



Meritocracy and citizenship education of learners with mild intellectual disabilities in post-apartheid South African schools

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Abstract

Worldwide, meritocracy serves as one of the key aims of education in embodying justice by emphasising individual intelligence, skills, and talents to validate individuals' success. In context, learners with mild intellectual disabilities require education primarily to represent justice by developing their intellectual and adaptive functions in achieving success. We identify as problematic the fact that the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) embraces meritocratic liberal-based citizenship education in educating learners with mild intellectual disabilities but stifles civic republican-based citizenship education in the process. Methodologically, in this philosophical paper, we employ descriptive, analytical, and evaluative approaches and adopt Tomaševski's 4A-scheme framework (1999) that is intent on achieving human rights in education. Essentially, the Schools Act fosters a liberal-based citizenship education that, in turn, fosters inequality by compromising educational availability; it encourages individual achievement, thus impeding accessibility, favours market-based models, thus denouncing acceptability, and promotes a rewards system that impedes adaptability. A civic republican-based human rights citizenship education is presented as a solution to reframe the embrace of meritocracy in educating learners with mild intellectual disabilities in schools.

Keywords: citizenship education, learners with mild intellectual disabilities, meritocracy, schools, South Africa

Introduction

Meritocracy,¹ as the conceptual brainchild of Michael Young (1958) is inherently about achieving social efficiency through individual ability² without considering wealth or class privilege. In principle, an individual is recognised and rewarded for attaining a certain level of achievement that contributes to societal progress. It is regarded as one of the key concepts that manifest a liberalism that is focused on individual rights and freedoms (Locke, 1689/1983) and thus finds relevance in citizenship education.³ Under this distinction, we contend that the acceptance of meritocracy as a liberal concept in education exacerbates individualisation which leads to exclusion of vulnerable groups such as those with mild intellectual disabilities⁴ (MID). Therefore, we identify the problem to be educational practices permitted by the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Department of Education, 1996) that embrace meritocratic liberal-based citizenship education in educating learners with MID and stifle civic republican-based citizenship education in the process. Consequently, this stifles a civic republican-based citizenship education approach to developing their intellectual and adaptive functions, thus leading to inequality. Pettit (1997) referred to civic republicanism as involving citizens exercising their rights and fulfilling their responsibilities in a democratic community without being dominated by others. Therefore, a civic republican-based citizenship education approach considers that “meritocracy . . . perpetuates inequality by rewarding those who are already privileged” (Sandel, 2021, p. 145). Essentially, the meritocratic system promotes a rewards-based approach, market-driven models, and individual achievement, which further disadvantages learners with MID whose success is dependent on enhanced learning support.

As the primary focus of this paper, learners with MID are characterised as having deficits in both intellectual and adaptive functions. These deficits occur in three domains, conceptual, social and practical, that represent different aspects of human cognition. The conceptual domain is responsible for abstract thinking, the social domain for communicating with others and the practical domain for reading, writing, and assuming responsibilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Arguably, in cultivating the development of their intellectual and adaptive functions, they are entitled to a citizenship education that focuses on the collective wellbeing found in the benefits of civic republicanism in post-apartheid South African schools.

¹ For Michael Young, in *The rise of the meritocracy* (1958), the underlying formula used to rate the subject is I.Q. + Effort = Merit.

² Individual ability is intertwined between and among one’s talent and potential and, as Young’s (1958) formula of the subject considers, intelligence and effort.

³ Citizenship is a combination of legal status (rights and responsibilities), a sense of belonging to a community, and active participation in civic life to promote the common good, so the concept of citizenship falls along a spectrum from liberalism and communitarianism to civic republicanism (Osler, 2005). We focus only on the extremes of liberalism and civic republicanism here.

⁴ Mild intellectual disabilities are cognitive impairments occurring in the developmental stage that cause deficits in both intellectual and adaptive functions that work collectively.

The primary objectives of this paper are to:

- provide an overview of the literature on meritocracy based on educational practices and how they impact educating learners with MID;
- adopt Tomaševski's 4A's (1999) as a perspective from which to contextualise the liberal-based citizenship education propelled by meritocracy towards reconciling human rights in education;
- present a critical analysis of meritocracy embedded in the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) that embraces liberalism; and
- consider the best course of action to take against the liberal meritocracy manifested in post-apartheid South African schools in favour of a civic republican-based citizenship education to have learners with MID graduate as active citizens.

