to every situation. The reason for that is that in a lot of scenarios the opportunities vary immensely.

This discourse did not grow and spread by itself, but it grew together with the values of liberalism – the ideology that affirms that individuals earn as much as they make the effort.

“The society is free if the race is fair. The race is not fair; there is no equality of opportunity when freedom to realize oneself through success and achievement is impaired, and this occurs whenever ethical, religious, or social limitations are placed on economic activity, whenever governments interfere in the race by favoring some privileged class, whose members could not win on their own.”²²

However, even though a big part of the world’s population understands that people have different backgrounds and different opportunities, this discourse is still very present. This discourse can legitimize competition, because the way to beat others is to try harder than them. “Privileges are exchanged by equal opportunities, where individuals are the ones that decide their own fates and they are not slaves of history, traditions or birth”²³. Therefore, if winning the competition only requires more effort, it means that social mobility can be achieved if the

²² Kramnick, Isaac. 1981. Equal Opportunity and ‘The Race of Life’. *Dissent*, 28: 178-187, page 182.

²³ *Id.*, page 179.

individual tries hard enough. The only three things any individual needs to be successful are ability, effort, and virtue.

Moreover, when linking meritocracy to democracy, there is a gap in between those concepts – one ends up legitimizing the other, wrongly. Democracy is supposed to guarantee the same treatment of every individual and, therefore, the same opportunities. However, it still exists when there is a lack of the promised equality. Nowadays, looking at most of the countries we can observe what Gøsta Esping-Andersen²⁴ puts as a Liberal Regime, in which a government would base itself in market solutions when addressing different types of social issues. The access to education would be molded by a market logic – it is enabled through individual effort and merit. However, basic meritocracy is the lack of discrimination. If there is a certain difference in the way different people – from different genders, skin colors and social classes – are treated it is a fallacy to affirm that there is a possibility to evaluate individual merit by effort.

Considering the book of Isaac Kramnick, where he talks about the differences in the opportunities, he points out that in the moment that there was an attempt to give same opportunities to every citizen, it makes privileges inexistent - in theory. Consequently, the equality of opportunities makes the individuals the ones that will decide their fate. “Individuality became an internal subjective quality; work became a concrete test and property a material extension of self”²⁵. With that, the individual is the only responsible for the success or failure he will get – no one else would be able to intervene in this. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that there are different visions that go against the meritocratic discourse.

Thus, with the meritocratic discourse enrooted in society, with the lack of access of some groups to education and with the lack of education policies regarding the issue, the cycle of inequalities in the most unequal countries is faded to continue.

As said before, the meritocratic discourse arises with the substitution of the privileges by equal opportunities. And, as well, with the rise of democracy – which would be the main provider of equal rights to all citizens.

But how to preserve the association of democracy with an imaginary populated by equalities, if social inequalities are explicit and perennial? On the one hand, modern society is anchored

²⁴ Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²⁵ Kramnick, Isaac. 1990. *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*. London: Cornell University Press, page 8.

in the discourse of equal opportunities and equal rights, guaranteed by the State. On the other hand, the meeting of this discourse with that of meritocracy has among its main effects the individualization, legitimization, and internalization of social inequalities. This is because the social position of each individual in society is justified as an absence of merit, and not as an absence of equal rights and opportunities. “Meritocracy as a social system is therefore a structural impossibility, and, as a cultural discourse, it is a damaging fiction”²⁶. That happens because the whole concept of social mobility is a fallacy when it is put together with inequalities, as in countries such as Brazil. The advantages the rich families have, for example, are structural. And this is true as well for the disadvantages the individuals in the lower social classes have, which makes them unable to achieve social mobility²⁷. Together with the theory that I will explain next, the Equality of Opportunity, it is possible to observe that with a lack of conditions that make circumstances not important, there is a big difference in the opportunities when it comes to access in education.

6 EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

There is a more modern theory, which is called the Equality of Opportunity, and it relates a lot to the concept of Meritocracy, but in another direction. This theory does put into account the individual effort and its rewards, but it does not disregard the complexity of the circumstances of each individual. “Equality of opportunity exists when policies compensate individuals with disadvantageous circumstances so that outcomes experienced by a population depend only on the factors for which persons can be considered to be responsible”²⁸. This theory is of extreme importance because it aims at policies implemented by the states and evaluates on how they can be fair – not only considering the differences between the individuals in unequal countries but also the actions individuals are responsible for. This theory focusses on the inherent inequalities but also on the personal responsibilities.

In that sense, this theory has the goal of showing that individuals are not entirely responsible for their own fates but, nevertheless, that some actions have differences outcomes, and this considers individual efforts and merit as well.

²⁶ Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge, page 217.

²⁷ Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge.

²⁸ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page. 217.