Methodology

All research is situated within conceptual, empirical, and philosophical boundaries. In this paper, we justify the philosophical method over empirical methods because it does not rely on data collection to support conclusions but clarifies the problems of education and presents possible alternatives (Standish, 2014). Accordingly, the philosophical method does not involve the collection of original data but is characterised instead by a literature review, the adoption of a theoretical framework, and a critical analysis of secondary evidence⁵ in order to conduct a theoretical analysis. We draw on three methods of inquiry: a descriptive enquiry; an analytical one; and a normative one conceptualised by Frankena (1973), to ground the article. Under the guidance of the study's keywords (citizenship education, learners with mild intellectual disabilities, meritocracy, schools, and South Africa), the descriptive enquiry reviews the relevant literature and the adoption of Tomaševski's 4A's framework (1999). The analytical inquiry explores the context of meritocracy and examines how the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) serves as its mechanism. By extension, it considers how citizenship education emphasises adapted learning methods for learners with MID to develop social responsibility and independence and decision-making while ensuring accessibility to civic rights, responsibilities, and democratic participation in post-apartheid South African schools. Finally, the normative inquiry presents a human-rights-based perspective on citizenship education for learners with MID in post-apartheid South African schools in focusing on personalised learning approaches that enhance both their intellectual and adaptive abilities.

Meritocracy in education and learners with mild-intellectual disabilities: A critical review of literature

Virtues and justifications of meritocracy as an aim of education

The intersections of meritocracy are found between an individual and groups as well as between an individual and the state (Young, 2006). Therefore, the concept of meritocracy

⁵ Google Scholar was used as the primary search engine to select articles and policy documents.

structures these relationships on the basis of equality and reciprocity. Hence, as a matter of justice, equality of opportunity should be offered to all (Rawls, 1971). The concept has garnered legitimacy based on the reasons extended by Goldthorpe (1996): “(1) careers open to talents; (2) educational opportunity matched to natural ability; (3) achievement as the basis for social inequality in industrial society” (pp. 255–256). For these reasons, an individual’s success in any of these areas would not be the result of social crimes such as bribery, social ills such as nepotism, or social attitudes with elitist views. Meritocracy reflects Mill’s (2015) focus on utilitarianism and individual freedoms, criticising aristocracies that limit fair resource distribution and prevent social mobility for those without privilege or high status. As a case study, the intellectual and adaptive functional development of learners with MID in schools is encapsulated in this bracket to provide them with a chance at opportunity. The postulation is based on just governance that provides education that improves learners’ thinking skills by focusing on reasoning and rationality as key foundations. In addition, freedom should promote independence and empowerment, helping learners develop resilience in social interactions. Furthermore, equal opportunities should support self-sufficiency and social mobility, enabling individuals to improve their lives through personal efforts. The critique of meritocracy in education is based largely on its focus on inequality (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2021), its emphasis on individual achievement without considering systemic barriers (Ravitch & Stoehr, 2017), and its market-driven approach, which raises concerns about how merit is defined and rewarded (Akabor, 2020). In the following subsection, the connection between the realities of China, Germany, and South Africa is based on all three being democratic countries while differences in their execution of civic republicanism makes them interesting in relation to the notion of meritocracy in their educational practices.

Debates about meritocracy and educational practices in South Africa: Pedagogical and societal implications

The National Senior Certificate (NSC) presently awards prizes to public schools⁶ based on the criterion of the most improved schools according to pass rates. It includes schools with improvement and excellence in individual subjects and schools with overall excellence in academic performance for the particular year (Western Cape Education Department, 2022). Additionally, these awards include the issuing of prizes accompanied by money to the top three achieving matriculant learners who have completed the NSC. The criteria are based on *candidate subject awards* that are given to learners with the highest marks and *excellence despite barriers to learning* to learners with special education needs who obtain the highest marks in six subjects (Western Cape Education Department, 2022).

Akabor (2020) contended that rewards such as the above work against the implementation of inclusive education that acknowledges, values, and enables the participation of all learners in schools. As a result of the academic competition that is enabled in educational environments, mechanisms for individual learner support are disregarded. Andrews (2024) has corroborated

⁶ These include ordinary schools, full-service ordinary schools, special schools, schools of skills, and technical schools.

the downside effects of meritocracy by asserting that schools' pursuit of excellence breeds competition in these Grade 12 examination results in rewarding schools that are more focused on outcomes than on addressing and supporting learner needs. Moreover, it discourages learners from valuing education and applying themselves, given the schooling culture that entrenches academic high achievement as a priority (Batruch et al., 2023).

In situating learners with MID, practices of awarding prizes to a very select few infer that the extrinsic rewards system compromises the development of the conceptual domain by virtue of school priorities not set on equal earning support. Since the primary focus of this paper is on learners with MID who attend ordinary public schools and not special schools, we note that these public schools exemplify market-based models. The striving to attain the monetary rewards that the DBE grants the so-called excellent school each school year is of greater importance than a genuine commitment to well-rounded education and personal growth beyond standardised achievements. This ableism perpetuates and reinforces inequality, which, for the social domain, enforces MID learners' low self-esteem in relation to cooperating with others and participating in deliberative discourses. Essentially, their limited ability to read social cues or acquire social skills drives them into states of passivity, obedience, and overreliance on others. In consequence, the practical domain becomes affected in that the individual achievement which ought to be construed as individual growth, overshadows the development of their other strengths to execute tasks successfully.

Meritocracy educational practices debates in China: Pedagogical and societal implications

The establishment of educational *School practice of key secondary schools*⁷ in Beijing (Ministry of Education, 2002) as part of its budget reforms was an approach to cut down on spending with only a few secondary schools enjoying the benefits of a quality education. The establishment of these schools was based on the decision to prioritise a few schools in relation to resource allocation by allowing admission of only the top academically performing learners (Jin & Ball, 2020). Arguably, these schools, which are inherently public, like those in South Africa, exemplify market-based models, emphasising competition and (in)equality while redirecting an education less focused on improving the education of a diverse learner population and more on the learners deemed to be academically superior. For Young (1958), “[I]t is that a meritocracy could only exist in any full form if there were such a narrowing down of values that people could be put in rank order of worth” (p. xvii). Implicitly, ranking school systems and learners alike exemplifies a commodified education that is based on elitism, with the long-term reward system determining the prospects of entrance to higher education institutions, employment, and guaranteed social mobility.⁸ By extension, Du et al. (2020) echoed the point that the tiered education system in Chinese education has unintended consequences of social stratification and that the individual achievement of learners from

⁷ Under the Compulsory Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2006), Key Schools are currently referred to as tiered schooling.

⁸ Unrelated to basic education, a common practice that is perpetuated in the higher education system in China is the practice of high-stakes university entrance exams (gaokao). These highly competitive exams for the vulnerable cohorts in society, either in relation to material conditions, ability, or geographic location, foreshadow meritocracy that ignores, as Jiang (2024) has corroborated, inequities however egalitarian and fairly perceived such examinations seem to be to these groups.

these schools creates a successful illusion of meritocracy, resulting in an uneven playing field in the grassroots of education.

In identifying learners with MID, educational practices such as *Key Secondary Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2002) or tiered schooling reinforce a system that prioritises meritocracy. As a result, the state perpetuates inequalities for these learners who face cognitive barriers to learning, particularly when their challenges are not addressed through an equality-focused approach. The rewards system implies that educational standards, from basic to higher education, set low expectations for their success. Despite these institutions being public, the market-driven model continues to limit their meaningful inclusion and participation, making it more theoretical than practical. This strong focus on individual academic achievement highlights the prioritisation of academic success over vocational skills development.

Meritocracy educational practices debates in Germany: Pedagogical and societal implications

The practice of “early tracking” (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2015)⁹ is a system that involves learners streamed in tracks between three categories (basic, intermediate, and academic track) of secondary schooling, which are decided upon from the age of 10. Essentially, its long-term aim is to ensure post-secondary labour market success. Its characterisation, which is similar to the tiered schooling practice in China, implies that if a learner belongs to the academic track, the only one that enables entry into higher education institutions, they are more likely to succeed later in life (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2015). Therefore, in the academic track, learners have potential opportunities in the upper echelons of the labour market since the 21st century globalised world is geared towards more formal career paths.