To a better understanding of this theory, it is necessary to understand the difference between ‘equality of welfare’ and the ‘equality of resources’. In the case of ‘equality of welfare’, it does not consider the individual responsible for his preferences²⁹. The example given by Dworkin, the author who explained this concept, is that the society should not be in charge of supporting an individual that has tastes that are more expensive than others³⁰. That is, equality of welfare would be making it possible for individuals to achieve whatever they want to achieve – and the expensive taste could be the desire the individual wants to achieve. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that children do not have enough maturity to be able to be accountable for their actions and preferences. However, in the case of ‘equality of resources’, we focus on “where resources include aspects of a person’s physical and biological environment for which he should not be held responsible (such as those acquired through birth)”³¹. However, there were also critiques about the part that focus on the expensive tastes – because sometimes the “inefficiency in converting wealth into welfare being a handicap, rather than an expensive taste”³². Thus, there is a difficulty on realizing when the person has an expensive taste, or the person has a bigger need for more services because of conditions she did not choose to have.

Another important explanation to understand better the equality of opportunities are the concepts of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’, introduced by Sen³³. Functionings would be the ability to achieve something because of the goods that were provided, that is: “to move about, to become employed, to be healthy (...)”³⁴. And the capability would be, in Sen’s view, the functionings together that would be available for the individual. Sen argues that there is the need of equality of capabilities and the explanation behind this is that two people can have the same functionings (or the lack of it) but very different capabilities – he uses the example of someone starving and someone doing a hunger strike. Thus, opportunities come not as an individual’s functioning but as the functionings that were available to this person, what would be this person’s capability³⁵. Therefore, having the service – functioning – is good, but the

²⁹ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page 223.

³² *Id.*, page 227.

³³ Sen, 1980 apud Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

³⁴ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page 227.

³⁵ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

individual needs to be able to access this service, and others, so that the conjunction can be a capability.

Later, more authors did their own critiques to Dworkin's concepts, affirming that governments should not look for equality of resources but in fact for equality of opportunities for welfare³⁶. This concept was put by Arneson³⁷ and he affirmed that there was a need to "distribute resources so that all persons had equal opportunity for welfare achievement"³⁸ even though the welfares would differ depending on the individual choice.

The true Equality of Opportunity, therefore, is achieved when members of each type

"set of individuals with the same circumstances, where circumstances are those aspects of one's environment [...] which are beyond one's control, and influence outcomes of interest [...] face the same chances, as measured by the distribution functions of the objective that they face"³⁹

Consequently, it would still be unfair in case inequalities still appeared when there was the same effort from both parts.

In the end, this theory shows that if social mobility only exists in exceptions, it means that there is no equality of opportunity. Nevertheless, that it is not desirable that everyone is always at the same level – but that the level acquired should not be guided because of the background of the individual, or a heritage from the parents. When there is an equality of opportunities, there is a fair competition and with that, the differences in people's lives are a result of each one's effort. The most important goal of the theory is to find a way to make sure that people are rewarded accordingly to their own effort, proportionally⁴⁰. Therefore, this theory aims to find policies that are sensitive to effort but that consider the individual's luck – the whole context in which he was born in.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Arneson, 1989 apud Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

³⁸ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page. 227.

³⁹ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page. 229, 231.

⁴⁰ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

Moreover, this theory is extremely important because it shows that the goal of social policies is to fix the different starting points and conditions of a population. Nevertheless, it is also important because it aggregates the concept of economic development together with the equality of opportunity. “An equitable development process should seek to ensure that the opportunity for children to access key goods and services is not correlated with the circumstances that are beyond their control, such as gender, parental background, or ethnicity”⁴¹. If one thinks about development, in the long run, it should mean the approach to equity⁴² – the more developed, the more equal.

The Equality of Opportunity theory takes into account two aspects to provide a ‘just’ society: equalizing and disequalizing. “Equalization takes place with respect to those factors deemed circumstances; inequality is non-compensable, however, if its due, tautologically, to factors for which individuals are held responsible”⁴³. In that sense, there would be an effort to equalize all the circumstances individuals did not have a choice over – and to make sure that otherwise, this is also considered.

However, there is a problem with the process of achieving equity – it is costly. And it depends not only on the money invested on each individual, but also it has to do with the ambitions each person has. If there is an impossibility to achieve higher living standards and social classes, the effort of the more vulnerable will decrease – why put so much effort on something that is so hard to achieve? Nevertheless, investment is necessary for the better functioning of the services that could enable people in less privileged situations for a starting point. There is a need to change the investment from some areas that can have more output than others, but that is in the short term. That is, if we investigate education, the investments that are inputted in the area will not be seen for a long time until they can be an output. Nevertheless, they are, in the long term, a high output for the development of a country. However, as the public policies regarding investments in more disadvantaged groups come from governments that usually have a limited time in power or have to present fast results, this is a difficult topic.

⁴¹ Vega, J.R.M., R.P. Barros, J.S. Chanduvi, M. Giugale, L.J. Cord, C. Pessino and A. Hasan. 2012. *Do Our Children Have a Chance? A Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington DC: The World Bank, page 10.

⁴² Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

⁴³ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page. 271.

Furthermore, it is important to point out and have in mind that intergenerational mobility is usually a way to measure the Equality of Opportunity of a place⁴⁴. That is, because the circumstances should not be the ‘owners’ of someone’s fate – so it should be possible to move to a different social position than the individual’s family. And this is especially true in the society we live nowadays that I will address next. That is because it is a society that focuses on individual abilities that come mostly from formal schooling – which would clearly exclude whoever did not have the access to it.

7 THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

The Knowledge Society has emerged with changes in the industry and in the work force. This society is observed as a social phenomenon, an intellectual construct, a political objective and a policy instrument⁴⁵ (UN, 2005). As the author Peter Drucker explains in his text, there have been different moments in the society when it comes to the organization of types of labor and jobs. After there was a change in workforce that were slaves or servants and that, became afterwards members of a different working class, the aspects in the organization were distinct because they did not work for an individual only – neither for themselves as subsistence. In the beginning of the 1990s, the number of those workers increased a lot⁴⁶. A change in the leading class of society also took place in this period. They were not the ruling class, as the elites per se, but they were the largest population of a post-industrial society in the developed part of the world⁴⁷. This emerging group consisted of knowledge workers. The new framework of this society – the knowledge one – the main way to be able to enter the labor market and to rise socially was – and it still is – having a good education, obtained through formal schooling as the author points out.

The formal education is necessary for those who desire to access works of knowledge and, in this framework, the main way to obtain the education that is required is through formal school education⁴⁸. Apprenticeship – which can also be considered as training courses - is usually insufficient for the labor market in this society, and specially for higher positions. With that,

⁴⁴ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All.

⁴⁵ United Nations. 2005. *Understanding Knowledge Societies: In Twenty Questions And Answers With The Index Of Knowledge Societies*. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

⁴⁶ Drucker, Peter F. 1994. Knowledge work and knowledge society. The social transformation of this century. *Godkin Lecture at J.F. Kennedy School of Government*, May 4.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

the new structure we have in this deeply focused on education society is the formal schooling – as said before, it would be the most important institution⁴⁹. The society is structured by different aspects, such as teamwork – organizations must work as a whole, and it is not only about individual achievements anymore. Therefore, in this very new configuration it is very common that the person that is your employer, also has an employer – which is the reason this society could also be seen as an employee society. Consequently, the higher the individual is on this pyramid of bosses, it is very probable that the better the social position. Being at a higher point in this pyramid means, therefore, that the individual should be more qualified and, because of that, have a higher wage. This would be ‘fair’ because, qualification is acquired through education – which is time-consuming, making his time more worthy.

Moreover, this new society that is called by Peter Drucker as Knowledge Society has important considerations behind the concept itself⁵⁰. It means that the individuals in this new society have also a better understanding of the context that they live in, a better understanding of community and government, a better understanding of what it is to be a citizen – and can have a better grasp on concepts such as development, strategies and policies⁵¹. Consequently, this is not only important for the labor market but for the society in general – individuals are now more apt to understand and participate in the democratic system⁵².

However, this new society did not bring only advantages and benefits – as one would expect. With the emergence of this new society, the education becomes the main point, and by many, it is seen as spread all over the world, all over social backgrounds and different scenarios. This assumption makes the idea of bad performance as an excuse for people that did not try as hard as they could, as if they did not put all the effort they could into their own performance and formation. Additionally, the idea of bad performance as a lack of effort is not only aimed at individuals but also developing countries in general, because this would only be a consequence of not having enough knowledge – which should be easily accessible. This idea is even backed up by the fact that education is a fundamental right (Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This fact supports the assumption that every individual that has the desire to acquire education, would be able to – since it is accessible and free to every human being (when it comes to basic education). It is impossible to deny the fact that the expansion makes it easier

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ Samoff, J. and B. Carrol. 2003. From manpower planning to the knowledge era: World Bank policies on higher education in Africa. *UNESCO forum on Higher Education Research and Knowledge*, July 15.

⁵² *Id.*

for other people – not only white rich men – to access education. However, it is still hard to assume that it is easily accessible for everyone. The fact of the expansion itself cannot be criticized by itself but more on what comes with it in the package. The expansion was brought together with it the idea that education would be reachable for every human being, depending on their own willingness to get educated. This idea ends up creating a scenario of equality of opportunities to achieve education degrees – depending only on the desire and effort. The consequence of the mass production of knowledge and the expansion of the access to education, the meritocratic discourse also found its place and grew immensely. Following the same line as liberalist values, the meritocratic discourse gives more strength to the idea that every individual would gain proportionally their own effort, not considering any other context of this person's life, like family background, gender, social class or race.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out the various reasons on why the assumption on equal opportunities is a fallacy, especially when we look at countries like Brazil.