Biewen and Thiele (2020) argued that early tracking practices are rigid and inflexible, despite the Ministry of Education’s rationale and responsibility for ensuring efficient allocation of educational resources, with the sorting system working to meet national workforce objectives in the long run. They contended that the Ministry of Education’s predetermined career paths are prematurely chosen for the learners based on the characteristics they exhibit between the ages of 6 to 10 during compulsory primary education. Essentially, they have critiqued the entire tracking system in preferring a delayed one. In this preference, there is a reduced margin for error in learner misplacements caused by educator pedagogies that fail to provide all learners with the best possible tools and opportunities for them to develop their skills and interests carefully as an appropriate strategy that supports their autonomous career decisions. Domina et al. (2019) and Dräger et al. (2023) have confirmed that in existing research, there is a clear overlap between learners’ outcomes with those in academic tracks and large academic gains as a reward for belonging to that specific track. By having schools focus exclusively on intellectual achievement, learners may miss the opportunity to develop

⁹ The Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) is a standing conference of the Federal Republic of Germany’s Education and Cultural Affairs ministers in which the interests and objectives of those two ministries are reflected in its publications under the name.

additional skills that they could acquire in a more diverse learning environment where a range of abilities is nurtured in the same school.

In their critique of the early tracking system, Biewen and Thiele (2020) have implied that the future of learners with MID is decided upon too soon. In effect, their opportunity to benefit from holistic teaching methods designed to develop their conceptual domain, which should be the responsibility of both the state and educators, is minimised. Therefore, based on the principles of meritocracy, their individual achievement is predetermined and limited. Given the clinical experiments on intellectual disability conducted by Patel et al. (2020), this infers that the development of the social domain remains suppressed. Behind this, is the clustering of (neurotypical) learners of presumed equivalent ability (as per the three categories of the tracking system), and the consequent lack of exposure to learners with different capabilities and the failure to acquire the social skills necessary to interact with them. In corroboration of both the empirical (Patel et al., 2020) and theoretical evidence by Domina et al. (2019), this lack of diversity in schools leads ultimately to inequalities in the overall educational experience. In contrast, the basic and intermediate tracks offer a distinct advantage in developing the practical domain by focusing on practical skills. Although it limits positive development in the conceptual and social domains, the concentrated model reinforces thorough development of a specific area in which a learner exhibits strong ability. In juxtaposing the oppositional scholarly voices against the essence of a rewards system, the goal of the early tracking system (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2015) that delivers personalised education indirectly, facilitates all learners to be independent and productive in their respective areas of ability.

A liberal meritocracy in citizenship education from the perspective of a human rights 4A's framework

The 4A's framework, created by Katarina Tomaševski (1999), emphasised the importance of human rights in education as a primary responsibility of the state government that evaluates education policy by ensuring that governments fulfil their obligation to education. In a logical order, its four key tenets include availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Availability pertains to the government's duty to fund educational institutions, accessibility refers to how easily learners can obtain an education, acceptability ensures that the education provided is of high quality, and adaptability aligns with the philosophy of inclusion, emphasising that schools should adjust their teaching to meet the specific needs of learners (Tomaševski, 2001). In essence, the 4A's framework seeks to ensure that the right to education is readily available to all learners because, as a social right, it opens the door to economic, political, and cultural rights essential for the active political participation of all citizens. Exemplified in learners with MID, the practice of this theory achieves this through the fulfilled obligation that ought, then, to improve their employability prospects post-basic education (economic). Moreover, it provides equal opportunity to alleviate socio-economic circumstances by having such learners become independent from their caregivers (political) and remain contextually sensitive in the various spheres of society in which they exercise their agency (cultural). In the context of this paper, we adopt the 4A's framework to probe the

accountability of the state in addressing human rights amidst the tenets of the liberal-based citizenship education propagated by meritocracy in schools. By ensuring the recognition of learners with MID as full citizens in status, experience, and practice (Osler, 2005), the human rights perspective provides a more socially just framework.

The state's obligation to make schools available (and thus increase enrolment) should supersede but not deny the private sector's efforts to offer private education. In this context, meritocracy in education would prioritise inequality over inclusion as schools compete for limited resources in both physical and social infrastructure, including staff. Essentially, the recognition of citizenship then becomes conditional, granted as a status linked to unequal social rights, as a sense of belonging restricted by selective interests, and as a practice that does not acknowledge the individual needs of learners with MID. The tenet serves as a reference point for understanding the status of human rights in post-apartheid South Africa's citizenship education and reflects the capacity of ordinary public schools.