8 OBJECTIVE

My main goal is to shed a light on how social mobility can be linked to and directly impacted by the meritocratic discourse present in Brazil. Thus, the focus of the research will be on how the discourse present in the country can get in the way of the policy-making process in the education area. And, consequently, how the lack of action in the area can maintain the inequality cycle present in Brazil. I will analyze the general numbers regarding access to primary education and focus on the access of vulnerable population to primary and secondary education in Brazil. Moreover, I will also take into account the reasons of the numbers that are shown in researches and the lack of action in structural policies, that go beyond the affirmative actions that I will address in this research. Affirmative actions are public policies that are focused on addressing groups that suffer from ethnic, racial, religious or gender discriminations – they aim to promote the socioeconomic inclusion of those groups that were historically excluded from access to opportunities. Through the analysis, it will be possible to see how the meritocratic discourse can influence different outcomes in policies – or the policy inaction and how this influences specific groups' lives when it comes to social mobility. Additionally, I will analyze if the meritocratic discourse can also be an impediment for more drastic changes in the educational system as a general – mainly looking at the general commitment to education coming from the government.

The educational system of Brazil excludes a big part of the vulnerable and marginalized population, since access to quality education is much harder for people in those groups. Education, however, is not the only service that is harder to access. I will not study those other services and deficit of access. In this thesis, I try to understand how a discourse that is now so enrooted in the way of thinking of all social classes made it possible for the lack of policies. The presence of this discourse enables policy makers and the Brazilian government to ignore the fact that different conditions, circumstances, and backgrounds give individual's different access to public goods and services, such as education.

Additionally, this research project also proposes a better grasp on how the complexity of Brazil as a country and its legacies made it worse for those inequalities to rise at first, but specially on the mechanisms that make them still so apparent. Therefore, I will focus on the lack of the social mobility and the reason why it seems to be an ongoing reality considering the lack of access to education but also on how the high discrepancy in the social classes appeared – and the connection of lower social classes to racial profiles.

It seems central to point out that the country I will talk about, Brazil, has most of its population that identifies as black. Nevertheless, for different reasons that were addressed in the beginning of this research, most of this population is also the more vulnerable. A high percentage of the black population is considered to be in the low-income class. In the end, the aim of the research is to understand how one discourse, even after several years of attempts to have every individual worldwide having fundamental rights, can get in the way of an actual equality in rights and in opportunities, mainly.

To reach my main objective, I will analyze and connect the main ideologies in the discourse that makes up tools to exclude and maintain the cycle of inequalities in Brazil. Understanding how powerful discourses are for the exclusion of different and important groups in the fundamental rights can be used for different situations. However, in this research I will focus on the topic that I find the most important for the ability to move socially – education.

9 CASE STUDY: BRAZIL AND THE UNEQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION

To better explain the problem of the meritocratic discourse – especially in countries with higher inequalities – I will use the example of Brazil. UNESCO published a handbook where there was an effort to figure out methods to ensure that equity in education is at the spotlight both domestically and internationally. However, the handbook observes a lack of an absolute

concept around equity in education – which makes it harder to understand when the equity is achieved or not. The handbook, then, provides

“5 different concepts that can help in measuring equity in the educational system:

- a. Meritocracy: educational opportunities are distributed on the basis of merit.
- b. Minimum standards: educational opportunities must be at least the same for everyone below a certain threshold.
- c. Equality of condition: educational opportunities must be the same for everyone in the population, regardless of their different circumstances.
- d. Impartiality: educational opportunities should be distributed equally by gender, ethnicity, religion, language, location, wealth, disability, and other characteristics.
- e. Redistribution: mechanism for compensation of initial disadvantage.”⁵³

Therefore, we can observe that there are different ways and angles for looking at equity in education – and they are very valuable depending on the context we focus on. In Brazil, for example, it is impossible to affirm that anything beyond minimum standards is achieved – if even that.

The access to education in Brazil, although it is supposed to be a fundamental right, varies depending on different factors – such as racial profile and social class. For the primary and secondary education, there is a very clear division of classes in Brazil. Since the higher social classes usually opt for the private education in those stages of the education. In opposition, the lower classes can only afford taking their children to public schools – that is, when there is no need for them to help the family with the income.

As said before, social policies in general are a difficult issue to address when it comes to investment and attempts to make the circumstances less unequal, mainly because their output comes in the long term. However, education can be even worse “because a good part of it occurs before the “age of consent”, that is, the age which people should be held at least partially

⁵³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2018. Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education. Montreal, Quebec. <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/handbook-measuring-equity-education-2018-en.pdf> (last access: July 25, 2022), page 127.

responsible for the various choices they make”⁵⁴. However, there are some social policies in the Brazilian higher education that are affirmative actions that try to provide more equity in the access – like quotas or financing. Both policies still consider individual effort since there is a need to pass an exam and to keep an average of grades higher than the others. Nevertheless, since it does not change the structural fact that people that come from more vulnerable backgrounds are the ones that need it to succeed, it seems like not looking at the roots of the problem. It can help a part of the vulnerable population but those are still considered exceptions if we look at the group as a whole.

The Brazilian law requires that all children up to 17 should attend school, otherwise they should be taken away from their parents. However, this is not what happens in practice – school attendance is very low, with a percentage lower than the average in the other OECD countries – Brazil’s being 87% and the average being 88%, according to IBGE⁵⁵. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that even the children that complete their studies in public schools have already a big disadvantage in comparison to the ones that attend private schools. The public schools sometimes have lack of investing, and this is confirmed according to a survey made by the Municipal Secretary of Education in 2011, in which 62% of the municipal schools had infrastructures defined as “regular, bad or terrible”⁵⁶

If it is true that access to education is already precarious in the poorest regions of the city due to lack of investment in teachers, infrastructure, and school supplies, it is also true that the obstacles to the physical mobility of poorer neighborhoods worsen this problem, to the extent that they often make it impossible for them to attend school.

⁵⁴ Roemer, J.E. and A. Trannoy. 2015. Equality of Opportunity. In A.B. Atkinson and F. Bourguignon. *Handbook of Income Distribution*, pp. 217-300. Oxford: Elsevier B.V. All, page 261.

⁵⁵ Putini, Rafaela. 2018. Frequência em escola ou creche no Brasil está abaixo da média de países da OCDE, diz IBGE. *G1*, December 05. <https://g1.globo.com/educacao/noticia/2018/12/05/frequencia-em-escola-ou-creche-no-brasil-esta-abaixo-da-media-de-paises-da-ocde-diz-ibge.ghtml> (last access: December 02, 2019).

⁵⁶ Apud Longaigh, Clara Ní. 2017. Uma Introdução à Educação Pública no Rio de Janeiro. *RioOnWatch*, February 17. <https://rioonwatch.org.br/?p=24544> (last access: December 02, 2019).

Figure 1: Level of education of people of 25 years or more (IBGE Educa. 2022)



The way the meritocratic discourse is presented in the educational system is that “educational opportunities are distributed on the basis of merit”⁵⁷. This way of understanding effort is directly aligned with the imaginary of a competition fought on an "equal footing", as if the opportunities and experiences of individuals were on the same level. For this reason, it is important to take both the meritocratic discourse that is outdated but also the theory of Equality of Opportunity, which is what public policies should aim for. People are, indeed, responsible for their own actions and for the effort they put into the things – however, it is impossible to compare individuals when they have different opportunities based on circumstances. And in this case, not only the opportunities matter but also the ambitions that they acquire depending on the circumstances they live in.

Despite equality of rights and public services, the problems of democracy become evident when it comes to access. Starting from the hypothesis that this social inequality is linked to a profound inequality of opportunities, this article confronts the discourse of meritocracy not only with the objective of pointing out its limits, but also of exposing its effects on society. The discourse makes it possible for policy makers to avoid addressing the root problems coming from the inequalities – since they come from the lack of effort and not the lack of opportunities (or different circumstances).

⁵⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2018. Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education. Montreal, Quebec. <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/handbook-measuring-equity-education-2018-en.pdf> (last access: July 25, 2022), page 23.

Even when there is access to education, the problem is ongoing. The lack of differentiation between students within the school causes, according to François Dubet, a factor of "'cruelty' [...] to emerge, because when the student fails, the responsibility for the failure is imputed to himself, so that the problem ceases to be social and becomes individual. And this implies a motivational issue"⁵⁸. Thus, the school legitimizes social inequalities, making the lower classes guilty for being where they are, since in principle everyone had the same opportunities and started from the same places, being differentiated only by their individual efforts.

Therefore, "the liberal meritocratic school is not a fair school because it does not consider pre-established inequalities, whether of class, gender, or ethnicity"⁵⁹. Thus, it is possible to realize that even with the expansion of education and the easy access to it, opportunities are still very unequal, and several factors still act on the formation of individuals and their futures. The problem with this expansion is that it reproduces the class relations of capitalism, according to Collins⁶⁰ and promotes an ideological legitimization of the dominant class, in an attempt to show that failure comes solely and exclusively from the individual and not from the conditions in which he or she lives. For example, in the Northeast region of Brazil, there is the major concentration of illiterates (13,9% - IBGE), while the South and Southeast only have 3,3% (IBGE)⁶¹.