The tenet of accessibility finds significance in arguing against a liberal-based citizenship education as informed by meritocracy that impedes holistic quality education and its concomitant benefits. The tenet points to the impending barriers to accessing education (i.e., physical, social, and economic) and issues of non-discrimination (Tomaševski, 2001). Essentially, it situates meritocracy in education as a system that prioritises individual achievement over collective wellbeing, contrary to the goals of citizenship education. Accessibility as a tenet offers a means of understanding the status of human rights in post-apartheid South African citizenship education. It highlights the factors that contribute to the underperformance of minority groups, such as learners with MID, and the barriers that hinder their educational outcomes and success.

In the application of acceptability, the principle takes into consideration the design of classroom spaces, the learning material that is provided, and the use of effective pedagogies that create a learner-centred, participatory environment to respond to the needs of diverse learners in order to create suitable conditions for a quality education. In this context, it critiques meritocracy in education, which favours competitive market-driven models over the pursuit of universal quality education. The tenet provides a frame of reference for the status of human rights in post-apartheid South African citizenship education by contextualising and advocating that the educational quality of ordinary public schools be pluralistic and offer relevant skills in order to be competitive in the labour market. Arguably, learners with MID benefit from widening their social mobility across global platforms.

In the application of adaptability, the tenet proposes more progressive laws that focus on flexibility in policies, curricula, and syllabi that can be of benefit to learners with MID in ordinary public schools. It also takes into account the suitability of the curriculum and syllabus in the present and the future demands of learner diversities. Fundamentally, it critiques meritocracy in education that emphasises a rewards-based system rather than an approach that ensures equitable adaptability, catering to all learners' needs and interests in developing their full potential. In our view, the tenet provides a stance on the status of human rights in post-apartheid South African citizenship education by contextualising and arguing

for the holistic empowerment of learners with MID through the development of lifelong learning aptitudes.

Contextualising the meritocracy embedded in the South African Schools Act for citizenship education of learners with MID

On the basis of educational availability, the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) is pivotal since it provides the basis for enacting meritocratic educational practices such as the NSC awards. Under the justifications of equality postulated by meritocracy, its objectives, as stated in its preamble, are

[t]o provide a uniform system for the organisation, governance and funding of schools. . . provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners . . . advance the democratic transformation of society. (p. 2)

The objectives frame an equal landscape that supports education as a fundamental human right. Profoundly, they emphasise making education compulsory in a uniform and regulated system in order to eradicate all barriers to creating fully inclusive schools in South Africa through a democratic system that promotes social justice as a benchmark of transformation. Accordingly, the acquisition of knowledge under compulsory education develops the conceptual domain to maximise the cognitive development of learners with MID. Equally, meritocracy suggests that the equality of opportunities to these learners to belong in educational institutions that develop their social domain is paramount in preventing discrimination against them and propelling them towards success in these institutions of learning. However, simply having access to education, as justified by the call for a uniform system that alludes to certain educational standards not being compromised and quintile rankings that aim to provide funding to the most disadvantaged schools, is not enough to validate a liberal meritocracy's notion of equality or justifiable to develop maximally their conceptual and social domains. Challenges such as high teacher-to-learner ratios reveal a lack of sufficient schools and resources and raise concerns about the government's full commitment to preventing issues such as overcrowding. Therefore, the notion that all learners can succeed equally under meritocracy is misleading. In particular, empirical evidence reveals that the negative impact of meritocracy on the experiences of learners with MID is further exacerbated by a lack of resource availability in public schools. Without tailored lessons and close monitoring of their progress (Akabor, 2020) they struggle to succeed.

Regrettably, given the inequalities in resources, support, and opportunities, learners with MID struggle to develop the practical skills they need for work, social participation, and civic responsibilities after school. In reality, a liberal-based citizenship education in the implementation of the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) does not fully recognise their citizenship as a legal status through affirmative action. It also fails to affirm citizenship as a feeling of belonging since their educational outcomes limit their future opportunities for participation in society. Furthermore, it does not affirm their citizenship as a practice through

the equality of opportunities since systemic barriers continue to block their chances of upward social mobility after they have completed their schooling.