Besides social inequalities, there are several other inequalities that act as limiting factors in several cases, and one of them would be culture, for example. Minorities end up being the most affected by this meritocratic system because any kind of inequality or injustice is looked down upon. "Minority members are kept in inferior class positions because they compete in a school system in terms of a culture that is alien to their own, and hence they compete at a disadvantage"⁶². Any power relationship surfaces in this case and makes minorities have to work harder to achieve the same place as someone who is already born with all the privileges. Those inequalities are also visible in the illiterate percentages: for the black population in Brazil, we see a number as high as 8,9% while for the white population it is 3,6%. In regards to drop offs, the percentages also show unequal results within the different populations: 20,2% of

⁵⁸ François Dubet 2004 apud Marcato, C.T. and C.L.A. Conti. 2017. Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia. *Devir Educação* 1 (1): 66-74, page 69.

⁵⁹ Marcato, C.T. and C.L.A. Conti. 2017. Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia. *Devir Educação* 1 (1): 66-74, page 73.

⁶⁰ Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. London/New York: Academic Press.

⁶¹ See *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

the individuals with ages between 14 to 29 years did not complete basic education – either because of a drop off or because they were never enrolled. Furthermore, from that 20,2%, 71,7% are black people. The drop off reasons are varied but the most cited one is the need to work and provide income for the family (39,1%). The delays in schooling also increase later in the children's lives: from 11 years old onwards. And, once again, it has a big difference if we observe different racial profiles: for the white population, 90,4% was in the grade according to their age and in the black population, the rate goes to 85,5%. It is also important to point out the discrepancy present in the differences in between primary and secondary education and the tertiary: while 82% of the students in school attend public institutions, it changes for 73,7% of the students attending private institutions when it comes to higher education. As expected, the inequalities keep on growing by each stage of life.

Figure 2: People from 18 to 24 years (translation: rate of schooling; adjusted rate of liquid schooling attendance; adequate schooling attendance; delay in schooling; does not attend school and has already concluded the stage) (IBGE. 2020).

Pessoas de 18 a 24 anos – 2019

	Taxa de escolarização	Taxa ajustada de frequência escolar líquida	Frequência escolar adequada	Atraso escolar dos estudantes	Não frequenta escola e já concluiu a etapa
Brasil	32,4	25,5	21,4	11	4,1
Norte	33,3	21	18	15,2	3
Nordeste	32	19,5	17	15	2,5
Sudeste	31,2	28,1	23,2	8	4,9
Sul	34,6	30,6	25,9	8,8	4,8
Centro-Oeste	35	31,1	25,4	9,6	5,7
Homem	30,7	21,5	18,4	12,3	3,1
Mulher	34,2	29,7	24,5	9,7	5,1
Branca	37,9	35,7	29,7	8,2	6
Preta ou parda	28,8	18,9	16,1	12,7	2,8

Fonte: IBGE, Diretoria de Pesquisas, Coordenação de Trabalho e Rendimento, Pesquisa Nacional por Domicílios Contínua 2019

It is possible to observe, therefore, that in countries with high rates of inequalities it would be hard to evaluate individuals and their achievements only based in merit – the circumstances must be considered. If they are not, only the exceptions will be ‘freed’ from the intergenerational legacy.

10 RELEVANCE

The relevance of this research consists in the fact that the access to education has a big impact in every individual's life. As it was explained, the society we live in nowadays makes education close to mandatory to have good living conditions and to achieve a decent lifestyle. If not everyone has access to it in their childhood, what can end up compromising the rest of the years, the problem has to be on the spotlight.

The importance to understand the connection between the inability to ascend socially and the meritocratic discourse is broad. When there is an internalization of a problem that affects a major part of a population but that has no action taken towards, it shows the position this population is located at. As it is possible to imagine, if the population affected was the dominant one, the issues would be much more salient than they are nowadays. That is, because the connection between not being able to access a basic good and the fact of being unable to increase your social position can impact an individual's life from birth to death – and this should be in the spotlight for any democratic government. In this paper, there was an attempt to look not only at the discrepancies in the structures and access – even mobility – but also to backgrounds. If there is a known and enrooted cycle of inequalities, that do not allow people from lower-income classes to increase their economic status, it is only expected that spending a lot of effort in something that will have no output is not the main goal.

It is fairly easy to observe the meritocratic discourse in the education area, especially because one can almost say the performance of individuals in this system is based in merit. The day-to-day life in the schools and universities is based on having the best performance or at least above average. However, even within the same learning environment, there are still different scenarios in each students' life. Some performances can outstand others, even with the same – or less – effort. Nevertheless, the differences in the lives of the students and their own particularities are not considered when performance is evaluated in those environments – the feedback is based in the work merit only.

The merit-based reward keeps on going in every stage on an individual's life. The higher the stage of education a person achieves, the fitter this person will be for a position with a higher demand in the labor force. Additionally, the more specialized a job requirement is, a bigger importance is given to the studies in the specific area. Therefore, there is a clear differentiation in the employment market: the higher the level of education an individual can reach, the higher

the abilities to do the job⁶³. The expansion of highly specialized jobs happens altogether with the expansion of the formal schooling⁶⁴. However, at first, this expansion of the education system happens because of the need to generate similar values, culture and way of thinking in countries that were marked by a heterogenous population – following a clear liberalization of the world.

With the scientific advances, the jobs offer started being more specialized as well, with a necessity for highly qualified people. Consequently, there was an increase in education in the sense that it had to follow the pace of the other advances. Subsequently, the labor market started focusing on people that were more qualified or that fitted specific requirements, giving those individuals higher wages. However, those degrees could not be obtained by any individual – they were time-consuming and, in a lot of times, money consuming as well. Not only for tuition fees but also because, using the available time to study would therefore mean it could not be used for another work – which meant less money. In this configuration, the individual would have to either have savings to be able to survive or support from other individuals. However, in the end the specialization made it possible as well to have an expansion in the educational system. That expansion, nevertheless, did not change the opportunities given to all the social classes⁶⁵. This expansion cannot be seen only as a good achievement – although it facilitates the access of the more vulnerable in most of the cases, it also has its downside. The other facet of this ‘equality of opportunities’ is that it makes social inequalities explainable – but not because of public policies, but because of each individual. It makes social inequalities legitimate, where people in more vulnerable situations deserve to be in a position they are, justified by a lack of effort. With that, the expansion works in both ways – it makes it more accessible but it also makes inequalities a just consequence, because

“just as the ethnic struggles shaped the other social struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the permeation of educational credentials into the occupational world has shaped the major issues of stratifications in recent decades”⁶⁶

⁶³ Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. London/New York: Academic Press.

⁶⁴ Drucker, Peter F. 1994. Knowledge work and knowledge society. The social transformation of this century. *Godkin Lecture at J.F. Kennedy School of Government*, May 4.

⁶⁵ Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. London/New York: Academic Press.

⁶⁶ Id., page 94.

In the end, there is an actual expansion in the access to education but the same expansion does not translate to the job offers. As said before, the access to primary education differentiates depending on the neighborhood an individual is born in or because of the color of the skin. Therefore, I will look at primary educational system – which is also linked to the higher education since there is an exam to have access to public higher education. And, with difficulties in access or graduation of primary education – there is no other stage of the educational system an individual could attempt to achieve. In this sense, it is essential that the individual completes the primary and secondary education and, moreover, has a good education that makes him able to compete with people that had an easy access to all of those stages.

With this, there is the "internalization of exclusion" as Luiz Freitas⁶⁷, which would be the exclusion of those who cannot win in this competition that exists within the school itself, thus being marginalized twice. Thus, the "merit arising from liberal meritocracy is not merit, but an inheritance"⁶⁸. An individual who comes from a wealthy, well-structured family and can make use of his time and energy to achieve his goal, cannot take the entire merit for himself, since he is already born in a more favorable position to achieve what he aspires to. However, the success of individuals in both the school and work spheres is not just a matter of personal effort, as there is no equality of opportunity. "It is not an individual question, but a social one, in two distinct senses: objective conditions, which involve resources of the most diverse [...], and others of a cultural nature, also related to social position"⁶⁹. In that sense, it is important to address the concept of Equality of Opportunity. The concept points out that no individual should be confined to a future because of their parents' background – which translates into their social and racial profile. However, this is not what happens.

Therefore, "the liberal meritocratic school is not a fair school because it does not consider pre-established inequalities, whether of class, gender, or ethnicity"⁷⁰. Thus, it is possible to realize that even with the expansion of education and the easy access to it, opportunities are still very unequal, and several factors still act on the formation of individuals and their futures. The problem with this expansion is that it reproduces the class relations of capitalism, according to

⁶⁷ Freitas 2002 apud Marcato, C.T. and C.L.A. Conti. 2017. Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia. *Devir Educação* 1 (1): 66-74.

⁶⁸ Marcato, C.T. and C.L.A. Conti. 2017. Justiça e Igualdade na Escola: a Falácia da Meritocracia. *Devir Educação* 1 (1): 66-74, page 70.

⁶⁹ *Id.*, page 71.

⁷⁰ *Id.*, page 73.

Collins⁷¹, and promotes an ideological legitimization of the dominant class, in an attempt to show that failure comes solely and exclusively from the individual and not from the conditions in which he or she lives.

However, in addition to maintaining these inequalities, meritocracy justifies them by placing the 'blame' on the very individuals who failed to achieve their goals.

Additionally, on the last two years the whole world went through a pandemic, which made a lot of the world population unable to follow their daily routines. However, as expected, for some people to adapt to the new digital life the last two years brought to the planet was harder than for others. During the last years, inequalities have been taken to an extreme and, as expected, the individuals that were already vulnerable were the ones that suffered the most with this crisis – as usually. In the case of education, the main action was to move activities online, what demands internet connection and gadgets that are able to connect to the server. Once again, as expected, most of the vulnerable population – specially in Brazil – did not have access to the tools to adapt to the digital world, which made inequalities grow even bigger.