Meritocracy that emphasises individual achievement does not ensure educational accessibility that serves the common good or benefits collective wellbeing. It is contradictory to the preamble of the SASA which states,

. . . this country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in doing so lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities. . . combat racism and all other forms of discrimination . . . (Department of Education, 1996, p. 2)

The acknowledgement of redress in the excerpt above supports the view that learners do not start on an equal footing based on historical barriers. Accordingly, schools are mandated to provide citizenship education that demonstrates accessibility by removing all barriers in laying a strong foundation for all learners to work hard and progress and thus promote civic responsibility in order to cultivate the benefits of national prosperity. Positively, subsequent inclusive policies auxiliary to the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) have been introduced. However, a stark contrast challenges and disrupts the idea of a level playing field in upholding the meritocratic ideal of individual achievement based on hard work, personal progress, and responsibility. Empirical evidence reveals that the unjustified ends of meritocracy impacting the experiences of learners with MID involve the purposeful avoidance of the learning support these learners require. The justifications are based on their being perceived as normal in the absence of physical disability and possibly because of the lack of educator pedagogical skill or bad attitudes (Mabaso, 2024). Thus, good policy intentions are met with resistance and injustices persist along with the amplification of historical inequalities that result from squandering opportunities such as providing these learners with adequate post-school transition interventions, and the perpetuation of misinformation regarding the abilities of learners with MID.

These factors limit the personal development of learners with MID, especially in developing their conceptual domain and inviting them to new ways of thinking, by failing to remove barriers that make education more accessible and by encouraging diverse learning experiences. Furthermore, the idea that education is always improving in quality is misleading, since schools often focus on competition, academic results, and reputation rather than on equal access for all. As a result, some learners face disadvantages beyond their control, such as poor teaching practices that further restrict their educational opportunities. The meritocratic focus on individual achievement undermines the true purpose of citizenship education that affirms learners' social domain through inclusive learning that reduces social exclusion. Furthermore, there is a lack of recognition of citizenship as a feeling of belonging in the school community, where success is seen as a shared effort that promotes the development of the practical domain and contributes to collective responsibility. In addition, citizenship as a practice is not fully affirmed since these learners are not adequately prepared

to become representatives of the next generation of learners with MID who are able to challenge discrimination and ensure the continued inclusion of such learners in education.

The compromise of educational acceptability polarised by the varying quality that merits learners' success are the market-based models supported by meritocracy that thrive under the liberal notion of individual rights. Thus, private role players exploit the opportunity to provide better-defined educational acceptability standards at a price. Chapter 5 of the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) fully legitimises the right and liberty for private (independent) schools to function. However, their liberties based on deregulation and their boundless financial power compromise (in practice) the tenets of Chapter 4 (the funding of public schools) and how the educational equality gap can be bridged. Specifically, Chapter 4 states,

[a] governing body of a public school must take reasonable measure within its means to supplement the resources supplied by the State in order to improve the quality of education provided by the *school* to all *learners* at the *school*. (Department of Education, 1996, p. 24, emphases in original)

One one level, the positive side of this legitimatisation is the possibility of private-public partnerships where private schools can be used as resource hubs for public schools. On a deeper level, the flourishing of (ordinary) public schools in the higher quintiles (i.e., fee-paying schools) is presently attributed to the resources that the School Governing Bodies are able to provide to their cohort of learners with MID. In effect, such members facilitate giving their learner cohorts with MID a significant competitive edge in providing better quality education than that offered in under-resourced lower quintile schools (i.e., non-fee-paying schools). Private schools, however, thrive on the social and cultural capital that comes with attracting corporate sponsors since this boosts their reputation for prestige and respected standards of education. Therefore, given the scenarios of private schools and fee-paying public schools, the justification of meritocracy under market-based models exposes a flaw in the concept. It, in fact, is not one purely of social efficiency through individual intelligence, skills, and talent that overlooks wealth or class privilege, as simplistically framed by Young (1958). Accordingly, the maximal development of learners with MID in the conceptual domain of acquiring world-class knowledge in ordinary public schools of lower quintiles especially becomes unfairly inhibited by underinvestment and commercialised conditions. Furthermore, the widespread failures in the public education system, such as inefficient bureaucracy affecting resource distribution and competent personnel implementing best professional practices (Mnisi & Mathebula, 2024), weakens the overall effectiveness and credibility of public education.