11 CONCLUSION

The meritocratic discourse ends up internalizing, legitimizing, and individualizing social inequalities because the social class in which individuals find themselves in society ends up being related to the size of the effort that the individual himself has made - assuming an accessible social mobility. Thus, individuals from lower classes are considered worthy of the social position they are in, an assumption that does not take into consideration any other inequalities already present in society, “people are more likely to tolerate severe inequality, if it is suggested that, regardless of this fact, there is enough social mobility for everyone to succeed”⁷². In Brazil, individuals from the lower classes are blamed for an inequality that often ends up being inherited from the place and family where they were born, which shows that the zip code of the city interferes a lot in the life of each individual. There is an absence of equality and opportunities - which, however, is not taken into account when people make use of the meritocratic discourse.

⁷¹ Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. London/New York: Academic Press.

⁷² Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge, page 217.

In Brazil, as it is in most of the countries close to it, the equality in education is still a far way ahead. This makes the equality of opportunities in general very different depending on different factors for every individual. “Sadly, personal circumstances still matter greatly for Latin American children. Your parents’ level of education will very likely determine yours, and your birthplace is still the most powerful predictor of whether you will have access to basic infrastructure”⁷³. It is possible to see that the opportunities in Brazil are highly linked to the family background:

“The advantaged students outperformed their less favored peers by 97 points in reading in Brazil, contrasting with the difference in the OECD average of 89 points. Intergenerational trends in Brazil also show that two-thirds of children of parents with no basic education do not achieve this level of schooling either”⁷⁴

As it is visible with the policies presented earlier in this text, there was an effort coming from the Brazilian government to broaden the access of the minorities to higher education – however the effort when it comes to primary education is not as visible with affirmative actions, especially because primary education is universal in the country. In addition, municipalities and local governments are the ones in charge of financing basic education, what means that there is a big discrepancy within national states as well. Nevertheless, even with affirmative actions for the access to higher education, the high rates of inequalities and low rates of social mobility did not have a big decrease. The reason for this is because, individuals do need the highest education they can have to achieve better job positions in life, however, the issue itself does not begin – nor stop – in gaining access to higher education. It is, needless to say, much deeper and more complex than this. Moreover, policies like the ones mentioned above, although the target is a whole population, in the end they only reach part of this said population. With that, they are affirmative policies but they cannot have a structural change.

Through the reflections made, I would like to take into consideration mainly the fact that the school ends up internalizing and legitimizing meritocracy, since the school system is all based on individual merit. Therefore, what would be the solution for an education that considers,

⁷³ Vega, J.R.M., R.P. Barros, J.S. Chanduvi, M. Giugale, L.J. Cord, C. Pessino and A. Hasan. 2012. *Do Our Children Have a Chance? A Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington DC: The World Bank, page 3.

⁷⁴ OECD. 2021. Education Policy Outlook Brazil: With A Focus On International Policies. <https://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/country-profile-Brazil-2021-INT-EN.pdf> (last access: July 28, 2022), page 11.

besides individual effort, the various differences and inequalities that already exist among its students? What would be an innovative model to follow that did not standardize individuals?

The many public policies in different areas that address a certain group or population, in the end, can overlap with the policy of universal access, and as Reginaldo Moraes points out in “Neoliberalismo: de onde vem, para onde vai?”:

“Universal access makes services considered social rights and public goods. Selective access makes it possible to define more narrowly and to discriminate the recipient of benefits. [...] Neoliberalism's social policies, in turn, come closer and closer to the profile of compensatory policies, that is, policies that suppose, as a previous and 'given' environment, another project of society defined in a field opposite to that of collective deliberation and planning. The new model of society is defined by the universe of exchanges, by the invisible hand of the market”⁷⁵

The mentality shown above explicitly focus on groups as if the government was giving the opportunity for those persons, and not as if it was something that were already theirs by default. And this overlaps with the concept of Liberal Regimes from Gøsta Esping-Andersen⁷⁶, since it treats social problems with a market-logic.

Taking into account the points raised, we come across the realization that access to education is not the solution to the problems of inequality, since it does not matter how much some individuals manage to ascend socially in the face of an extreme lack of resources, most of them still have to deal with a series of other obstacles to social ascension. It is then necessary to think about what kind of public policies could be applied so that the structural model of education and remuneration would change and so that individuals who rise socially would no longer be a small percentage of the low-income population.

⁷⁵ Moraes, Reginaldo. 2001. *Neoliberalismo: de onde vem, para onde vai?* São Paulo: Senac, page 66.

⁷⁶ Esping-Andersen, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

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