In the public education system, learners with MID are regarded as cohorts who are too challenging hence the minimal support offered to meet their needs. Equally, in the private education system that thrives on prestige based on maintaining high pass rates to attract new consumers, learners with MID are viewed as bad for business given the redirection of the business model to focus only on excellence and rankings (Akabor, 2020). Granted, empirical evidence spotlights meritocracy to enable disadvantaged learners to get scholarships to attend

elite (private) secondary schools in South Africa. However, learners with MID are excluded from experiencing this perk (Wallace, 2020). A concerning issue is that the development of their social domain is at risk of being suppressed as social hierarchies become more dominant. This leads to their citizenship as a status based on their unique abilities being overshadowed by prestige, pushing them into a position of obedience and conformity. Moreover, affirmation of citizenship as a feeling of belonging based on equitable representation in the education system as a whole is undermined by competitiveness. Equally, affirmation of citizenship as a practice congruent with developing their practical domain, which is critical to their self-efficacy to exercise their civic responsibilities, is nullified.

In contextualising the adaptability of citizenship education in promoting rewards as a transformative approach for meritocracy to thrive, Section 8 of the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) provides opportunities to schools to exercise flexibility through the Code of Conduct by setting

. . . a standard of moral behaviour for learners and equip[ing] them with the expertise, knowledge and skills they would be expected to evince as worthy and responsible citizens. . . promot[ing] the civic responsibilities of the school and it develop[ing] leadership. The main focus of the Code of Conduct must be positive discipline; must not be punitive and punishment oriented but facilitate constructive learning. (Department of Education, 1996, p. 3)

Psycho-socially speaking, it is to be viewed positively when full attendance, which reduces absenteeism, is rewarded and when peer support is rewarded in the pursuit of reducing social ills such as bullying in schools. Notably, the educational practice of NSC awards, along with accountability measures and the safeguarding of individual rights in schools, reinforces the perception of meritocracy as being neutral and objective. Thus, increasing the opportunities for developing the conceptual domain of learners with MID based on obtaining a more in-depth system of learning characterised by interconnected learning, develops their knowledge.

Given the diversities of these stakeholders, more often than not, anomalies occur in terms of how they devise flexible laws (school rules) that grant learners with MID equal opportunities. Empirical evidence suggests that learners with Williams Syndrome (a mild intellectual disability) may struggle with assertiveness (Jovanović et al., 2019), which may, in turn, limit their opportunities for leadership roles (as a reward) in meritocratic systems. These include serving as Representative Council Leaders in ableist-based school environments, despite the fact that the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) established such structures to promote peer discipline and learner representation. In other words, such opportunities based on rewards denounce the progressive development of their social domain, which is influenced by equal social treatment with their peers. This expectation aligns with the expectation of standardised moral behaviour outlined in each school's code of conduct. Accordingly, this section on the code of conduct in practice infers the impending ambiguity caused by meritocratic systems' narrow approach to rewards when extended to identities such as MID. Thus, uncertainty regarding their human rights raises concerns about whether their citizenship is legitimately accepted as a legal status that supports an education that promotes holistic

skills and learning abilities. Positively, the awards and prizes (as rewards) that these learners receive in mainstream education reinforce citizenship as a feeling by acknowledging their unique identities. However, citizenship as an active practice through school-level responsibilities is less aggressive in developing their practical domain for future civic responsibilities in society.

In summary, the central critique of the SASA's (Department of Education, 1996) liberal-based citizenship education is that:

- it leads to inequality, which compromises the education being made freely available in educating learners with MID;
- it focuses on individual achievement instead of promoting the collective wellbeing thus hampering accessibility;
- it supports market-based models over an inclusive universal education denouncing acceptability in the state of education; and
- it promotes a rewards system instead of recognition of special educational needs, which impedes adaptability.

The meritocracy myth in citizenship education: A human rights-civic republican theorisation

The primary goal of meritocracy in education creates a limited commitment to promoting citizenship education, which should instead be implemented through comprehensive educational support. Specifically, this pertains to the wide availability of education services, regular monitoring of respective codes of conduct in schools, and the provision of funds for schools to implement practical tasks related to exposing them to civic responsibilities (project-based learning). Essentially, in theorising meritocracy as an embodiment of justice from a human rights perspective, learners with MID as one of society's most vulnerable groups would benefit the most from the availability of educational support in developing their intellectual and adaptive functions for active citizenship. However, the unintended consequence of the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) is that it normalises educational practices that are not focused on affirming human rights as a means of ensuring equal opportunities through an education that is tailored to the requirements of diverse learners. Therefore, the nature of meritocracy undermines their equality of opportunity by framing the fulfilment of their educational right as a burdensome duty of the state.

As a birthright, it remains crucial that accessibility to education should break down barriers to learning for learners with MID. Specifically, evaluating respective school policies to demonstrate commitment to improving these learners' to their cognitive progress, cooperative learning tasks, and acknowledgement of their different learning strengths.

However, the development of their intellectual and adaptive functions with meritocracy rearticulating citizenship education has vast negative implications, specifically, as a legal status that meritocracy reduces to tiers and conditions; as a feeling suppressed by dominant groups' reinforced hegemonic power; and as a practice that undermines human rights by diminishing equality. Young (1958) defined meritocracy as being based solely on skill, talent, and intelligence. However, this approach is problematic because it follows a strict path to success that does not consider the additional support some learners may need to develop their abilities and identities.

Unfortunately, meritocracy weakens citizenship education by making it less effective. This is evident in its failure to support the intellectual and adaptive development of these learners since it does not prioritise financial, human, or social investment in improving the quality and availability of education, specifically, responsive teaching that encourages a better acquisition of knowledge, the future-ready skills easily available in ordinary public schools, and hands-on practical relevance to learning in becoming active citizens in their micro (schools) and micro (local and global communities) environments. In other words, in a liberal meritocracy, citizenship education does not align with preparing these learners for life after school. It fails to support their social mobility and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to participate fully as global citizens. Therefore, the inconsistency of the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) as a legal instrument is divisive in terms of ensuring equality of opportunities for success regardless of differences in learner identities. By implication, the measures of merit that overemphasise individual rights, individual success, and self-serving interests compromise the embodiment of human rights in the learning process that ought to cultivate the development of the intellectual and adaptive functions of learners with MID.

Overall, citizenship education in post-apartheid South African schools lacks adaptability. The liberal meritocracy influences how it interacts with human rights and responds to global trends that prioritise equality. Specifically, equality should ensure that learners with MID develop their thinking and adaptability skills to become active citizens. This means that they should gain broad knowledge, be socially aware, and contribute actively to important social issues. Therefore, it is clear that the liberal approach to citizenship education under the SASA (Department of Education, 1996), which claims to promote equality, lacks consistency. It presents the idea of the common good as a competition in which neurotypical learners in public and private schools are seen to be the winners while learners with MID, who are considered to fall short, are seen to be the losers in the dominant meritocratic education system.

Civic republicanism as an appeal to reframe meritocracy

Civic republicanism is important in overturning the status quo of individualism in education for the benefit of learners with MID in its emphasis on collective wellbeing, which encapsulates social justice that underscores human rights (Tomaševski, 2001). Education based on civic republicanism promotes equality by ensuring meaningful access to learning support. Thus, it contributes to the development of the conceptual domain in critical thinking skills for political understanding, which is important for participation in civic life (Sandel,

2021). In developing their social domains, civic republicanism provides MID learners with greater exposure to opportunities that broaden their social engagement skills along with rewards that promote social cohesion and lessen competition. Furthermore, civic republicanism finds relevance in developing their practical domains for maximised participation through critical active engagement in order to foster a sense of responsibility and the performance of civic duties. Essentially, it de-emphasises the notions of individual achievement that ignore the barriers MID learners confront.

Conclusion

Meritocracy in education does not promote fairness since it fails to support the special educational needs of learners with MID or help them reach their full potential in the achievement of their educational goals. We addressed the problem that the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) embraces a liberal-based citizenship education in educating learners with MID on the premise of meritocracy, which is further fortified by educational practices that stifle their intellectual and adaptive development. We adopted Tomaševski's 4A's framework as the key objective of achieving human rights in education. When examined through this framework, the SASA (Department of Education, 1996) shows that meritocratic education creates inequality. Invariably, it compromises the free availability of education for learners with MID and prioritises individual achievement above collective well-being, thus limiting accessibility. It also favours market-based models over inclusive universal education, thus exacerbating the state of educational acceptability. Additionally, it promotes a rewards system rather than the recognition of special educational needs and this impedes adaptability. A civic republican-based citizenship education is presented as a solution to reframe the idea of meritocracy in educating learners with MID in post-apartheid schools. Its practical implications include community service work as a core curriculum component and strengthened partnerships between community organisations and schools. Inferentially, classroom practices will be characterised by collaborative learning that integrates application of real-world experiences. We recommend future research into the epistemic feasibility of citizenship education policy as a standalone subject in post-apartheid schools.

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